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Silencing and Subjugation Masquerading as Love and Understanding: Sonya Hartnett's The Ghost's Child

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The strange feathers she had invited did not belong in her house.

Tony Morrison, Paradise, 155.

International award-winning author Sonya Hartnett writes predominantly for young adults, but much of her work defies categorisation with regard to both readership age and genre. The Ghost's Child (2007), which won the 2008 Australian Young Adult Book of the Year award, says much about the author's resistance to classification throughout her body of work. Commentators have referred to the novel, which centres on the life-long reminiscences of its female protagonist narrator, as a magical blend of myth, fable, fairytale and ghost story (see Bantick 2007, Newbery 2008, Flanagan 2014). The book speaks of timeless universal human interests such as resilience, love, loss and longing, dependency and betrayal (see Preston, 2009). But it also works allegorically as a reminder that how we see ourselves is shaped by the historical and cultural discourses which define us. More specifically, the novel brings to light the power-imbalances often found across cultures in the practice of everyday post-colonial life.

This paper argues that the authority contained in Hartnett's principal character's "living" voice masks colonial discourses of silencing and subjugation in play. When considered in these terms, The Ghost's Child becomes an artistic forum for the unearthing of how colonialism's self-serving, discursive representations have, historically, spoken for colonised individuals, children and adults alike, denying them equal participation in the affairs of life.

The geographical setting of The Ghost's Child is not made clear. Consistent references to boats and the sea make it possible to suppose, however, that the action takes place on an island that may well be Australia. And there is no mistaking the unique Australianness of passages such as the following:

she roamed the hills, pressing her hands to the trunks of eucalypts, picking cockatoo feathers from the grass. She watched bull ants marching off to battle and mahogany snakes sleeping on stones. Rabbits thumped the cracked earth, the hot air tasted like medicine. The gum trees were friendly to her, nodding their olive heads. Bark peeled from them, brittle as cicada shell; in their branches stood tawny frogmouths, their beaks lordishly raised. (23)

The argument for an Australian-setting is also supported by the fact that the narrative voice is that of an old woman called Matilda Victoria Adelaide, names that depict her as a figure belonging to non-arbitrary signifiers of white Australia's cultural and colonial authority.

From the beginning readers are encouraged to regard Matilda as a reliable witness to actions and events that make up a complex network of threads which come together only at the end of the book. At its most basic level, the novel testifies to events in Matilda's life which she recalls and relays to a strangely familiar young boy she finds sitting in her living room when she returns home one afternoon after "walking her dog". Hartnett's approach to the life choices made by her narrator protagonist and the subsequent pain the latter experiences because of them, lie within the boundaries of what
is essentially narrated as a family history. From the outset, readers are positioned as both listeners and witnesses to sometimes happy, sometimes tragic events that unfold to reveal the conjoint destinations of the storyteller and the boy who listens. The first thing Matilda does for her young visitor is to light a fire, that warm place around which people have gathered customarily to hear stories told aloud by a trusted friend or relative. The result is that readers do not simply imagine the boy listening and encouraging Matilda to speak about everything that comes into her mind, interjecting at times like some annoying analyst, or editor. Rather, as Matilda begins to shape the spectacle of her past life for her visitor, readers are positioned as trusting listeners and witnesses, their destinies somehow conjoint. The boy is described portentously as "a strong bold bird that had flown into the room and, finding itself cornered, was bored but unafraid" (7). As such he becomes the vehicle through which the identity of his father becomes known, but the discomfiting topics which the narrative addresses such as miscarriage, suicide, ageing and death, are delivered solely from Matilda's perspective. The narrated account of Matilda's life growing up reveals an awkward relationship with domineering, materialistic parents and her consistent, but often unsuccessful attempts, to please them. Central to the story is Matilda's relationship with an exiled, beach-unsuccessful man whom she names Feather, her version of their short married life together and the suffering she endures following his and her son's deaths.

The narrative logic of The Ghost's Child promotes the idea that it is a benign literary meeting place of storytelling traditions, the spoken and the written. The seemingly benevolent qualities of Hartnett's language help to cut across the oral and written literary divide and blend the two communication art forms together. The narrator's recollections give testimony to a history of self which the mind of other characters (and readers) even as memory enterst into Matilda's own, in an inclusive, dialogic body associated with a verbally-realised narrative. And there are two types of "listener" here. The first is the uninvited boy, the unfamiliar familiar, who had chosen to call Matilda's house his home (2) and proves to be the ghost of her miscarried child. The second is the very-much-alive reader who is artfully induced to accept the possibility that the dead commune with the dead and that this "completeness" (6) situation is how things are. Matilda tells her story in a mix of interior and dramatic monologues. The words she fashions are real enough – we can see them before us – the voice that delivers them is a spectral one however for, like her lost son, Matilda is a ghost. One of the book's most profound ironies is its presentation of Matilda as a remembering ghost-witness-narrator whose rhetoric gives supernatural expression to the reality of her human associations.

As I have written elsewhere, the figure of the ghost, or revenant – the one who returns – provides a multidirectional space of confrontation where logical contradictory states of then and now, life and death cannot be separated cleanly from one another. Literature's ghosts come in many forms and prevail across all cultures. Australian author, Catherine Jinks' ghost writer Eglantine, for example, permeates the walls of a house with her words. African American Toni Morrison's, Beloved, projects the dual nature of being in the world as simultaneously disembodied and embodied, spiritual and earthly. Aboriginal writers such as Alexis Wright and Kim Scott on the other hand embrace the notion of transgenerational and transcultural haunting to open up and extricate what it means to be black to follow in the literary convention that speaks rather than write, but plays with it in an interesting way. Bound up as it is with the question of narrative authority and a concern with redeeming, or reconciling the past, Matilda's story is an attempt to lay old ghosts to rest, in much the same way as a nation might. As Gelder and Jacobs observe, "reconciliation is a policy which intends to bring the nation into contact with the ghosts of its past, restructuring the nation's sense of itself by returning the grim truth of colonisation to the story of Australia's being in the world" (40). Seen from this perspective, the novel can be read as an allegory for a topic close to the heart of Australian social life, and a challenge to received ideas of this country's colonial history.

The discursive space from which Matilda narrates and gives substance to everything and everyone from the past, accords with her values and perspective in the present. Throughout the novel, the name Maddy, a variant of the Hebrew, "Madeline" and the Old English, "Maida", which means 'maiden or young unmarried woman', designates Matilda's identity when young. Matilda's "I" and "She" omniscient narration makes it possible for her to be constantly in touch with, and speak for, a past self whom she remembers narcissistically, as strange but perfect and at no time seeks to displace. In her memory "Maddy was strange [...] She had a perfect right to exist, and was perfectly made in every way...but she seemed not quite right for the world" (22, ellipses present in the text). Matilda's narcissism is continually present in her memories of a younger self: "I am the most beautiful thing in the world" (38), italics in the original text she says of her developing identity. Matilda tells her story surrounded by a "crowd of cold ornaments" (15), things she has collected over her lifetime. The collection forms a shrine to absent people, events and an otherwise unarticulated view of a world she has created for herself. Matilda's collection is kept in a room described as "a bell jar" (40), an enclosed space where one might store a sacred object to protect it from the outside world. [1]. Of particular relevance among such protected objects, is a photograph showing Matilda "at the helm of a spry white boat" (13). As a symbol of leadership and control, the ship's helm denotes the kind of self Matilda "sees all the time whether [she] is looking for her or not" (13) to suggest the trace of a past self which lives on against her will. The idea of a trace of a past (self) lingering in unstable union with the present (self) is consistent with Gelder and Jacobs' perception of post-colonial life as inhabiting the inside/outside world of the ghost; that in living in "a contemporary moment, where one remains outside, but somewhere located beyond them or 'after them'" (1998, 24). In this view, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Hartnett's ghostly narrator is haunted by the uncanny absence/presence which marks post-colonial existence, past and present.

In the transmission of a life story, the vagaries of memory become the creative activity of the narrator in whose controlling hands (plotting ego) the elements of the tale are structured and relayed to an audience. This is so whether the words (things) that form the story are spoken or written. Even as the objects in Matilda's home act as vehicles for self-projection, they do not exist autonomously any more than do words. Rather, objects constitute a complex system of symbols which, when taken as a chain of memories fragmented and masked by the passage of time. Throughout the novel, the aim of any storytelling process has been to generate a pact between truth-seeking readers, locution and narrating voice. Understood in this way, the memories Matilda holds may contain possible truths but, like words, are unreliable as providing an immediate access to actual people or events. Hartnett makes evident the paradoxical nature of memory and narrative in an early section of the novel in which Matilda tells the listening boy: "You can only see clearly the road you took to reach where you stand. The other roads – the paths you might have taken, but didn’t are all around you too, but they are ghost roads, ghost journeys, ghost lives and they are all hidden by cloud" (15). This passage sets up the biased ambiguity of Matilda's narrative as the authoritative representation of a personal reality (road) she had not taken. And whilst her narration acknowledges there was always something taking place beyond the limits of her vision, the possibility of there being other ways of remembering remains shrouded in silence. It is as though Matilda's silences, which are at times indicated by explicit ellipses in the text, deliberately conceal a story she is either unable or unwilling to tell.
When speaking of her childhood, Matilda recalls unnamed parents who, as noted above, resemble the archetypal father and mother of traditional fairy tales. The fact that they are incompatible with each other, as well as with their daughter, identifies Matilda with the lonely princess of fairy tales. The father Matilda remembers is proud, ambitious, preoccupied with money, important and often absent. Matilda’s sense of his superiority, a strong-willed iron man was often feared and respected: "broad and rough. She was rather scared of him, though he treated her with the same blunt fairness that he dealt out to all things" (17). The depth of his influence is made clear when her father poses the novel’s unsolvable, conceptual conundrum: "What is the world’s most beautiful thing?" (27), and Matilda takes upon the challenge: "I am not so sure. The declaration that her "courage and defiance made her father proud of her, it made her beautiful" (38) is also telling. More than once Matilda states that she is her father’s daughter (29, 70), confessing she had "inherited a touch of his stubborn pride" (29). In so doing, she aligns herself with the structures of father and those she harbours for her mother. Matilda consistently finds fault with her mother whom she recalls as a vicious, social-climbing woman: "a red back spider, stylishly clad and venomous" (66). As Matilda tells it, much like the wicked temptress of traditional fairy tales, her mother was the cause of lasting pain and fear, someone who "seemed to teeter forever on the crumbly threshold of fury" (19). Unlike the (unspoken) love and respect she has for her father (32, 68) at no point in the novel does Matilda express feelings of affection towards her mother. Rather, she narrates a self-centred side to her character when she shows resentment towards her mother’s concern for the “fate of mites in Foundling Hospitals” (19), who, Matilda feels, stole the love that was rightly hers (20).

Lack of impartiality is also true of Matilda’s portrayal of her lost husband, Feather, the principal enabling subject of the narrative. As with the portrayal of her father and mother, knowledge of Feather’s familial life is only ever made known through the fragile veil of Matilda’s memory and narrating voice which represent him as ghost-like, at once knowable and unknowable. In addition, Matilda’s notion of Feather’s identity evokes a colonial discourse that associates colonised peoples with nature as wild and uncontrolled. As she name-gives him implies, Feather has an affinity with birds. Matilda has Feather communicate with a pelican which "lowered its beak to the young man’s ear and clacked a sea-bird noise" (49); while a pectoral "feeds him a sardine" (62). And for him, the high flying sea eagle is the world’s most beautiful thing (52). A spiritual connection to the natural world is often ascribed to Indigenous identity. In fact the white-headed sea eagle is much revered by Australia’s Indigenous peoples as well as those of Papua New Guinea. The bird plays an imposing role in Indigenous thought where it signifies a spiritual rather than an earth-bound attitude towards life and the need to nurture and care for all natural things (see Young 1991). But, as though by right, Matilda has named Feather and throughout the novel he is known by no other. As a consequence, she initiates and extends her control of a basic element of Feather’s identity that cuts him from the world of the past.

By giving him a name, Matilda ties Feather to a short Australian colonial history of naming, claiming and taming rather than to a preceding ancient Aboriginal spiritualised epistemology.

Matilda’s first observations of Feather are of a slim, near-naked man with sun browned skin and long dishevelled hair. Hartnett writes: “A corner of her mind was already noticing his peculiarities, his smokelessness, his featheriness, the glint of his skin” (51), all markers of Indigeneity which Matilda’s narration consistently emphasises. If the possibility of Feather’s Indigeneity is accepted, given the self/other cross-over discussed below, it must follow that Matilda’s narrated self also reveals a craving for Indigeneity. There are a number of specific instances in the text which demonstrate the power of white Matilda’s narrating voice to construct an Indigenised self within what Rebecca Dorgelo calls “the discursive space of the indigene” (131, 2010). In conversation with her father in the text’s opening pages, for example, Matilda echoes Feather when she declares “sea-eagles are the most beautiful things in the world” (2, 8). The child-self Matilda summons up as being “misfit and out of place, like a jigsaw piece cut wrong” (38) also works as a depiction of the Aboriginal peoples who have been made strange in their own land through the processes of colonisation. And when Matilda refers to describes as having “a solid black heart” (47) and helps her to make sense of the world. [3] Very much at odds with Matilda’s white-Indigenising project, is that the Nargun cautions her that Feather is not hers to be possessed or owned, as one would a slave (85). In doing so the Nargun acts as Matilda’s conscience and locates her within the boundaries of a repressed white colonialist history of enslaving indigenous peoples.

Each in his or her own way, Matilda’s family members contribute to Feather’s subjugation and become the architects of his fate. Matilda’s mother regards Feather as no more than “a savage” (70) or as a joke “in very bad taste” (71) marking him as a severely under-consideration. Matilda’s belief that her father “would see that Feather was like a fine brumby colt, something worth catching and owning” (71) reinscribes colonialism’s master-slave relationship. When Matilda seeks her parent’s support to marry Feather, she exhibits him as one would a curiosity (66) an act which represents a difficult condition of slavery. Throughout the storytelling process, Feather’s humanity is altered and claim is laid to his body even as his value is negated. Ever her father’s daughter, Matilda puts up little resistance to his non-negotiable demand that Feather give up his way of life for her: (73)

Maddy was herself, and she loved and wanted [Feather], so she stood in anxious silence and said nothing and saved nothing, hungering for him to agree. And when, without turning his sights from the hills, Feather nodded and said, ‘I will.’ Maddy did not feel like the architect of a gaol, but exultant and victorious, and no longer alone. (74)

The astute reader will recall that, earlier in the narrative, Matilda has her mother state that “victory is the world’s most beautiful thing” (27). The implied privilege conferred on the term “victorious” as opposed to “defeated”, rests here with a colonial hierarchical signifying system that sustains the construction of the “self” in opposition to the “other”. It is with a non-narrating ghost that Hartnett’s now-narrating voice “victorious” in her campaign to take possession of Feather by any means, including coercive force. Here the author makes it known that the heroine of The Ghost’s Child occupies a controlling position informed by the same cultural structures of authority from which she comes. Not only is Matilda her father’s daughter, she is her mother’s as well, the spectre of their legacy towards the foundation of her sense of self adding yet another ghost to a tale already full of them. Matilda’s confessed hunger for Feather replays a familiar theme in many colonial novels and travel writings in English, from De Foe to Kipling, to Australia’s Nan Chauncy, which “betray themselves as driven by desire for the cultural other” (Young, 1995, 3), even as they cast Indigenous characters as less than human, or as ghosts [5]. But it is no accident that Matilda takes possession of Feather and he in turn takes possession of her. Neither is ever free of the other. “Your heart is a prison, and you are locked in it too” says the Nargun, associating the meaning of
possession with the notion of a history shared by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginals alike.

Ghosts have enjoyed a borderland existence in the imagination ever since people began to tell stories to each other. Much like Feather, ghosts are associated with flying, are free and difficult to pin down. “Weighted to the ground” (55) by his man’s body, however, Feather is often left alone gazing towards a horizon he can see but is powerless to reach. “There’s somewhere else I need to be – someone else I have to be. Every day that I am not those things, a light goes out in me” (108) he says. From a post-colonial standpoint, Feather’s words echo the dispossession and imposed stripping of identity that is the colonised condition. In addition, having his sense of freedom taken away and replaced with “a key and a door” (83), Matilda (and likewise her mother and father) denies validity to how he sees and understands the world. In an uncanny echo of the old proverb “one who walks in another’s tracks leaves no footprints”, Feather vanishes. There are “no footprints in the dunes, no messages dug into the sand” (59) and “nothing behind except everything” (110). As a human being, Feather fades away (83), a discourse of self-obliteration readily equated with suicide and death but also with having been divested of the power to represent himself on his own terms.

In Matilda’s subjective narration, Feather is as flawed as he is perfect and as anxious as he is assertive in his horizon gazing, which she perceives as his desire to flee from her and the responsibilities of their life together. “His love was faulty, insipid” (114), she says. As history shows, it is in the interests of the coloniser to define colonised people negatively and stereotypically as lacking and in need of help in order to become assimilated into the so-called civilised mainstream. In her relationship with Feather, Matilda’s process does and more by symbolically binding his throat in collars and his wrists in cuffs. The soundness of her judgement is brought into question when she confesses a willingness to treat Feather like a human specimen and regrets that as an ethereal, ghostly figure who was as “spare as a shadow” (54). Feather’s silence can be read as a sign of his passivity but it can also be seen as a silence enforced by the weight and meaning that emanate from the one who holds the power to represent. It is as if Feather’s re-presented story has become absorbed in Matilda’s to an extent that it (he) may never have existed. At best Feather’s story is either partial or unfinished. At worst it is entirely erased by the narrating Matilda.

Unlike herself, the enigmatic man Matilda chooses to call Feather may once “have had a proper name,” (53) but if so, readers never learn what it might have been. Nor is his parentage ever discussed in any meaningful way. In fact at one point Matilda goes so far as to claim the impossible by saying that Feather “doesn’t have a mother” (66). To deny Feather a “proper” name or a family background is to suggest his past is not worth knowing or remembering. It is as if Feather’s future purpose for him rob Feather of substance, vitality and meaning. His colonial discourse of control, aimed at changing everything that was previously recognisable about Feather, keeps faith with what Homi Bhabha calls the colonial writer’s “secret art of invisibility [...] which changes the very terms of our recognition of the person” (1994, 47). At one point in the narrative Matilda says she wishes Feather were just a dream that would disappear into nothingness (70), effectively excluding the reality of his material existence as a feasible counter-narrative to her own. In Matilda’s absenting narration, Feather exists only as some unmarked space on the horizon and this makes it difficult, if not impossible, to accept the version of him that she provides.

A principal tenet of post-colonial criticism is the idea that the colonised subject is always a subject of the coloniser’s imagination. In Matilda’s imagination Feather is variously remembered as a jaguar, Pan, tousled and tameless as a flash of lightning, but never as a man (60-61). However well-motivated readers may consider Matilda’s memory of Feather to be, failure to disperse the notion that he belongs in the world of fantasy rather than the human, leaves intact a reliance on the “realness” of images that were false to begin with. Such failure is evident in the following passage in which her words evoke the concept of “the noble savage” stereotype and render Feather insubstantial even as she appears to praise him:

He walked the water’s edge like a lost ocean bird which must wait for the wind to recollect it and carry it elsewhere. A stranded, migrating winged thing: when she asked where he came from, Feather would smile and shrug; when she asked if he meant to return to that place, he would simply smile again. His silence made Feather the smartest and most mysterious person Maddy had ever known. (53)

Here Feather is conceived fancifully in Matilda’s memory as someone who exists in a form of limbo, a nowhere land outside civil society where the familiar and uncanny share uneasy temporal space. In a Comradian moment which speaks to the experience of colonialism as being in the midst of the incomprehensible, Matilda confesses that Feather was “someone she couldn’t understand” (146) to suggest a view of life that went far beyond her conception of it. But it is Feather and not Matilda who is expected to change, to turn his back on his horizon and “live life as a civilised fellow, as the rest of us do” (73), words Matilda gives to her father, whose tactics of domination her narrative embraces.

It is not surprising then that when Feather and Matilda marry, they “settle” in a cottage surrounded by a fence, that all-too-familiar marker of colonial dispossession and control, which also serves as a metaphor for the site upon which colonised and coloniser meet in intellectual confrontation. Within that space, Matilda believes she has the power to re-make Feather into an emotional shadow of herself so that her joy will become his joy and her sorrow his sorrow (94). Yet however hard she tries to change him, we are never given to feel that the Feather she describes will ever be able to give Matilda an enduring place in his life. Not even the promise of a child “could make him turn from his horizon” (94) she says. As Matilda has it, Feather had never wanted the child to whom she refers as the fay, the old English meaning of which, is the one who is fated to die. “[I]’m sorry for your loss” (100, my emphasis) Matilda has him say when their child dies, as though Feather denies both the value of her maternal instinct and his own paternity. If we are to believe her, Feather’s words signify that a child had no meaning in his life and a dead child “was a nothing returned to nothingness” (105).

An important feature in this passage is its emphasis on the demonising of Feather through colonial discourse that make possible recognition of him as the unfeeling and monstrous other. As Bhabha has it, this form of discourse is “crucial to the binding of a range of differences and discriminations that inform the discursive and political practises of racial and cultural hierarchization” (1994, 67) in the colonial imagination.
Readers are never given enough information about, or reasons for, Feather's alleged callous behaviour to be able to finally judge him as good or bad, better or worse. The image of his identity as Matilda presents it is, to use Bhabha's words, "always poised uncertainly, tenebrously, between shadow and substance" (49). What is made clear is that Feather saves Matilda when, driven by sorrow at the death of their child, she attempts to commit suicide by drowning (99). Not by chance is this scene reminiscent of the ancient myth of Eurydice who died before her time, in spite of all her lover Orpheus's efforts to save her. The fact that, like Orpheus, Feather goes down into the water to save Matilda is clearly not in accord with her version of him as capable of coldly putting both her and their lost child "into his past" (110). But as Matilda would have it, Feather proves incapable of accepting what she has to offer and is forced to leave her: "None of this is what I wanted. None of it is the way it should be" (101), she has him say. From the perspective of Australian colonial history, Feather's words are far from trivial. Rather, they evoke uncomfortable truths with regard to the inequities of settler-indigenous interaction in Australia's frontier past. It is not unreasonable to suggest that a highly symbolic kind of self-identification is being demanded of readers here with regard to the often repressed, highly contested area of colonial dispossession in this country.

Whilst the novel does not make it explicit, as earlier noted, there is sufficient evidence to support the conclusion that Feather's conspicuous departure from the highly structured life he shared with Matilda, symbolises an escape from an unnatural (read colonised) world in which he could not live. Such a conclusion is very much in keeping with the novel's symbolic system which ties Indigenous people's psychological development to nature, but not necessarily to knowledge. Though Matilda consistently represents Feather as a part of nature seen as spiritually nurturing, we are never encouraged to think of him, or of Feather, as an informing presence: "He was a kestrel, an eel, a lacewing. He begrudged nothing else its life, but..." (110). Further, through Feather's character, Hartnett makes it clear that settler-colonisers' view of the natural world, but does so even as she has Matilda attempt to assimilate Feather into a system of ideas bent on the senseless control of it. This is the principal point of tension in the novel and one cannot help but regard this situation as uncanny in both a personal and national sense. Certainly Feather can be read as a selfish shadow of a man whom Matilda represents as capable only of meaningless words and a love that was mediocre (145). But he can also be seen as the artificial creation of an already artificial world, the product of Matilda's self-centred narrative discourse and the source of her guilt for the part she played in denying him a sense of identity, equality and place. In such a reading, the entire book becomes a lament for the loss of Aboriginal cultural identity and an intimate relationship with the natural world in general.

What has been lost as a consequence of Australia's illegitimate past is summed up in the closing stages of the novel with the dramatic mythologising of Matilda's epic sea voyage to find Feather aboard her boat, the Albatross. From the time of Homer's Odyssey, the surface of the sea has figured largely in literary history as the world's grandest emotive mirror. There are a number of direct allusions to classical literary works to be found in the novel's flamboyant expression of Matilda's need to find Feather and set things right. They include Homer's Odyssey, Melville's Moby Dick and Coleridge's epic poem, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. As it invokes Coleridge's albatross, Matilda's narrative enters the enchanting fabric or dreamscape of the Ancient Mariner's world where she is constantly in contact with the various forces of nature. As in both Coleridge's poem and ancient legend, the waters in The Ghost's Child seethe with terrifying sea monsters like the Kraken and the Leviathan, with talking turtles, whales and dolphins. The fantastic anthropomorphic story Matilda tells of her purposeful search for Feather, the "one beautiful thing she has lost" (118) displays a need to bring the spiritual into the natural world. It also continues to extend Matilda's imaginative craving for another world, way of life and, by extension, form of Australianness. In the context of the novel's consistent deployment of allegory, the meaning of Matilda's sea voyage to find Feather is not detachable from the idea of an inherent sense of guilt-by-association with the tragedies of Australia's colonial past. The passage of time may not have dulled Matilda's sense of loss, but neither had it diffused the sense she may have been the cause of that loss in the first place. As she has it: "Feather's shadow would hover over her forever, a bruise in the background for the rest of her life, a wound that pained when it was deliberately or accidentally knocked" (154). In this passage, Matilda paints Feather as a source of life-long pain in much the same way as she does her mother, in the early stages of the novel. Used together, the incompatible words "deliberate" and "accidental" encompass the inconsistencies central to considerations of whether the silencing that haunts the narrative can be seen as carefully considered or happen by chance. Further mirroring the general silencing politics of the novel, the eponymous albatross is used as metaphor for the grave: the horizon of "eternal peace" (146) which Matilda could not see and about which Feather could not speak. The meeting between Matilda and Feather on the Island of Stillness illustrates the uneasy polarities of cross-cultural interaction in Australia. As seen through Feather's eyes, the rocks on the island gleam like jewels whilst Matilda sees only crusty dry dirt (143). If the novel's hidden meaning is understood as the polarisation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of seeing and understanding the world, then the Island of Stillness symbolises cultural death, the locus of dispossession where loss of family, tradition and stories mean a people cannot grow or feel and in fact are punished for the way in which they know their country.

At the beginning of this essay, I suggested The Ghost's Child can be interpreted as an allegorical text which unaethers colonial narrative discourses seeking to silence, or render inessential, the voices of colonised peoples. A great deal can be learned about storytellers by the way they put memory into words to revise or explain the past, for much is at stake in who holds the power to do the telling. As we have seen, other than Matilda's voice there is otherwise a conspicuous silence among the novel's remaining characters and her reliability as (ghost) narrator is diminished as a consequence. Matilda's novel never gestures meaningfully towards other possible ways of remembering: "her shades were not of grey, only black and white" (148); "[...] lets you hide inside" (112)骨折的_sharing the latter: Her memories are encased in "a white box [that] lets you hide inside" (112)骨折的_sharing the latter: Her memories are encased in "a white box [that] lets you hide inside" (112). In these ways, boundaries and distinctions between divergent evolutionary paths. The past is never over, however, and colonialism is never a one-way process, the nature of the development of white and black histories is such that they continue to haunt one another. Feather's haunting of Matilda is a form of immortality that speaks of Australia's colonial history as the horizon where people and nations converge. Towards the conclusion of Hartnett's story, Maddy is not forgotten. It is perhaps the finest achievement of The Ghost's Child that we are left haunted by a yearning for Feather's ghost to return so that his voice may not be forever silenced.
Notes:

1. See also the references to bushfires, lizards, bellbirds and eucalypts on p46.

2. The song, Walzing Matilda, is hailed many as Australia’s unofficial National Anthem. Queen Victoria was on the English throne when much of Australia was colonised, and Adelaide was one of her children’s names. Victoria is now one Australian state’s name, and Adelaide another state’s capital city.


5. It is possible that Hartnett is paying homage here to Patricia Wrightson whose fantasy The Nargun and the Stars (1973) broke new ground in Australian literature for young adult readers.

6. Friday’s footprint constitutes a ghostly encounter for De Foe’s stranded hero; Kipling’s imperial horror stories often feature the ghosts of young children. In Nan Chauncy’s Tangara (1950), Merrina is a young Aboriginal girl from the spirit world. Of relevant interest in that “Merrina” means shell and symbolises the prosperity of one generation arising out of the death of the preceding generation.

7. The meaning relates to ‘fey’ a difference undetectable at the level of the voice. The origin is pre-12th century from Middle English feye, Old English fæge. http://www.merriam-Webster.com/dictionary/fey

Works Cited:


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