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### **‘Haunted by the Narrative’: Focalising Ogilvie’s Haunted Landscapes**



Fig. 1. Helen Ogilvie. Stone house, Portland (1964). Oil on gesso on Board. 12.5 x 18cm. Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest, Melbourne.

Helen Ogilvie’s works- “Stone House, Portland” (1964) as seen in Figure 1, “Weatherboard House, Pearcedale” (Ogilvie 1964) as seen in Figure 2, “Houses Waiting for Demolition” (1963) as seen in Figure 3 and “Grape Picker’s Cottage” (1964) as seen in Figure 4 have historically been interpreted, defined and perceived through the lens of colonial-settler-centric narratives (Saward 2018, 32). These narratives belong to the Australian Colonial Gothic tradition, whose tropes are present in the compositional elements of her work, namely through Ogilvie’s colonial, frontier, homesteads and her Australian landscapes. Her landscapes are defined negative spaces that have been made void through land colonisation policies. Its emptiness draws on colonisation policies implemented and based on the conception of the *terra nullius*. The implementation of these policies enabled the eradication of flora, fauna and peoples characteristic of Indigenous Australian ecologies, and thereby the Australian bush wilderness, for the use of frontier colonial settler agriculturalists. This

eradication is indicative of the Australian Colonial Gothic's characterisation of the Australian bush wilderness and its Indigenous ecologies as monstrous and otherworldly, that pose a legitimate threat to the establishment of colonial civilization upon the continent and, therefore, a threat that was perceived as "necessary" to be eradicated (Gelder and Weaver 2013, 9; Turcotte 1998, 8-9). The centralisation of her homesteads within her works, a recurring motif, was due to her personal nostalgia of growing up in rural New South Wales as well as her intention of wanting people to give a second glance and to memorialise the colonial homestead structure (Palmer 1995, 26-29). While her homesteads remain her focal point, and thus- as exemplified in the Australian Colonial Gothic- the most stark symbol of the dominion of the colonial expansionist enterprise on Indigenous Australian land, her landscapes could be and have been interpreted as contributing to the amelioration of her homesteads' role as relics proudly memorialising Australia's colonial history (Saward 2018, 32). Hence, we term these tamed landscapes that serve as a backdrop for the homesteads as *terra nullius* landscapes.



Fig. 2. Helen Ogilvie. *Weatherboard House, Pearcedale*. (1964). Oil on Gesso on Board. 17 x 22.6cm. Russell and Mab Grimwade Miegunyah Fund, Melbourne.

What is ignored in favour of this interpretation is that Ogilvie's *terra nullius* landscapes also play an additional role as vessels that memorialise the ecologies and peoples eradicated from its surface. In other words, colonial perceptions of Ogilvie's work and, specifically her landscapes, adhere to the Colonial Gothic constructions of Indigeneity and Indigenous ecologies as "diabolical" and "fiendish" and, in doing so, deflect attention away from the "political and moral questions concerning the expropriation of Indigenous land" (Turcotte 1998, 8-9; Van Toorn 1992, 89). Deviation from settler-colonial narratives reveals a landscape that no longer focuses on settler colonial fears and disorientation but instead emphasises a landscape that continues to be haunted by violence enacted to eradicate Indigenous Australian ecologies. Centering their absence instead of the presence of the homestead presents a subversion of the Colonial Gothic tropes inherent in her work. This subversion leads to the 'degothicisation' and 'despectralization' of the othered Indigenous

Australian bush wilderness and, instead, spectralises, ‘gothicises’ and others the architecture of the colonial homestead as a symbol of perpetrated colonial violence.

This project aims to begin to decentralise settler colonial narratives in which current perceptions of Helen Ogilvie’s work are rooted in. In doing so, it is possible to give way for opportunities to centre Indigenous Australian histories and narratives in future perceptions of her work alongside prevailing settler-colonial ones. The analysis detailed in this report aims to further contribute to the larger movement to decolonise art history. It acknowledges the place of Ogilvie’s works, as Euro-colonial art, in the perpetuation of colonial, imperialist histories, narratives and ideals. The implicit reality of dispossessed Indigenous Australian communities and the eradicated Indigenous Australian ecologies, through said decolonisation of Ogilvie’s work, will enable the centering of Indigenous Australian ecologies and communities as the subject of interpretations surrounding her works, rather than being relegated to the periphery.



Fig. 3. Helen Ogilvie. *Houses Waiting for Demolition*. (1963). Oil on Gesso on Board. 20.5 x 24.1cm. Russell and Mab Grimwade Miegunyah Fund, Melbourne.

Historically, Indigenous Australian bush ecologies posed the most immediate threat to the establishment of Euro-colonial enterprise, particularly through the presence of Indigenous Australian people (Turcotte 1992, 9). Australia’s landscapes had long since, prior to the embarkation of European settler-colonists upon the continent’s soil, being imagined as a grotesque space populated by “monsters” (1). The physical reality of the bush wilderness, additionally, incorporated flora that was familiar in name but unfamiliar in form, strange animals and reversed seasons. It was a landscape consisting of ecologies, in other words, that somewhat resemble the ecologies and landscapes of Europe but with enough deviation so as to be conceived of as unnatural (1-2). The amalgamation of these elements rendered the landscape an uncanny space, whose uncanniness was further exacerbated by the reactions of European colonial-settlers, which were of “desperation, horror, uncertainty, entrapment, solitariness and hostility” towards the Australian bush landscape (Turcotte 1992, 1).

The crystallisation of settler colonial fears resulted in the spectralisation of the bush landscape and its Indigenous peoples, forming the core of Australian Colonial Gothic narratives. Within this paradigm, bush ecologies were considered monstrous, occulted spaces of “wild savagery”: sites where settler disorientation and the looming possibility of death were projected onto the figure of the Indigenous person (Van Toorn 1992, 87; Turcotte 1998, 9). Indigenous Australian peoples were thus manifested in the settler colonial psyche as “savage”, monstrous apparitions. It is a characterisation that relied on the Western political conception that Indigenous Australians were living in a pre-civilised state, rooted in the colonial European consideration of agricultural civilisation as the apex of social progress, and the hunter-gatherer life adopted by Indigenous Australian communities as inferior (Buchan and Heath 2006, 6). As such, Indigenous Australian peoples, alongside the uncanny bush wilderness they inhabited, interacted with and were implicitly associated with, weren’t only a threat to the establishment of European colonies upon Australian land. As Penny Van Toorn (1992, 89) elucidates, they were also a threat to the moral legitimacy of the settler colonial enterprise. It would be contentious (though not impossible) for the European settler to occupy and stake dominion over a land that was already peopled, no matter how other and “savage” its peoples were characterised as, and attempting to do so would be further disputable if Indigenous Australian communities were considered as a “civilisation”.



Fig. 4. Helen Ogilvie. *Grape Picker's Cottage*. (1964). Oil on Gesso on Board. 14 x 20.5cm. Russell and Mab Grimwade Miegunyah Fund, Melbourne.

In perpetuating narratives of Indigenous Australian communities and the bush wilderness as spectralised, monstrous Others through the Australian Colonial Gothic traditions, therefore, attention is deflected from the political and moral questions concerning the expropriation of indigenous Australian land. In doing so, Indigenous Australian communities are made inhumane, and the natural bush wilderness is made unnatural. Through the excuse of eradicating what is inhumane and unnatural, there can be no accusation of immorality. Indeed, Australian Colonial Gothic characterisations of Indigenous communities and the bush wilderness may be considered orientalizing in nature, wherein the dominant narrative facilitates the subject's- that is, colonial settlers'- control over those entities relegated as Others, or objects (Van Toorn 1992, 90). Such narratives naturalise and normalise the violent, brutal dispossession of Indigenous Australian communities and the

eradication of Indigenous Australian ecologies, which Van Toorn (1992, 87) describes as the actions of “colonial settlers to exorcise their internal fears/ paranoia/ disturbances”. Empowered by these narratives, therefore, staking dominion over Australian land through the eradication of the unfamiliar, the making absent of the bush wilderness’ present flora and fauna in order to dispossess, in turn, Indigenous Australian communities, is made entirely legal (Buchan and Heath 2006, 14). The “political void” of Indigenous Australia is replaced with the colonial “gift of civilization” and “new techniques for living” (6). The implementation of this was enforced through policies in accordance with *terra nullius*, which effectively allowed the forced making of the Australian landscape into ‘nobody’s land’ to be redefined as ‘colonial land’ for the purpose of establishing colonial settler frontier civilisation (6-7).

We see evidence for these colonial attitudes surrounding *terra nullius*, what constitutes ‘colonial land’ and the Othered bush wilderness, in Katherine Graves’ (1953) accounts of homesteading in Tasmania. Her authorship of her accounts in the 1950s further exemplifies the afterlife of colonial attitudes and narratives long after the departure of British colonial administration. It is an account that further contains Australian Colonial Gothic motifs, in the implicit spectralisation of the bush wilderness and depictions of razed, *terra nullius*, agricultural landscapes. For instance, Graves (1953, 12) describes the cleared land that she and her husband purchase alongside their homestead in terms of its utility. The suitability of its soil for the raising of sheep is carefully calculated (13-15). Its presumed capacity for profit is weighed through careful deliberation. Their train of thought is an obvious one for a family hinging their livelihood on the success of their pursuits in agriculture and animal husbandry. There is a distinct demarcation drawn, however, between the razed, clear land they wish to purchase and the bush wilderness lying beyond its boundaries, which Graves (12) describes dismissively as “bush and marsh”. Indeed, she equates the “bush and marsh” to “the back of a crouching beast,” a threatening image whose implicit violence symbolises a continuing settler colonial fear towards the bush wilderness (12). Despite this fear, the cleared land she purchases is distinctly identified as the property of the early colonial settlers who obtained the land through free grants (15). In doing so, she implies a certain causal arrogance and entitlement that perpetuates the idea of the tamed land as the right of the colonial settler. The colonial settler’s right to possess Australian land and tame it, however, is not one that may be completely relegated to the past. Indeed, Graves reinforces her and her husband’s right to purchase and possess the land through her certainty of the supposed extinction of Indigenous Australian communities that once populated, worked, benefited from and cared for the bush wilderness.

If the tamed Australian land is the right of colonial settlers, then the untamed bush wilderness is associated with Indigenous Australian communities. This is illustrated most clearly in Graves’ (36-37) hints at the existence of Indigenous Australian peoples in the marsh in the form of stone artefacts used for sharpening spears. Significantly, these are artefacts associated with weaponry and violence. Furthermore, she explicitly engages in a fantasy painting Indigenous Australian peoples as a violent threat when patrolling the boundaries of her tamed land (36-37). She imagines “a black brandishing a spear” at her heels, and upon

reaching her homestead and her tamed land, she feels a sense of safety and security (36-37). Through the narrative of her fantasy, the demarcation of land is made clear and the identities of each section of land are made stark. Graves' "silly kind of game" insidiously implies that because the untamed wilderness, with all its implications of danger and violence is identified with Indigenous Australian peoples, the wilderness must be razed and tamed into a cultivable void in order for it to be identified with and made suitable for the colonial settlers (36-37). The eradication of the threat of the bush wilderness and the dispossession of Indigenous Australian peoples, as such, in Graves' settler colonial account is entirely justified.

Ogilvie's landscapes, as such, embody the continuing prejudices of the Australian Colonial Gothic and Graves' account in the visual depiction of the eradication of "threats" posed by the Australian bush wilderness and Indigenous Australian communities. Her landscapes are nearly void of any flora characteristic of the bush and thereby any visual cue denoting the presence of Indigenous Australian communities. They enhance the visual focal point of her homesteads by reflecting back the luminosity of the Australian light back onto them, making their derelict, abandoned architectures appear pristine to the viewer. Homesteads are notably, in the Australian Colonial Gothic, perceived as the cornerstones of frontier settler colonial civilisations. Indeed they are also emblematic of the triumph in the Australian frontier, and the successful exertion of dominance over Indigenous Australian communities (Saward 2018, 32). These roles adopted by the trope of the homestead, thereby, may be said to be the core of why settler colonial narratives have been imposed and continue to be imposed upon Ogilvie's homestead works. Indeed, this interpretation is exacerbated by Ogilvie's reasoning behind the composition of her work: her nostalgia for disappearing colonial frontier civilisations, the result of the rapid urbanisation movement of the 1960s wherein frontier residents left behind the abandoned shells of their homesteads for more attractive urban dwellings instead (34-35). Furthermore, the depiction of their distinctly European architecture was received favourably abroad, particularly in Britain, as records and relics of the height of Britain's empirical prowess (Sheridan Palmer, interview, 2024). The presence of Ogilvie's homesteads alongside the absence denoted through her *terra nullius* landscapes, therefore, is not only a sign of the expansion of colonial territory within Australia, but also serves as an irrefutable image of colonial ownership of Indigenous Australian ecologies, and authority over Indigenous Australian peoples.

In the process of memorialising the narrative histories of the Euro-colonial enterprise through her homesteads, however, Ogilvie's works may also be interpreted as memorialising the violence inherent in the dispossession of Indigenous Australian peoples and the razing of Indigenous Australian ecologies. That is to say, in having her landscapes bear the physical evidence of *terra nullius*- its bare, negative space- and having said evidence ameliorate the narrative of settler colonial prowess, interpretations of Ogilvie's work tend to justify, naturalise or conceal the history of settler colonial exploitation of Australian ecologies and Indigenous Australian peoples. The realisation is one that removes the pristine veneer of her homesteads and lays bare the reality of its uncannily derelict, decrepit architecture. One comes to the understanding that Ogilvie's homesteads are distinctly gothic elements in themselves. Though the Australian Colonial Gothic does favourably characterise homesteads



as being haunted by its past as a fully domesticated home, a site of civility and a monument to colonial agricultural prowess, defining the homestead as a gothic entity, one haunted by the violence perpetrated against Indigenous Australian ecologies and peoples, spectralises Ogilvie's homesteads. It is transformed, just the Australian landscape and its peoples were transformed by way of the projection of settler colonial fears, into a monstrous site, wherein its monstrous entities are the colonial settlers themselves.

In considering Ogilvie's homesteads as spectralised entities instead of glorified symbols of colonial prowess, in forcing the trope to reckon with the violence with which it has been established, the opportunity to realign the roles held by her homesteads and landscapes. As Byatt quotes, "it is through the tales of the dead that the imagined worlds of the living are created". Applying her sentiments to the interplay between Ogilvie's homesteads and *terra nullius* landscapes, draws on the case that the Australian Euro-colonial enterprise relied on the subjugation of the narratives of dispossessed Indigenous Australian people and eradicated Indigenous Australian ecologies in order that they may realise colonial civilisation upon Australian land. To put it more succinctly, it is upon the backs of *absent* Indigenous Australian ecologies and peoples that colonial, frontier civilization is physically manifested or made *present*. In considering her homesteads as monstrous gothic vessels in themselves, whose colonial residents are spectralised, we place them in equal standing to the trope of the monstrous bush wilderness, and, in addition, in equal standing to spectralised, absent Indigenous Australian flora, fauna and peoples of her *terra nullius* landscapes. In doing so, the hierarchy upon which the settler colonial interpretations of her work have been built, one where the frontier civilisation 'rightfully' subjugates the bush wilderness, is dismantled.



Fig 5. Sophie Mama. *Haunted by the Narrative*. (2024). Oil on gesso on board. 22.5 x 30.0cm.

In dismantling the settler colonial gothic hierarchies in her work, her *terra nullius* landscapes, then, adopt a novel role. Ogilvie's landscapes are haunted due to the Australian colonial gothic and *terra nullius* by the gothic spectre of the Indigenous Australian person and all unfamiliar uncanny natural elements that reinforce settler colonial fear towards said spectre (Gelder and Weaver 2013, 9). However, when the homestead is made uncanny, it is transformed into a trope that highlights the reality of colonial perpetrated violence rather than the fiction of violence initiated and perpetrated by Indigenous Australian communities. Her landscapes are haunted, then, by the colonial settlers, not its Indigenous Australian peoples. It is a dismantling that removes her landscapes as one that is defined by the adjective "*terra nullius*" and recenters them as Australian, First Nations landscapes, an additional focal point of her composition that demands to be centred and considered in the overall interpretations of her work rather than relegated to the peripheries of her canvas. As seen in Figure 5, we decided on a creative outcome to visualise this subversion. We conceal the colonial homestead in the foliage of the bush wilderness which is symbolic of Indigenous Australian ecologies, thus working to centralise Indigenous ecologies, and thereby Indigenous perspectives, by placing them at the forefront of this work.

Our analysis, as such, is a fundamentally decolonial one, originating in the reinterpretation of Ogilvie's homesteads and landscapes and the centering Indigenous Australian narratives and histories of dispossession, wherein it is possible to formulate critiques of colonialism as it manifests in visual and material culture and adopt a critical approach to the prevalence of empire and colonialism in the interpretation of art. Colonial settler interpretations of artwork, particularly those rooted in the Australian Colonial Gothic. This Gothic framework upon which settler colonial narratives were constructed specific to the settler colonial experience at the expense of Indigenous Australian voices and Indigenous Australian ecologies. In reinterpreting Ogilvie's homesteads and landscapes, and centering Indigenous Australian narratives of dispossession, we may formulate critiques of colonialism as it manifests in the visual and material culture, and thereby adopt a critical approach to the prevalence of empire and colonialism in the interpretation of colonial art. For doing so responds directly to histories of Indigenous dispossession and creates the opportunity for those peoples historically underrepresented, and othered, in narratives of colonisation to appear.



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