"Living Ghosts": Other Afterlives in Australia

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Abstract:
Rituals that respect the dead are as old as human civilisation, and continue with great vitality, despite being completely irrational. This article makes the (risky) claim that the relationships of the living to the dead (enacted through ritual, perceived through hauntings, felt through grief, exchanged through gifts) are a core aspect of Australian culture conceived of multiculturally and mulitrealistically. It is argued that the tendency to reduce 'reality' to the one level of the objective and material has obscured the diversity of cultural, social, and financial capital invested in the dead, from the national war dead to what is often glossed as Indigenous peoples' spiritual relationships to Country.

Keywords: Ghosts; ethno-psychiatry; narrative; afterlives; spiritual connection; multiculturalism

1. Introduction

Rituals that respect the dead are as old as human civilisation, and continue with great vitality, despite being completely irrational. Rationalists, as well as those that Bruno Latour might characterise as "the Moderns", are dedicated to debunking or eradicating superstitions and archaic practices seen as only being part of the lives of erstwhile pagans and primitives. It is the Moderns who have "put an end to the irrationality of superstitions and discovered the effectiveness of technologies" (Latour 183) along a globalising front of progress, that includes missionaries who have helpfully gone about ridding "savages" of their barbarous practices, while building temples to a "tortured and murdered god of love," offering eternal life (Greenblatt 9).

Perhaps Christians are not rational enough, but their churches show no signs of disappearing under any withering critique coming from a sociologist or a psychologist seeking to explain away their strange practices, or, like the positivist Auguste Comte, instituting a secular 'religion of humanity,' in the early nineteenth century, which would fulfil the social 'cohesive function' of older religions. Meanwhile, other Australian 'Moderns' have, for over a hundred years, had no trouble putting aside their rational beliefs in order to honor a select group of national dead who 'gave their lives for us' at Gallipoli. This ritual has been subject to critique for not being inclusive enough (see Nicoll), or indeed, focusing on the wrong war. ANZAC, it is often argued, should find a way to include the arguably more foundational frontier wars (see Lake). It is this 'other' aspect of the afterlives of the dead that this paper wishes to focus on, giving some idea of the multicultural variety of Australian afterlives, while attempting to understand the continued existence of the dead in the lives of 'those left behind' (see Despret).

In terms of what is risky for Australian society, this essay offers an argument for greater inclusiveness of the 'multicultural dead.' We will speak of the resistance that is put up every time the Gallipoli legend is challenged for celebrating mainly only white men's role in one particular (overseas) war. The inclusion of the Aboriginal dead in frontier wars is the risky alternative, risky

for a mainstream (white) Australia that, today, even struggles with the very liberal notion of reconciliation. It would be equally risky to ask about the continued role that other multicultural dead play in national life. For example, Chinese Australians might find they have to bury their dead in unconsecrated 'alien' sections of cemeteries because their relatives cannot always be sent home to be buried, according to their saying, as 'falling leaves upon the roots of the tree.' More research needs to be done to get a sense of what risks Chinese Australians feel they are running with these unorthodox 'foreign' burials, and conversely, how they feel their families and identities are being more happily embedded in Australian life, so that their departed start to become Australian ancestors (see Brumley).

When old Paddy Roe, from Broome, North-Western Australia, used to speak of ghosts he would call them "living ghosts." These beings, he would say, "belong" somewhere, or he would make a statement like, "something live in this country you know" (Roe 93). My understanding from him is that these beings do not exist in some alternative realm to which the shades are banished, but remain in contact *with us* in this world, and not just anywhere, but *only in particular places*: on the track to a waterhole, or in a gully where some crime might have been committed, as Paddy Roe, in his first book, spins it out in three "Living Ghost" stories and two "Donkey Devil" stories (see Roe). This Aboriginal world of the Nyigina and Goolarabooloo peoples of North-West Australia is not subject to some kind of either/or divide where death is final and absolute: where people would be either dead or alive, or its corollary: you either believe in ghosts or you do not.

2. Ethno-psychiatry

In order to get beyond that structure that distributes all phenomena across a divide where the 'objectively real' is on one side, and 'subjective perceptions' are on the other, we might need to start to analyse multiple ontologies, the project characterised in anthropology as the 'ontological turn' (see Holbraad) and embraced more widely among those French-speaking philosophers (see Stengers, Latour, Despret, Nathan, etc.). I have characterised as 'the new French pragmatists' (see Muecke 2021 x). Tobie Nathan's ethnopsychiatric clinical work and writings are notable for taking seriously patients' complaints about (for example) being bewitched, and then conceiving a 'folk therapy' that might actually work. Here is one of his clinical examples:

> I was treating a woman who had been delirious for about a dozen years. In fact, each time she had given birth, to her five children, she had succumbed to what psychopathologists call 'postpartum psychosis'. When I met her for the first time, she was wandering at night, running away dishevelled with a baby of a few months of age. She was an Algerian Kabyle, and was constantly accusing her sister-in-law (the wife of her husband's brother) of having made a *s'hur* ('cast a spell'). During the first session, I simply asked her to bring me, next time, an egg that she had kept under her head at night. The night she put the egg under her pillow, she dreamt about an object hidden under the threshold. She woke up her husband, and in the middle of the night he set about dismantling the aluminium draft-protector covering the threshold to their apartment. They found, wrapped in a plastic bag, some Arabic writing in saffron ink. They took this object to a *taleb* [healer] without delay, who of course confirmed for them that it was a spell. After this series of events—please believe me—the woman was no longer delirious. I kept the therapy going with her for another two years at least and I can say she got over her difficulties totally. (66)

Nathan clearly specialises in non-Western ethnicities, and his therapy is deeply informed by his anthropological knowledge. Mainstream psychiatry would, of course, treat this Algerian woman as if all psychopathologies are universal and subject to the same medicalisation according to the DSM-5 manual. As Nathan says, such therapy "isolat[es] the sufferer, while on the other hand it reinforces the group of experts (the doctors)" (49). There was no way mainstream medicine could see her suffering as caused by anything exterior to her mind or body. But she insists on the cause being a spell, and Nathan's knowledge of the role of eggs in North African folk remedies finds a way for this object to recalibrate her relationships with her family:

> she was the only one of her family line in France and was totally dependent on her all-powerful husband—what I mean is, without father, paternal uncle or brother to defend her interests against those of her husband's family. My simple request to bring an egg acted like a trigger for a whole series of events. (66-67)

"The main aim of such a theory," concludes Nathan, "is therefore to technologise the therapeutic relationship. One technique created the illness; another technique—or rather a counter-technique—will permit a cure" (67). It is a pragmatic approach, therefore, but it is based on an important theoretical presupposition, that the woman inhabits what he calls a 'multiple universe society,' not the Western 'one universe society' where what is real is confirmed by experts in their field, within a general objective and material ontology, and anything else is imaginary or delusional.

Indebted in some ways to the foundational fieldwork of Jeanne Favret-Saada in Normandy and reinforcing Bruno Latour's more recent elaboration of different 'modes of existence,' this approach introduces *ontological subtlety*, which accepts the premises that *we don't yet know what might be real*, and reality is *best described in multiple ways*, rather than via a reduction. One kind of reduction would be a psychologist's account of what a church service is, a partial account because we know how anthropologists' and historians' accounts would differ in significant ways, and, if added to the first account, could contribute to a *more realistic* overall description.

3. In Aboriginal Australia

Paddy Roe taught me about such subtle ontologies. Ontological subtlety is at work, linguistically, in the very phrase 'living ghost,' for how can such a being be alive and dead at the same time? It is a subtlety much exploited in the zombie genre, not to mention in the story of the resurrection of Christ. I eventually came to realise that Roe too inhabited a multiple universe society. For him, a perception of strangeness is a sign of 'something.' A species of tree might be 'in the wrong place;' a dog has ears like a donkey and a big woolly tail: it gives people going fishing before dawn a big fright, but when they come back to look at the place where it was, there are no tracks, "oh, something wrong ... must be ghost." Or when they hear babies crying, where there are no babies:

> only baby crying - - -
> he's a living ghost you know - - -
> well they only just say *wirang* -
> *wirang* you know he belonga there -
> (soft) *wirang* you know he belonga there
> (Roe 115)

These kinds of accounts are common. There is a Facebook site "Indigenous ghost stories" with just this kind of story being posted:

> This story happened in Broome when I was 8-9 years old… Well I was living with my uncle and aunty and 2 cousins at the time, and the house we stayed at were on stilts. So at night time we use [hear] to noises of someone running down the hallway giggling and laughing, even my uncle and aunty could hear it. It was very freaky at the time but we all got use[d] to it. Where us boys slept we had bathroom straight across from our room and the light would just shine in a bit and my cousin bed was right in line with where the light was shining and my bed was on the opposite side facing towards him. Anyways one night I woke to go toilet and I could see this big black figure leaning over my cousin as if it was tryna jump inside him so I tried to scream for my uncle. Just as I was about to yell the figure looked straight towards me and it jumped right on me and I couldn't move or yell or nothing I was stunned.. I was that scared I went back to sleep and told my uncle the next day. He then ended up getting one of our grandfather who had mobarn (black magic) to check the house out… he then told us that there was a little girl spirit living in the house and she wanted to take my cousins soul coz he was a naughty child.. we had to smoke the house out that afternoon and after that we didn't get any humbug.. But I still get the shivers when I think about how that figure snapped its neck then jumped straight on me so I couldn't move gives me goose bumps talking about it.. I always sleep with the tv on now…!! True story.[1]

That story could be a typical one from Broome, or perhaps from any part of Aboriginal Australia where the stories belong to particular places, as in, also from the Facebook site: "Does anyone info (sic) on the man in moree that had goat feet and a suit? Thanks."

While I claim that the white settlers and Moderns necessarily reject such 'mumbo-jumbo' by virtue of their modernity, it is immediately apparent, despite their protestations of rationality, that their dead also have rich afterlives. Let us start from Judith Butler's (34) proposition that "if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life," suggesting that life does not just go on and then stop forever, but the life lived builds up a kind of excess or credit, the portion of that life that will be grievable after death. The living thus invest in their afterlives in a gift economy crossing the barrier of death, conscious of what their descendants will inherit, and not just in material terms, but with a kind of yearning for immortality down 'vectors of vitality' made possible syntactically with the future anterior forms of verbs. This is consolidated in the tributes or eulogies made at a funeral: "It is certainly an interesting way of thinking about what honoring and inheriting signify … giving a place … to the past in the well-named future anterior: 'Her presence in this world *will have made* a difference'" (Despret 51, my emphasis).

The version of death we are familiar with, the materialist and secular version of death, became embedded in Europe only in the late nineteenth century, but this is "a very local and historically very recent conception of their status" (Despret 4). In Vinciane Despret's recent book, *Our Grateful Dead*, the foundation for this article, she asserts that "Death as something that opens only onto nothingness is certainly the least common idea in the world" (Despret 4, citing Molinié). Her book

[1] https://www.facebook.com/IndigenousGhostParanormalStories

is replete with stories, from those as simple as taking flowers to one's mother's grave, to carrying her own father's handkerchief for those moments she feels sad about him. No need to add the investments in elaborate, expensive funerals, collective monuments and war memorials and complex national rituals to celebrate the war dead, "the lives that are grievable," whose excess of life continues to confer on us, the living, after all these decades, a large measure of honour and moral value. Those who have been left behind continue to gather those stories.

Whose dead? There have been many calls to honour the dead in Australia's first wars, the frontier wars. But that must be too risky a proposition for white, settler, Australia. There is so much at stake in the continued existence of the dead, in these afterlives, personally and collectively with an outpouring of 'public feelings' (see Stewart). Life does not stop with death, says Vinciane Despret, existence continues, in an attenuated, transformed and transforming way, as it continues along those vectors of vitality, which one can approach with the necessary 'ontological tact' of the good ethnographer and the interpretive skills of the exegete.

To make our point textually, exegetically, Christos Tsiolkas's *Dead Europe,* could come to hand garnished with the spice of Derrida's philosophical 'hauntology,' but one can tie very interesting threads together just by walking around looking for stories and seeing how they concatenate. This was another of Despret's pragmatic, methodological strategies, her 'narrative matrix÷':

> a narrative matrix … is a machine for making stories that get closer and closer; a matrix of stories that are constructed out of the preceding ones, and, as they do this, the one connects with the other, not on a thread, but in the way that cloth is made. This is what we might call writing in three dimensions. Any point of the frame can give birth to a new narrative direction. Every stitch that is created leads you to the next, or to another, according to the connivance of the patterns. (17)

This means that the ethnographer, the collector of stories, does not foreclose possibilities by introducing the filter of 'not believing,' or by imposing a theoretical metanarrative. The structure of the narrative matrix will hence be more rhizomatic, less hierarchical, and more likely to allow a great flow of generosity into our relationships with the dead. We do not have to obey the pop psychology and go through the seven stages of grieving, so that we can achieve finality, acceptance, and thus admit only one version of the story we can have with the dead. No, there are many. They have cross-cultural variations and genres, rituals, and literary tropes. As I found in Aboriginal Australia, they tend to be place-based, and this may be a generalisation one can risk about ghost stories: they are place-based. Only a certain house is haunted, but not another. Its capacity to be haunted lies in its exceptionality: "something there,"~~,~~ as Paddy Roe would say. And there is always a story.

Let us begin by experimenting with Despret's narrative matrix. I mention her book, as I am translating it, to a friend, and there is immediately a story. I will call her Sarah.

Sarah's mother had recently died. She was in grief, but happy to talk to me. Several remarkable things had happened since the mother died, leaving her husband and a number of adult children. For one, Sarah had started talking to her sister, with whom she had had a serious dispute twenty years ago. Now they spoke on the phone nearly every day. And her father and brother, who had never really gotten on either; they were now living happily together!

How had these changes come about? It was as if her mother (Sarah was prepared to speculate), were orchestrating things posthumously. The mother, she went on, who had been oppressed in the marriage, was now suddenly organising the family, as if she had a new power. Was Sarah grateful to her mother for these interventions, I asked? "Yes, of course. It's uncanny, fascinating!"

The gift economy with the dead continues to circulate. Not only do they leave us material things in the form of inheritances, but also stories and sometimes signs, and we continue to reach out to them. Reading around in the archival sector of the 'matrix,' Despret discovered another remarkable story:

> A woman from the village of Mansfield in England had promised a close friend who was very sick that she would place in her coffin a packet of letters her dead son had once written to her. With all the confusion of her grief, she forgot. She was in a state about this until the village postman died, not long after. She went to see the postman's family and asked permission to deposit the letters in his coffin. She knew she could trust him to be as diligent a postman in the other world as he was in this one. This was reported in the *Morning Herald* on February 14, 1829. (25)

It would be rational just to forget about the promise made to the dead woman, but this story reveals, according to Despret, that the obligation to the dead can even be stronger than with the living, and the solution more inventive.

The different existences of the dead manifest in multicultural varieties, leading to a hypothesis for future work in the study of Australian culture: the *varieties of posthumous existence in Australia are neglected, as if culture only belongs to the living. Culture and heritage come about between the living and the dead in a circulatory economy that creates and reinforces traditions and heritage. And these cultures are plural.* For example, the Chinese tradition of Tomb Sweeping Day (Qīngmíng jié) takes place in early April, and it is observed in Australia. Research remains to be done on how long it has been going on, and how it reinforces Chinese-Australian ancestry, especially in a pointedly place-based ritual. This, perhaps more than other aspects of Chinese-Australian life, will give real insights into the nature of that hybrid identity.

I have made the claim, with Tobie Nathan and Bruno Latour, that 'multiple universes' and 'multiple realities' are to be valorised over 'single universe societies,' because the latter extol a material, objective existence as the bedrock of the real. When Indigenous cultures assert that there are other kinds of existence, and many kinds of cultures invest time, effort, and money into their relationships with the dead, while art and culture attribute real effects to fictional and spiritual existences, then portals to 'multiple universes' start to open or reveal themselves as always having been there anyway. So, why is it more valuable to live in a multiple reality society? This, I would claim, is a richer society, where there are not only different stories to do with the dead, different forms their existence can take, but there are also multiple place-based gods and spirits.

In North-West Australia we learn from Paddy Roe that there are children's spirits (*rayi*), malevolent trickster imps (*mik, wurrawurra*), fairies, all these existences that secular materialism has tried to banish. Why is it more valuable? Because there is a wealth of culture to be recovered from this scorching of the earth was done in the name of one dominating material value alone,

while perversely the State spends millions on the potlatch of one kind of dead, an exclusive white national dead. This is a trick to which anthropologist Mick Taussig has devoted a book, *The Magic of the State* (1997).

This was the very magic that anti-colonial ghost dances (most famous in North America) were conjuring counter-spells against. And here one should mention Belgian philosopher, Isabelle Stengers, who wrote *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell.* But the ghost dances of North America are another story altogether. I am thinking more that, for our context and times, harnessing the powers of the dead to keep cultures plural is a kind of counter-spell, an effort to avoid irreductions (see Latour), and an acknowledgement that what is really real is necessarily complex and open to additions.

Death is not an absolute, nor is the spiritual transcendence to another state, because the dead remain with us in our stories, in our matrix of stories. So, death cannot have a unitary value, always the same, which we might *want to* attribute to singular god. "You make my life meaningful," one says to a god or to an adored loved one. Then suddenly that person is gone. A spouse is lost after so many years of togetherness it seems that the value had become permanent. A community loses a valuable leader whose absence creates an ethical, if not moral, void: the bereaved start to drift, asking themselves, "what can we *do* now?"

Some of us felt a bit like that at Paddy Roe's funeral twenty years ago. We had the service under the old Tamarind tree at Dora St and then moved down to the cemetery. We took turns shovelling the red earth onto his coffin as the women, and some men, cried. The Catholics repeated the Hail Marys endlessly, people made more speeches, and I remember Franz saying, "I guess we'll have to let you go, old man," like Paddy himself used to say, sitting under his old Tamarind tree, sending us off so he could have a break.

His daughter Teresa sat on a chair at the head of the grave and we took turns to say a few words to her and embrace her. When it was my turn she held on strongly, it was a bear hug, and I thought after a while I should get away and let someone else have a turn. I felt someone tap on my shoulder. But she hung on to me. After a minute we let go and I looked around to see who was waiting. No one there. I found Krim and asked him, did you tap on my shoulder? No, he said. I thought about the quality of that tapping. Real, imaginary, symbolic? It had the quality of certainty, even if I wanted to think it hadn't happened, it was still kind of definite. Maybe he was letting me know I could write about it, tell you about it, and I know it is also a way of saying that he will never leave me, and that he is always there, he belongs there.

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