

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ken Gelder, Jane M. Jacobs. *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998. xvii + 163 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-522-84816-8.

Reviewed by Ben Goldsmith (Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy)

Published on H-ANZAU (September, 1998)

In this concise and readable book, Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, two Melbourne University academics, explore and examine the effects of the complex 'entanglements' of the Aboriginal sacred and mainstream Australian society. Importantly, these entanglements are framed as being both products and effects of Australia's contemporary situation as a postcolonial democracy. The 'postcolonial' is here conceived as a set of processes rather than as a temporal moment which permits a neat (though far from incontestable) sidestepping of the many particular historical moments and struggles through which indigenous and minority claims on the modern nation come to circulate and be heard in the public sphere.

Through its adoption and extension of the Freudian concept of the uncanny ('specifically the combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar - the way the one seems always to inhabit the other' [p. 23]), the book attempts to provide a framework for thinking through the ambivalences, contradictions and extremities of the articulation of indigenous and non-indigenous systems of knowledge and law, and in particular the debates which ensue from negotiations over land ownership and use. But unlike another recent book which took this intersection as a central point of enquiry, David Tacey's *The Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia* (1995), Gelder and Jacobs do not consider the possibility of the reconciliation of the two (that is, their combination to produce a new social unity) to be a realistic or achievable goal.

Unlike Tacey, Gelder and Jacobs do not place their faith in the redemptive possibilities of a postmodern synthesis of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Indeed, for Gelder and Jacobs this kind of reconciliation is not only unattainable but undesirable; reconciliation is figured as 'never a fully realisable category' which 'can never be completely settled' (p. xvi). But paradoxically this 'unsettlement', which Gelder and Jacobs take as a postcolonial condition, is viewed productively, as an active, dialogic force which 'incites discourses and

counter-discourses; it produces alignments and realignments; most of all, it reminds us that (whether we like it or not) "all of us" are implicated to greater or lesser degrees in this modern predicament' (p. xvi).

This unsettlement occasioned by the inevitable incompleteness of the reconciliation process is considered to be a postcolonial condition because it represents, amongst other things, the breaking down of old, colonial binaries. In an uncanny Australia, as the authors note in their conclusion:

'one's place is always already another's place and the issue of possession is never complete, never entirely settled. The conventional colonial distinctions between self and other, here and there, mine and yours, are now by no means totally determinable; a certain unboundedness occurs whereby the one inhabits the other at one point, disentangles itself at another, inhabits it again, and so on ...' (p. 138)

The authors reject Lyotard's term 'differend' to describe the condition of 'poly-legitimacy' in which competing claims cannot be resolved because of the absence of a common rule of judgement. Instead, the term appropriated here to describe the fundamental ambivalence inherent in the notion of the uncanny is the Derridean 'solicit' with its attendant baggage of multiple slippery meanings ('to incite ... to allure ... to attract ... to disturb ... to make anxious ... to fill with concern ... to shake the whole, to make something tremble in its entirety ... to conduct (a lawsuit) ... to press or represent a matter ... to transact or negotiate' [p. 21]). This term emphasises the activation of both the Aboriginal sacred and modernity which then exist symbiotically in a constant process of negotiation.

The unsettlement occasioned by the 'entanglement' of the Aboriginal sacred and modernity can then act as a stimulus to debate about the characteristics and direction of modern Australian society, but it may also usher in, as Gelder and Jacobs acknowledge, the new racism of Pauline Hanson, Graeme Campbell and certain promi-

ment members of the Queensland National Party. Unlike older, romantic (colonial) forms of racism which took solace from the boundedness of indigenous Australians (that is, not only that they would remain 'in their place' geographically and socially, but that they would inevitably die out), this new racism (which is labelled 'postcolonial' because it results from the recognition of indigenous claims on the nation, from, that is, their sympathetic appearance in the public sphere, a movement 'out of [the] place' designated for them under colonial conditions) revolves around the claim that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders *have too much*: land claims out of proportion with their representation in the general population; additional welfare benefits unavailable to non-indigenous Australians, and so on.

This new racism achieves public prominence, Gelder and Jacobs appear to suggest, precisely because of the increased 'entanglement' (a word used extensively here) of the Aboriginal sacred and the public sphere; the Aboriginal sacred 'always throws up questions to do with who is "marginal" - who is empowered enough to claim to represent the nation, and who feels as if the nation has disdained them' (p. xii). Under the avalanche of 'minority claims' on the attention of the nation occasioned by the somewhat more enlightened official attitude towards immigrant, ethnic and indigenous interests since the 1970s, conservative political elements have in recent times made political capital from the argument that the 'mainstream' has been forgotten and ignored. While this is most evident in the rhetoric of One Nation, the current coalition government relied on similar sentiments to sweep to power in the federal election of 1996.

Uncanny Australia is of most use and interest in charting the evolution and spread of this shift in rhetoric about indigenous peoples from lack to excess (and the copresence of the two arguments) which feeds in to (and on) mining interests' responses to attacks on their 'right to explore for minerals and ... to mine those minerals [they do] find' (Lauchlan McIntosh, executive director of the Australian Mining Industry Council, 1987). These responses imply that the mining industry is disadvantaged and discriminated against when indigenous land claims are sympathetically heard; that is to say, mining companies appropriate for themselves the discourses of minority identity politics in arguing their case. As Gelder and Jacobs ask rhetorically in their conclusion, 'When even the richest social groups in Australia can lay claim to "minority" identities, what happens to redistributive, representational democracy in this country?' (p. 142). AMIC, now the Minerals Council of Australia, sponsored a major mapping exercise in the early 1990s to identify

the limits of potential land claims. The results were published in SL Davis and JRV Prescott's *Aboriginal Frontiers and Boundaries in Australia* (1992), and SL Davis *Resource Managers Pty Ltd and AMIC's Australia's Extant and Imputed Aboriginal Territories* (1993) and were presented as detached, scientific, objective studies of the 'boundaries' of indigenous territories (without apparently recognising that these are often the subject of contestation between indigenous communities).

These works however produced 'a troubling irconcilability between two kinds of Australia: the "traditional" and the "modern" which designates "traditional" occupation as the only legitimate' form of indigenous land ownership (p. 60). Land claims which do not fit the test of traditional occupation may then be characterised as illegitimate, and the indigenous community making that claim may be accused of being expansionist and of acting against the national interest. Paradoxically, the validation of sacred or secret-sacred sites through national registers as evidence of indigenous claims on land (in which, as in the Hindmarsh Island case, the secrecy and sacredness of sites must be compromised to some degree in order for them to be 'legitimated') may initiate or compound resentment against the community because indigenous people are seen to be both equal to non-indigenes (because they may be identified through bureaucratically mediated property rights) and simultaneously superior (because their identification with/through land [or property] is premised on spiritual beliefs which non-indigenous people cannot access). This resentment is another feature of what Gelder and Jacobs see as 'post-colonial racism' occasioned by the entanglement and co-circulation of the Aboriginal sacred and modern, non-indigenous Australian society.

The appearance of the one in the other and of their interaction is located in a number of institutional, geographic and regulatory sites and frameworks. The chapter 'Where is the Sacred? On the Reach of Coronation Hill' examines the contested indigenous opposition to mining at Coronation Hill (or Guratba, to give its Jawoyn name) in Kakadu National Park, which brings in to question the possibility that a site may have become sacred in the period since colonisation, and complicates the separation of 'tradition' and 'modern-ness' in consideration of indigenous arguments against mining.

'The Return of the Sacred: On Repatriation and Charisma' considers the questions raised for museums and for the human sciences by the unsettling of the (colonial) assumption that Aboriginal peoples would simply die out and disappear which legitimated the collec-

tion of skeletal remains and material culture for future study. But while the repatriation of remains and objects (which Gelder and Jacobs consider to be a postcolonial act in its response to Aboriginal claims) may unsettle 'the museum system', it may also 'work to renew it and to reestablish its force' in that it permits the appearance of new (ie. indigenous) perspectives on the work of museums, it shifts the emphasis in collection and display from objects to consideration of the human dimension, and it may provide a new rationale for museums to act as 'keeping places' if access to secret or sacred objects is controlled, by virtue of the modern technologies and techniques of preservation and restoration available to contemporary museums.

The chapter 'Authorising Sacredness: On Storytelling, Fiction and Uluru' assesses the different forms of authority and invocations of tradition and attachment to place at work in the oral storytelling tradition (epitomised by Paddy Roe, Stephen Muecke's guide in to Aboriginal Australia) and the novel (Sam Watson's *The Kadaitcha Sung*), and uses the universal sacredness of Uluru as a linking device. Where Paddy Roe's narrative is at pains to distinguish between the sacred and the profane (apparent in the metaphor of top and bottom soil, where top soil is the preserve of tourists, is public, unbounded and transgressive, and bottom soil is secretive, secure, exclusive and representative of Aboriginal authority and tradition), Watson's novel 'places [the sacred and the profane] in a highly "promiscuous" relationship with one another' (p. 112). Everyone in Watson's novel is subject to the influence of Uluru and is touched by its aura. Gelder and Jacobs link this boundlessness to Uluru's status as a global tourist destination; because it touches so many people 'and... so many people come to touch Uluru', it is 'certainly not exclusive to Aboriginal people' (p. 112). Noting the significance afforded Uluru by New Age groups, Gelder and Jacobs observe that there is 'a sense that the Rock is "open" to a range of appropriations from its many visitors simply because it is what it is - and that this openness is difficult to control even when the Rock is touched (and touches in return) out of love' (p. 113). Uluru, the authors argue 'has had an Aboriginal ethnicity imprinted upon it since 1985 - but at the same time, it continues to remain "open" and "available"' (p. 116). This openness allows groups other than the local traditional owners, the Anangu people, to make claims on Uluru, which is jointly managed by the traditional owners and the National Park authorities.

The final chapter 'Promiscuous Sacredness: On Women's Business, Publicity and Hindmarsh Island' extends earlier analysis of what happens when secret or sa-

cred sites 'enter into the public sphere of advocacy, policy and the law, as they must do when Aboriginal people seek to have such sites protected' (p. 117). The chapter assesses the 'modern scepticism' that often attaches to claims to land framed by secrecy by close analysis of the Hindmarsh Island case in which the arguments of one group of Ngarrindjeri women that the proposed site for a bridge and marina would disturb secret-sacred sites were disputed by another group of Ngarrindjeri women. In 1995, the Royal Commission established to investigate the case, found the secret-sacred claims to have been fabricated, but in an 'uncanny consequence', while for one of the dissident women the island had been of no significance before the case, it had become as a result of the case -and of her own scepticism - enormously significant.

Uncanny Australia is then a wide-ranging book which assesses the 'entanglement' of the Aboriginal sacred and modern society and regulatory frameworks across a variety of cultural and geographic sites. It is incisive and provocative, but there are a number of problems which present themselves.

In the first chapter of *Uncanny Australia*, Gelder and Jacobs note that David Tacey's book *The Edge of the Sacred* was (allegedly) enthusiastically taken up by former Prime Minister Paul Keating, who is said to have recommended it to his Cabinet because it sat well with his own agenda on reconciliation. While it is unlikely (albeit diverting to speculate) that John Howard would read, let alone recommend, *Uncanny Australia* to his Cabinet, Gelder and Jacobs are unselfconsciously certain that their book will circulate widely and become a touchstone for debate; 'our book,' they assure the reader in their preface, 'is full of very quotable quotes' (p. xvii). But the question of who the book is addressing remains open; what does seem clear is that it is not targetted at indigenous people despite Gelder and Jacobs' intentions. They argue that 'in postcolonial Australia [the Aboriginal sacred] is produced and reproduced through a process of dialogue' (p. 20) with modernity, or rather with a society existing in a state *after colonialism*. What this formation ignores is the fact that for indigenous people what Gelder and Jacobs call 'the Aboriginal sacred' may exist entirely separately from modern (non-indigenous) society. Whereas it may come in to existence for non-indigenous people through the process of dialogue that Gelder and Jacobs describe, for indigenous people it has always existed as it is the core of the oldest living culture in the world. This raises a further problem in the book: Gelder and Jacobs' use of the term 'Aboriginal sacred' which they locate in the work of Tacey and, earlier in the century, in the work of Emile Durkheim. The problem is in the overarching

religious overtones of the term. Tacey implies that modern, secular Australian society lacks a spiritual dimension, and that this lack can be redressed by reconciliation with the Aboriginal sacred.

What Tacey and Gelder and Jacobs do not recognise is that what they term the 'Aboriginal sacred' is much more than a simple, primitive (in Durkheim's terms) religious belief system. It is a system of law ('The Law' for indigenous people), and the process of the 'entanglement' of the Aboriginal sacred and modern Australian society which is the subject of Gelder and Jacobs' book, is really a process of interaction between two Laws, or systems of law. This is an argument made by Christine Morris in a forthcoming paper (in D Posey and G Duffield, eds, *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*, UNEP). In contrast to Australian common law, The Law is a 'full law' because it is 'applicable to the seen reality and unseen reality'. The Law 'stems from a belief that humans must reciprocate with every aspect of life on earth and the spiritual realm. The penalty for a breach of this law is called "payback". Australian common law is a 'half law' because it applies 'only to the seen reality' and because this law

'stems from a monotheist belief system which has as its central dogma the supremacy of the human species as the custodian of the earth. The guiding principle of

law in Australia is the protection of the individual and his goods so that they may be an effective contributor to the economic system. Any breach of this law attracts a penalty of financial retribution or a restriction of the person's liberty'

Morris goes on to argue that the common law is inadequate for indigenous people because, since it deals only with that which is tangible and discernible, it cannot provide for the custodial/obligatory duties of those subject to a full law and elements of that full law (such as payback) can never be successfully or unproblematically incorporated in to the common law. Recognition of this Two Laws argument would potentially both strengthen and unsettle Gelder and Jacobs' argument.

Despite these problems, *Uncanny Australia* is undoubtedly a significant contribution to the study of and debate over the myriad points of intersection between indigenous and non-indigenous systems of law. It is also of use in tracing the shifts in political rhetoric and the characterisation of indigenous peoples as expansionist, greedy, and privileged which have occurred in recent years. It is of use then in charting the tracks of the 'strange demons' which Stuart Hall (in a quotation reproduced in the preface) noted would be released by the dismantling of the colonial paradigm.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Ben Goldsmith. Review of Gelder, Ken; Jacobs, Jane M., *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*. H-ANZAU, H-Net Reviews. September, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2370>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net and the Electronic Journal of Australian and New Zealand History, all rights reserved. Permission is granted for the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use contact Paul Turnbull <paul.turnbull@anu.edu.au> or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.