

‘A Place with Its Own Shying’: Countering the Aboriginal Uncanny in Vivienne Cleven’s *Her Sister’s Eye*

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In their introduction to the book *Phantom Past, Indigenous Presence*, Colleen E. Boyd and Coll Thrush recall the recurring nature of the ‘Indian burial ground’ (vii) cliché in popular culture. As Boyd and Thrush see it, the Aboriginal burial ground as the rationale for a piece of land being uncanny or haunted has become ‘a tried-and-true element of the cultural industry’ (vii). Boyd and Thrush argue that possessed, sacred Aboriginal territory or the ‘Indian uncanny’ (ix) remains one of the most common explanations for the supernatural attributes of a house or other physical site in texts produced in ‘settler colonies’ (Ashcroft 133) such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, ‘[w]hether . . . the haunted house down the dirt lane, the spectral woods behind the subdivision or the seemingly cursed stretch of highway up the canyon’ (Boyd vii).

However, the primary texts Boyd and Thrush refer to in their introduction are all produced by non-Aboriginal artists. Furthermore, these texts also assume that only *non*-Aboriginal people can find their homes supernaturally *unheimlich* or uncanny (or more literally ‘unhomey’) in the Freudian sense.¹ This article shifts the focus from what Boyd and Thrush label the ‘Indian uncanny’ in order to focus on one Aboriginal writer’s subversion of the ‘Indian uncanny’ formula for her own ends. Using an Australian-influenced, Gothic building as its ‘major locus’ (Botting 2), Vivienne Cleven’s novel *Her Sister’s Eye* features a haunted—or more precisely an animate—Queenslander house which symbolically insists that Aboriginal history and concerns are contemporary and crucial, rather than issues relegated to a spectral past. I will use as a springboard Kathrin Althan’s and Gerry Turcotte’s arguments that an Aboriginal writer such as Cleven rejects the cliché of supernatural, uncanny ‘darkness’ and replaces it with a model which proposes that *non*-Aboriginal, white Australians are a more likely source of uncanny fear, supernatural and otherwise. The eerie, ‘shying’ house in *Her Sister’s Eye* demonstrates that the ‘Indian uncanny,’ haunted house trope used to further symbolically marginalise and demonise Indigenous people and cultures in literature and film can be claimed and deployed by Indigenous writers. Cleven establishes the ‘shying’ house as a tool to interrogate and undermine residual colonial influence in countries such as Australia which are ‘haunted’ by Indigenous dispossession of land. Furthermore, comparing *Her Sister’s Eye* side-by-side with two other ‘uncanny’ house novels—Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet* and Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth*—Cleven also adds to an evolving continuum of fictional houses that stand as metaphors for Indigenous dispossession in Australian fiction.

In their introduction, Boyd and Thrush refer specifically to American horror fiction such as Jay Anson’s ‘non-fiction’ *The Amityville Horror*, but the ‘tried-and-true’ nature of the ‘Indian uncanny’ genre (or what I will from now on refer to as ‘Aboriginal uncanny’ in order to incorporate Australian examples of this genre) is apparent in examples of haunted house fiction by non-Aboriginal writers set in Australia as well. As such, before I examine *Her Sister’s Eye*, I will discuss Winton’s *Cloudstreet* in order to show some ways in which Aboriginal people and culture have been characterised as the frightening Other in contemporary Australian fiction. As I will go on to show, texts such as *Cloudstreet* follow a gothic horror tradition that Cleven

writes against. Ken Gelder, Paul Salzman and others have thoroughly examined the absence of Indigenous issues and characters in *Cloudstreet*, but it is worth revisiting Winton's treatment of Indigenous characters and land possession in *Cloudstreet* in order to establish the contrast to Cleven's deployment of the gothic genre in *Her Sister's Eye*.

Cloudstreet features a house that is regarded as a 'queer joint' (ch. 9)² because it was once a mission house for Aboriginal girls: its current non-Aboriginal inhabitants—the Lamb and Pickle families—are disturbed by the house's animate qualities (it breathes, for example), and the ghosts of an Aboriginal girl who committed suicide, and the grasping white woman who ran the mission. In *Cloudstreet* and other fiction that indulges in the 'Aboriginal uncanny,' non-Aboriginal characters must battle malevolent supernatural forces of Aboriginal origin in order to claim their non-Aboriginal, physical or symbolic territory. In the case of *Cloudstreet*, the territorial claim is successful: the Lambs and Pickles 'possess' the house in every sense when they drive away the house's mission ghosts and, therefore, eliminate the house's 'queerness.' The families are thereby able—disturbingly—to disassociate themselves and the house from the lingering memory of Australian crimes perpetrated against Australia's 'Stolen Generations.'

In invoking the stereotype of the dangerous, supernatural Aboriginal person rather than presenting Aboriginal people and culture as real and current, Winton seems to echo the reactive 'resentment' (Gelder and Jacobs 17) or unease of some non-Aboriginal Australians around Aboriginal sacred sites and land claims as discussed in Gelder and Jacobs' *Uncanny Australia*. The problematic politics inherent in Aboriginal sacred ground as a reason for land being 'bad' is remarked on by Ross Gibson when he suggests that 'no-go zones' in 'colonial societies' are more about invader-settler guilt than actual haunting and allow colonial cultures to 'simultaneously acknowledg[e] and ignor[e]' past violences against Indigenous peoples (15). By, on one hand, *recognizing* Aboriginal dispossession and non-Aboriginal violence against Aboriginal people, but on the other hand relegating the violence and any instances of Aboriginal power exclusively to small physical spaces such as houses and a long-ago past, a writer such as Winton suppresses Indigenous people's historical and contemporary concerns. Winton creates fictional, Aboriginal 'prohibited space[s]' (Gibson 15) only in order to contain and *conquer* the space and the disenfranchised people the space represents. *Cloudstreet* also implies that the 'settled' life of non-Aboriginal settler-invaders outside these 'unsettled' spaces continues unaffected by the dangers of Aboriginal presence. In other words, in order to have properly 'settled' people within the context of Australia, the 'settled' need to have spaces in which the 'unsettled' is contained within 'prohibited space' in order to help maintain the illusion of 'settled' space. According to Gibson, 'prohibited space' shows that a history of

savagery can be encysted even if it cannot be eliminated. A badland can be understood as a natural space deployed in a cultural form to persuade citizens that unruliness can be simultaneously acknowledged and ignored . . . In a culture unconvinced of its sovereignty in the landscape, a badland is mythic and far from useless. (15)

Cloudstreet concedes that settler-invader guilt can occur in Australia, but emphasises that Aboriginal people and culture are—at best—the nature-bound, mysterious Other,³ whose concerns belong to a quaint, formerly relevant history. Indigenous people occur only to make land 'bad.'

In short, a text such *Cloudstreet* reinforces Jacques Derrida's assertion that 'haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony' (37). In essence, one could argue that the 'haunted' or

‘unsettled’ nation serves as a backdrop to the ‘unsettling,’ animate houses in *Cloudstreet* and *Her Sister’s Eye*. Sugars and Turcotte elaborate on Derrida’s call to ‘readers to learn to speak with ghosts—to acknowledge the shrouded and the silent—and to move towards a collective sense of redefinition and reconciliation’ (Sugars xiv). But contra Gelder and Jacobs’ argument regarding an ‘uncanny Australia,’ I assert that Indigenous people in Australia *also* live in an uncanny space, and the physical land mass that makes up Australia, their *home*, has been rendered ‘unhomely’ by the arrival of non-Aboriginal settler-invaders and their descendants.

Cleven’s novel *Her Sister’s Eye* takes place on dispossessed Australian land, and features uncanny buildings and murdered Aboriginal characters, but unlike ‘tried-and-true’ fictions about uncanny dwellings such *Cloudstreet*, and *Amityville Horror*, Cleven’s novel re-interprets the ‘Aboriginal uncanny’ by being written from the perspective of an Aboriginal author. The *unheimlich* and animate nature of the primary ‘scary house’ (Cleven 52) in *Her Sister’s Eye* also springs not from predictable, vindictive Aboriginal ghosts, but from what Katrin Althans labels ‘white shadows’ (‘White’ 140), in other words, the horrific effects generated by racist, violent white people and their actions. In particular, the Queenslander house featured in *Her Sister’s Eye* is a house that derives its uncanny attributes from the white Australian Drysdale family which has lived in it for generations. Gerry Turcotte proposes a similar argument to Althans’s ‘white shadow’ premise in his article ‘Spectrality in Indigenous Women’s Cinema,’ but without using the colour coding of black and white. I prefer Turcotte’s analysis and its lack of colour coding rather than Althans’s position, because while Althans’s arguments are useful, she assumes that all settlers and readers of these texts by Aboriginal writers are of white European extraction. In fact, historically and to this day, Australia has received and continues to receive settlers of colour who are positioned economically and in other ways into the non-Aboriginal ‘dominant’ culture. Turcotte does not discuss Cleven specifically, but elaborates his argument by suggesting that in the work of Aboriginal filmmakers Tracey Moffatt and Beck Cole and writer Alexis Wright, ‘it is the dominant culture which is refigured as the Gothic other—the rapacious, the bloodthirsty and, in some cases, the dispossessed’ (10). I would apply this same argument to Cleven’s *Her Sister’s Eye*: Cleven ‘revers[es] majority constructions’ (Turcotte, ‘Spectrality’ 10) by writing a novel with Gothic undertones from an Aboriginal perspective in which the white dominant culture is figured as the source of the frightening and uncanny. To use the wording of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, Cleven ‘writes back’ against the traditional, colonial-Gothic modal binary that represents darkness and the Indigenous as negative, and lightness or whiteness as positive. As Althans notes, using her black/white symbolic terms, writers such as Cleven reject the ‘dark,’ stereotypical features of colonial Gothic horror writing and ‘turn . . . the dark shadows of the Gothic white as a sheet’ (‘White’ 151).

Of course, reading a book such as *Her Sister’s Eye* as a Gothic text needs to be done with caution, as using a Gothic filter can lead to counterproductive, interpretive traps for a non-Aboriginal scholar. For example, Jodey Castricano articulates the difficulties of using a ‘Western Gothic model’ to discuss the work of Aboriginal writers in Canadian literature, and points out the risks of non-Aboriginal scholars reading this work inadvertently ‘doing the work of empire.’ Castricano expresses her concerns about ‘how to read . . . without slipping into the “received ideas” about the Gothic, without doing the work of empire by framing the novel and its concern with the spirit world in terms of what might be called “psychological colonialism”’ (807–08). While it might be dangerous to read *Her Sister’s Eye* as a novel that incorporates Gothic conventions or what Althans refers to as elements from ‘conventional European Gothic tales,’ I would argue that Cleven *invites* the reader to see conventional Gothic imagery or motifs in her novel in order to—as Althans asserts in *Darkness*— ‘distort those very conventions’

(122) and reject the familiar Gothic example of the ‘dark’ Other, the ‘Aboriginal uncanny,’ as the singular source of horror.

The ‘scary house’ in *Her Sister’s Eye*—a decrepit Queenslander belonging to the murderous and depraved Drysdale family—is the epicentre and symbol of white townfolks’ hold over the Aboriginal people forced to the fringes of the fictional town of Mundra. But as an example of how Cleven ‘distorts’ European Gothic convention in the novel, its ‘scariness’ emanates not from ‘darkness’ but rather from the lasting influence of the late Edward Drysdale—the former ‘big honcho’ (145) of Mundra, and leader of the racist vigilante group, ‘Drysdale’s men,’ composed of a ‘group of men dedicated to keeping black fellahs out of town’ (224), according to Aboriginal elder Vida Derrick. The house is also, at a later time, home to Edward’s son Reginald, and Edward’s adult grandson Donald. And, while throughout the novel the Drysdales’ Queenslander is interpreted by particular characters as having uncanny, animate characteristics, and is presented as uncanny throughout the novel, its uncanniness is transitory—at the end of the novel when the house ceases to belong to the Drysdale family bloodline both literally and figuratively and so disconnects from the town’s dominant, racist culture, it loses its uncanny qualities. The house’s animus evaporates when the effects of the ‘white shadows’ of the Drysdale men, the Drysdale family line, and the town’s violent history conclude with the deaths of characters Raymond Gee and Sofie Salte—the only remaining, living Aboriginal characters in the present day who still suffer from the direct effects of the Drysdale family. Another explanation of the house’s transformation in the novel from uncanny ‘scary house’ to contented haven is that the house ceases to be *unheimlich* when those who inhabit the literal and figurative abject ‘borderland positions’ (Turcotte, *Peripheral* 185) in Mundra—characters who in most conventional Gothic fictions would belong to the province of the *frightening* rather than the frightened—at the end of the novel take over the house and its grounds: namely, Murilla Salte, an Aboriginal woman, and Reginald Drysdale’s widow Caroline, a white woman who is also regarded as the local ‘madwoman.’

To briefly summarise the novel, *Her Sister’s Eye* opens from the perspective of drifter Archie Corella as he arrives in Mundra, the site of a major childhood trauma he has blotted from his memory. The novel begins with Archie’s recollection of how he arrived in Mundra as an adult, and took on work as a handyman and gardener for the Drysdales at their Queenslander. Archie in reality is Raymond Gee, but Archie has forgotten that he was born Raymond Gee: when Raymond was a child he witnessed the deliberate shooting death of his sister by Edward Drysdale, and when Raymond tried to shoot Edward in revenge, Edward ‘flogged’ (214) Raymond with the butt of his rifle and scarred his face. Traumatized, Raymond left Mundra as a teenager to ‘wal[k] the roads’ (215) and assumed the identity of his best friend Archie, who died when he was young.

Following Archie/Raymond’s arrival, the novel focuses on the aftereffects of Edward Drysdale and his company of white, ‘Drysdale’s men’ in driving the Aboriginal people of Archie/Raymond’s and Murilla’s parents’ generation to Mundra’s outer limits on the banks of the Stewart River, and one night opening fire on them, in the process killing Raymond’s sister Belle. More recently, the Drysdale family’s ‘mean streak [that] goes back generations’ (165), manifests in Edward’s grandson Donald—a man with whom one could easily link the ‘white shadows’ because of his ‘milky-white chest’ (100)—who rapes underage ‘black girls white girls’ (60) of the town and keeps their clothing in a shed on the Drysdale property. One of the girls Donald raped as a child is Murilla’s younger sister, Sofie, an eerily skillful swimmer who, as an adult, leads Donald to his drowning death in the Stewart River. The ‘Drysdale’s men’ also have a female counterpart in the socio-economic fabric of the town—the Red Rose ladies—an

allegedly philanthropic women's committee made up of 'skirt-wearing Hitlers' (166) or women married to members of 'Drysdale's men,' who, as Sonia Kurtzer describes it, 'reserve' their 'benevolence and charity . . . for those who are "white" and who agree with the town ethos of keeping all the blacks out of the town' (325).

When Archie first beholds the Drysdale Queenslander, he has immediate trepidation about the house, interpreting it as 'a place with its own shying' (22). A 'shyer,' according to Archie, is someone like Donald Drysdale, a man who '[s]hied himself away, like a snake when he feels the vibration of a man's footsteps approaching—hiding away, curling up in a hollow log, all the while watching with cunning eyes, ready to strike' (12). The house with its 'cunning' qualities, its disconcerting features, appears to Archie as a 'living thing':

Archie looked across at the run-down Queenslander. It crouched forward out of the undergrowth as though it was exhausted from weathering too many storms. Moss-green shutters hung carelessly from large fly-screened windows. Embracing the house like a protective arm was a white rust-speckled, wrought-iron verandah. The iron was fashioned like a delicate lace petticoat. The rotting, worm-bored steps had two planks missing from the bottom and the once cream-coloured walls were skinned and blistered, the timber exposed. Up near the roof, the gutters hung precariously, water dripping steadily from their rusty mouths. And the door looked down from this sad vista, glaring back at him.

The house seemed to buckle and sweat underneath the sweltering sun. Archie could almost hear the wood expanding, as though the house was a living thing, crying in protest. (9–10)

Archie resolves to enter the house as infrequently as possible, believing that 'something was rotten in the house of Drysdale' (98) and that it is a 'chapel of grief and hurt' (101). The house's animus is also registered by Murilla's sister Sofie who names the house 'the scary house' (52) and regards the house and its objects as animate: 'Sofie scans the musty smelling room. *Wooden chairs cry, creeaak n grrooann. Tick tock, the tall clock yells. . . . Dark n cool as river water the hallway opens its mouth*' (62, emphasis in the original).

Finally, the house's 'shying' is underlined by the condition of the grounds that surround it because the land the house stands on is weirdly 'barren' (107). Roses that Archie plants in Caroline Drysdale's garden do not flourish, and as the Drysdales' housekeeper Murilla observes when she looks out the window, no vegetation associated with the house ever grows:

The skeletal trees bend in death, their gnarled branches reaching skyward like the grasping talons of a witch.

Everything that was once alive and green died a long time ago.

Nothing will grow in the yard now. The dirt seems to have some sort of sickness. It's as though when Reginald Drysdale died he took something away. *Took part of life with him into death.* (38, emphasis in the original)

In addition to its 'shying' and 'cunning' features, infertile gardens, and unnerving interior, the house carries a trait that marks it as a traditional Gothic house: a woman trapped within. As Katrin Althans points out, Caroline Drysdale, the wife of the most recent owner, embodies

characteristics that at first glance make her belong to the tradition of the ‘Gothic heroine’ (Althans, *Darkness* 122) for whom the house is a prison rather than a home. For example, Caroline’s husband and son work hard to portray her to guests and the rest of town as ‘a crazy woman’ (118), or the kind of ‘madwoman’ character highlighted by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. In her article, ‘Can You Forgive Her?: The Gothic Heroine and Her Critics,’ Kate Ferguson Ellis explains that ‘the task of the classic Gothic heroine is to escape from the castle that has become her prison, to preside over its demystification, a process that usually requires its violent deconstruction, and to claim the fortune and lineage that the villain has sought to make his own’ (463). Caroline Drysdale initially fulfills the criteria of the typical Gothic heroine in terms of her ‘tasks.’ While living in the Queenslander under the rule of her husband and son, she is trapped because she is agoraphobic, abused by her husband, and emotionally manipulated by her son. She knows that her position is not a good one, but she feels incapable of defending herself—once when Reginald has beaten her so severely that she cannot talk, she hands Murilla a note that reads, ‘VERY UNHAPPY HOUSE THIS ONE’ (111), and urges Murilla to quit her job as housekeeper and leave.

Caroline is also not welcome in town or into the Red Rose ladies’ committee because she was born into the Hughes family, which, according to a member of the Red Rose ladies, Tamara Dalmaine, carries ‘[m]adness . . . Her parents were crazy as old man Cleaver.’ Tamara elaborates by adding, ‘All of the Hughes had that in them . . . [T]hat’s why they never really fit in the town’ (184). In truth, Caroline’s parents’ ‘madness’ is considered such, not because they were mentally ill, but because they were friendly with Lillian Gee, Archie/Raymond’s mother, and because Hughes family members have always been sympathetic to the plight of the town’s Aboriginal citizens. As elder Vida Derrick says about the Hughes family, ‘not all the white fellahs were whatcha call bad people. No, there was some that was good’ (145). Compounding Caroline’s psychological incarceration in the house, Caroline also cannot ‘find’ herself: she laments to Murilla that she lost herself when she married Reginald, ‘What happened to Caroline Hughes?’ she asks rhetorically, ‘I lost her when I came to this place. Lost everything, everyone’ (105). In fact, as Caroline tells Murilla, Caroline is only one in a long succession of ‘staff and wives’ who have been ‘control[led]’ (188) to their detriment by the men of the ‘house’ of Drysdale.

The Drysdale Queenslander is not the only house in *Her Sister’s Eye* affected by the ‘white shadows’ of Edward Drysdale and his group’s violence—numerous houses in the novel feature uncanny characteristics, even if the uncanniness is not as explicit as the Queenslander’s ‘shying’ animus. In an intriguing reversal of the ‘Aboriginal uncanny’ motif, the Aboriginal characters and their one white ally Caroline Drysdale are the only ones in Mundra forced to battle the ‘shadows’ in their homes—other white characters do not. But they do not fight malevolent *Aboriginal* ‘shadows’—instead they are forced to cope with houses and land contaminated by ‘white shadows,’ that is, the land’s memory of the evil of men such as Edward Drysdale who ‘took part of life with him into death’ (38). Edward the ‘big honcho’ is not explicitly present as a ghost, but his and his biological family’s residue has still tainted Mundra’s land and many of the buildings that stand upon it. Mundra was literally a ‘prohibited space’ for Aboriginal characters in the novel before Edward died and he and his men determined with guns and intimidation who could and could not enter Mundra. After Edward’s death, characters such as Murilla and Archie are able to live within the town limits, but Mundra is still a ‘prohibited space,’ only this time, supernaturally.

When Aboriginal characters such as Murilla, Archie, and their parents and relatives do occasionally have access to homes, their houses are always *unheimlich* whether in the literal

sense of the houses being ‘unhomely’ because they are unfit for human habitation or because the house rests on supernaturally barren land. For example, for the earlier generation—such as Murilla and Archie’s parents—Aboriginal-owned houses and house-like domiciles such as the ‘shacks, tents and humpies’ are often flooded by the Stewart River out by ‘the dump road’ (144) and are precarious locales of desperation and futility. They are in essence ‘chapel[s] of grief and hurt.’ In the present day, Murilla and Sofie’s house is ‘mouldering’ (24) and threatened with bulldozing, and Vida Derrick needs to grow her chrysanthemums in ‘rusted copper tubs’ (71), because they won’t grow when planted in the ground. Archie Coreolla’s house is described by the narrator as being like ‘a picture-book cottage’ (128), but the yard ‘looks like the wasteland of an abandoned mine claim, with great piles of dirt and unusually deep holes dotted across the yard. Along the fence are countless pots of withered rose plants’ (128–29). The reason Archie has dug so many holes in the yard is because ‘[t]he dirt won’t give to him; he can’t grow roses at all, they always die. But he reckons the deeper he digs, the more chance he’ll have of one taking root, surviving’ (129).

The nature of the Queenslander and other *unheimlich* houses in the novel suggests an interesting revision of the ‘Aboriginal uncanny’ genre and Ross Gibson’s conceptualizing of ‘bad’ land. In *Her Sister’s Eye*, rather than *white* characters being terrorised by Aboriginal history and having to negotiate ‘bad’ land, it is the *Aboriginal* characters who are confronted with ‘white shadows’ and relegated to the ‘bad’ land. The white citizens of Mundra (with the exception of Caroline Drysdale, the ‘madwoman’) do not suffer while living on the town’s ‘bad’ land; rather, they experience untroubled access to and ownership of houses, and none of them experience *unheimlich* homes or guilty consciences. They not only own structurally-sound, inanimate houses with thriving gardens, but some even own *multiple* houses (196). Nevertheless they still feel threatened by Aboriginal presence—they establish committees and groups dedicated to keeping the white ‘ethos’ of the town intact. And even when one of them is ostensibly defeated and robbed of her home—as Red Rose lady Polly Goodman is when Sofie inadvertently burns down her house—they are never ‘houseless.’ Sofie overhears a bystander suggest that Polly can stay in her second house ‘on Mary Street’ (196) while recovering from the fire.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin note that ‘the position of groups such as the Maoris, Inuit, and Australian Aborigines is a special one because they are doubly marginalised—pushed to the psychic and political edge of societies which themselves have experienced the dilemma of colonial alienation’ (144). In *Her Sister’s Eye*, Mundra’s Aboriginal inhabitants are relegated by white Australians and ‘white shadows’ to every ‘edge’ imaginable: psychic, political, and geographical in terms of their uncertain ‘home’ site at the end of the ‘old dump road’ (142) on Mundra’s outer limits, and in their unsettled and disintegrating houses located in Mundra proper. Archie’s picture-perfect house is never ‘rooted’ enough for him to evade his memory of Belle’s death, and when he finally recalls his true identity and Belle’s murder, in anguish he throws himself in the river and drowns. For Archie, if his roses ‘take root’ they will ‘survive,’ but the same applies for himself and the other Aboriginal characters in the novel. Vida Derrick echoes the sentiment when she remarks that ‘Fellahs gotta have roots’ (141). Archie, and similarly characters such as Murilla, Sofie, Doris and their elders, struggle throughout the novel to ‘take root’ physically and psychically, and belong fully in Mundra.

‘Taking root’ in Mundra is not easy for misfit white people either; Caroline is also unable to ‘take root’ because like her family, she ‘never really fit in the town’ (184). But the ‘shying’ house that, on one hand, operates as home and headquarters for the evil Edward Drysdale, and is the prison in which Reginald Drysdale confines Caroline, also becomes the site where, as Murilla notes, numerous things ‘finally [come] to an explosive end’ (186). And using the

Drysdale Queenslander, Cleven explicitly rejects the notion of the ‘Aboriginal uncanny,’ and I would suggest *also* rejects the black/white, mutually exclusive binary proposed by Katrin Althans. This is because when Caroline finally decides to fight back against Reginald, it is in the Queenslander that she commits the act, and in doing so she begins the gradual process of expunging the ‘white shadows’ from the house, and turning the house into a more *heimlich* site for herself *and* for Murilla. Caroline poisons and kills Reginald in retaliation for his decision to fire Murilla after Murilla, out of sympathy for Caroline, deliberately pours hot sauce on Polly Goodman, Red Rose lady and Reginald’s secret lover. This ‘explosive end’ marks a turning point in Caroline and Murilla’s relationship—even though Murilla may question Caroline’s mental health and the ethics of killing Reginald (190), Murilla’s public humiliation of Polly Goodman and Caroline’s murder of Reginald because of his threat to Murilla demonstrate that no longer are Murilla and Caroline merely employee and employer: they have become accomplices and allies.

In the concluding chapter of *Her Sister’s Eye*, Murilla and Caroline’s connection as allies is re-emphasised. Murilla and Caroline plant recently-deceased Archie’s withered roses in the Drysdale house’s garden, an act that Carole Ferrier writes ‘suggests a symbolic transformation of the earlier dominance of the Red Rose ladies’ (45). The women ‘work side by side’ (Cleven 232) to plant the roses, and Caroline believes that this time the roses will grow in the house’s garden with its ‘bad’ (231) soil, and her conviction is reinforced by Murilla agreeing with Caroline that the rose plants ‘just might but we have to keep an eye on things.’ The apparently trouble-free, equal-seeming relationship between the women and the contentedness of the scene are significant for a number of reasons. Even though Murilla is still Caroline’s employee and subject to Caroline’s whims—for example, helping Caroline plant Archie’s rose plants in the garden—the imposed racial hierarchy or power differential between the women appears greatly diminished in this final scene, especially compared to the first time Caroline appears in the novel in a scene where she is yelling at Murilla to do senseless tasks such as clean imaginary stains out of the carpet (26). Secondly, planting Archie’s flowers on the Drysdale grounds suggests a symbolic, Aboriginal ‘taking root’ in formerly dispossessed land contaminated by ‘white shadows.’ The women’s apparently easier alliance with each other is further reflected in the first line of the novel’s final paragraph: ‘The garden soil scrubbed from their fingernails, waiting for the kettle to boil, the two women sit before the window as lightning dances across the sky’ (232–33). Their seeking shelter in the house as the storm approaches—a desirable storm because it makes it a ‘[g]ood time to be plantin’ (232) according to the character Treacle—and their waiting for the kettle to boil, suggest a more evenly matched co-residency of the space that is the house. There is no indication that Murilla has to serve Caroline as she did at the beginning of the novel. The ‘waiting for the kettle to boil’ suggests that they will both drink the beverage made from the boiling water in a kind of communion. Murilla sits ‘before’ the front window with Caroline like she belongs in the house—and they are *both* spectators rather than one spectating as the other works. Murilla’s symbolic co-possession of the Drysdale house with Caroline represents a claiming of the town for both Aboriginal and white townspeople. The former gothic castle/prison has transformed into a home in which to ‘take root’ and ‘survive,’ with a garden destined to prosper.

The ending of *Her Sister’s Eye* provides an interesting contrast to other novels such as Winton’s *Cloudstreet* and Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth*. I have already discussed how *Cloudstreet* incorporates the ‘Aboriginal uncanny,’ but the effects of Winton’s doing so become even more marked when compared to McGahan’s *White Earth*, which also relies in a way on the ‘Aboriginal uncanny.’ Both novels conclude with a statement of sorts regarding the relationship between whites and Aboriginals, and their claim to a house on land that has been

forcibly taken from Aboriginal people. But while *Cloudstreet* and *White Earth* propose that Aboriginal and white Australians have never lived and *will* never live peaceably together in the houses in question, *Her Sister's Eye* suggests another possibility.

To elaborate: in *After the Celebration*, Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman provide a brief comparison of *Cloudstreet* and *White Earth* regarding how the novels engage with Aboriginal dispossession and the place of white settlers in Australia. To begin, Gelder and Salzman point out that the pre-Mabo era *Cloudstreet* seems to advocate for a symbolic and transparent handing-over of Australia to white Australians by Aboriginal Australians. In *Cloudstreet*, the ghosts of the suicided Aboriginal girl and the woman who owned the mission are exorcised by the birth of a white baby in the room where the deaths occurred. As numerous critics such as David Crouch, Nathaneal O'Reilly, and Gelder and Salzman have noted, *Cloudstreet* seems to suggest that with the birth, the two white families that live in the house and who are both biologically linked to the new baby, have managed to truly claim the house as their own home space. Gelder and Salzman emphasise that the character Sam Pickles is even told by a mysterious 'black man' that, 'You shouldn't break a place' (10) and urges Sam not to sell the house. Gelder and Salzman argue that

This is a novel . . . which has a spectral Aboriginal character effectively hand over property to the non-Aboriginal characters who have moved in, giving them his blessing into the bargain. Native title isn't even an issue here, as the novel leaves its Aboriginal characters behind in order to chart a fully realised *non-Aboriginal* form of belonging. (31)

In essence, Aboriginal people have no claim, no place, and belong nowhere in the new world represented by the house in *Cloudstreet* and its non-Aboriginal owners. The house that was once 'prohibited space' for the white Australian characters, has now in effect become 'prohibited space' for Aboriginal people.

In contrast, McGahan's *White Earth* was written after the Mabo decision, and so Gelder and Salzman suggest that McGahan does not follow as readily Winton's bizarre 'solution' to land claim issues in Australia. At the end of *White Earth*, the house that is on contested ground burns to the ground, with a white character claiming that the land belongs 'to no one' (374). Gelder and Salzman argue that McGahan—unlike Winton—seems to advocate that opposing white and Aboriginal land claims cannot or will not be settled because the land belongs to neither group. But once again, Aboriginal people have no place and no claim. To continue with Gibson's argument regarding 'prohibited spaces,' in the case of *White Earth* space is 'prohibited' for both Aboriginal *and* non-Aboriginal people.

The ending of Cleven's *Her Sister's Eye* suggests an intriguing third alternative to Winton's and McGahan's propositions in their respective novels. By concluding *Her Sister's Eye* with a scene in which Caroline and Murilla sit inside the front room of the Queenslander together with Murilla 'keeping an eye on things' the novel seems to suggest that while white Australian and Aboriginal communities might not necessarily have a *guaranteed* equal friendship, the two communities can perhaps reach a tentative truce, and can co-exist in the house and on the land together.

In summary, in *Her Sister's Eye*, the cautiously positive ending occurs when two border figures who only have each other for company—the white misfit Caroline, and characters who live on the fringes represented by Murilla—easily live *within* the Drysdale house, historically the 'scary

house' at the 'dead end of the line' (231). The women's apparently untroubled possession of the house as a haven of possibility at the novel's end suggests that with the end of the Drysdale family line, the Red Rose ladies' imminent demise (the ailing Polly Goodman is the only surviving Red Rose lady), and the deaths of the remaining people who represent the last, direct traces of the Drysdales' horrible legacy—Raymond and Sofie—the house's grounds and the land in Mundra will again be fertile. The house, and possibly the town, have become a larger kind of 'borderland' rather than a barren, 'prohibited space,' a meeting-place between those white settlers who claimed the town and river as their own, and the Aboriginal people who were forced from the land and were once relegated to the literal and metaphorical 'fringes' (144) but who have now returned.

To return to this article's opening and Turcotte's observations in his article 'Spectrality,' it is indeed 'the dominant culture which is refigured as the Gothic other' (10) in *Her Sister's Eye*. Cleven 'interrogates' and 'exposes' the 'systems of meaning' (Turcotte, *Peripheral* 185) represented by Drysdale's men, the Red Rose ladies, and the whole concept of white 'ownership' in the town of Mundra, and perhaps more broadly, in all of Australia.

NOTES

¹ Notwithstanding my and many critics' misgivings about applying Western psychoanalytic theory to a piece of literature by an Indigenous writer, the reference to supernaturally haunted houses in *The Amityville Horror* and *Her Sister's Eye*, as well as the common interpretation of the word 'uncanny' in texts such as Boyd and Thrush's *Phantom Past* and Gelder and Jacob's *Uncanny Australia* make unavoidable at least some reference to Freud's definition of the 'uncanny' in his 1919 essay 'The Uncanny.'

² The 7th edition of the *MLA Handbook* indicates in section 6.4.2 that when citing from an electronic document that does not have stable page numbers, such as an ebook, the section, paragraph or chapter number rather than the page number should be indicated in parentheses.

³ As Gelder and Salzman suggest, all the Aboriginal characters in *Cloudstreet*, 'are cast as non-real, spectral, ethereal' (31).

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