

Forms of Memory in Post-colonial Australia

Lyn McCredden

Copyright ©2009 Lyn McCredden . This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged

Abstract: there are many forms of memory in post-colonial Australia, and many kinds of haunting. This paper investigates the poetry of contemporary Indigenous poets Sam Wagan Watson and Tony Birch, and reads the script of the Federal Government's February 2008 *Apology to the Stolen Generations*, asking how and why the nation should be haunted – historically and imaginatively - into the future.

Keywords: memory, haunting, poetry.

The poetry of young Queensland indigenous man Sam Wagan Watson takes many approaches to memory.

When we smoke the houses that our loved ones have lived in, and say 'Yenandi' in the old tongue, we're not evicting them ... we're ensuring their whispers continue the journey." (Wagan Watson, *Author's notes*).

In contrast to this description, a ritual of respect conducted between his people, Wagan Watson's poem "the dingo lounge" is full of grief and accusation, as he considers the degradation of contemporary Indigenous beliefs :

those of the brown-skin lycanthrope
have merely become the forgotten offspring
from the dark ages of the dreamtime
the black man's beliefs
are being swallowed up and regurgitated in foreign lands for a
dollar (Wagan Watson, *Smoke Encrypted Whispers*, 52)

Wagan Watson has a high suspicion here for the memorialising business, "the dreamtime can be resurrected anytime/and found on the video store shelves". He laments the pastness of his culture: "the bonemen have performed their last dance/and the shrieks of the black dingo...unheard in the night." ("the dingo lounge", *Smoke*, 52). In this haunted and angry poem his muse, Morpheus "in his arduous attempts to dream/has taken to anti-depressants." It's a poem which lashes out at the commodification of memory by both indigenous and non-indigenous. Most shockingly, the poem laments and castigates the state of those abject indigenous "shapeshifters [who] skulk around the dingo lounge/haunted by the screaming engines of the machines

of consequence/...as their numbers dwindle”, ghosts of the early bonemen who lived differently.

Hauntings

In a 2008 paper, post-colonial critic Graham Huggan describes what he sees as the current “gothic period” in cultural criticism, “characterised by an outpouring of often densely theoretical work on trauma, mourning, and various aspects of contemporary late capitalist ‘wound culture’”. (Huggan, 1). This essay explores the tension, inherent in much personal, communal and national remembering, between such “gothic” responses to the very real wounds perpetrated by human upon human, and what I will be calling the *haunted dimensions* of remembering. In this way, the essay explores how the nation might move into the future: without forgetting the horrors of the past, but also restoratively, not forever dragging victimhood and horror behind it.

One way of approaching this tension is to think about the ghosts that haunt both literature and memory. Sometimes they are invited, and created, by the writers who refigure them. Sometimes they come uninvited, psychically and historically impelled. Derrida in *Spectres of Marx* speaks of the “untimeliness” of ghosts, and of the uncanniness and anxiety perpetrated by their non-appearance. Huggan, drawing on Derrida, describes such ghosts of memory as continuing

...to haunt us despite the reparative work of mourning. In this last sense, they can be seen as anti-commemorative; for whereas mourning domesticates the past with a view toward eventually exorcising it, ghosts move freely between the past and the present, confronting us against our will.” (Huggan, 1).

I want to put some pressure here on Huggan’s adverb, “despite” here, and his term “mourning”, in the light of Freud’s early distinction between mourning and melancholy. In Freud’s context, it is not strictly true that mourning is “anti-commemorative”, nor that it is necessarily simply domesticating of the past, in contrast to the hauntedness Huggan prefers. In a personal letter to a colleague who had lost a son, Freud wrote:

Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know that we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what will fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish. (Freud, *Letters*, 386).

The distinctive roles of mourning and melancholy, both debilitating and empowering, have of course been open to long debate. Like his disciple Lacan, Freud claims a kind of rightness – “and actually this is how it should be” – in relation to remembering loss, “that love which we do not want to relinquish”. It is helpful here to remember Freud’s distinction, that “In mourning the world has become impoverished and empty; during melancholia, it is the ego itself” (Freud, “Mourning”, 246). These are potentially helpful words in relation to communal and national remembering too. Is the post-colonial nation at its very core of identity necessarily *melancholic*, depleted perpetually of

identity, stricken at its very root; or can we trace, rather, the processes of *post-colonial mourning* at work – ways of accepting and remembering loss and its impoverishment, but with the potential for future empowerment, a sense of the rightness of remembering? Freud's "how it should be" suggests processes which are linked to hope, of not merely remaining with "wound culture" and an eternally impoverished ego.

If we are to address the hope entailed in remembering, it is necessary to examine what forms post-colonial remembering is taking in contemporary Australia; remembering experienced differently by indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, but also differently by individual writers. Can memory take on the form of hope: hope as arguably itself an equally haunted process, one which is informed by intimate knowledge of the past and its impoverishments, but which threads towards a future not yet explicit? Huggan suggests that the work of memory produces a mourning which domesticates the past, while the present needs to continue being haunted by ghosts "against our will". However, is there a possibility of remembering which does not simply domesticate the past, but which continues to acknowledge the past's potency and woundedness, *and* which simultaneously empowers us to imagine an unknown future? Is this hopeful remembering possible as a communal – even *national* – form of remembering, or is it possible finally only at the personal, psychic level? We can see a similar conjunction of personal *and* institutional questions about memory and its consequences being asked so powerfully during the July 2008 papal visit to Australia for world youth day by victims of sexual abuse by religious clergy.

The Apology and the future.

The text of the Australian Federal Government's *Apology to the Stolen Generations* was presented in Federal Parliament to a gathering of Indigenous leaders, and via a media hook-up to the nation on February 12, 2008. What does it tell us about current forms of remembering in post-colonial Australia? For instance, what do we make of the fact that the word "future" appears 13 times in this document of 360 words? *The Apology* begins:

Today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

We reflect on their past mistreatment.

We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations – this blemished chapter in our nation's history.

The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future. (*The Apology*).

What can be made of the rhetoric – the metaphors, verbs and pronouns - which construct this symbolic act of remembering? "We", that ancient, homogenising collective noun, is used throughout. Levinas would remind us that this collective pronoun automatically works its inclusiveness through *excluding* some; here the subject "we" immediately sets aside the other as the focus of the apology, all those others – "the Indigenous peoples of this land", the Stolen Generations, those victims of "past mistreatment". This is not just carping on words. *Who* is offering the apology? The agent who perpetrated the "mistreatment" and the blemishes of course: but then "we" becomes "the nation", "the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and

governments”, “We the Parliament of Australia”. Powerful figures, and impersonal and invisible at best. This collective “we” is asked to “*reflect*” on the mistreatment, quiescent at best; but very soon, at line 4, “we” are asked to plunge into the future: “The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia’s history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.”

Some little space is left for mournful reflection, though *hauntedness* is not a metaphor here, being a more difficult public emotion. There seems arguably no longer any use, in the temporal framework of *The Apology*, for Freud’s inconsolability, the perpetual mourning/remembering of loss (though of course that does seem allowed in terms of white diggers remembered as part of the Anzac mythologies). Some would argue that this moving on is appropriate, that the long work of remembering and mourning has been done, and that, as the metaphor has it, a new page has to be turned.

From the opening line of *The Apology*, with its reference to “the oldest continuing cultures in human history”, memory is bound up with particular conceptions of time. The ghosts and traumas of the past are symbolically relegated to that past, as “the future” takes over: “moving forward with confidence to the future”, “For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written”, “a future that embraces all Australians”, “A future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again”, “A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to close the gap”,

A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed.

A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility.

A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners...

Simultaneously the problems are seen to be “enduring”, *and* to be levelled, all Australians being equal partners. While there is much applause for change and renewal, from policy makers, pragmatists and those wanting social justice now, “The Apology” has also been seen by some as a festival of white self-forgiveness which blots out the past and changes little; and by some as merely rhetorical, useless symbolism which changes little *practically*. From both ends of the spectrum comes a refuting of *The Apology*, and doubt that the past can be rewritten, or overwritten in this way, let alone the future. What space is there in the rhetoric, and the still to be realised consequences of *The Apology*, for Derrida’s notion of the future, as necessarily haunted, as that place where “[a]t bottom, the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come, or come back” (Derrida, *Specter*, 39)?

This essay is asking how hope can be constructed for the future if the past is held onto with unremitting woundedness and a concomitant refusal even to imagine possible futures. This unremitting referral back to the woundedness of the past would arguably hold us not in appropriate mourning, but in the realm of melancholy where the ego – an individual’s, a community’s or a nation’s – does not even desire its ghosts to haunt the future, but traps them in the past, or anxiously confronts them again and again in a present which can’t move forward. What might happen – imaginatively, ritually,

politically - if we seek ways of desiring and allowing such ghosts fully into the future? Or perhaps we need to say *finding ways of accepting that they will confront us*, since it's not a matter of agency and simple choice here, either for individuals or nations. This would be a way of remembering, of mourning and of orientation to the future simultaneously. It is comprehensively not a linear model of time, history or remembering. In an interview Derrida speaks again of this specter of the future, of

a future . . . which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable. The Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So if there is a real future behind this other known future, it's l'avenir in that it's the coming of the Other. (Derrida, in Dick and Kofman, film).

Relationship to the past, to the present, and to the future is, for Derrida, anti-linear, full of traces which can never fully be recovered, nor eradicated:

...the rhetoric of memory . . . recalls, recounts, forgets, recounts, and recalls forgetting, referring to the past only to efface what is essential to it: anteriority. (Derrida, *Memoires*, 82).

The traces of the past are turned to, of course, but we cannot be gods in relation to the past, we cannot and should not invoke it as completely *known*. For Derrida 'limitless memory would...be not memory but infinite self-presence'.⁴⁵ (Derrida, *Dissemination*, 109). We remember, we forget, we move into the future, we go on remembering. This is "how it should be"; and equally, we go on filling in, substituting, but at best opening ourselves to a hauntedness which is the trigger, the provocation for deeply imagining the future.

Indigenous Poetry

Hauntedness as permeating any understanding of the future can be read in some of the best poetry by Indigenous artists in Australia. Melbourne academic and poet Tony Birch has recently published a poem/prose sequence "The true history of Beruk: [William Barak] (archive box--no. 3)", spanning the years 1835 to 2007, and invoking the presence of a ghost, the indigenous leader Barak, who lived in the early 1800s, along the upper reaches of the Yarra river with his people, the Wurundjeri. In the opening lines it is the white men of history – Cook, Buckley, Batman – and then a different kind of speaking by Beruk.

'My Words', Beruk-Ngamajet--1835

Captain Cook marched--
in jacket and brass button
Buckley stood ragged
in possum skin at Muddy Creek
Batman came looking
with glass, beads, powder
and mirrors in a wooden boat

around the sea

Buckley spoke his old tongue--
the visitor is not ghost
he is not ghost
look at Batman's face
do not touch his skin
his bread or his house
do not touch his house

Beruk spoke the truth--
whitefellow shoot us
down like kangaroo
whitefellow come
by and by
and shoot us
shoot us down

whitefellow come
and shoot us down

The whole poem, with its prose and verse sections alternating, moves from this section set in 1835 to 2005, and we find a surprising, ghostly and moving finale to the poem, as Beruk's spirit reinhabits the riverbed he once knew so well:

Beruk visits the riverbed--2005

Beruk moves quietly through the canyons of the city--all is stone still now. He passes the winking lights--imitating life. He listens for machines grinding to failure. Beruk observes his reflection in the flaws of glass, now inhabited by the petrified few. Women offer themselves. Men spit abuse. While dead children drift silently by, on a journey from the river to the ocean. Beruk slips into the water, beneath the heavy metals--the leaching arsenic, iron oxides, poisons and the death throes of toxic fish. Below the monster hulls of ships the current carries Beruk onward and down, to where the riverbed of the Wurundjeri awaits his return. Beruk calls into the darkness--singing his travels until his feet meet the floor of 100,000 lives once lived. In the beauty and blackness of the riverbed Beruk greets his son, David. He then greets his father--the Ngarnajet. They sing, feet raising a rhythm of shifting earth:

we will be gone
all gone soon
we will be gone
and we will come
we will come
and be

we will be

Is this simply nostalgia, memory struggling to hold on to what is passed, impossible, no longer potent? The fact is that in 2008 we do have the gritty persistence of this poem, with its images and multiple voices drawn up from the archives, and we have the contemporary indigenous poet's will to "sing, feet raising a rhythm of shifting earth", just as he represented Ngarnajet and Beruk and David did. In an essay reflecting on his own poem, Birch writes about Port Phillip Bay and Melbourne, of

... the recent dredging of the river - the Yarra River or the bay...Commercial interest, globalisation means that we're going to become a gateway city again in Melbourne and that we need to have a deeper channel to get bigger tankers into the port so that we can ship more goods into the hinterland as we would have said in the 19th Century. I was very interested when this dredging occurred, that in fact part of the exploration talked about the original pre-European Wurundjeri river bed, which is in Port Philip Bay and which exists today at about 115 metres in a ravine at the centre of Port Philip Bay...that Wurundjeri story which is deepest within the landscape...these stories reflecting contemporary landscapes...I do not want William Barak's story or the story of the Wurundjeri people to be a historical story. I want it to be a story that resonates in Melbourne today, so that we understand it today. (Birch, "Promise")

Past, present and future are haunted, *because* individuals, communities and nations are memory animals. But memory does not offer stability and solidity. It cannot simply be relegated to a closed page or a dusty vault. Memory works through a haunting, a melancholy which moves beyond merely "wound culture" it is an honouring of "that love which we do not want to relinquish". The imagined/remembered figure of Beruk is one which causes us to mourn for a past of destruction and deep woundedness; but it is also a spectral figure which finds shape into the future, "where the riverbed of the Wurundjeri awaits his return". In memory there is nostalgia, mourning, and loss, but not necessarily and finally the impoverishment of ego. Rather, the post-colonial poetry of Australian Indigenous poets enables – and is the product of - active, imaginative, historical remembering, and refiguring into the future.

References

- The Apology to the Stolen Generations*. ABC News Website: <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/events/apology/text.htm>> Accessed July 10, 2008.
- Birch, Tony. "The true history of Beruk: [William Barak] (archive box--no. 3)". *Meanjin*, 65:1, March, 2006, pp.72-75.
- Birch, Tony. "'Promise not to tell': Interrogating Colonialism's worst (or best) kept secrets," Transcript of paper presented at First Person: International Digital Storytelling Conference, ACMI, 2006.
- <http://www.acmi.net.au/global/media/first_person_birch.pdf>. Accessed June 14, 2008.
- Derrida*, dir Dick, Kirby and Kofman, Amy Ziering, Jane Doe Films, 2003. Derrida, Jacques. *Disseminations*. Barbara Johnson (trans). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

- Derrida, Jacques. *Memoires*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx, the state of the debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*. Peggy Kamuf (trans). London: Routledge, 1994.
- Freud, Ernst L. (ed.) *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*. Basic Books: New York, 1960.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." *Pelican Freud* (1979), 11, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1917, pp. 245-68.
- Huggan, Graham. *Travel Writing and the Uncanny*. Borders and Crossings conference, University of Melbourne, July 16, 2008. Personal correspondence, 2008.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Seán Hand (trans). Sander Gilman and Steven T. Katz (eds). Johns Hopkins Jewish Studies. Johns Hopkins UP: Baltimore, MD, 1990.
- Watson, Sam Wagan. *Smoke Encrypted Whispers*. St. Lucia: UQP, 2004.
- Watson, Sam Wagan. "Author's notes — conclusion." *This Line is Now Connected*, Angela Rockel, *Jacket* 27, April 2005, cited at <http://jacketmagazine.com/27/rock-waga.html>. (Accessed July 15, 2008), 2005.
- Zehfuss, Maja. "Derrida's Memory, War and the Politics of Ethics"
- Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy*. Madeleine Fagan (ed). Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007, pp. 97-111.

Lyn McCredden teaches Australian Literature and Cultural Studies at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of the critical monographs *James McAuley* (1992), and *Bridgings: Readings in Australian Women's Poetry* (1996, with Rose Lucas), as well as the volume *Intimate Horizons: the Sacred in Australian Literature* (forthcoming, ATF Press, 2009, with Bill Ashcroft and Frances Devlin-Glass)