

## Of Holes and Wounds: Postcolonial Trauma and the Gothic in Catherine Jinks's *The Road*\*

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses Catherine Jinks's *The Road* (2004), a multi-protagonist novel, looking into the relationship between personal and historical forms of trauma in the context of postcolonial Australia and following Rothberg's comparatist approach. More specifically, and taking advantage of the many synergies between the traumatic and the gothic, it studies the novel's reliance on gothic tropes like the uncanny and the abject in order to demonstrate that both theme and narrative form work together against the overcoming of individual and national plights. The indigenous paratexts that frame Jinks's story, read in the light of Walter Benjamin's theses on history, prove particularly meaningful in this respect.

**Keywords:** Trauma; Australian postcolonial gothic; the uncanny; the abject; Indigenous tales.

**Summary:** Introduction. Trauma theory in the postcolonial context. Trauma and the gothic. Evil across cultures. Domestic violence in excess: The founding trauma of the Australian nation. Unhomely Australia. Conclusion.

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza la novela *The Road* (2004), de Catherine Jinks, siguiendo el enfoque comparatista de Rothberg, con idea de explorar la conexión entre traumas individuales e históricos en la Australia poscolonial. En concreto, y aprovechando las sinergias entre lo traumático y lo gótico, se analizan tropos de la literatura gótica como el concepto freudiano de lo siniestro y la versión de lo abyecto de Kristeva. La intención fundamental es demostrar que tanto el tema de la novela como su forma narrativa dificultan la resolución de la problemática individual y de la nacional. Los paratextos indígenas que enmarcan el relato de Jinks, leídos a la luz de las tesis sobre la historia de Benjamin, resultan particularmente significativos a este respecto.

**Palabras clave:** Trauma; literatura gótica australiana postcolonial; lo siniestro; lo abyecto; relatos indígenas.

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**Sumario:** Introducción. La teoría del trauma en el contexto postcolonial. El trauma y lo gótico. El mal a través de las culturas. Más allá de la violencia doméstica: el trauma fundacional de la nación australiana. Australia siniestra. Conclusión.

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## INTRODUCTION

The characters of Catherine Jinks's *The Road* (2004), a multi-protagonist novel set in contemporary Australia, are caught up in a mysterious form of spatial acting-out, as they drive once and again over the same stretch of the Silver City Highway, New South Wales, unable to reach their destinations. Much to everybody's bewilderment, the bush landscape bordering the road remains strangely static. Some blame their maps for inaccuracy, others think of but dare not mention UFOs, magnetic fields, time loops and black holes, till it dawns on them that the phenomenon might be related to some killings in the area that look like the work of a maniac. The maniac is, in fact, stranded with the group of characters after having savagely murdered his wife and stepson, his wife's great uncle, and two brothers on a holiday trip that happened to be around. It is when the ground appears to bleed and when the flora and the fauna take up an active role in preventing the characters from leaving the area, that it becomes apparent to them these strange happenings could be related to the Indigenous question, still an open wound in the country. Domestic trauma, personal trauma in the face of unexpected events, and the historical traumas inherent in colonisation and subsisting in the postcolony, intermingle in Jinks's novel. Besides investigating into the continuity between past and present traumas, personal and collective plights—a reading *The Road* openly invites—this paper intends to read trauma across cultures following Michael Rothberg's comparatist approach. The study of postcolonial trauma in *The Road* is complemented by an analysis of the novel's gothic dimension. *The Road* starts as a dark fantasy where the natural and the supernatural meet, and gradually develops into a horror story that draws heavily on familiar gothic tropes such as the uncanny and the abject, dear to Australian postcolonial gothic. Since traditional trauma theory and postcolonial studies make strange bedfellows (Visser, "Decolonising Trauma Theory" 250), I will first tackle the complex relationship between both fields as outlined by Stef Craps and Irene Visser. This will be followed by a

section on the synergies between trauma and the gothic based on Marita Nadal's insights on the topic. As the subsequent close analysis of *The Road* intends to prove, the tropes and strategies of trauma and gothic writing come together in Jinks's novel, preventing a facile resolution of both the personal and the national lines of plot.

## 1. TRAUMA THEORY IN THE POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

Drawing on the American Psychiatric Association's definition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Cathy Caruth has defined trauma as "a response to an event 'outside the range of usual human experience'" ("Trauma and Experience" 3). In medical literature as well as in Freud's work, trauma is considered a wound inflicted upon the mind (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 3). This wound of the mind—understood as a "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world," is not, Caruth explains, "like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that . . . is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (*Unclaimed Experience* 3–4). In the face of the overwhelming presence of trauma in our "catastrophic age," Caruth contends that "trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves" ("Trauma and Experience" 11).

Despite the important contribution of trauma studies to the postcolonial field, critics like Stef Craps and Irene Visser have drawn attention to the pitfalls of a direct transposition of the premises of classical trauma theory to the nonwestern world. In *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, Stef Craps states that Caruth's work and other founding texts of trauma studies "largely fail to live up to [the] promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement" (2). He enumerates four main reasons why trauma studies, "rather than promoting crosscultural solidarity," can contribute to the perpetuation of "existing injustices and inequalities":

they marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted the universal validity of

definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas. (2)

In line with Derek Summerfield, Craps argues that “the uncritical crosscultural application of psychological concepts developed in the West amounts to a form of cultural imperialism” (22). The purpose of Craps’s book is, thus, to purge trauma theory of the biases of the context in which it was born in order to make it suitable for the interpretation of literary texts produced in the postcolonising world. To this end, Craps calls for a broader focus that extends to include nonwestern traumas at the same time that he challenges the individual, event-based, transhistorical model of hegemonic trauma theory, which he deems ill suited to the analysis of “postcolonial literature that bears witness to the suffering engendered by racial or colonial oppression” (5). Careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, Craps affirms that once “reshaped, resituated, and redirected” (14), trauma theory, along with psychoanalysis and deconstruction—which birthed it—can make an invaluable contribution to postcolonial thought (35): “an inclusive and culturally sensitive trauma theory can assist in raising awareness of injustice both past and present and opening up the possibility of a more just global future—and, in so doing, remain faithful to the ethical foundations of the field” (127).

In her article “Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies,” Irene Visser suggestively wonders whether trauma theory can be “postcolonized” (270). Like Craps, she warns against uncritically adopting the western model of trauma for the analysis of postcolonial texts (272). The lack of historical particularity of Freud’s theory of trauma on which the western model is based “sits uneasily with postcolonialism’s eponymous focus on historical, political and socio-economic factors in the processes of colonization and decolonization” (273). However, although Freud’s theory is certainly found wanting when applied to the nonwestern world, Visser acknowledges it “as a point of departure that invites further expansion as well as emendation to enable an openness towards nonwestern, non-Eurocentric models” (280). She suggests that the definition of trauma in a postcolonial trauma theory should be expanded in order to be able to account “for the aftermath of

colonialism's systematic oppression, with its characteristics of prolonged, repeated and cumulative stressor events" (276), often involving "complex issues of complicity, guilt and agency" (280). Visser takes up the issue of postcolonial trauma again in her 2015 essay "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects," a thorough review of what has been achieved so far as well as what still needs to be done in the project of adapting the western trauma model to the postcolonial field. In this second article, Visser stresses the role of postcolonial fiction in narrativizing trauma and allowing "insights into specifics of the colonial past as a pathway to integration of the traumatic memory" ("Decolonizing Trauma Theory" 258). Postcolonial fiction, she states, "dramatizes the notion that the trauma of colonialism can and must be addressed" (258).

The story of *The Road*, set in contemporary Australia but embedded in an old Indigenous tale, connects the experience of trauma as an event-based individual phenomenon with the wider collective damage inflicted by the Europeans on the native population reenacted in the murder of an Indigenous woman and her son. Like Tancred unintentionally slaying Clorinda in the ur-story of classical trauma theory (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 2), the white characters in the novel are confronted with the traumas of colonialism in their belated form. Extrapolating from Caruth, the traumatic events described by Jinks become "fully evident . . . in connection with another time" ("Introduction" 8), namely, the colonial period of Australia's history, whose ugly legacy lives on. Issues of complicity, guilt and agency haunt the group of white characters, who, like Tancred, stand ambiguously in-between the figure of the perpetrator and that of the victim of trauma.

## 2. TRAUMA AND THE GOTHIC

Marita Nadal has written about the desirability of relating trauma and the gothic. According to her, not only trauma but also the gothic evokes "something prior that eludes us," an enigma "that implies uncertainty and entails a difficult access to history" (162). The following quotation from Punter and Bronfen's "Gothic: Violence, Trauma and the Ethical" substantiates Nadal's thesis:

[The Gothic] recognises that in fact, wherever one digs one will come across the bones of the dead . . . and that instead of such excavations

providing a new historical security, a new sense of order and origin, they will merely produce an “overhang,” an increasingly unstable superstructure as the foundations are progressively exposed. (16)

Trauma and the gothic, Nadal argues, are also “connected by their ghostly and spectral aspects, which originate in the physical and/or psychological wounds of the past” (162). It comes as no surprise that the tropes of the gothic often invade the discourse of trauma scholars, as the following words by Caruth show: “To be traumatized is precisely to be *possessed* by an image or event” (qtd. in Nadal 162; my emphasis). Besides the centrality of haunting, gothic and trauma also share a liking for excess (Nadal 169). In sum, in Nadal’s words, “if the Gothic explores taboo, terror, suspense, and ‘the guilty secrets of past transgression’ (Botting 1996: 114), trauma is also concerned with fear, secrecy, guilt, uncertainty, possession and haunting” (166).

The same can be said of the set of narrative techniques favoured by both gothic and trauma texts. In many trauma narratives, Anne Whitehead states, “the real can no longer appear directly or be expressed in a conventional realist mode” (84). The range of devices Whitehead identifies in narratives dealing with trauma could perfectly read as a list of gothic stylistic features. Repetition, figuration, gaps, indirection, intertextuality, fragmentation and the instability of the narrative voice, among others, figure prominently in trauma and gothic texts alike, making meaning and understanding problematic. One of the reasons for the symbiosis between trauma and the gothic is that, borrowing Whitehead’s words, “trauma fiction often demands of the reader a suspension of disbelief and novelists frequently draw on the supernatural” (84).

Notably, the gothic interest in evil makes of the genre a privileged form for the depiction of postcolonial anxieties. As many a critic has noticed, postcolonial writers often draw on the gothic “to articulate the unspeakable history of colonialism” and to “reveal hidden pasts and create ways of expressing traumatic . . . histories” (A. Rudd 2). In spite of the fact that the gothic is a “transplanted genre” (Gelder, qtd. in A. Rudd 9), it has fruitfully adapted to the particular context of the excolonies. As Gelder, elsewhere, reminds the reader: “Australia was colonised and settled by the British—towards the end of the eighteenth century—at precisely the moment at which the Gothic novel emerged as a clearly defined genre back home” (115). In line with the experience of the group

of characters in *The Road*, the gothic, according to David Punter and Glennis Byron, encourages “a specific view of history,” one in which “the past can never be left behind” and “will reappear and exact a necessary price” (55).

### 3. EVIL ACROSS CULTURES

The oral history of the Indigenous peoples of Australia constitutes a reservoir of wisdom and experience passed on from generation to generation and constantly enriched by new observations (McKay xvii). The Indigenous tale that frames Jinks’s *The Road* in the form of a prologue recounts the story of how evil was released upon the world and clearly prefigures the events of the novel.<sup>1</sup> The ancestral hero Ngurunderi killed a wombat, whose spilled blood took the form of a man and attacked him. Ngurunderi, then, killed the Evil One, but left his body where it had fallen. As the story goes on,

Upon resuming his journey, Ngurunderi soon realised that he was making no progress. He recognised the same sand hills and the same trees. No matter how far he walked, he could not escape the body, which was absorbing every creature that approached it. He realised that, unless he utterly destroyed it, the Evil One’s body would continue to be a threat to every living thing. (Jinks)

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<sup>1</sup> The inclusion of the indigenous story in Jinks’s novel poses two related problems. In a note, the author acknowledges that the prologue derives from “a story retold by A.W. Reed in *Aboriginal Myths, Legends and Fables*,” a publication that was “hugely influential on Australian culture and the perception of Dreaming stories in the 1970s and 1980s, although,” the author admits, “the authenticity of some of the stories was later questioned.” This means that the tale reaches us at a third remove from the original and that we cannot trust its authenticity either. More importantly, it raises the question of appropriation of indigenous lore without permission, a practice Helen F. McKey strongly denounces: “people have gathered, plundered, and published books of Aboriginal stories, regardless of whether they were secret stories for use in initiation rites or intended for public use” (xv). “In many cases,” McKey adds, “a number of these stories were altered—or sanitized—to suit the prevailing sensitivity and values of the era. These acts deeply offended the Aboriginal people” (xv). For further discussion of the topic of cultural appropriation, see George J. Sefa Dei’s “Rethinking the Role of Indigenous Knowledges in the Academy” and James O. Young’s “Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation.”

In the mind of the western reader, the indigenous tale evokes the words of Walter Benjamin in his influential 1940 essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History”:

Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious. (255; original emphasis)

Earlier in his essay, in quasi-mystical terms, Benjamin invokes the responsibility of present generations in righting the wrongs of the past: “There is a secret agreement between the past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim” (254; original emphasis). The whole essay, finished shortly before his flight from Nazi France and his suicide in Spain, is pervaded by a sense of urgency. “The ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (257), he says, in reference to fascism and the pressing need to fight it. Like Benjamin’s thesis, *The Road*’s prologue refers to the power of the enemy and its wide-ranging effects and makes plain the imperative need to stop him. Unlike Benjamin, however, the indigenous story does not mention hope.

The quotation from an anonymous indigenous writer on Jambuwal the Thunder Man—which, as an epigraph, precedes the story of Ngurunderi—situates the novel in the context of the colonisation of Australia by the Europeans: “After the night of the storm even the whites must have learned that Jambuwal is stronger than any of us, that to harm him or his people is to risk his anger. The white man may have guns, and dynamite to blast the rocks, but Jambuwal is the mightiest of all” (Jinks). Despite what the fragment states about the awesome power of Jambuwal, it has been the whites, paraphrasing Benjamin, that have not ceased to be victorious over the Indigenes, defeated and defenceless in spite of the protection of their mythological heroes. Many a thinker, starting with Aimé Césaire, has, in fact, found disturbing parallelisms between the evils of colonialism and those of fascism. Situating himself in the position of the European, Césaire believed that the Nazi genocide was no other thing than colonialism come home (Rothberg 93), a poignant form of historical retaliation for the evils inflicted in the process of the imperial enterprise. In his seminal book *Multidirectional Memory*:



*Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* Michael Rothberg touches on Césaire's and also Arendt's ideas on the intricate connections between fascism and colonialism in order to demonstrate how different historical traumas echo and illuminate each other (69–70).

The most obvious incarnation of evil in *The Road* is John Carr, an insane young man who has recently lost his job and has been abandoned by his wife. Grace—an urban Indigene—and her small son Nathan have suffered physical and psychological abuse, in what appears as a clear case of domestic violence. Although there is an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) against John forbidding him to come close to them, Grace still does not trust him and is hiding in his great uncle's farm at Thorndale, close to the Silver City Highway. Nathan whiles away the time digging “holes in the red dirt of Thorndale with a dessert spoon” (1), somehow anticipating, as we shall see, his own destiny. John is convinced that Grace is the source of all the negative things happening to him, including a crash with a kangaroo that almost killed him, and attributes Grace's awesome powers to her indigenous blood: “she had called on the black forces at her disposal, and tried to dismantle his life” (282).

Early in the novel, Grace is discovered and killed, her body horribly mutilated by John, who still mistrusts her when dead. When later on the ground starts bleeding—“the scratches in the earth looked extraordinarily like open wounds” (281)—John blames Grace for it: “He knew whose blood it was . . . He should have known that this would happen—that even death wouldn't finish her” (281–82). Nathan, hiding in a deep hole in the ground, suffers a similar fate. John's dog follows his scent and he is eventually shot dead as well. The hole in which the boy looks for shelter, described as dark, mysterious and impenetrable, and which the dog refuses to enter (99), is more tomb than protective womb. Neither the reader nor the characters ever get to see the kid's body. Not even the murderer himself, for he fires from the mouth of the hole, fires until his magazine is empty. After watching “a dark, doomed red” “glistening thread . . . slowly trickling out of the hole,” “satisfied,” John leaves (120). In contrast, the body of Nathan's mother is exposed and described in gruesome detail. But not his. The characters that discover the shooting know of Nathan's existence through a picture in his mother's wallet and feel compelled to look for him. In fact, the missing kid in his hole seems to exert a kind of gravitational attraction on them all. Although his body is not found in the diegesis of the novel, Nathan's absent presence haunts

both characters and readers alike: “‘We never found the kid,’ she squawked. ‘There was a kid livin there, and we never found ’im . . . If we go back we could take another look’” (267).

#### 4. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN EXCESS: THE FOUNDING TRAUMA OF THE AUSTRALIAN NATION

The image of Nathan’s body in the hole is rich in meaning and invites reading on different levels. The battered boy savagely killed at the hands of his stepfather exposes the fissures in the patriarchal family, a topic central to the gothic genre from its origins, and puts the spotlight on the devastating effects of domestic violence. Extrapolating from Lacan’s psychoanalysis, it rules out completeness and closure and points to the lack around which the subject is always formed. Like the experience of trauma, Nathan’s body remains unimaginable, inaccessible to representation, withheld both from the rest of the characters and the reader as well, an absent referent in Poststructuralist thought. More importantly herein, Nathan’s death can also be read in excess of his personal plight. Although Joseph Flanagan in “The Seduction of History: Trauma, Re-Memory, and the Ethics of the Real” writes about “the difficulties that arise when an experience of trauma is shifted from the personal to the historical and the political” (391), he admits to a certain continuity. The affinity, he states,

lies not in the correspondence of historical trauma with personal memory but in the re-enactment of historical trauma within the constitutive processes of subject formation. Historical trauma, in other words, does not so much follow the neurobiological path of instinctual processes as the psychic life of the individual presupposes the existence of historical trauma. Individual trauma thus follows the path of the historical, not vice versa. (394)

*The Road* seems to ease out the process and encourage the association of Nathan and his mother’s mistreatment at the hands of a white character and their tragic fate with the founding trauma of the Australian nation as a whole: the dispossession and genocide of its indigenous population. In *Cartographic Fictions* Karen Piper alludes to the infamous doctrine of *terra nullius*, held until 1992, which conveniently spread the false idea that the colonisers were “invading a

void” (8) by glossing over the indisputable fact that the land was being taken violently from its native population. For Tom Lawson, *terra nullius* was “probably the most eloquent indication of how little impact indigenous populations had on the British mind or that of other European colonisers” (3). “‘Of course,’ he adds, ‘the British did not believe that the land was literally uninhabited’” (3), but “because indigenous Australians did not operate any formal laws of property, and indeed because they did not exploit natural resources through farming in a manner that the British could recognise, it was assumed the land was essentially empty” (3–4). It was this assumption that paved the way for the British to claim legal ownership of the Australian land and for the subsequent invasion, with disastrous consequences for the native population. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies (AIATSIS) mentions the massacres as well as the devastating effects of new diseases (“First Encounters and Frontier Conflict”). The fact that Grace and Nathan leave their home in fear for their lives and are eventually tracked down and murdered by John raises echoes of the fate of their ancestors during colonisation at the same time that it brings to notice the enduring discrimination of indigenous Australians.

The killing of Nathan and Grace, the only two indigenous characters in the novel, triggers off a strange phenomenon that affects the rest of the protagonists, all white, all travelling on the Silver City Highway, an almost seven-hundred-kilometre-long road in the arid Far West region of New South Wales. The area the Silver City Highway serves is associated with the “epic journey” of Captain Charles Sturt and his companions in their “attempt to reach the centre of Australia and to resolve some of the geographical problems that were hindering the outward growth of settlement” (“Historical Roads of New South Wales” 2). The name “Silver City,” a reference to the rich mineral deposits in the Broken Hill area, further emphasises the highway’s connection with the colonial enterprise and the exploitation of the country’s raw materials and resources. In *The Road*, Alec, a truck driver; Chris and Graham, two brothers on a holiday trip; Noel and Linda Ferguson and their three children; Ross, a retired banker, and his wife Verlie; Ambrose and his girlfriend Georgie; Del, an eccentric old lady and her dog; Col, a retired constructor; and the murderer himself discover that no matter how long they drive they cannot reach their destinations. As happens with Ngurunderi in the indigenous tale, they are unable to make any progress. Some even run out of petrol in the attempt and have to be taken in by the

others. There is, however, nothing wrong with time, which goes on its course. The problem seems to come straight from the place. Ross, a rational man, blames the map for letting him down: “He began to fold the map, which of course wouldn’t cooperate . . . ‘So all I can suggest is that the map’s wrong. They’ve misprinted the numbers or something’” (124); his wife Verlie notices that the distance marker posts on the road are illegible (122); and John, the killer, believes he has misread his map and misjudged the distances (283). In her study of maps—like roads, a key instrument of colonial occupation—Piper appropriately argues that “the idea of the map was invested in overcoming the darkness of primitive territorial organisation and establishing sovereignty, as whiteness, as home; but it left residues of the uncanny within its borders” (12). In *The Road*, maps prove to be totally useless in helping characters out of the precise stretch of the Silver City Highway they are stuck in. It is the uncanny element, as Piper puts it, that prevails over the reassuring familiarity of the chartered territory.

In *The Road*, some of the characters are under shock after visiting the scene of the crime and bumping into the mutilated bodies: “How many corpses could a man endure before he went insane? They would haunt him for years—he knew it. They would populate his dreams” (252). The fact that the laws of physics seem to have stopped working adds an even more disturbing turn. The response of most of the characters is, at first, denial. “We’re getting out of here as fast as we can,” says Linda. “We’re going straight to the police. God, I can’t believe this is happening” (184). Denial combines with repetition compulsion, another common reaction in the face of trauma, with every attempt the characters make at driving away from the spot: “they were stuck on a kind of treadmill, like characters in an old cartoon, passing the same stretch of roadside (two trees, one rock, two trees, one rock) over and over and over again” (192).

In “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” Michelle Balaev explores the connections between the concepts of trauma and place. The role of place, she argues, is “to portray trauma’s effects through metaphoric and material means,” inserting the traumatic experience of the individual in a larger cultural context (149). This is particularly the case with postcolonies like Australia, where places still bear the marks of past traumas in the form of genocide sites, erased toponymy, desecration of indigenous sacred sites, forced relocations, confinement in reservations and general deprivation of the right ownership of the land. One of the

most powerful ways in which trauma becomes manifest in *The Road* is in its anti-conventional treatment of place. In the novel, the landscape is no mere canvas on which the action unfolds but the most important agent in furthering the plot.

The landscape in *The Road* is unmistakably Australian and progressively forces on the white characters the connection between their problems and the traumatic history of the country. The group is stranded in the middle of the bush, portrayed from their perspective as an “endless, boring stretch of outback” (68), which makes it especially difficult to know whether they are progressing or not. “It was the kind of landscape that you could easily ignore,” thinks one of the characters before things start to go wrong (49). The first to admit that something strange is happening is Alec, a local truck driver. “‘Look, I know this road!’ Alec cried. ‘I could drive it in me sleep! Nothing’s changin! It’s all the same! The same stretch over and over!’” (115). He and Peter—the eldest of the Fergusons’ kids—are the only ones that are aware of “the big picture,” as Alec puts it (317):

“For God’s sake!” Alec threw up his hands, and began to tug at his dusty brown curls. “Will you wake up? We’ve been driven off the fuckin road, can’t you see that? First they didn’t want us getting to Broken Hill—now they don’t even want us on the fucking highway! Didn’t you see all those guts? They were there for a reason! They were there to scare us! They were there to make us turn back!” (316)

Alec also notices that “no matter how far they went, they always seemed to end up at Thorndale,” the scene of the crime. “Was there a *reason* for that?” he wonders (219; original emphasis). Peter does not like the fact that the adults, with the exception of Alec, are more concerned with finding a possible solution than with discovering the cause of their problem: “The trouble is, Peter thought, there might not be a solution if we don’t work out what’s happening first” (272). Del, a God-fearing person, believes they are being punished for having left the kid (296). “Is it something Aboriginal?” (344) asks Georgie, not exactly an enlightened character. The reader, who, unlike the characters, has access to the paratexts, knows that she is certainly right. The group is being summoned to engage in an ancestral fight against evil, personified in the present in the figure of John, the killer of the two indigenous characters. In a further sense, considering the bigger picture, they are also

being made to pay for the harm inflicted on the land and its native population by their white ancestors. As the former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd stated in his momentous 2008 “Sorry Speech,” “we are the bearers of many blessings from our ancestors; therefore, we must also be the bearers of their burdens as well.” Besides, these crimes are not a thing of the past but continue to exist in current racist policies and practices. Extrapolating from Craps’s *Postcolonial Witnessing*, the characters are not addressed as innocent victims but as bystanders and potential collaborators, in order to make them conscious of their “own role in the ongoing conspiracy of silence regarding Aboriginal history and Aboriginal dispossession” (42). The land in *The Road*, literally bleeds (281) and the sap flows out of the trees as if from an open wound (310). The group, moreover, encounters what look like indigenous rock paintings in the form of hand prints. Peter notes that “while some were dark, and dry, and old, some were redder. Clearer. Almost... Almost fresher” (315)—a veiled allusion to the murder of Grace and her kid, as well.

Alec, once more, shows his insight in discovering that the reason for all the inexplicable natural phenomena is John (358). It is Linda that reaches the man first and throws kerosene on him. He then trips and falls into the fire they had made to light themselves (394). A supernatural blast of wind seizes the blanket Noel casts over John in an attempt to put out the flames (395) and his body is “reduced to a blackened skeleton by an intense—perhaps unnatural—heat” (397). When John dies, after having killed everybody but Alec and the Fergusons, “the clamour of crows was superseded by a curious rushing noise, like the wind, or the sea, or the beating of ten thousand wings. It died away quickly” (398). The first thing Peter sees when he wakes up in the car the following morning is the figure of a policeman and it is at this point that the plot ends abruptly. Although the narrative finishes in *medias res* in what concerns the surviving characters, still “stuck in the bush, on a track, exactly where they had ended up the night before when the petrol ran out” (398), a short epilogue helps move the story full circle. The epilogue features Ngurunderi building a fire to burn the body of the Evil One: “As the body was consumed, many insects and birds were released. Only then did he feel free.”

There are, however, remarkable differences between the indigenous story of Ngurunderi and the events in *The Road*. Significantly enough, while Ngurunderi manages to achieve his purpose singlehandedly in the

myth, in Jinks's novel the undoing of evil requires the outside help of the group of white protagonists. The natural world takes up an active role in warning and engaging the characters, but it is finally through the agency of his peers that John dies. In line with Kevin Rudd's remarks in his "Sorry Speech," it will remain primarily the responsibility of the whites to right the wrongs that their forefathers committed in the first place. John's insanity and his horrible crimes in *The Road* are but a remnant of the collective madness of colonialism, which encouraged in the conquered nations terrible practices that were forbidden by law in the metropolis.

There are further differences between Ngurunderi's story and the outcome of Jinks's plot. At the level of the ancestral tale, everything seems definitely settled. In Ngurunderi's tale, the complete destruction of the Evil One by fire is followed by the liberation of humans and non-humans alike. In the novel, in contrast, not everything is resolved. Will the police believe the incredible story of nature's conspiracy to get the characters involved in a form of supernatural justice? Will Alec and the Fergusons ever recover from the traumatic experience? The role of the survivor is not an easy one, as Judith Herman remarks in her seminal *Trauma and Recovery*: "to be spared oneself, in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience" (54), pointing to the possibility of trauma in the future. As will be explained in the following section, the novel's abrupt ending and its loose strands are further emphasised by Jinks's reliance on gothic strategies and tropes.

## 5. UNHOMELY AUSTRALIA

*The Road* is divided into eighteen chapters, each made up of a series of sections in which the various threads of the plot criss-cross for the purpose of building up suspense. Although narration is consistently external, the position of the focaliser is taken up by more than one character. The use of prismatic views and constant changes in focalisation further contribute to unsettling meaning, as they work against closure and short-circuit any attempts at a smooth resolution of the plot. That meaning in *The Road* is not easily settled becomes clear on closer inspection of the indigenous story of Ngurunderi, this time from the perspective of John, the killer and one of the character-focalisers. The dead body that absorbs every creature approaching it and that poses a

threat to every living thing in Ngurunderi's story is that of the Evil One. The body that obstructs the characters' progress in *The Road* is, however, obviously that of Grace, alongside the dead body of her son Nathan, since John, earlier identified as the source of all evil in the novel, does not die until the very last pages. The effects of Grace's mutilated corpse on the characters, in a sense, seems to support John's thesis that she has put a curse on him: "he had to get out before something bad happened—before the dark forces of her will regrouped [sic], somehow. She was dead now, but he still didn't trust her. He was half-afraid that he had failed to destroy her poisonous spirit, despite all his efforts" (118). The fears he expresses next are well founded, as the narrative will later confirm: "What if he had simply released it into the air, or into the soil? Suppose it managed to strike back at him in the usual way, by turning the world against him?" (118).

It is clear for the reader that there are disturbing parallelisms between John and the hero Ngurunderi, as well as John's expectations about Grace and the deeds of the Evil One in the myth. Their awesome capacity for shape shifting makes them nearly invulnerable and still dangerous after death. This proves that, as is often the case with gothic texts, framing devices like the indigenous story in *The Road* contribute to destabilising straightforward reading, thereby foregrounding the instability of meaning and ruling out closure. On a minor key, *The Road* features some other common gothic narrative strategies like prolepses and meta-commentary. Verlie, for instance, pondering on marriage, remarks: "You couldn't expect a fairy tale ending" (204), something that equally applies to the novel itself. Despite the fact that this kind of deterministic commentary rather than disseminate meaning helps to fix it—as it warns the reader in the know about the outcome of the plot—the overwhelming presence in *The Road* of uncanny and abject elements, two fixtures of postcolonial gothic in general and Australian gothic stories in particular, eventually tips the balance firmly in favour of uncertainty, ambiguity and confusion.

In her study of postcolonial gothic fictions, Alison Rudd devotes a chapter to Australian gothic, characterised, she affirms, by the overwhelming presence of the uncanny and the abject. Significantly enough, for Homi Bhabha, the "unhomely" or uncanny is "the paradigmatic condition of the postcolonial." It is in an "unhomely moment," Bhabha states, that the relationship of a personal trauma to a wider political reality comes to light (A. Rudd 14). In Jinks's novel,



Alec's familiarity with the road on which the action unfolds is suddenly and unexpectedly shattered by the series of strange events related to the killing of Grace and her son, forcing on him and the rest of the characters the connection with the predicament of indigenous peoples. Gelder and Jacobs in *Uncanny Australia* relate representations of the uncanny in contemporary Australia to the Mabo case, the historical decision of The High Court of Australia in 1992 to rule out the doctrine of *terra nullius* and confirm the natives' traditional land rights (A. Rudd 18). As Catriona Elder summarises in her book *Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity*, Edward Koiki Mabo "undertook a long battle with the Queensland government to prove his people—the Meriam people of the Island of Mer in the Torres Strait—had title to their land and had never ceded this to the British" (175). The High Court's decision in favour of Mabo inaugurated the "era of native title" (175). In Elder's words, "there were grounds for indigenous peoples to claim their land had wrongly been taken from them and to argue they should have it back or be compensated" (175). As Haydie Gooder and Jane M. Jacobs argue in "'On the Border of the Unsayable': The Apology in Postcolonizing Australia," indigenous claims to the land shook the sense of belonging of non-indigenous Australians.

The anxieties of white Australians often find their way into fiction in the form of uncanny experiences. "An 'uncanny' experience may occur," Gelder and Jacobs affirm, "when one's home—one's place—is rendered somehow and in some sense unfamiliar; one has the experience, in other words, of being 'in place' and 'out of place' simultaneously" (qtd. in A. Rudd 18). Through the uncanny "the settler is reminded of the 'unsettledness' of their occupation" and of the burden of guilt that non-indigenous Australians have inherited from the colonial past. The words of Gerry Turcotte on the Australian settlers' "experience of being 'trapped in a strange world where the laws of "reason" no longer function' and where they are 'oppressed by the uncanniness of place'" (A. Rudd 18, 105) can be literally applied to the white characters of *The Road*. Their sense of dislocation and the threats emanating from the place can be read as a trace of traditional white fear of the Australian outback and its original inhabitants during settler times, which resists total erasure in contemporary times and is fuelled by the indigenous land claims.

Besides the suspension of the laws of physics that explain progress through space, the characters in *The Road* must confront a whole array of dangers coming from the nonhuman world, like the abnormal presence of

road kill, the attack of a crow, the prosecution by a man figure made up of flies, the menace of the vegetation threatening to engulf their car, and a water hole filled with a substance reminiscent of pus and inhabited by an amorphous glutinous creature that brings to mind the figure of the Bunyip, an Australian water demon both white settler and indigenous cultures associate with the “monstrous consequences of colonialism” (A. Rudd 19). Back in 1891, Rosa Praed described the Bunyip as “the one flesh-curdling horror of which Australia can boast” (qtd. in Gelder 118). Although the previous list raises expectations of the uncanny, which Freud associates with a regression to the “the old, animistic conception of the universe” (qtd. in Piper 11), the vicissitudes of the group of characters mainly resonate with Kristeva’s concept of the abject.

The abject is for Kristeva synonymous with horror and, as such, it poses a threat to identity and body integrity. The abject, explains Kristeva, is that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (232). Bodily fluids like blood or pus, which disturb the boundary between inside and outside, and corpses, which remind us of our gross materiality, are powerful sources of the abject and are overwhelmingly present in *The Road*, a novel that blends the thriller with the gore. “Any crime,” writes Kristeva, “because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime . . . [is] even more so because [it] heightens the display of such fragility” (5).

The abject is also associated, Alison Rudd notes, with the figure of the monster and the monstrous, “as a warning of the boundaries that must not be crossed” (A. Rudd 24). In a postcolonial context, she argues, the abject resonates on three levels. Firstly, it evokes the figure of the native, represented as abject in Western constructions of otherness, something “to be expelled from the imperial project” (25); in *The Road*, Nathan’s and especially Grace’s dead bodies, as a product of the novel’s founding crimes, are painful reminders of the abject treatment of Indigenous during colonisation and of their continuing marginalisation in contemporary society. Secondly, the abject refers to moral and political hypocrisy in connection with “practices such as the genocide of indigenous peoples, for which excuses were found within the civilizing mission” (25); the white characters in Jinks’s novel are made aware of their historical responsibility in the indigenous question, at the same time as one senses their lack of affinity with the Australian landscape, according to recent legislation, no longer a *terra nullius* but the rightful possession of its

original inhabitants. In the third place and more positively, in postcolonial writing the abject is sometimes portrayed as an “enabling condition” that facilitates the “emergence of a postcolonial national identity” (A. Rudd 25, 26). The monstrous representation of the bush in *The Road* as well as the horrible crimes that take place in the typically Australian landscape seem to leave little room for this last possibility in a novel haunted by the feeling of not belonging.

## CONCLUSION

As my reading of *The Road* proves, the case of domestic violence that opens the novel transcends the limits of the personal. The death of the two indigenous characters, Grace and Nathan, in the hands of John Carr actualises and brings up to date the genocide of the natives by the white settlers in the times of the empire. Individual traumas are thus made to resound with the historical trauma of the indigenous peoples of Australia. Although the fauna and the flora of the bush, the equivalent in Jinks’s novel of the mythical Jambuwal, do not prevent John from committing his crime, they do intervene to force the group of white characters travelling on the Silver City Highway to confront him and make him pay for his misdeeds. “Can a community ‘work through’ its founding trauma or is it doomed to act it out forever?” wonders Joseph Flanagan in “The Seduction of History” (391). In depicting the Australian bush as a place of gothic entrapment and enclosure, which prevents the white characters from proceeding with their ordinary lives, Jinks’s *The Road* seems to imply that both personal and national working through are something not yet attainable.

Despite John’s death on the last pages of the novel, readers are left with a feeling of disorientation and inconclusiveness; first because the plot ends with the characters still stuck in the middle of the bush, but more importantly, because the frame story of Ngurunderi casts doubt about issues of evil and guilt. The elusiveness of meaning in *The Road*, which I have read as a clear example of Australian gothic, is further reinforced by the presence of the uncanny—the unhomely in Bhabha’s term—together with the abject. It is precisely the many unhomely moments the white characters go through, reminders of their precarious belonging in the Australian land, that allow for the confluence of individual and national plots. The overwhelming presence of the abject in the form of mutilated bodies, strange natural phenomena and monstrous

creatures also contributes to a breakdown in meaning and identity. Particularly, in *The Road*, beyond the themes, the abject lies in the novel's choice of narrative form itself, a form trespassing the boundaries of classic realism and, through gothic and trauma tropes, revealing the lasting presence of old wounds.

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