'To the Island': Myths of Identity and Belonging in Andrew McGahan's *1988*

VIVIENNE MULLER, QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

The city country opposition and specifically the city as life and identity denying, as opposed to the country as a source of freedom and spirituality, has a long history, but essentially in the Australian context it is this dichotomy that operates familiar and dominant myths and stereotypes of national identity. It is something of a cliché to claim that in many of our literary and filmic depictions of Australianness, the country and not the city is the 'ideological crucible' which casts a particular version of the national stereotype (Lucas 122), one that endorses a masculinist identity together with a taxonomy of accompanying virtues such as resourcefulness, independence, mutual support, courage and tenacity. This view prevails and is strongly romanticised in much of our literature and popular culture despite the fact that it is grounded in the idea of a unified notion of the 'country' and of 'identity', and fails to accommodate the plurality of social existence.

While it could be argued that there have been enough diverse accounts of Australianness in recent writing to suggest that there is a healthy heteroglossia at work, the process of re-imagining the country as a viable and authentic place of nationalist origins is still an ongoing one in some contemporary narratives. In *1988*, Andrew McGahan aims some timely satirical broadsides at masculinist myths of Australian identity via the adventures of Generation X picaro, Gordon Buchanan, yet in part recuperates a certain degree of nostalgia for such myths of origin. Gordon's decision to leave Brisbane at the time of the Bicentennial, the official celebrations of a nation's history, is a reminder that he fails to connect his own personal sense of identity and Australianness to the 'authorised' and official one, yet his desire for an alternative to an unrewarding life in the urban setting which drives the narrative into the outback could also be read as a desire for a simpler way of life 'one associated with a heavily mythologised time of pre–urban national infancy.' (Crisp 164)

> I watched the Brisbane streets roll by. Suddenly I was worried. The Northern Territory? A Lighthouse? Me? I made it home and went to bed. I lay there thinking. I calmed down. It would be fine. Later on I'd wake up sober and decide to dump the whole idea. I slept. Got up late. The Chinese were still there. The dust on the computer was still there. The mess in the kitchen was still there. And the heat and the hayfever and the long tedious day. It was settled then. To the lighthouse. (*1988* 18)

1988 engages with and invokes many of the traditional tropes of national identity, and can be read as a parodic version of the hegemonic nationalist masculine-subject-positioned-in-rural-landscape. The novel is a self-revealing account of Gordon's attempts to go bush in order to find inspiration for his *magnum opus* and a place to belong, only to discover that it is oppressive, boring, terrifying and life-denying. Unlike the idealised figure of Crocodile Dundee who embodies many of the qualities of Ward's famous description of the Australian legend, and who, as Jane Crisp (164) states is 'invested with the plenitude and power of the Imaginary' arising specifically

out of identification with a 'country' landscape, Gordon Buchanan fails to feel at home in the country as he has failed to find a meaningful life in the city. *1988* makes it clear, that for the young twenty-something middle-class educated male towards the end of the millennium traditional myths of identity or belonging with their locus in the outback have clearly reached their use-by date. Wayne, Gordon's painter companion on the journey to the outback, who thinks the isolation of the wilderness will be good for his art, does not 'do' landscapes, and Gordon the 'wannabe' writer of the great Australian novel presumably inspired by a wilderness setting provokes instead a horror story of abjection and failure.

Both the country and the cityscapes in *1988* are heavily imbricated with the discourses of settlement and colonisation, which position Gordon as hapless victim unable to shape his 'own self-constitutive desires' (Norris 32). While it could be argued then that *1988* is a postcolonial text in its humorous demolishing of tropes of colonisation and national identity, it could also be argued that the text is complicit in the very mythology it irreverently tries to demolish precisely because there is no envisaged alternative space or place beyond the city or bush dichotomy that has traditionally defined Australian identity. At various points where the narrative comically engages with national myths of identity and belonging, it also codes these as the only ones possible, thus situating the protagonist, as Foucault would argue, as the 'product of various contending forces that define its very conditions of possibility' (Norris 34).

Various forms of 'country' landscape in the novel including the outback all the way up to Darwin are mediated through the processes of settlement that have constituted the island of Cape Don as a vestigial frontier colonial outpost and the mainland outback as a commodified space where tourists and developers enact a commercial colonisation of landscape in the comfort of their cars or Greyhound buses. Gordon inhabits a landscape Symbolic bristling with the cultural mythology of a bygone era, perpetuated in ritualised celebrations such as the Brisbane 1988 Bicentennial. At Longreach he reads about the heroic feats of Captain Starlight whose successful articulations of the nationalist stereotype depend on the familiar qualities of endurance and larrikinism in a rugged landscape. Gordon's response is a dismissive: 'Australian history–I didn't know any of it' (42). This comment receives an added ironic and resistant edge, delivered as it is close to the then under construction National Hall of Fame, a monument enshrining the pioneering bush image. The following day, Gordon stops the car to climb a hill 'just to see'. He and Wayne sight a small cave 'full of piss and shit' ('What were you hoping for? Cave Paintings?' Wayne asks). Puffing on cigarettes and Ventolin Gordon comments that 'I wasn't sure what I'd been hoping for, but this didn't seem worth the climb.' (46) Gordon's own trek across the outback in his canary-yellow Kingswood, with the necessary anaesthetising aid of drugs, cigarettes and booze thus becomes a caricatured facsimile of the treks of former heroes across the great outback.

Cape Don, the island off Darwin, which is Gordon's and Wayne's destination, is portrayed as a prison in which inmates play out their allotted roles under the panoptic colonial gaze. Far from inspiring, the landscape is described by Gordon as some back lot scrub property. Although it has been given back to the Aboriginal people, Cape Don bears the hallmarks of its colonial past; the old disused shacks in the less settled parts of the island in which the Aborigines were allowed to live—sometimes forty to a shack, the old schoolhouse, signifier of the White mission to civilise, the rundown houses that Gordon and Wayne occupy with their recognisable European architecture. While Cape Don is currently jointly run by white and Aboriginal people, and while the deterioration of the buildings at the Cape suggest its diminishing power as a

colonising site, its significance as such is kept alive through its value not as a part of the Aboriginal-owned national park, but as a weather monitoring station. Arguably the lighthouse, although now fully automated, stands as a limp but still recognisable phallus of white superiority. Wayne and Gordon's job is to transmit the cloud formation and weather patterns every three hours supervised by the white ranger Vince. The policing is carried out by Vince and results in friction and enmity between Gordon and Wayne when they fail to do their duty. Gordon's and Wayne's ineffectual efforts to meet the three hour deadlines constitute carnivalesque moments which reveal the inadequacy of overarching 'official' myths of identity and belonging. Back in Brisbane after the six months at the Cape, the potency of these myths however is radiated in another light house, this time the more erect phallus of the Expo Skyneedle. This synchronicity between both signifiers is fatalistically enunciated by Gordon who describes it thus:

> At the very top it had a powerful light. The light was revolving, its beam sweeping across the sky ... It was strong. Solid. Silent. Stretching out over Brisbane, over everything. (309)

Part of the history of national mythologising and the setting up of a normative regime of Australian identity is the way in which official accounts render others as marginalised, or oppositional or abject. In terms of dominant myths of Australian identity and the nationalist subject these others have historically been women, Aborigines and homosexuals. In *1988*, a certain reverse colonisation occurs in which women and Aborigines occupy more privileged places in their relationship to the environment. The white women at Cape Don are presented as more capable and in control of the environment and themselves than most of the men. Stacey, Gordon's and Wayne's replacement at the end of the narrative, is competent and enthusiastic, making mock of the men's earlier efforts. To Stacey, the landscape is 'beautiful' in contrast to Gordon's view that 'It hadn't looked like much and that's the way it turned out to be' (284).

In contrast to dominant embodiments of competent masculinity in country landscapes, such as the Crocodile Dundee figure, Gordon constructs his masculinity as abject as opposed to the clean and proper body of hegemonic (patriarchal) masculinity. Reflecting on his sexual performance to date as a city boy he says: 'I couldn't get the hang of it, and is aware of the ways in which he fails to measure up'. 'My penis was small and I always came quickly. I was ashamed of it. Ashamed of my whole body' (15). Gordon in the country landscape is further reduced to the position of the abject, signified particularly in the deteriorating body. At one stage when he is the only one left at Cape Don, Gordon spots his drug and alcohol ridden, malnourished, boils–pitted body in a mirror to see he was 'hideous':

> Huge and round and white. Streaked with grime. My erection poked out from under my belly. It was tiny, ludicrous. There was a band-aid tangled in the pubic hair. And there were boils everywhere. Red pus oozed from their heads. My eyes were pink, my face covered with a dirty ginger fuzz. It was disgusting. I was a monster. (240)

The abject is associated according to Kristeva with bodily decay, fluids, anything that reminds us of that which is not clean and proper. The abject and Bakhtin's grotesque carnival body have been read positively in resistance theory as constituting a subversion to the dominant order because they threaten the idea of a fixed and

stable identity. Gordon's abjection therefore could be seen as a thetic or threshold moment that destabilises both corporeal and by extension cultural identity. Gordon wavers between an embracing of dominant discourses of masculinity and Australianness, by which he measures his own performance and fails, and a sense of self that threatens to spill in excess beyond the good and proper body. His views of women partake of the same uncertainty and ambiguity. So, on a number of occasions, Gordon's yardstick is a normative heterosexual masculinity that does not countenance dysfunctional performance or failure with women. This coupled with other scenes in which Gordon is aware of the masculine role he is forced uncomfortably to assume sets up masculinity as dysfunctional, thus parodying notions of masculine competence associated with the national accounts of Australian male identity. Gordon further demolishes phallocentric renditions of Australian maleness by confessing to having an exciting one-off homosexual encounter. At one stage he even contemplates having sex with Wayne and in another incident pokes fun at the Queensland country red-neckery ('Tricky being gay in Queensland' he says to an unimpressed motel attendant). Such allusions to alternative psychosexual identities go some way towards destabilising hegemonic masculinity, while not seriously entertained as replacing it.

Mateship, a cornerstone of the nationalist stereotype is also tested in the rural proving ground and comes under severe strain. Gordon's and Wayne's relationship with each other, tenuous at the beginning of the journey, deteriorates rapidly at the Cape. The mateship/masculinity myth with its attendant virtues of courage, hope, mutual support is traditionally tested in the austerity and harshness (Lucas 121) of the outback. But rather than cement relationships such a landscape creates division and jealousy. Gordon rapidly becomes bored with the desert landscape on the journey to Darwin, and is afraid of the coastal wilderness at Cape Don—'the abode of the defeated' (222)—venturing little beyond the safety of the compound Even Vince, the present ranger, is emotionally and literally 'at sea' at the Cape, more intent on escaping the horrors of the landscape by drinking and listening to classical music. On a fishing expedition designed to impress his visiting son, he runs out of petrol, spending the night in crocodile-infested waters, and has to be saved by Aborigines. Vince's failure in the tropical wilderness is offset by his nostalgia for his earlier life in the outback in which (at least in his imaginative reconstruction of his past) he was more at home. By invoking as oppositional these two types of wilderness, the one real (and in the present) and the other remembered and in the past, McGahan again suggests, as he does in the twin lighthouse effect, the long shadow cast by tenacious myths of identity and belonging.

By contrast to Vince, Gordon and Wayne, Barry, the previous ranger, is at home in a landscape that in his present job as still life photographer for the tourist market he now commercially exploits. The entrepreneurial Barry plunders and poaches the landscape without remorse. On a fishing trip with Gordon and Wayne, he is quick to demonstrate their incompetence and his control over the surrounds. The point is made that he ran the ranger station like a prison camp and his dog Kevin is trained to hate whomever Barry tells him to hate—in this case one of the Aboriginal caretakers. He is a reminder of the Australian identity in its most colonising, racist and predatory forms, and he relegates others to the abject. To Gordon he says 'So where do you get off calling yourself a writer' and he dismisses Wayne's paintings as unworthy. Barry, who is big and tough, and 'has no doubts about anything', is, as the boys recognise, the embodiment of the rough masculine Australian male, that mythological figure of official nationalist discourse. Wayne says of him, 'He's good-looking. He can do any-

thing. He's the great Australian dream' (221) This portrait is a heavily parodied one, but like the cultural Symbolic in which it is situated it is not easy to dismantle. Gordon and Wayne recognise how Barry's type harmonises with the romanticised and mythologised national stereotype commenting that in bicentennial Brisbane 'they'd worship him'.

The 'other' to the official versions of myths of Australian identity, Australian Aboriginal people occupy an ambivalently coded space in colonial and postcolonial discourses of settlement especially in their relationship with landscape. The novel ironically offsets Gordon's postcolonial encounter with Aboriginal people against the colonial enterprise (symbolised in the rituals of the Bicentennial back in Brisbane), which originally marginalised them and relegated them to exotic or despised other. Gordon's encounter would seem to redeem some of this construction, especially in its portrayal of Aboriginal people as being more at home in both the colonised and non-colonised environments than their white counterparts (with the possible exception of Barry). Gordon is invited by Allen Price, Chairman of the Board of the Gurig National Park, to travel to the neighbouring island of Araru, an island populated only by aboriginal people. Gordon is wined and dined according to local custom, but he is fated to repeat the unfortunate mistakes of the past, revitalising, more through naiveté than deliberate intent, the colonising temperament. He offends custom and culture, but while he demonstrates a certain sensitivity and respect in his dealings with Aboriginal people he is also capable only of seeing them only within the guidelines of the imperialist script. He fantasises for example about himself in relation to Eve, one of the custodians of Cape Don. While this fantasy comically corrodes a stereotype, it is also complicit in it.

Gordon's response to a growing sense of oppression, as it becomes obvious he cannot write his novel or feel at home in the bush, is to retreat into the comatose state of non-agency, achieved largely through the effects of cigarettes and alcohol. Bhaskar, a dialectical critical realist, argues that the facilitating of agency requires a sense of absence. Gordon cannot envisage the absence of that which oppresses him, and thus resorts to the only forms of power available to the subject—the power of compensation. He lashes out against the landscape and things in the immediate landscape—an example of this is his wild rampaging though the bush in a four-wheel drive. Gordon's failure to write his magnum opus is testimony to the unbridgeable gap between the imagined, idealised outback and the actuality of his experiences. The text he does write retrospectively is really a horror story which records the ways in which the subject's encounter with the Symbolic (city or country) is always a moment of entrapment. The novel then becomes, as all Gothics are, an account of the return of the repressed in which the semiotic and the abject bleed into the Symbolic. It is also a comic Gothic, in which Gordon chooses to parody much of what happened to him at Cape Don, in the process demystifying the wilderness and casting doubts on its viability as a sustaining source of a unified national identity.

Humour and horror, as both Bakhtin and Kristeva remind us, provide a temporary way out of the cycle of failure and defeat, a leakage towards alternatives. However, Bhaktin reminds us that the carnivalesque is soon over, and besides, as it is often officially sanctioned, it also has little socially transformative potential. The ending of *1988* thus anticipates *Praise* which features Gordon post his Cape Don experiences in the city, but equally unable to transform his environment or transcend the dominant narratives of identity defined by the nationalist enterprise. Relegated to a semiotic that erstwhile has been the habitat of women (in psychoanalytic and cultural theories),

men like Gordon are marginalised by prevailing discourses of power, privilege and masculinity under the late capitalist system.

In *1988*, Gordon's journey to the lighthouse may have the effect of rendering official myths of identity and belonging meaningless at the level of local experience, it also corroborates their potency as discourses of 'authorised nationalism'. Like a range of other recent cultural texts that engage discursively with such myths but reach a kind of paralysis when it comes to transformative politics, there are in *1988* no other viable links set up between identity and landscape, in either its country or urban configurations.

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