



Disorienting Horizons: Encountering the Past in Chloe Hooper's *A Child's Book of True Crime*

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Chloe Hooper's novel *A Child's Book of True Crime* powerfully responds to the expressions of non-indigenous disconcertion over the devastation caused to indigenous people and their environments through settler occupation which have become prominent in public discourse over recent years. This has been prompted in particular by the challenge to dominant national narratives brought about by the Mabo decision and the *Bringing Them Home* report into the Stolen Generations. While these articulations invoke many points of issue, it is in the representation of this unsettling colonial past as necessitating redemption that this paper finds interest. How the discourse of badlands, or of a crime-riddled landscape, is frequently employed to describe an aberrant malignancy on the potentially "good" national body is particularly important. Such a discourse is evident in many forms of contemporary writing. In the Mabo judgement of Justices Dean and Gaudron it can be seen in the statement that "[t]he nation as a whole must remain diminished unless and until there is an acknowledgement and retreat from [. . .] past injustices" (qtd. in Brennan x-xi). It is also reflected in Tim Flannery's work where he looks to atone for the "bitter harvest" of an "arrogant colonial vision" (Flannery 2) in new environmental practices. "You can't really call yourself Australian," he argues, "if you're living unsustainably" (qtd. in Haran 11). Finally, it is found in the rhetoric of Official Reconciliation that relies on closed chapters, and bright, new futures for a remade nation and its subjects. This is what Anthony Moran describes as the imperative to clean up "a tarnished national image" and "to free the nation of the guilt and shame associated with its foundation" (Moran 101). Thus the future horizon of the Australian nation that promises national health and prosperity is predicated in this rhetoric on the transcendence of unclean or uncomfortable pasts that stain and retard a cultural landscape.

Ross Gibson's latest book *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* deploys the concept of "badlands" to signify the geographic areas of Australia in which a history of violence and crime appears to be layered and endemic. These are spaces "where people are warned not to go" (Gibson 13), isolated locations that seem to accrue stories of murder and perversions, often related in popular narrative to extreme or harsh environmental conditions. Historically, Gibson tells us, the badlands referenced the insufficiencies felt by colonizers in the attempt to conquer desired environments. What could not be taken and domesticated either economically or ideologically by colonial industry stood for the inability of settlers to make their "new" lands ontologically secure, and thus became untenable and abject in the colonial imaginary. To this extent, the badlands are discursive sites of colonialism, landscapes in which the dis-ease of settlers in an unfamiliar environment finds location and expression. In the contemporary Australian context to which Gibson refers, however, the notion of badlands as places that indicate colonial uncertainty is revised to accommodate a somewhat recent turn in settler awareness towards the trauma and damage incurred since their arrival in the continent.

The contemporary function of badlands is to encyst bad pasts and to contain their destruction, affirming, by contrast, the dominant remainder of the country as settled and controlled. Chloe Hooper's novel is set in Tasmania. In the national imaginary, the worst and most perverse in Australia's history is often ascribed to this region. The geographical isolation of the state is markedly convenient. Martin Byrant's explanation for his choice of Port Arthur as the site for his mass killings in 1996 was that "A lot of violence happened there [. . .] It must be the most violent place in Australia. It seemed the right place" (qtd. in "Out of Control" 36). This is yet another tale of suffering and death that is accumulated in a quarantined landscape, now "itself [. . .] cast as a serial killer" (Gibson 30). To this extent, the Australian nation needs the badlands, and yet it eschews them also, for badlands act as reminders of the things that most affront a settler population that, even as it calls to recognize its past, ultimately desires a righteous and stable self-image. Badlands haunt and bring to the fore what refuses repression, not only perpetually circulating reminders of violence and death, but implicating these in the "badness" of the present, as "old" and "new" crimes oscillate and disturb conceptual boundaries. Challenging the rhetorical attempts to assert a distinction between the past and the future, these lands and their active presences continually insinuate "bad" things into the everyday in which the self moves in both proximity and distance to all constituents of its environment. Mess, waste and damage are all part of the ontological and ecological process.

I use the concept of badlands to explore Hooper's recent novel *A Child's Book of True Crime*, a text that offers one of the most insightful literary depictions of postcolonial Australia to emerge in the last few years. A non-indigenous Australian

herself, Hooper sets her novel in the fictional bourgeois town of Endpoint, on the coast of Tasmania. Here, the recent publication of *Murder at Black Swan Point*, a work of true crime, has returned to public discourse the gruesome murder twelve-years previously of Ellie Siddell, and the woman presumed to be the killer, Margot Harvey, whose car was found abandoned on the outskirts of Endpoint at Suicide Cliffs. Written by an out-of-towner, Veronica Marne, *Murder at Black Swan Point* brings up the unsettling facts of the crime that the local townspeople had desired to forget. "Why couldn't she let the dead rest?" they demand of Veronica; "She's opened up a Pandora's floodgate of worms!" (Hooper 48). Not only were Ellie and Margot considered to be "good," and dutiful women, conforming to the codes of nicety and discretion that Endpoint holds dear, but the revelations that proceeded the crime refused to yield answers in entirety to how or why the situation had reached its terrible climax. The fact that the young and child-like Ellie was ensconced in an affair with her employer who was Margot's husband conflicts with the original images presented. Margot's suicide is never confirmed; facts in the case resist cohesion; and rumours cannot be reconciled. Despite the traces left behind in DNA samples, the abandoned car, and the blood left scattered in the Harvey's bathroom, there is no linear correlation between these clues, and no balance of cause and effect in a mystery where "all the possibilities branched off endlessly" (194).

It is this irresolution that proves the most untenable to the Endpoint community. Here, we are told, "nasty things don't happen" (77). Safety and surety is epitomized by "homemade honey at the local store, and lovely bed-and-breakfasts" (78). Behind this self-image, however, a landscape dotted with the titles such as "Cape Grim," "Nameless Lake," and "Purgatory Hill" relays something different, and it is through the protagonist of the novel, local school teacher Kate Byrne, and her fascination with the crime, that other, more pervasive "bad" pasts are thrown into relief. As Kate undertakes her own clandestine exploits with Veronica's husband, deliberately modelled out of fear and fascination on the Siddell/Harvey affair, the picturesque backdrop of coastal Tasmania with its "gingerbread houses" (16) and tourist havens, becomes alive with a different uncomfortable history: an "*Ur*-true-crime-story" of penal servitude and indigenous dispossession and slaughter where, "in volume after volume the bodies pile up" (97).

This is a township that is out of touch with the past and inhabiting a safe distance from the self in the present. For a township believing "history only happened in textbooks" (67) it cannot allow this history to enter the space of the everyday. Consequently, painted wheelbarrows full of lavender flank the entrance to the old prison warden's cottage in Endpoint, convict graves are painted white to hide their "stain," and the former convict women's prison at the nearby Port Arthur now churns out exquisite truffles and handmade chocolates. In the primary school, children are taught Dreamtime stories, considered too young for the "issue of genocide" (33). Kate's foray into the underworld of adult lust and fan-

tasy is both imagined and experienced: as she makes love to Thomas. “Grainy black-and-white photos of Ellie Siddell’s body” (27) slide across her mind and these are juxtapositioned with this landscape, illuminating the operations of surface and depth in a postcolonial society repressing the traces of its complex past. It is in this way that the novel plays with the conventions of what Andrew McCann has termed the “colonial Gothic” (McCann 1) narrative, and makes overtures to the circulation and consumption, behind closed doors, of the disturbing Gothic commodity in a society dressed in smooth reserve.

According to McCann, in a colonial economy “the ‘repressed’ of colonization,” such as “collective guilt, the memory of violence and dispossession, and the struggle for mastery” (1), is admitted and encountered only so far as it can remain contained and safely consumed. There is uncertainty in the Gothic commodity, for its proximity to the surface of public mores enables the uncanny disruption of familiar and comfortable conditions. However, McCann argues, the titillation provided by such *frissons* with the “bad” heightens its currency in the marketplace of secrets, where the more abhorrent or anxiety-inducing a commodity may be, the more it is desired for covert consumption. What precludes the secret from totally puncturing the necessary facades of safety that define its status, are the boundaries of the commodity form. Imbibed in private and cordoned-off like the badlands, terrible things and uncomfortable pasts can remain in the depths of a national imaginary.

The book of true crime signifies such a commodity, enabling the discomforting to be packaged and consumed: a mode to keep crime in its place. Here, the trope of corrupted innocence can be encysted like the badlands, with transgressions retained as symbolic or imaginative, while an exterior environment remains untainted and clean—in the mind, at least. Kate’s own consumption of Ellie’s murder, and the narrative of sexual jealousies and intrigues that surround the event, perform this “safe” encounter with the underside of reason and order. From Veronica’s book, Kate feels as if she has “already seen inside” Ellie’s bedroom (Hooper 70). In this murder scene “[h]er clothes carpeted the floor,” Kate narrates. “Lipsticks and perfumes were spread over each inch of the dressing table [. . .] It was hard to believe she’d brought her lover here, but she was still only nineteen. And I bet every time Graeme Harvey led her to the single bed, and pushed away a layer of debris, Ellie wished she’d remembered to tidy up” (70). As Kate feeds on the story with increasing intensity, the details or clues chronicled in *Murder at Black Swan Point* foster her pleasure in paranoia as she begins to imagine herself as the perfect murder victim and her house as perfect crime-scene material. “At a certain hour, as dusk swelled, axe murderers started growing in the flower beds,” she describes. “Or else Margot did” (129).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, it is the continued commodification and repressed circulation of “badness” that delays its assimilation into a settled sense

of place. Thus in the Gothic tradition of the uncanny, *A Child's Book of True Crime's* houses are insecure, open to intrusion and violation, while at night, and away from the conventional day to day, parents dream of infanticide and children of murder and violence. The hidden consumption of terrible things in this logic prevents the possibility of ever overcoming what so disturbs and prevents a certain sense of place, and the repressed thus remains forever unsettling in the badlands, unleashing its damage in predictable ways. Hooper's representation of an environment in which crime appears condemned to repetition could be seen to suggest this: an approach to postcolonial anxieties that establishes a continually compounded foundation for trauma from which, when left un-expiated, subsequent harms transpire. Yet the novel does not simply depict a land condemned to badness for the inability of its population to openly reveal and accept the knowledge it takes subliminal pleasure in refusing, and ultimately *A Child's Book of True Crime* resists this kind of reading.

There is *poetically*, if not politically, little distinction between the desire to cover over and forget, and to reveal and accept the past, when such revelation pursues the progressive disjuncture of firm conclusions and made over beginnings. In either case, the past and its damage that mark an environment are considered out of touch and effect in an ecological milieu. Much like refuse or waste in dominant commodity logic, the use-value of a past that is deemed to solely arrest progress, be it economical, ontological, or national, is discounted as active and relational in a lived environment. Hooper never seeks to evacuate the past or heal and resolve unsettlement, and unlike the discourses that employ a poetics of archaeological uncovering *as recovery*, Hooper's badlands elude correction. They find form in the novel's negotiation of a crime that can never be known in total and never find its full resolution. They represent a multitude of unfinished ontological forms. *A Child's Book of True Crime* reconfigures the Gothic commodity, and the presences that preclude remade beginnings, in its *embrace* of disturbance as an ecological response. The self as it relates to the world is also a force in a process of the subject's becoming. These becomings rely on the incommensurable, unpredictable and continuing effects and meanings generated as different bodies, presences and events encounter each other with the proximity of relations and the distance of the inconclusive.

Kate's realization that she can never master the narrative of this crime, despite her attempts to transpose, through consumption, her own experiences onto Ellie's, illuminates not only her uncertainty in terms of fact, but her uncertainty as a subject in an environment that is alive with its own remembering. "Knowing who the murderer had been," Kate admits, "wouldn't keep me safe" (197). Furthermore, *A Child's Book of True Crime* demonstrates that the commodity can never remain within contained lines of discrete consumption, and cannot be fixed in an ecological place. In *Uncanny Australia*, Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs offer an alter-

native understanding of the uncanny that accords with the novel's disavowal of a surface/depth dichotomy that would allow the continued repression of the past. Instead, they conceive of the uncanny as meaning the cohabitation and oscillation of apparently oppositional elements (24) such as surface and depth, past and present that constitute the weathers of an environment in process. Gelder and Jacobs emphasize this movement as disturbing the supposed limits of commodified knowledge. In an uncanny place, the "secret" is never contained or cordoned-off, but is relational and active, renegotiated ceaselessly as different approaches to and retreats from the past are made. This highlights irresolution as a condition of being in the world, but also transformation and retransformation. It is a movement back and forth between positions, and the space in revelation that is also concealment.

Rather than circulating below facades of decency in Hooper's novel, the past lies about in a landscape that is curvilinear rather than rectilinear, oscillating both in and out of view. Here, levelled ground, smooth surfaces and newly constructed environments cannot cover over or forget previous presences. Kate's recollection of her father's school, "built on a graveyard" (Hooper 187), makes literal a metaphoric view of Australian non-indigenous ground, confronting the discourses of progress that prefer to mourn the passing of indigenous presence as part of "bad" pasts, and articulates what it is to "live with history" (186–87). "Bones poked out of the earth," Kate recalls, "and it was realized some of the coffins would need to be exhumed. When the chains of a crane accidentally broke, a coffin came crashing down into the schoolyard. One little boy was expelled for running up and trying to prod a wedding ring off a skeleton's finger" (187).

This kind of relation to the past in the present is unauthorized and deemed inappropriate by dominant conceptions of how life should treat death. Death should be outside the self and respected within these limits. This relationship intimates what is in the midst of happening in an immediate environment and is replayed by the school children who run and scream on an outing with Kate through the space of Port Arthur. Dressed up as pickpockets and forgers, they enact an historical stage rather than desiring to consume it, while amidst the exhibits and cases displaying the hard evidence of history in the Port Arthur museum, the children "reeled around, *delighting in their nausea*" (96) [emphasis added]. Such motifs of spatial disorientation litter the text, highlighting the shifting relations between the self, the past and the present. The carton of cigarettes in the exhibit, stuck onto the wall of the museum for demonstrative effect and emptied of its contents by pilfering hands, signifies its own encounters with previous irreverence, ironically mimicking the past and exceeding the ordered boundaries that traditional museology imposes. Relation breaches what can be read as history commodified, even vulgarized in this way, and demonstrates the continual production of meaning that touch initiates.

The Endpoint community's whitewashing of the past is placed next to this: the same gravestones painted over now lie broken and scattered about the cemetery. "Kids," Kate observes, "maybe even the dead's direct descendants [. . .] had nothing better to do" (36). This is a recognition that is unsettling for its own transgression of social codes since the past refuses to remain in its "place." Such damage speaks of relations and a living with history that does not abstract memory from the landscape, but reforms its shape without erasing its trace. Alive, the badland shoots and folds like a rhizome. Kate points to rocks, "bruised purple, bruised red—swollen with history" (31); while around her "leaves whisper [. . .] rumours" (125) above dirt that "smelled rich with its own fertile plans" (79). "Each giant boulder vibrated with alarm. Each tiny pebble quivered underfoot" (9). Here, the past and its bad things refuse to stay at an ordered distance, and as the self comes into contact with different ecological constituents, disorientation establishes the landscape on which Kate's footing must be negotiated: "Every molecule was now changing" (185), she remarks on a world and its events that she can no longer contain. While an historicized environment brings her in touch with "bad things" and secrets, it will never fully disclose a singular event nor provide a foundational and solid floor from which the present can be explained or singularities comfortably compared. Kate's inability to extract Ellie's story from her environment does not collapse the two women, but allows for Kate's own movement between and through these narratives. Neither subject can be reduced by the other even while their presences cross and enfold.

The novel concludes on the blustery coastline of Tasmania, where Kate's proximity and distance to Ellie's death is articulated as she tips forwards and backwards with the ocean's syncopation, feeling faint as waves "now rose like walls of glass, then shattered, leaving smashed shells—or the ground-up bones of suicides—by my feet" (238). There is nothing whole in what the sea throws up for Kate, and *A Child's Book of True Crime* refuses reconciliatory poetics in its approach to Australia's badlands. Hooper represents an environment in which the self is always already in relation to past and present events, and must continually negotiate these in everyday ways. It is in this alternative envisioning of the self in its relations with the world that a challenge to dominant expressions of non-indigenous uncertainty in contemporary Australia is made, elaborating instead a model of ecological and ontological becoming that refuses conclusion and destabilizes the meanings and effects of continually present-ing pasts. The text argues that the self can never be extricated from a relation to the past, however mutable and uncertain this may be, and offers an alternative understanding of a postcolonial nation considered in need of resolving its splits and leaving the bad behind. For lands, once made bad, remain always active, and in Hooper's poetics of the disoriented and unresolved, possibilities for living with the damage of the past *as part of* ecological presence are realized outside a dichotomy of restitution

and disabling harm, turning our attention towards the surprises, risks and unpredictable becomings that emerge from badlands always exceeding temporal, geographic and national limits.

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