

The Art of Talking with Ghosts

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“We’ll go get wood,’ said the white man. He spoke in a deceitful way. He told them to get wood and they did. They loaded it up and heaped it up in one place. They didn’t know that the wood they were heaping up was for them.

When they got there they saw white men in the bush. ‘Oh there they are.’ One white man came with the men in the wagon. He took them there. The other white men were already lined up on their horses in the bush ready with the poison. And this one brought the men and the food from the house in the dray. They looked and there were white men coming out everywhere, the murderers. ‘Why are they coming down from the hills?’ they asked themselves. The white men saw the wagon with the Aboriginal men and they met.

They told them, ‘Cut wood and heap it up, stack it in one spot.’ They thought it was for the house but it was to burn themselves. They stacked it up. They said to them, ‘All right, let’s knock off for dinner now.’ They had jam, tinned meat and bread. I don’t know how many bottles of strychnine they put in the bread. They said, ‘Hurry up, hurry up, you must eat quickly. We have to go to work.’ They ate then, just anyhow, quickly.

Two old men didn’t eat. They looked and saw someone shaking and thought, ‘There might be something in this bread.’ They ran away as fast as possible up the hill. The white men on horses couldn’t catch them. My father and uncle took off. They didn’t eat that food.

When the others were all dying on the ground, they were twitching, they hit them with sticks. They whacked them. They hit them with sticks until they were finished. Then they carried them to the wood heap and threw them on in a heap. Then they poured kerosene onto them to burn them.

That white man who had gone out with the wagon came back with just the wagon, no men. They were all dead already in the fire. And those white men who came from all over split up and went back to their own places. They never went back to Bedford Downs. They never went back to the house. When the old women asked him, ‘Where are all the men you took out?’ he said, ‘Oh they all ran away and left me.’ But he was lying. They were burning in the fire.”

Timmy Timms (Gamarliny, Balmendarri) – speaking of the Bedford Downs Massacre in *Blood on the Spinifex* (Melbourne: Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2002).

This incident was not an isolated event and the Gija people of the East Kimberly can recall many other massacres¹ and other random acts of violence from a period within a generation of living memory² that they call the “killing times.”³ Frontier violence was political violence:⁴ it was part of the British colonisation of Australia. At least 20,000 Aboriginal people were killed before the federation of the nation in 1901 and yet their deaths are not memorialised as a part of Australia’s national story.⁵ The Australian landscape is not innocent; rather it bears the traces of historic violence and is itself an embodiment of trauma. Contemporary settler-colonial Australia is a country haunted by the ghosts of its violent frontier history. The massacre sites that scar the country are psychic ‘hotspots’ of trauma. The remains of many of those killed continue to be unaccounted for. The families of the men murdered in the bush outside Bedford Downs were never able to give them appropriate funeral rites because the bodies were burned. There were no remains. All that is present at the site of the massacre today are the stumps of the trees⁶ the men unwittingly cut to build their own funeral pyre. How does a community deal with such terrible loss, particularly when there are no physical remains of the dead? The ancestors of the men murdered at Bedford Downs have, in part, dealt with their loss through the making of art.

¹ The locations of eleven massacres in the Gija region of East Kimberly include; Jailhouse Creek, Mistake Creek, Wartageny, Bedford Downs, Koondooloo Gorge, Spring Creek, White Rock, Queensland Creek, Panton River, Horse Shoe Creek, and Linnekar Gorge. Daiwul Gidja Culture Group, ‘Lirrkarn kerrem (lida-garn gedem) Teaching people to understand,’ Cross cultural awareness program course notes, Daiwul Gidja Culture Group, Kununurra, 1999, p65. Marcia Langton, “Hungry Ghosts: Landscape and memory,” in *Blood on the Spinifex*, p 13.

² Between 1887 and 1917 there were at least 20 occasions on which police and/or their native assistants shot at Aboriginal people in the East Kimberly which were recorded in the police patrol journals. C Choo, ‘Miriuwung and Gajerrong history history report no.2,’ in *Blood on the Spinifex* p17.

³ *Blood on the Spinifex* p14.

⁴ Henry Reynolds, *the other side of the frontier* p200.

⁵ Henry Reynolds, *the other side of the frontier* p201.

⁶ *Blood on the Spinifex* p24.

The works of Paddy Bedford, Peggy Patrick, the Timms brothers and others known collectively as the Jirrawun artists⁷ were collected together and shown in a 2002-2003 exhibition named *Blood on the Spinifex*. Powerful works of contemporary abstract art, the paintings in *Blood on the Spinifex* were created at least in part because as Dirrmingali (Peggy Patrick) states “We want you to know what white people did to black people in the past. We hope there can be real peace and friendship between black and white.”⁸

To experience the works in *Blood on the Spinifex* is to become a witness to the pain of the Jirrawun painters and their community. Witnessing can be understood as a way of knowing, of acknowledging the pain of others.⁹ Works in the *Blood on the Spinifex* exhibition are history paintings, they tell the history of the Gija people and their experience of frontier violence.¹⁰ Yet their narrative quality may be hidden to many viewers. The Jirrawun artists paint in an abstracted minimalist style similar to that which came to prominence through the works of the late Rover Thomas, the most famous of the Turkey Creek painters.¹¹ The most apparent element in all the works is the land itself, intimating the importance of the relationship between people and place in the world of the Jirrawun painters. For them, the spirit world is embedded in the landscape¹² and it is present, even if not visible, in these works made as part of the *Joonba*.¹³ Highly reduced symbolic elements populate the picture plane, the meaning of which may not be apparent to a viewer without explanation. Many works are aerial views that can be understood as a kind of mapping of the narrative.

⁷ Langton, “Hungry Ghosts” 12.

⁸ *Blood on the Spinifex* p10.

⁹ Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak*, 225.

¹⁰ Langton hungry ghosts p12.

¹¹ Turkey Creek, the English name for the Gidja community of Warmun in the Kimberly, was home to leading indigenous artists Rover Thomas, Queenie McKenzie, George Mung Mung, Paddy Jaminji and Jack Britten.

¹² Langton hungry ghosts p13

¹³ Langton hungry ghosts p13

In Paddy Bedford's *Two Women looking at the Bedford Downs massacre burning place* (2002) one is presented with an aerial view of the scene in striking bands of black on purple ground. In the lower third one can see the fire represented by a large red circle, the smaller circles surrounding it suggest the tree stumps that remain at the site. In a black band at the top of the painting are two small circles representing two women who are said to have viewed the event from the relative safety of an escarpment.¹⁴ What is profoundly absent from the work is the spectacle of violence. What viewers are left with are the glowing embers of the fire and the stumps of the trees: the remains of the event. But perhaps there is another presence: a more spectral remains. The Gidja people of the Kimberly speak of the spirits of those killed at Bedford Downs as "hungry ghosts"¹⁵ who are un-reconciled.

There is a spectre haunting Australia: the spectre of settler society's un-reconciled past. In *Spectres of Marx*, Jacques Derrida states that in seeking the ethical

"it is necessary to speak of *the* ghost, indeed *to the* ghost and *with* it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and *just* that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born. No justice...seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*."¹⁶

Here Derrida is very clearly linking, responsibility with justice and engagement with the past. For Derrida one must join with ghosts to exercise responsibility and entertain the possibility of justice. What is at stake for non-Indigenous Australians if they take responsibility and sit down with ghosts is the recognition of their occupier being but also the possibility of change, the

¹⁴ *Blood on the Spinifex* p24.

¹⁵ Langton hungry ghosts p13

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006), xviii.

possibility of ethical relations with the 'other'. Peter Carey, one of Australia's most lauded literary figures recently commented on the fact of being an Australian that "You wake up in the morning and you are the beneficiary of genocide."¹⁷ Here Carey highlights the ordinariness of being a beneficiary of terror and violence: in Australia, as an occupier, this fact is so commonplace, such a daily part of who non-Indigenous Australians are that it has become invisible to settlers themselves. It is not, however, a fact lost on Aboriginal communities who demand acknowledgment of those warriors slain while defending their country or the families murdered for merely existing in the face of pastoral expansionism and nation building agendas.¹⁸ Like all settler nations Australia is a haunted land, the ghosts of the un-reconciled dead call out to current generations for attention but rarely are they answered. There remains no reckoning.

The editors' introduction to Derrida's *The Work of Mourning* is called, 'Reckoning with the Dead.' To 'reckon with' is to calculate the value or cost of something or to punish for past misdeeds. In the context of settler-colonial Australia, reckoning with the dead holds both these meanings as non-Indigenous Australia attempts to reckon the cost to settler being and the cost to settler's relationships with Indigenous Australians, of remembering or of eliding their violent shared history. The price of responsibility that must be paid by non-Indigenous Australians by virtue of being part of a human political community of occupiers needs also to be considered. When Jacques Derrida speaks of learning to live with ghosts or specters as a "politics of memory, inheritance and generations,"¹⁹ he could be speaking directly to the problems of contemporary settler-colonial Australia. What is at stake for settlers as they consider this situation is how they choose to remember the past, how they

¹⁷ Stephanie Convery, "Peter Carey: 'You wake up in the morning and you are the beneficiary of genocide'," *The Guardian*, November 18, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/nov/18/peter-carey-you-wake-up-in-the-morning-and-you-are-the-beneficiary-of-a-genocide>.

¹⁸ Mundine Djon, "The Aboriginal Memorial to Australia's Forgotten War," *Artlink*, Issue 35:1, March 2015, 28-9.

¹⁹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviii.

make sense of the socio-political situation they have inherited from their forebears and what legacy they will leave for future generations. In changing their identity and becoming something other than occupier, non-Indigenous Australians may feel a sense of great loss. This loss of occupier identity should not be viewed as loss in the negative sense but as Derrida repeatedly advises in *The Work of Mourning*,²⁰ as relationality; as the work of living. Living in relation to others is the business of *being*; we cannot *be* alone.

So how, as relational beings, can we enact the work of mourning? The obituary belongs to writing, the funeral oration to speech, and many of the orations in the book *The Work of Mourning* begin by extolling the difficulty of finding the right words in the act of mourning.²¹ Because visual art does not require words as an intermediary but goes directly to the sensory experience it has an advantage over spoken or written mediums when it comes to the task of mourning. Visual art is a medium well suited to the work of mourning because mourning is doing emotional work, a kind of sensory work, a similar sensory activity to the work of art.

My most recent artworks examine the relationships of violence between the constituent agents in the experience of invasion and occupation but they do so with a particular awareness of the spatial dimensions of violence as concerns bodies, place and bodies in place. They are works of melancholia or perhaps more precisely artworks *in* melancholia because I see them as actions in a process of remembering, a process of bringing the past into relation with the present. My art does not *represent* melancholia or mourning but rather opens a space to allow an experience of mourning itself. In opening a space for mourning I hope to create spaces of ethical engagement, of understanding.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001).

²¹ Derrida, 5.

In seeking to remember violent events, I strive very consciously not to use the dead for political purposes, thus my artworks do not hold out the hope of redemption for settlers but rather attempt to embody what theorist Kaja Silverman calls a heteropathic²² form of memory in relation to an ungraspable past. My art practice rejects idiopathic methodologies of memory, such as traditional monumental memorial forms,²³ recognising that *they* seek to absorb the other into a metanarrative, much as the political campaigns to assimilate Australia's First Nations peoples have tried to do. Refusing to remain complicit in what anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner called 'the great Australian silence'²⁴ and acknowledging that terrible events occurred and continue to occur in this country, is work towards heteropathic or ethical relations between Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Artworks that engage with mourning and melancholia act from a place of responsibility because they answer the call of the dead and re-call the past. The ways in which places of historic violence are marked, or not, their stories remembered or elided and how settlers respond to the ghosts of those as yet unable to rest, will prove to be the measure of settler Australia's capacity for an ethical response to the ghosts that haunt it.

Please note that this presentation will involve a slide show of relevant works of art and as such will require access to a digital projector.

²² In *The Threshold of the Visible World* 1996, Kaja Silverman posits heteropathic identification with others as being on those others terms, as opposed to idiopathic identification which absorbs the other into the self.

²³ There is now a considerable body of work problematising traditional monuments and the erasure of memory including; Mieke Bal, Jonathon Crewe and Leo Spitzer eds., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999); Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Adrian Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture Desire, Singular Memory and the Politics of Trauma* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

²⁴ W.E.H. Stanner, *The Boyer Lectures 1968 – After the Dreaming* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1969).