

Southern Cross University

Tessa Chudy, Nell Cook, Moya Costello

A 'ruined or fractured' sublime: voice, identity and agency in reading and writing the gothic/noir in subtropical regional Australia

Abstract:

In the excess of subtropical regional Australia, the emergence of the gothic is twofold. One is subjective and affects a lament through the articulation of a gothic voice, and the other is specific to an uncanny relationship with place. The gothic represents the indeterminacy caused by unresolved loss, commonly known as a state of mourning. Jacques Derrida (2001) describes mourning as 'that of an interiorization (an idealized incorporation, introspection, consumption) of the other [who] ... having passed away, leaves in us only images' (159). Noir, like the gothic, has a strong sense of predetermination, a blurring of the line between past, present and future, and of unease and dislocation. This collaborative paper uses our fictional works to make an intervention into Australian subtropical regional gothic at a time of global risk and uncertainty. In the expression of both excess and containment, and the familial, romantic and traumatic, the language, or voice, of our fiction writing is informed by our critical reading of allied texts. The trauma that loss evokes is embedded in gothic/noir narratives such as Rosa Campbell Praed's (1891/2007) 'The bunyip' and Peter Temple's (2005) *The broken shore*. Particularly in Australian gothic fiction, it is not only the concrete images of human settlement that are haunted but the landscape itself projects this 'hauntedness'. Climate change and environmental degradation, like the haunted house and the monstrous, act as gothic tropes. Nature is written as strange. Turcotte (1998) says that the gothic appeals because of its ability to articulate tensions and problems, noting that the 'local variant' of the gothic is mixed with the romantic, and that as a mode the gothic is 'at its most exciting when least obeyed' (12, 17, 19). So the gothic recognises a specific, and problematic, cultural and historical context where there is a struggle between the excesses of the 'landscape' and the containment of 'settlement'.

Biographical notes:

Tessa Chudy is a visual artist currently completing a PHD in creative writing at Southern Cross University.

Nell Cook is a writer who teaches Writing in the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Southern Cross University. She has published several short stories and is currently working on a gothic novel set on the north coast of New South Wales.

Moya Costello teaches Writing in the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Southern Cross University. She has two collections of short creative prose and one novella published, and co-edited anthologies.

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In this moment of the early twenty-first century, the three reader-writers of this paper live in subtropical regional Australia. This moment is characterised by crisis and this place by the uncanny and excess. These are tropes of the gothic and noir which are not entirely dissimilar in their aesthetic. The crises of our present moment include the end of an oil-based economy; post-capitalism and post-industrialisation where the concepts of consumption and progress are challenged; species extinction in a degraded environment amid human-influenced climate change; huge discrepancies between poverty and wealth; large, global movements of whole, displaced populations characterised by trauma and mourning. Gerry Turcotte (1998) writes that the gothic resonates with 'spiritual dis/ease' (10), 'the horror' and 'uncertainty of the human experience' (11), while Nicholas Christopher (2006) notes that noir is 'born of crisis' (15). Crises are often rendered in gothic/noir literature through establishing a nexus between the excesses of the environment and those that emerge in characters as a result of trauma.

The gothic/noir is suited to Australia and specifically the subtropics because when we, as non-Indigenous, attempt to create a feeling of safety in this place, there is a twofold response: one is specific to an uncanny relationship with place and the other is subjective and affects a lament through the articulation of a gothic voice, the post-traumatic mournful. Sigmund Freud (1919/nd) explains the uncanny – 'where the home is unhomely' (Turcotte 1998: 10) – as the return of the undealt-with repressed, the irrational acceptance of the rightness of all thought similar to the *unthinking* repetition of instinct, and the effacement of the distinction between reality and imagination. 'Some of the ... key terms ... of psychoanalysis (the uncanny, the unconscious, repression) are predicated on, determined by, or theorised in the discourse of gothic fiction' writes Markman Ellis (2000: 13). Moya Costello's (2010) text-in-progress attempts to depict the instability of identity when coupled with the uncanny/'unhomely' in Australian regional subtropical gothic:

Homelessness: a vertiginous sensation; suspension over a dark, fathomless space. Here Tilda hung.

In Northern Rivers, water flowed and twisted across the land like snakes, like the snakes of the region did ... as if they owned the land, as if it was theirs. And it was. They had been there much, much longer than Tilda. They registered her presence; they knew her movements.

Here she might fall. Or she might float. She might fly.

This text-in-progress aligns with Australian gothic/noir fiction in which not only the concrete images of human settlement are haunted but the landscape itself projects this 'hauntedness'.

In an Australian colonial text, in Rosa Campbell Praed's (1891/2007) 'The bunyip', the plaintive screams of the bunyip can be interpreted as a gothic trope standing in for the trauma of the settlers/inlanders as well as the peoples they dispossessed. At a river-swamp camp, a group of travellers discuss whether buniyps exist. The swamp is a gothic space;

the bunyip is an Indigenous mythic monster. The respectability of the characters is achieved by the continual reference to their pragmatic personalities. They hear the bunyip as the plaintive cries of a lost child, which validates a corporeal presence and overrides what could be an individual psychological state. The symbolic order is enforced by the characters' doubt about the supernatural, but the concluding scene, where they discover a dead child, serves ironically to undermine the power of that order by highlighting its ambiguity and tenuousness. For the women in the narrative are outside of the constraints of the domestic, and the scene itself can be read as part of excess in that the travellers are forced to confront the ideology of empiricism and rationality. The bunyip moves across ontological spaces without losing any of its symbolic power. The supernatural in this instance can be read not only as the collision of parallel worlds but also as the manifestation of trauma which is an eternal past/present threat. The gothic narrative is subversive in its undermining of the symbolic order via representation of the supernatural as an alternative vision.

Exaggeration 'beyond reality' is a mode in the gothic to provoke unease (Becker 1999: 6). Gothic/noir is suited to the *excess* of the regional subtropics. The climate is a combination of high rainfall, heat, humidity and strong sunlight. It is a strangely beautiful landscape, sometimes even drought-prone, bruised and scarred by excessive clearing, erosion and noxious weeds, but containing pockets that seem entirely self-contained and operate according to their own peculiar logic, and through familiarity evoke a sense of wonder as a kind of 'ruined or fractured' (Eagleton 2003: 19-20) sublime. Terry Eagleton (2003) originally described the gothic as a 'ruined or fractured realism' (19-20), but a biodiverse rainforest region bordering several national parks and a region where the built environment has not overwhelmed the natural environment evoke the wondrous sublime, the inconceivable and unrepresentable (Habib 2008: 125; Bennett and Royle 2004: 255-256). When the rain comes with humidity, floors of high timber houses swell with damp and crack when walked on. Mould covers tiles and clothes, and moss appears on any surface exposed to the weather. Water spills over leaf-filled gutters and runs under the houses, soaking the clay and giving white ants a perfect environment in which to flourish. When the wet passes and the wood dries, doors creak and metal roofs crack in true gothic form as the house adjusts to weather extremes. Ants run in black lines across the floorboards, and bush turkeys strut across verandas in search of European food. The land is bush turkey territory as they have been here since the Jurassic period. The significant biodiversity also includes wallabies, echidnas, koalas, possums, foxes, rabbits, snakes, frogs, toads, rats, mice, flying foxes, leeches, ticks, spiders, mosquitoes, flies, bees, wasps, beetles, worms, crickets, cockroaches, fruit fly and multiple species of birds. Although the sky is a misty, soft baby-blue, vegetation is both neon-lime and dark green, almost black.

In gothic and noir there is the pervasive presence of shadows which are both physical and psychological. But despite gothic's affiliations with horror, noir is the bleaker of the two. There is a powerful sense of a maze of predetermination, a sense that the past is more real than the present or the future, that marks noir apart from gothic; noir 'threatens to subvert

the concept of time, removing the distinction between the past, present and future' (Woolfolk 2006: 118). The dark and sinister past in the gothic, often relating to familial secrets, does threaten to return and destroy the present. But gothic offers the chance of redemption once past secrets are unravelled, revealed and exorcised. Noir rarely does this. There is no escape from the past which all but overwhelms the present and any hope for the future.

In Peter Temple's (2005) *The broken shore* – 'kanga noir' is Temple's ascription (May 2007) – the divide between the city and the country is embedded with horrors that inevitably cannot be overlooked or swept aside. A policeman recovering from serious injury in the city has returned to the bleakly beautiful coastal area where he grew up, only to find himself confronted both with his own past and another sinister past hidden by those associated with a recently murdered wealthy man. Here past secrets implicate the central character/s, the broader community, and the environment itself – complicit in its beauty, sinister in its stillness, secretive in its shadows. It is what happens to central figures that defines one of the key differences between gothic and noir. Noir's anti-heroes are broken at the outset and are lucky to emerge at the end of the narrative nightmare with their lives. Often – although not always – the gothic is associated with vulnerable but resourceful heroines who emerge stronger and wiser from their trauma; Charlotte Bronte's (1847) *Jane Eyre* is an example – happy and wealthy after a traumatic betrayal and loss instigated by her beloved, Mr Rochester.

Kay Schaffer (1988), Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs (1998), and Ross Gibson (1992, 2002) have written of loss in terms of place and identity in Australian literature. Yet much more could be written about the emergence of an Australian gothic sensibility as it pertains to the particular mournful traumas embedded in an Australian psyche.

Jacques Derrida (2007) characterises mourning as 'that of an interiorization (an idealized incorporation, introspection, consumption of the other ... as the one, [who,] having passed away, leaves in us only images' (159). He specifically discusses the way we speak through those that come before us. His reflection on how language works to trap us in a state of deferral can be applied to the way settler/invasor society responds to landscape as entrapment by a constant deferral to the lost homeland.

Mourning is often described as a temporary state before moving on to resolution; yet this is not always the case. The past is a constant 'present' in the form of the flashback that threatens to overwhelm. The sufferer of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has a twofold experience. There is either an inability to express emotion, or an overwhelming emotion that cannot be reckoned with. The trauma is lived out in nightmares, or in waking life because the sufferer is trapped in a state of unresolved grief, a submerged presence that pervades and disrupts, undermining identity. In *Unclaimed experience*, Cathy Caruth (1969), studying holocaust survivors, suggests that in PTSD the traumatic event is not immediately processed, and the inevitable result of what is a frozen moment in time is a disruption of the psychic self. Time creates distance between the past traumatic event and the present, so that memory

distorts the past or brings it into the present as a *real time* event. The emotional reaction to this history is a momentary haunting of the present.

In writing the Australian subtropical gothic traumatic and mournful, Nell Cook (2010) seeks to deploy the category of trauma not by representing 'the 'traumatizing events—since representation risks ... betraying the bewildering, imperfectly representational character of traumatic memory', but by transmitting 'directly to the reader the experience of traumatic disruption' (Caruth 1969: 49).

Close to the waterfall at the far end of the valley the sunlight is a different kind of light. It filters through the trees in a way that makes the earth itself seem green and the people who live there in that wet place seem translucent in their pallor and attitude as if they have absorbed the mist that is known as The Nightcap into their skin. Long ago they crawled up the sides of this valley until they found a place in among the rocks and they cleared areas with hand-tools and built makeshift shacks and if anyone had dared to venture there they would have found houses smelling of unwashed clothes and floors covered in candle wax. Over the years most of them moved further to the south of the valley and into the sun, a move instigated by the women who had already been slaves to men and didn't want to be slaves to an impossible environment. Now there were nightcap dwellers and valley dwellers and the valley dwellers spent a great deal of time worrying and gossiping about the nightcap dwellers.

On this particular morning the valley dwellers had come to talk about an incident that had occurred the day before. It had been raining for eighteen days straight. Small streams had popped up to the surface in places that had never had springs, and snakes and lizards had crept into the houses to hide behind wood stoves to get out of the cold. Reptiles like the rain but a winter rain like this was unsettling to a hibernating animal.

The visitors shake their umbrellas and remove their gumboots before they come in. They are talking about the swollen creek. Someone has brought a pot of soup to share and her husband puts it on the stove. He has been sitting by the fire all night in a state of inertia. He has been silent through breakfast and hasn't played his guitar for weeks. Before the visitors had come she had tried to jolly him out of his moribund state by reminding him of other wet seasons. She related these incidents as if he had lost all memory of them but she knew that he remembered everything; it was just that his relationship toward those memories had changed. To him the past was a force that seemed to come upon him like an unbearable weight, and he had jumped up on several occasions and banged the poker on his boot in order to distract her.

The gothic house is reconfigured in the Australian landscape as representing a white settlement constantly threatened by the forces of nature. Crumbling houses, labyrinthine and sinister, loom large and ominous in the gothic, along with the familial which emerges in gothic fiction as another dark and contested 'space'. The two often go hand in hand: the familial secrets within the crumbling house. Lucie Armitt (2000) describes the house interior as a dream '(or rather nightmare) space' (309), completely separate to and removed from the logic and light of the exterior/outside world. However, the family is

more insidious and on many levels considerably harder to escape from. Avril Horner and Sue Zlotnik (2009) note that 'the family is frequently presented as harbouring dangers, its structures at one and the same time regulating and focusing desire' (115). According to Susanne Becker (1999: 4) 'gothic horror is domestic horror, family horror'. Here is Tessa Chudy (2010) on an Australian subtropical noir 'family' 'home':

He had The Paradise brought here in fragments. It was reassembled, on the top of this rocky hill. Bare to the four winds – with a view to die for

It's Paradise alright. But with a twist, and a hollow, dark heart. If it weren't for the fact that my family lived here, it would be perfect. I was five when I came here and I can't imagine living anywhere else, my family notwithstanding

The Paradise has three floors and a flat roof. There are twenty-four bedrooms ... each with en-suites, stovetops and unstocked bar fridges, a front desk, a proper kitchen, a pantry, a bar, two dining rooms, one lounge, four storage rooms, an extra bathroom (for when all the on-suites are busy) and one room that apparently has no purpose at all.

The Paradise curves slightly along the crest of the hill. Inside it is a dimly lit maze of twisted hallways and too many stairs. The walls are all a strange greyish colour. Looking at it from the outside The Paradise seems to be crouching on the hillside, like a dinosaur waiting for the inevitable arrival of extinction, with its tragic little balconies hanging off the bedrooms, grubby windows like so many sightless eyes and peeling, once-green paint.

Gothic/noir is self-referential, characterised by a knowing generic self-awareness. Turcotte (1998: 11) describes gothic as a hybrid: 'a mode delineated by borrowings and confluences'. Mary Orr (2003) includes gothic in her alternative or 'shadowland' (12) terms for intertextuality or the 'roles, functions, effects, and ... forms which "intertextuality" has embraced' (238, 241). The language, or voice, of the fiction writing of the reader-writers of this paper – possibly both covertly and overtly intertextual – is informed by our critical reading of allied texts.

With brown curls hung over a copy of *Jane Eyre*, he was wondering how much like Mr Rochester he actually was. Book smart, heart-befuddled, he liked a drink. So did Mr R. But R was lying to Jane about his responsibility for the chic in the attic. And Calla was lying to himself about ditching Tilda. She was ... his own flesh. (Costello 2010)

To conclude: trauma emerges with the loss of security, when the myth of dominion/domain/dominance is disrupted. What is hidden then haunts, like the bunyip. How to live with the unresolved, the unsettling/unsettled? The protagonists in our fictions – in process and incomplete as yet – may, like Australian historian Lyndall Ryan (Read, 2000: 191), feel they can never belong to Australia because of its prior ownership. But they may be saltwater people, as Ryan described herself – or subtropical or rainforest people. Turcotte (1998) notes that the 'local variant' of Australian gothic is a blend of 'realism and romance' (12), and, as a genre, gothic is 'most exciting when least obeyed'

(19). Gothic and noir's continuing popularity partly comes from the coupling of anxiety and desire and an external/internal threat and attraction. Our (anti)hero/ines might at least consciously acknowledge their unsettled relationship with the natural and an/other cultural environment, and they may strategise according to a circumstance of participation in what they perceive to be a sublime 'entangled mutuality' (Rose 2005: 36).

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