

National Hauntings: The Architecture of Australian Ghost Stories

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Judith Wright once described within herself the twisting of “two strands, which have become part of me—the love of the land we have invaded, and the guilt of the invasion”. “It is,” she said, “a haunted country” (12).

The tug of these two strands, the non-indigenous desire to belong to a stolen land, gives the Australian ghost story a peculiar resonance. It seems as if this bifurcated tension in the postcolonial condition allows tales of visitations from the past to rehearse crucial anxieties within the Australian psyche, to tap a sense of “haunted country”. In this country the presence of ghosts can be read as traces of historical traumas, fears which are often exposed in expressions of apprehensive (un)settlement. As Ross Gibson writes in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*: “This ‘haunting’ is not only metaphorical. It is a way to name a perturbation that lingers in the Australian consciousness” (165).¹

The aim of this article is to draw out some reflections on this particular perturbation by reading Hume Nisbet’s mobilisation of a phantasmic topology in his story “The Haunted Station” alongside the unsettling ghosts of Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet*. It will ask what these West Australian stories of supernatural fear, separated by a century, can say about negotiating the problem of finding the past within the present. Because both are interested in uneasily occupied haunted spaces and in the dynamics of possession, a comparison of these two particular texts is productive, offering a way of reading one of the dark spots in the Australian psyche. These ghost stories reveal repressed fears about place and suggest that within this genre the sites of fear are essentially architectural: they are expressed through the writing of a dwelling which becomes the locus of threat. In other words, haunted houses provide a precise figure for an unsettled country. Negotiating these anxious architectures and their histories, however, may also suggest new possibilities for dwelling in Australia.

By definition a haunting implies a presence caught out of time. Confusing the binary between absence and presence, ghosts suggest a temporality in which past, present and future can be inter-implicated. As a central theme of gothic literature more generally, ghosts return, and their spectral presence has often been read in terms of a “return of the repressed”.² As Hélène Cixous writes: “the Ghost erases the limit which exists between two states, neither alive nor dead; passing through, the dead man returns in the manner of the Repressed” (543). In his 1915 essay “Repression” Sigmund Freud suggests that if the repressed succeeds in returning, say as the disembodied spirit of some unquiet soul, “The vanished affect comes back in its transformed shape as social anxiety, moral anxiety and unlimited self-reproaches” (157). In this manner, Australian ghosts might return the violence of colonialism as an ever-present dis-placement.

In another of his well known essays, “The ‘Uncanny’”, Freud describes haunting as a slippage between the familiar and unfamiliar. As Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs describe it in *Uncanny Australia*: “An uncanny experience may occur when one’s home is rendered, somehow and in some sense, unfamiliar; one has the experience, in other words, of being in place and ‘out of place’ simultaneously” (23). As an unsettling disturbance, the idea of the uncanny can remind us that although we often speak of Australia as a settler nation, “a condition of unsettled-ness folds into this often taken-for-granted mode of occupation” (182). The house has long been used as a metaphor for the western psyche, and thus the spaces of a haunted house provide the ideal site for the uncanny return of the repressed. The *unfamiliar* or ghostly simultaneously inhabits the *familiar* and comforting. And in Australia it seems possible to extend the spatial metaphor to imagine the house as analogous with the nation; here the haunted house becomes a metonym for Australia, its ghosts are the collective anxieties of white settlement.

If this argument is accepted, then haunted houses point to the ways in which persistent obligations mould the nation. It seems occupation is never free of ghostly vicissitudes; where there are ghosts in these texts there are also worries about property and possession. These anxieties are seen most precisely in the architectures of disquieting places. This is partly because, as Gibson writes: “The events of the past rarely pass. They leave marks in documents, in bodies, in communities and places, in buildings, streets and landscape” (179). And as Winton’s and Nisbet’s texts illustrate, the remains of history also inhabit houses. The ghosts in these stories are not alien to the architecture; indeed, while their human occupants may settle in these spaces and draw a sense of identity from them, the ghost itself is incorporated into

the very economy of the dwelling, its otherness determining the identity of these spaces. In this way both texts raise the spectre of indigeneity in Australia. Both Winton's and Nisbet's haunted architectures are marked by left-behind impressions of psychic energy. They write dwelling places that can concentrate the force of the past, blurring history into the present. One question, then, is this: do these ghost houses return the repressed "truth" about colonisation?

Gelder and Jacobs point out that "Australian ghost stories are also generally site-based", but they also describe how these stories are never constrained by their haunted places; they "do not respect the localness of their sites" (187). As metaphors for a nation and its fears, haunted houses are clear examples of places that move beyond their own specificity. These ghost stories are structured around a particular architecture but "dramatically extend the influence and reach of that site" (187). The effects of these localised hauntings bleed out across the nation, influencing a broader sense of the nation's well-being. Like haunted houses, Gibson's badlands, "[r]egardless of where or when they get located . . . eventually demand our attention, because their perimeters are rarely secure" (179).³ Here a guilty past might fester in the specifics of a place, a repressed history that will burst its edges, seeping out to taint the country. But should the presence of ghosts always be a dark reminder of colonisation and uneasy settlement? Possibly these ghosts are attempts to legitimate colonisation and white settlement; discursively populating the place with spectres could be a way of securing the country within white mythology.

"THE HAUNTED STATION"

A traumatic past returns in Nisbet's 1894 tale, "The Haunted Station". Nisbet was a Scottish artist who lived for a time, and travelled widely, in colonial Australia. The narrator of his ghost story, a medical practitioner, becomes a convict after he is wrongly accused of his wife's murder and transported to the Australian colonies to work in Fremantle building roads. After landing in Australia he seeks his liberty by fleeing into the bush with two fellow convicts. Taking advantage of the capture and shooting of his accomplices, the narrator makes his escape into the wilderness—travelling to a "far off and as yet unnamed portion of Western Australia" (116). Wandering delirious in a hostile environment, Nisbet's narrator, who is "expectant of something ghoulish and unnatural" to come upon him from "the sepulchral gloom and mystery" (110), suddenly comes upon "a house of two storeys". It was, Nisbet writes:

substantial looking in its masses . . . the weatherboards had shrunk a good deal with the heat of many suns beating upon them, while the paint, once tasteful in its dried tints, was bleached into dry powder, the trellis work . . . had in many places been torn away by the weight of the clinging vines, and between the window frames and the windows yawned wide fissures where they had shrunk from each other. (117-18)

Nisbet's description is rich with liminal illusion; a series of architectural borders and edges are compromised. Further, from the centre of this house "projected a gigantic and lifeless gum tree, which spread its fantastic limbs and branches wildly over the roof" (111). While the bush itself is described as a sepulchral gothic architecture, the structure of the house has been reclaimed by the landscape. It somehow comes to represent the country: "Nature, for a little while trained to order, had once more asserted her independent lavishness" (118). This is a familiar trope in colonial narratives, where the loss of control over the environment can signify a psychological disorientation. The attention Nisbet gives to the re-assertion of wilderness over the imposition of abandoned colonial architecture might suggest the house's embedded-ness in place, its solicitations of the land; or it might suggest the country's attempt to heal over the psychic scars that this architecture represents. At the very least, possessing or settling in this place would require either a concerted clearing of the space or some complicity with the natural landscape.

There is an assertive claim involved in the act of discursively embedding spectres into the landscape, giving them some ongoing spiritual stake in its spaces. In this way, ghost stories can become symbolic re-enactments of colonisation. Gelder reads Nisbet's story as a "kind of (post-)colonial allegory of discovery" ("Introduction" xvi). As such, "The Haunted Station" clearly uses numerous images associated with the idea of colonial invasion and exploration. The discovery in a distant and uncertain region of this house, which seems to grow out of the landscape, invokes the white discovery and exploration of Australia. Nisbet's narrator at first believes himself to be "the first white man who had *penetrated* so far" (116), the empty house then functions for him as *terra nullius*. He decides "the house was deserted, and my property, for the time at least" (120). And the architectural becomes conflated with the erotic as references to acts of penetration and taking possession abound: "I next penetrated the kitchen" (119), and "My curiosity was roused . . . I wanted to penetrate the strange mystery" (121).

The issue of possession is crucial to this text. Nisbet's narrator is marooned in the house by a fierce storm, yet the main reason he gives for staying is a "subtle motive" he could not "logically explain:" "*I could not leave the house, now*

that I had taken possession of it, or rather, if I may say it, now that the house had taken possession of me" (121). Some "unseen force was compelling" (121) him to stay. He makes himself comfortable with the possessions of the house, securing the shutters, lighting the lamp and opening a good bottle of wine, a book, and a box of first-class cigars, momentarily becoming the man of leisure. It seems the lure of the architecture works by lulling the explorer with its sense of settled possession, only to subsume his identity into its own unsettled structure.

Sitting comfortably in the house the narrator considers the likenesses of the house's former occupants on the wall when a dreadful spirit suddenly visits him. It enters mysteriously and is dripping wet: "his hair and moustache draggling over his glistening, ashy cheeks and bluish chin, as if he has been submerged in water, while weeds and slime hung about his saturated garments" (123). At last finding words, the narrator asks: "Who are you? Where do you come from? What do you want?" and receives the answer: "Well, before you took possession of this place I was its owner"(123). And what does it want with him? "To make you myself," says the spectre. Here the idea of possession takes on still further resonances. Through a classic trope of the ghost story, the apparition can be re-animated by possessing the body of the living. The phantasm attempts to re-assimilate itself by breaking down the binary between self and other: it wishes to perpetuate itself through possession.

Gelder and Jacobs argue that ghost stories "are traditionally *about* possession; one takes possession of a haunted house and is possessed in return" and that "all this happens on a property which is usually imagined as malevolent and overwhelming" (188). The postcolonial ghost story, however, coming as it does after settlement, "speaks more directly about (*dis*)possession through its emphasis on visiting or passing through" (188). Unlike the traditional ghost story, Gelder and Jacobs suggest that possession in the postcolonial ghost story is a thing to be negotiated. Nisbet's protagonist never quite takes possession; he is passing through and possibly becomes still more dispossessed by his encounter with the property. Looking back as he escapes from the house, he sees in a flash of lightning "the house collapsing as an erection of cards", and then disappearing "into the earth" (125). Perhaps his negotiations with these representatives of a traumatic past become the very things that encourage the eventual laying-to-rest of a painful history. This erasure of unpleasant memories is arguably a perpetuation of colonial impulses, mirroring an attempt to deny the history of indigenous dispossession.

The mobility of the narrator, however, might suggest the dynamic sort of dialogue with place that keeps open conversation between self and other, past and present. And the haunted station itself is not a precise symbol of permanent settlement or secure belonging: “It seemed to be a wooden erection, such as squatters first raise for their homesteads after they have decided to stay; the intermediate kind of station” (110). There is something temporary or insecure, not completely settled, about this habitation, even before it is haunted. It is this type of dynamic dwelling that can possibly figure a more productive spatiality and enable Australia to be written across the thresholds of history and identity.

CLOUDSTREET

Like Nisbet’s haunted station, the house in Winton’s *Cloudstreet* is also animated by horrors from the past, it is “a living breathing house” (132); its respiring presence is like a looming outcrop of wooden landscape, with an architecture deeply sensitised to the experiences of those inside. The living house has somehow soaked up the pain into its structure. Here Winton taps a theme from the tradition of the gothic ghost story; this haunted dwelling is clearly reminiscent of the sentient structure in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1845). In *Cloudstreet* the most powerful ghostly presence is that which the house itself pours like a caustic upon the psyche of those living within.

Early on in the novel, before the Lamb family arrives, the Pickles family moved around the house like fearful first settlers, “stunned and shuffling”, “the big emptiness of the house around them, almost paralysing them with spaces and surfaces that yield nothing to them. It’s just them in this vast indoors . . . They have no money and this great continent of a house doesn’t belong to them. They’re lost” (41). Again the tensions of non-indigenous possession and belonging in Australia are crucial. Homeless and uprooted to begin, the two families are unsettled in their occupation of this new place. The great expanses of space and unyielding alien surfaces of this “great continent of a house” paralyse their inhabitants in a way that echoes the same sense of unease, a sense of not belonging, which apparently plagued settlers as they initially encountered Australia. *Cloudstreet* too appears caught in the unsettling legacy of colonial structures. Moreover, it seems Winton only conjures the indigenous past, the prior occupation of the house or the country, as something shadily other, suppressed, and belonging to some unearthly haunted realm.

From the beginning it is a lugubrious house, mourning something. Apparently the old house on Cloud Street was once a jail for Aboriginal stolen children,

“Girls were procured and the house filled” (36). The house was locked up, guarded at night: “They had been taken from their families and were not happy. They crawled from windows but were tracked down and returned to the house” (36). One Aboriginal girl was found dead in the library of the house. She had killed herself with ant poison. These events seem to linger in, hauntingly as it were, the windowless library, the dead room, the dead centre of the Australian house. Winton’s current inhabitants are haunted by this past, by the ghost of the stolen Aboriginal girl; they perhaps suffer the unease of dwelling upon *her* land, and the greater massacres and injustices standing in the shadows of their habitation of this land.

However, in *Cloudstreet* there is no real negotiation between indigenous and non-indigenous characters. Nor is there an apparent attempt to animate a dialogue acknowledging the ghosts of our shared history. The ghostly, or otherworldly, status given to indigenous people in the novel becomes a way of erasing, objectifying and othering them. They are not all dead but nor are they given a fleshy reality. Rather, they are either spectres, watchers from the distance, or helpful prophets. Winton’s work reflects a contemporary Australian postcolonial condition that appears within the structures of colonialism even as it is historically located beyond them.

The haunting concentration of trauma within the house is exorcised by the birth of a baby. It is born in the house’s dead room, the stage of past colonial violence. As the baby is born, this miserable room goes quiet: “The spirits on the walls are fading, finally being forced on their way to oblivion, free of the house, freeing the house, leaving a warm, clean sweet space among the living, among the good and hopeful” (384). And thus the evils of the past are oddly resolved, the indigenous girl’s ghost appeased, by the birth of a white child. Part of the novel’s conclusion is a resolution of the pain of the past; this release has been read as reconciliation. But is the greater issue of possession finally resolved in *Cloudstreet*? Ultimately it does not seem to refuse the fantasy of reconciliation. The connections to a past, which a ghost in the house can offer, are effaced from the economy of Winton’s novel.

While ghosts can be associated with a kind of belatedness, their presence can also be used to legitimate fantasies of white spiritual relationship with place. Peter Read’s *Haunted Earth* aims to “explore the singular and often identifiable ghosts, deities, souls and entities that inhabit a place” (34). The book’s second section, “The darkest hour”, gives three accounts by non-indigenous Australians of unsettling hauntings which they experience as “punishment” for something that “they, their families or unknown strangers have done . . . either *to* the land or *on* the land or to the first inhabitants” (58).

Like those in Winton's and Nisbet's stories these ghosts represent the bad pasts that preclude the secure belonging Read craves for settler Australians. Yet as with *Cloudstreet*, *Haunted Earth* appears to argue for the ability to achieve a settled attachment to place, to reconcile the corrosive energies that can seep in and taint a place.

Instead of narratives about unsettling fears, Read's real focus is narratives that overtly signify the reconciliation and redemption figured by Winton's new-born baby. Claire Milner, for example, a farmer from New South Wales, encounters the peaceful ghosts of an indigenous tribe on her property. These spectres reassure Claire with a message of healthy coexistence, and offer some relief from any sense of illegitimate ownership. The suggestion here seems to be that once reconciliation is achieved, the dark places and pasts can be forgotten. Gibson, however, points out the cost of such forgetting: "The histories of most nations founded on violence suggest that an inability or refusal to acknowledge the past will produce evermore confusing and distressing symptoms in the body politic" (158-59). For Gibson the anxieties of being haunted by a dark past should not be repressed. The idea of a perfect and conclusive reconciliation is a fantasy that effectively works to erase history. A search for legitimate non-indigenous belonging should not attempt to put to rest the unpleasant ghosts of the past in favour of more soothing spirits. Rather, their unsettling presence should be seen as structuring an ongoing negotiation, a constant movement between possession and dispossession. By offering negotiations with the past which express a collective sense of (dis)possession these architectures should thus allow sameness and difference to spill across each other's edges in a productively unstable dynamic.

A precise figure for this kind of unsettled space, although haunted only by their creator, may be found in the imaginary architecture of Vincenzo Volentieri. According to Paul Carter, Volentieri reconceived the idea of the house for antipodean conditions; they became airy spaces in which there was a "complete absence of what might be called "outside". Walls are dissolved to create a diffused sense of extended presence" (150). These are "sensitive" structures, homes that "travelled by listening", that "sang out to one another in the night" (154). These mobile dwellings were intimate inside spaces that reflected and incorporated the external landscape, "sound houses" that inspired dialogue; they were "harmonious environments, not only free from nostalgia but immune to the graveyard rhetoric of stone walls and name plates" (154).⁴

CONCLUSION

These stories both seem concerned with the continuity and legitimacy of settlement. In this interest they share features with other postcolonial narratives preoccupied with ghosts.⁵ As analogs for the nation, Nisbet's and Winton's haunted houses navigate the tensions surrounding the occupation of place in Australia. Both their spectres represent some problem with the past that returns; as the past returns to haunt the present this awareness of unfinished business suggests the uncanny sensation of being simultaneously in place and out of place. As such, both stories are undercut by the awareness of displaced indigenous habitation and suggest a moral disturbance in the non-indigenous Australian relationship with place. However, neither architecture seems drawn in terms of the ongoing deferral of settlement that critics such as Gibson argue for. Rather, they rehearse the cultural symptoms of confusion and distress that result from the repression of an unpleasant history. At one level these texts can be read as white fantasies about dispossession that set up an artificial resemblance with indigenous experience, a dispossession routinely alleviated in the economy of the narrative. Ultimately, it seems *Cloudstreet* offers a fantasy of perfect reconciliation that denies any further need to negotiate with either the past or the other, while "The Haunted Station" suggests the fundamental horror of these exchanges and predicts they will only cause a final implosion within the society. Conceivably the ghost story itself is a way of silencing an indigenous presence within a discursive structure that asserts the legitimacy of non-indigenous occupation.

Regardless of this suggestion, both texts illustrate how the ghostly invasion of architecture (house and homes, the loci of our intimate attachments and possession of place) can suggest a broader national anxiety about belonging to place. In *Uncanny Australia* Gelder and Jacobs want to take this idea of uncanny unsettlement as "a productive feature of the postcolonial landscape;" they see these collective anxieties as inciting dialogue and suggest "it reminds us that (whether we like it or not) 'all of us' are implicated to greater or lesser degrees in this modern predicament" (xvi). The haunting anxiety of not belonging in fact activates the desire for its own articulation and thus enables a constant and productive exchange. In opposition to the apparent logic of either "The Haunted Station" or *Cloudstreet*, the argument here is for the *maintenance* of the haunted anxieties nurtured by these houses. While the narrative strategies of these authors may be read as overly redemptive, Gelder and Jacobs offer little in the way of real contexts in which a more productive exchange can be imagined. Maybe these unpleasant places are

like the sealed dark of Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well* and only refuse negotiation or articulation. Perhaps instead we need to re-imagine the architecture of our dwelling spaces themselves, to incorporate the idea of movement and dialogue inside, to settle with less certainty. Like the imaginary architecture of Volentieri, we arguably need to write Australian spaces which are not firmly possessed, and which are still "living spaces, places where words rebounded, where space itself stood up and spoke . . . a total environment of communication: one in which the charge of difference implied the desire to explore, not the stress of ungovernable fear" (Carter 158).

The whole house can be figured as a doorway. By writing and reading these spaces we become willing to enter and be entered, open to collective changes that necessitate going beyond the self. Here the critic must resist the urge to interpret the ghost as a sign of psychological confusion or distress, and instead entertain the real possibility of a spirit world and the consequences of Western culture's attempt to eradicate superstition and all that is deemed unfathomable. Just as the architecture of ghost stories is used to write of liminal encounters across thresholds and temporalities, to suggest boundaries as debatable places for communications with the other, so too might architectures be used as ambiguous places for negotiations, concessions and giving ground.

NOTES

- 1 A range of postcolonial theorists from various nations use the vocabulary of haunting to suggest the traces of lost histories and a return of repressed violence in their analysis of colonial experience. Some of these include Homi Bhabha's, *The Location of Culture*, Sneja Gunew's *Haunted Nations*, Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs' *Uncanny Australia*, Iain Chambers' *Culture after Humanism*, Pheng Cheah's *Spectral Nationality*, Jenny Sharpe's *Ghosts of Slavery* and Elizabeth Brogan's *Cultural Haunting*. The applications of the trope are varied, but often follow similar logics. For example, Atsuko Matsuoka and John Sorenson, in their *Ghosts and Shadows*, examine the African diaspora and suggest that "ghosts and shadows are not merely the spectral recurrences that haunt individual experiences; they often become the source of a structure of feelings, the basis of the mythico-history that allows groups to analyze their collective experience and identity" (5).
- 2 The gothic was a useful genre for writing colonial Australia; its themes were those of colonial experience, dealing in anxieties about hostile isolated places, lonely individuals lost in alien spaces, and fears of the unknown. For a further discussion of the gothic in Australia, see the work of Gerry Turcotte. Turcotte describes how the "generic qualities of the Gothic mode lend themselves to articulating the colonial experience inasmuch as each emerges

out of a condition of deracination and uncertainty, of the familiar transposed into unfamiliar space, and then forcibly ‘naturalized’” (103).

- 3 The haunting process puts into place a disruptive structure. In *Seven Versions of An Australian Badland* Ross Gibson writes of “the Horror Stretch”, a section of road in the central Queensland hinterland, upon which travellers are “haunted by fear and tragedy” (1). He decides “(w)hatever colonialism was and is, it has made this place unsettled and unsettling” (2).
- 4 Volentieri is Carter’s fiction. He subtly suggests the invention of his “Bicentennial Memoir” by referring to “the imaginary architecture of Vincenzo Volentieri” (4) and recognising Volentieri as “an architect apparently *made* for our Bicentenary” (158).
- 5 In Canada in particular there appears to be an obsession in non-indigenous literature with spectral indigenous figures that haunt the settlers who invaded their land. For example, Margaret Sweatman’s *When Alice Lay Down With Peter* examines how spectres signal the settlers’ ambivalent ownership of land previously occupied by the Cree and Métis peoples. Sweatman’s novel is interesting because her choice of the magic realist genre has the potential to resist the rationalist, and potentially imperialist, suppositions of the traditional historical novel. For more on ghosts in Canadian literature see Margaret Atwood’s “Canadian Monsters” and Justin Edwards’ *Gothic Canada*.

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