‘Something Terrible has Happened’: Australia as a Country of Mourning in Peter Weir’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Marie Darrieussecq’s *Tom is Dead*

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Fig. 1. Frederick McCubbin, *The Pioneer*. 1904. Oil on canvas, 225.0 x 295.7 cm. The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/ (accessed May 12, 2016).

You will be aware of an absence, presently,
Growing beside you, like a tree,
A death tree, colour gone, an Australian gum tree[1]

Where once was a sea is now a salty sunken desert,
A futile heart within a fair periphery;
The people are hard-eyed, kindly, with nothing inside them,
The men are independent but you could not call them free.[2]

[1] Sylvia Plath, "For a Fatherless Son," *Critical Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1963): 115.
[2] James McAuley, "Envoi," (1971), http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/mcauley-james/envoi-0151006.

Introduction

Following the publication of her novel *Tom is Dead*, Marie Darrieussecq wrote a public defence against her colleague Camille Laurens' charge of 'psychic plagiarism,'[3] the catalyst for a feud, highly mediatised in France, which raised numerous questions regarding 'the rights and limitations of fiction as a literary enterprise.'[4] Darrieussecq makes no claim to autobiographical truth in her novel *Tom is Dead*; she subsequently dismissed Laurens' contention that to write on 'serious subjects' a writer must have '"paid the debt" of suffering,'[5] asserting the right to write from her '*imaginaire*' while questioning the privileged claim of life writing to truth, '[a]s if fiction were never anything but the plagiarism of a factual account.'[6] *Tom is Dead* is very much the product of an imaginary: not only has Darrieussecq, a mother of three, never lost a child herself—she sets her novel in a country in which she has never lived. The French author sets her novel *Tom is Dead* 'as far [away] as possible' in Australia, despite her familiarity with the nation being largely based on a visit of three weeks—one week in Sydney, two in Tasmania—ten years before the writing of the novel. While asserting the adequacy of such a brief stay for an author to 'make up a country,' she claims that 'her' Australia is 'an imaginary country… of mourning.'[7] This statement has served as the inspiration for this study, in which I situate *Tom is Dead* alongside Peter Weir's classic Australian film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) to explore the representation of

[3] Camille Laurens in Leslie Barnes, "Truth, Trauma, Treachery: Camille Laurens V. Marie Darrieussecq," *MLN* 130, no. 4 (2015): 998.
[4] Ibid., 999.
[5] Camille Laurens in Marie Darrieussecq, "Fiction in the First Person, or Immoral Writing," *L'Esprit Créateur* 50, no. 3 (2010): 76.
[6] Ibid., 70.
[7] interview by Ramona Koval, August 31, 2009, http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/marie-darrieussecqs-tom-is-dead/3126602#transcript.

Australia as a space of mourning in the form and content of these two texts, and the ethical matters that arise from this troping of Australia by Weir and Darrieussecq.[8]

Tom is Dead takes the form of a journal written by a grieving mother, an unnamed French woman living in the Blue Mountains, ten years after she moves with her family—the Winters—to Sydney for her English husband's remote posting on a construction site in Sydney. Three weeks after their arrival, the second of their three children, the four-year-old Tom, dies by accident, falling from the window of their eighth-floor apartment in Bellevue Hill. The circumstances of his death are not revealed until the end of the novel—even then, the cause of death is never directly stated. The novel traces the narrator's grief from the immediate aftermath of loss, to her descent into the pathological grief-response of melancholia, the family's apparently permanent installation in Australia signalled by their move to the Blue Mountains, and the return to 'healthy' mourning which allows her to narrate her grief. Criticism on *Tom* has predominantly been concerned with Darrieussecq's employment to represent traumatic loss, or in comparison with Laurens' *Philippe* regarding the 'psychic plagiarism' controversy. There has been as yet little to no critical attention paid, however, to the relevance of the Australian setting to Darrieussecq's fictional account of mourning.

Picnic at Hanging Rock centres on the traceless disappearance of three schoolgirls and a teacher from the fictional Appleyard College during a picnic at Hanging Rock in Victoria's Macedon Ranges, on St Valentine's Day in 1900. Loss is evidently a

[8] In William Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 6. Watkin cites Jeanne Katz in her definition of mourning as 'the public expression' of bereavement and grief. In this study, however, I use the term mourning more or less interchangeably with grief, as Freud does in 'Mourning and Melancholia,' as does Darrieussecq, in whose native French the term deuil denotes both grief and mourning.

central theme of *Picnic*; despite the majority of the film being concerned with the aftermath of the disappearance, critical dialogues have focused largely on the film's instantiation of the Australian Gothic mode, privileging the theme of confrontation between settler-colonial society and the ancient and unfamiliar enormity of the Australian landscape. The most sustained analysis of *Picnic* privileging the themes of loss and mourning is that by Victoria Bladen, who reads the film as a pastoral meditation on loss as inherent in nature.[9] Peter Pierce discusses *Picnic* as one in a long line of 'lost child' texts in Australian cultural history, but like most critics privileges anxiety over mourning in response to the losses, which he reads as symptomatic of 'the anxious suspicion that Europeans do not belong in this country.'[10] Saviour Catania and Harriet Wild's respective accounts of loss in *Picnic* foreground Michael's frustrated love for Miranda. In doing so, however, they neglect the orphan Sara's mourning for Miranda, which is frequently relegated by critics to the periphery of the film as a mere subplot. I argue to the contrary that her mourning, subsequent illness, and eventual suicide, are of central importance to the film as a reflection on loss and 'Australianness.' My claim finds support in the fact that she, unlike Miranda or Michael, features in the film from beginning to end. The film's final lines of dialogue, moreover, are the College gardener's repeated utterance of her name, as he struggles to announce his discovery of her bloodied corpse, fallen into the greenhouse from the rooftop of the College, to Mrs Appleyard. It is this event that appears to signal the irrevocable downfall of the College, as Mrs Appleyard is reported through voiceover at the close of the film to have jumped to her death from the Rock.

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[9] Victoria Bladen, "The Rock and the Void: Pastoral and Loss in Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Peter Weir's Film Adaptation," *Colloquy*, no. 23 (2012): 171.
[10] Peter Pierce, *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety* (Cambridge; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 64.

Why is Australia in particular a 'country of mourning,' and how? Darrieussecq provides the beginnings of an answer to the question by characterising her narrator as a woman 'in exile from France.'[11] She explains the arguably risky decision to set her novel in a relatively unfamiliar country in the following way:

> It all came into place… because of the desert, because of the fires, because of the climate, because of the disappearing animals in Tasmania, because of the Aborigines' genocide, and everything became a place of mourning, really, and I didn't think about it before.[12]

Despite her claim that '[i]t could have been anywhere… Australia was just the place where the kid died,'[13] I show in this study that such a depiction of Australia may not be so incidental as Darrieussecq claims. This I demonstrate through my analysis of the French novel, written in 2007 and translated in 2009 by New Zealand-born Lia Hills, alongside Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). I refer in my analysis primarily to the shorter director's cut, released in 1998, and where relevant, to Joan Lindsay's 1967 novel upon which it is based. I approach loss and mourning in *Picnic* and *Tom* through psychoanalysis and contemporary trauma theory, to shed light on the significance of the Australian setting as a trope in both texts, and the ethical concerns arising from this, to show that the imaginative association of Australia with the affective condition of mourning has persisted into the twenty-first century, in ways both complex and problematic, transcending Australia's largely rural cultural mythology, and its national borders.[14]

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[11] Darrieussecq, "Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Is Dead*."
[12] Ibid.
[13] Darrieussecq, "Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Is Dead*."
[14] Psychoanalysis is a theoretical paradigm of particular relevance to the discussion of the novel, in light of Darrieussecq's work as a practising psychoanalyst, which she discusses in ibid.

1. Thematics

…you would have to choose between this world, the next world, and Australia.[15]

I am concerned in this chapter with Australia's figuration as a spatial 'metaphor for grieving'[16] in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Tom is Dead*. In both texts the Australian setting, whether urban or rural, serves as what Judith Wright has referred to as 'the outer equivalent of an inner reality.'[17] In both Darrieussecq's novel and Weir's film, Australia figures as a trope for the affective condition of the mourner—particularly when mourning results in melancholia, as it does for Darrieussecq's unnamed narrator, and the orphan Sara in *Picnic*. Freud, in his seminal essay *Mourning and Melancholia,* understood mourning to be a natural and healthy response to loss by which the work of mourning is carried out to completion through a process of 'reality-testing,' by which the subject comes to understand the definitive absence of the lost loved person. Melancholia, on the other hand, occurs at both conscious and unconscious levels, a response to loss which resists resolution, amounting to a potentially fatal pathology. While Freud takes ordinary mourning to involve a gradual process by which the subject's distress is limited to the time required to sever the sum of attachments to the loved person (though it is subject to question whether this is at all possible), in melancholia the process of mourning is prolonged and greatly complicated by the subject's refusal to withdraw attachment from the loved person by acknowledging permanent loss in the entirety of its implications. In her over-identification with the lost loved person, the subject

[15]Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, (Project Gutenberg, 2006 [1915]), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/844/844-h/844-h.htm.
[16] Darrieussecq, "Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Is Dead*."
[17] Judith Wright, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1965), xi.

falls 'under the shadow of the object,'[18] experiencing concomitantly with the loss of the loved person a sense of self-loss owing to the refusal of difference—that between subject and object, self and world—which marks melancholia in opposition to mourning.[19] This loss of individual identity through the failure of the subject to distinguish herself from the lost loved person aligns the mourner-melancholic with the abject, consisting in a 'devitalised existence,' in Kristeva's words, 'ready at any moment for a plunge into death.'[20] The fall toward death that is melancholia may indeed attain its utmost degree in suicide, as is the case for Sara in *Picnic*. As Kristeva writes of melancholia's 'sister condition,'[21] abjection, 'there I am at the border of my condition as a living being': the abject is that which 'disturbs identity, system, order,'[22] its exclusion the precondition for order and identity—the integrity of the symbolic order governing 'world'.[23] Heidegger's world/earth distinction is similarly relevant to my analysis of mourning, melancholia and exile; the world, that which is structured by human subjectivity, is like the Lacanian symbolic order in that it is 'the ever-nonobjective to which we are subject,' imperceptible as an object yet governing our experience of the earth.[24] Like the symbolic and the real, the world is by nature in conflict with the earth, which is ultimately impenetrable by language, the latter belonging by nature to the world.[25]

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[18] Freud in Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 167.
[19] Ibid., 124-26.
[20] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 4. For a discussion of the interrelationship between melancholia and abjection, see Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 128-44.
[21] *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 167.
[22] Kristeva in ibid., 140.
[23] For a discussion of Heidegger's world/earth distinction in relation to *Picnic at Hanging Rock,* see J. A. Wainwright, "Desolation Angels—World and Earth in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*," *Antipodes* 10, no. 2 (1996): 121-23.
[24] Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 43-46.
[25] Ibid.

In both *Picnic at Hanging* Rock and *Tom is Dead,* Australia is the site of the border condition of abjection, where the structures governing the symbolic are disrupted and penetrated by the 'impossible real.'[26] In Heideggerian terms, Australia is where '[e]arth juts through the world,' which 'grounds itself on the earth,' ultimately to traumatic effect in *Picnic* and *Tom*.[27] The melancholic is a subject by whom the earth has penetrated the world, a 'deject,' in Kristevan terms, 'through whom the abject exists.'[28] Melancholia, like abjection, may be understood as a liminal state of 'living death'[29] in which the melancholic appears, like all that we might classify as abject, 'on the part of death':[30] inherently resistant to signification, abjection is not signified but embodied.[31] If the abject is marked by its exclusion from the symbolic order, and if abjection is the 'sister condition' of melancholia, then melancholia may be understood to imply a state of exile from language, from the world of 'other people's meaning.'[32] This state of melancholic exile consists in the subject's being cast to a liminal 'border' space where the boundaries between subject and object, life and death, and the integrity of the symbolic order itself, threaten dissolution;[33] such is the characterisation of Australia in both texts, as inhabiting the margin of the 'civilised' world.[34] In both *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Tom is Dead,* the mourning

[26] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 11.
[27] Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 54.
[28] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 8, 6.
[29] *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 3.
[30] Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 140.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 4.
[33] Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 141.
[34] Sydney is situated at the margin of 'civilisation' in Marie Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, trans. Lia Hills (Melbourne, Victoria: Text, 2009), 29, 159. in that it is characterised as 'a civilised city' in comparison to Beijing, but implicitly less so than France, with its 'ultra-civilised sea.'

'Australian'[35] thus strays from the world 'toward the place where meaning collapses,' the site of exile attending the traumatic encounter with the abject.[36]

Memorably, Darrieussecq's narrator claims that 'Tom's death made Australians of us.'[37] Neither the idea of Australia as a site of exile, nor that of 'Australianness' being predicated on a kind of death, are new. In his essay 'Dying to Come to Australia,' Jon Stratton points out that those convicts whose death sentences had been 'transmuted to exile in Australia' were treated as effectively dead under British law.[38] Moreover, in response to DH Lawrence's claim that the Australian, in opposition to the European, is marked with 'the sign of… death; a kind of apathy, an emptiness, a void,'[39] Judith Wright claims to the apparent exclusion of Indigenous Australians that the 'the new Australian… has in truth died a little.'[40] She attributes this partly to the attenuation of 'civilised' European culture among white Australians, the result of which she interprets a gap yet to be filled by the establishment of a new and autonomous national culture[41] in the country where, as Marcus Clarke wrote in 1876, 'no poet speaks to us.'[42] Mourning is similarly informed by a gap: the gap created by the absence of the lost loved person, and the resultant gap between language and the affective experience of loss, particularly where mourning gives way to melancholia, as in both texts under discussion. The

[35] I use inverted commas here to distinguish figurative Australianness from literal Australian citizenship, which the Winter family appear not to seek in the novel. *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, moreover, is set before Australia's existence as an independent nation, problematising the matter of whom we may call Australian in the film and novel.
[36] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 3.
[37] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 129.
[38] Jon Stratton, "Dying to Come to Australia: Asylum Seekers, Tourists and Death," ed. Renata Summo-O'Connell, *Imagined Australia: Reflections around the Reciprocal Construction of Identity between Australia and Europe* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2012). 60.
[39] Wright, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, xvii.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., xvii.
[42] Marcus Clarke, "Preface to Gordon's *Poems* [1876]," in *The Writer in Australia: A Collection of Literary Documents*, ed. John Barnes (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1969), 35.

imaginative nexus between Australia and mourning, as well as the subjective 'living death'[43] of melancholia is made explicit in Darrieussecq's novel, the narrator claiming that '[t]he dead go to Australia,' characterising Sydney as '[t]he city where I became dead.'[44] She claims moreover, that 'truth is in geography':[45] becoming 'Australian' is in this novel the result of a threshold-crossing, that of the apparent emptiness of the centre of the world embodied in the Pacific Ocean, according to the world map she consults in which Europe is not at the centre, but at the margin. In the flight from Vancouver, the crossing 'between one shore and another' of the Pacific, 'we are living and then we are dead.'[46] The crossing between life and subjective death through the fall into 'the asymbolia of the traumatic'[47] is presented as a Fall in the biblical sense, literalised in the manner of the child's death. Darrieussecq's 'imaginary country'[48] thereby participates here in a Eurocentric spatial economy in which 'HEALTH AND LIFE ARE UP; SICKNESS AND DEATH ARE DOWN.'[49] Darrieussecq acknowledges the inherent instability and potentially illusory nature of this 'centre'[50] from which the subject has been outcast through the trauma of loss, eschewing a simplistic Old World/New World division through her inclusion of Vancouver in the expatriate family's 'lost paradise'—the *before* of Tom's death.[51] Through trauma the family are 'banished'[52] to the 'upside-down'[53] world of the Antipodes, where the 'impossible' event of the death of a child becomes possible, where 'the death of children…

[43] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 4.
[44] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 128.
[45] Ibid., 104.
[46] Ibid., 128.
[47] Rose Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," *Bible and Critical Theory* 3 (2007): 38.5.
[48] Darrieussecq, "Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Is Dead*."
[49] Lakoff and Johnson in Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 96.
[50] Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 38.2.
[51] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 153.
[52] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 63.
[53] Ibid., 1.

precedes the death of the parents, so nothing adds up anymore.'[54] For Kristeva, abjection is at its worst when death encroaches on that which is 'supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things.'[55] The child's corpse therefore instantiates especially 'the most abject of abject.'[56] Rather than the country of death itself, Darrieussecq's Australia is a spatial metaphor for the crisis of survival following such an encounter with the abject, the post-traumatic condition—traumatic in itself—in which the narrator gradually comes to terms with her survival of a subjective death through trauma.[57] This, according to Cathy Caruth, is what necessitates the 'double-telling' by which the subject might bear literary witness to traumatic loss: the writing of trauma, she suggests, emanates from the space between 'the crisis of death' and 'the correlative crisis of life.'[58] For Darrieussecq's narrator in *Tom is Dead*, this liminal space is Australia.

In *Tom is Dead,* Sydney, like Australia as a whole, enfigures the narrator's melancholic condition of 'death in life' in that it is characterised by a certain liminality, lying on 'a thin strip between sea and desert.'[59] Both the sea and desert in *Tom,* may be read as spatial embodiments of the pre-linguistic Thing, described by Kristeva as 'the real that does not lend itself to signification.'[60] In merging with the Thing, the melancholic subject is 'cadaverised… absorbed into sorrow,' like the dead body become waste, fallen from life into the abjection of the corpse.[61] In its association with the unclean, necessarily outcast from the symbolic order, the abject

[54] Ibid., 3.
[55] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 4.
[56] Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 140.
[57] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 7.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 128.
[60] Kristeva in Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 130.
[61] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 4.

may be likened to what Hélène Cixous refers to as the *immonde*: a word with no precise equivalent in English, it implies exclusion from the world, particularly through prohibition by the paternal law of the symbolic order.[62] The narrator accordingly describes the Opera House, standing metonymically for the city as a whole, as 'so beautiful, so far from the world.'[63] Moreover, the 'border of my condition as a living being,' where Kristeva locates abjection, is literalised in the narrator's proximity to the sea at Bondi, on Australia's coastal border.[64] The 'border' constitutive of abjection in Kristeva 'encroache[s] on everything,'[65] and so 'this godforsaken city'[66] both appals and compels the narrator as 'the utmost of abjection' for it is 'seen without God and outside of science… it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.'[67] Australia therefore continues to fascinate as the Winters' 'speaking place' with the dead Tom.[68] The isolation exacted by abjection through the encounter with the corpse, and through melancholia, is doubled in its cause: Australia's geographical isolation reflects both the 'renunciation'[69] of the world characteristic of melancholia, and the exilic condition of a family with 'death marked on their forehead,'[70] infected with the abject and thereby 'deprived of world.'[71] As the narrator claims of her post-traumatic, othered status, 'I know what kind of scream a dying child makes… I'm banished, because I have seen and I have heard… A circle of ashes, and the world of the living is closed to me from now

[62] Cixous designates the paternal law governing the symbolic order as that of '"those-He-Bible" and their kind' in Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 113.
[63] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 31.
[64] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 3.
[65]Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 141.
[66] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 105.
[67] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 4.
[68] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 129.
[69] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 1.
[70] Darrieussecq, "Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Is Dead*," 147.
[71] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 4.

on.'[72] While the abject consists in that which is violently repudiated in its embodied reminder of the materiality of the body, and therefore the mortality of the witnessing subject, the encounter with the abject dissolves the boundaries between 'self' and other in such a way as to induce horror: 'It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled.'[73] Among the consequences of the encounter with the abject are the narrator's self-estrangement, her sense of 'parental identity rooted in loss'[74] which fuels her melancholia, and her apparent inability to assimilate the traumatic loss, indicated by her worry that, in the clothes she had chosen for his cremation, 'he'd be cold.'[75] The narrator is thus aligned with the dead and abject as 'Tom's representative on this planet,' her peculiar anonymity suggestive of this dissolution of identity.[76] Also of interest in Darrieussecq's representation of melancholic exile in Australia is the narrator's sustained self-recrimination, among the manifestations of her preoccupation with criminality throughout the novel, recalling in its Sydney setting the post-settlement nation's origins as a prison colony. This is alluded to most explicitly when the narrator describes a police officer seeking a statement on her child's death as having '[a]n Australian face, red and blond, wide, jaw like a convict, a very white smile.'[77] Recalling Kristeva's association of criminality with the abject in its exposition of the vulnerability of the symbolic order and the paternal law by which it exists, Australia is the 'fallen world'[78] where convict becomes cop. The crossing of Australia's maritime border instantiates a subjective death by exile for the French narrator who, post-loss, assumes a self-estranged, post-traumatic identity as 'Australian.'

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[72] Ibid., 63.
[73] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 3-4.
[74] Kathryn Robson, "Psychic Plagiarism: The Death of a Child in Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Est Mort* and Camille Laurens's *Philippe*," *French Studies* 69, no. 1 (2015): 50.
[75]Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 59.
[76] Ibid., 82.
[77] Ibid., 90.
[78] Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 38.3.

It is, however, from the 'death' by arrival in Australia that the possibility for writing emerges, and the narrator may begin writing her journal—if not to bear witness to a traumatic loss, then 'to convey the impact of its very incomprehensibility,' as Caruth writes.[79] As Rose Lucas argues, drawing from Kristeva, all imaginative writing is predicated on a state of exile, emerging from the space between 'a debased and exilic *here* and an idealised, always unobtainable *there*, the place of remembered or imagined origin.'[80] The poetic, or in this case narratorial voice—and I will argue in the second chapter for the distinctly poetic character of the narration—becomes possible only in the 'fallen' world of 'the shadow of death,' from which the loss of the pre-traumatic, prelapsarian world is lamented.[81] In Lucas' example, the biblical Psalm 137, the lost world is Zion, for which the poetic speaker recognises her situation within 'the void of exile' while singing 'the Lord's song' in longing for a 'defining elsewhere.'[82] To do so reflects an overcoming of the melancholic 'impulses toward silence,' which consists in the recognition of difference between subject and object, and the *before* and *after* of trauma.[83] Such a melancholic attitude to place, time and the lost beloved is demonstrated in the narrator's designation of Sydney as the site of trauma and subsequent crisis of survival, even before her child's death: '"Sydney," said Tom at the airport. "Like in *Nemo.*"… It seems to me that this is where Tom's death begins.'[84] The child's recognition of Sydney as the city where the young clownfish of the film *Finding Nemo* is lost after being separated from his father is taken as one

[79] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 6.
[80] Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 38.2.
[81] Ibid., 38.3, 1.
[82] Ibid.38.2-3
[83] Ibid.38.3
[84] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 102.

among numerous uncanny 'signs,' illegible until accorded significance by the novel's informing traumatic crisis, thereafter fuelling the narrator's melancholic self-recrimination. Incidentally, the name *Nemo* in Latin means *no one,* suggesting the narrator's conflation of the child's loss with that of the pre-objectal Thing, the 'maternalised body of "Jerusalem"'—prelinguistic, therefore inherently nameless—'the body of beginnings from which the speaker has been torn' as a necessary precondition of her entry into language.[85] Drawing from Lacan's account of the subject's entry into language as predicated on the loss of the 'impossible object' or Thing, Lucas attributes to the poem (or 'poem') a compensatory function requiring the 'acknowledgement of fracture and loss,' the refusal of which draws the melancholic toward silence.[86] In *Tom is Dead,* the failure to acknowledge loss renders the narrating mother mute for several months; of the period following his cremation she claims that Tom, in death, 'appropriated things,' and that as a result '[w]ords and objects were dead.'[87] The narrator's definitive separation from her child instantiates a re-enactment of 'the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be'; as Kristeva writes, 'abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship.'[88] This denial of that originary loss ties melancholia closely, as Watkin points out, with abjection.[89] The writing of the notebook, ten years after the child's death, is itself evidence of the narrator's overcoming of the melancholic desire 'to identify with that which is lost, to take the drear path down, and into depressive silence and death'[90] by finding a language with which to bear witness to traumatic loss which must, as

[85] Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 38.8.
[86] Ibid., 38.7.
[87] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 71.
[88] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 10.
[89] Watkin claims that Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and *Black Sun* 'must be read in tandem' in Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 137.
[90] Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 5.

Cathy Caruth argues, take a specifically literary form.[91] That is, if bearing literary testimony to the 'limit subject' of the death of a child, in its excess to signification and 'normal, narrative resolution,' is ultimately possible.[92] As I will argue in the next chapter of this study, Darrieussecq employs a distinctly poetic use of language to accommodate the aporia of loss, in such a way as to reveal the novel's complex metatextuality.

Both mourning and melancholia are also at issue in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, primarily embodied in the orphan Sara and her primary tormentor throughout the film, Mrs Appleyard. Widowed in England before coming to Australia to establish the College,[93] the latter adheres in her dress to the Victorian conventions of 'half-mourning,' which allowed for the additional wearing of grey and lilac in the final six months of the expected two-year mourning period.[94] Her succumbing to melancholia, the refusal to withdraw attachment to the lost loved person, over the course of the film is suggested in her apparent regression to full mourning later in the film, complete with the cameo of her late husband Arthur at her neck, which she is also described as wearing in Joan Lindsay's novel.[95] We find a notable exception in the scene where she dines with Mademoiselle de Portiers, and speaks obsessively and repetitively of their holidays in Bournemouth, Appleyard's own lost paradise in the old world where 'nothing changed,' while wearing a light-coloured and ostentatious evening gown in contrast with the French governess' high-necked

[91] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 5.
[92] Wilson in Robson, "Psychic Plagiarism: The Death of a Child in Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Est Mort* and Camille Laurens's *Philippe*," 46.
[93] Mrs Appleyard is described as 'newly arrived from England with a considerable nest-egg' with which to establish the College in Joan Lindsay, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Camberwell, VIC: Penguin, 1967), 8.
[94] "Mourning - Victorian Era," http://australianmuseum.net.au/mourning-victorian-era.
[95] Mrs Appleyard is described as wearing 'a cameo portrait of her late husband flat on her respectable chest' in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, 9.

white dress, as though in outright denial of loss which appears to border on psychotic delusion.[96] Mrs Appleyard is aware at this point in the film of Sara's suicide and apparently in denial of its occurrence, having claimed that Sara was taken away that morning by her guardian, despite the evidence to the contrary soon to be discovered in the greenhouse. In drunken demonstration of her descent into alcoholism, the headmistress is in this scene subject to the sudden irruption of grief for the vanished teacher Greta McCraw, on whom she 'came to rely.' When asked by Mademoiselle de Portiers as to Sara's whereabouts, she quickly resumes speaking of Bournemouth as if, indeed, nothing had changed. In a pastoral reading of *Picnic*, Victoria Bladen argues for the centrality of loss in *Picnic,* which I would argue places Sara, rather than Miranda, in the role of protagonist of the film. Loss figures at both the level of the individual and the collective in *Picnic*, which might itself be seen as an elegiac monument to human life in its ephemerality, as Bladen suggests. I would argue, however, that the typically pastoral, elegiac tone Bladen identifies in the film is more problematic in light of its late-Victorian colonial setting than she admits.[97] I will take up this matter at greater length in chapter three. In Bladen's interpretation, the Rock might be compared to the tomb of Arcady as painted by Nicolas Poussin, upon which is inscribed the words *Et in Arcadia Ego* (1637-38). The latter draws heavily on the foundations of pastoral, particularly Virgil's *Eclogues*, in which the presence of death in the beauty of nature was contemplated in stylised natural surroundings, as in Peter Weir's highly aestheticised bush landscape, with its nods to Australian Impressionists such as

[96] The character is referred to in the film and in the credits as 'Mademoiselle de Portiers,' whereas in the novel her surname is *de Poitiers* in the original novel, ibid.
[97] Bladen, "The Rock and the Void: Pastoral and Loss in Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Peter Weir's Film Adaptation," 170-1.

Streeton.[98] In this twentieth-century (post-)colonial instance, however, pastoral idyll gives way to gothic nightmare. In the establishing shot of the College, the flying of the Union Jack—which we might regard as a triumphalist statement suggesting the conquest of 'civilisation' over wilderness—emphasises its character as an 'architectural anachronism,' the fragility of its paradigmatically Victorian colonial structures suggested through contrast with the establishing shot of the Rock, looming against a twilit or early-morning sky to imply its contrasting timelessness.[99] Though the tone of elegy for Victorian white Australia is evidently problematic in light of the history of colonial violence underpinning it, I would argue that this is to a degree subverted and interrogated by the film's gothic elements, which expose the fragility of the Victorian order upon which the College depends. The gothic emerges more decisively in the latter half of the film, where both Mrs Appleyard and her young victim Sara—following the occasion for mourning—fall into a deeper-rooted melancholia resulting ultimately in their deaths. As Kristeva writes in *Black Sun,*

> the power of events that create my depression is often out of proportion to the disaster that suddenly overwhelms me. What is more, the disenchantment that I experience here and now, cruel as it may be, appears, under scrutiny, to awaken echoes of old traumas, to which I realise I have never been able to resign myself.[100]

While Mrs Appleyard's final lines in the film, following her succumbing to alcoholism, are effusively nostalgic for the Old World**,** Sara's last substantial lines are to Minnie, the College chambermaid, when she speaks for the first time of the abuse to which she has been subjected at the orphanage, and of her separation from her brother 'Bertie.' The latter, as we soon learn, is in fact Albert Crundall, the groom of nearby Lake View, of whose proximity she remains ignorant. Though this

[98] Ibid., 162.
[99] Lindsay, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, 8.
[100] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 4-5.

is the most she speaks in any scene of the film, her melancholic refusal of the world beyond the internalised lost beloved, is emphasised by her refusal of Minnie's attempt to comfort her, despite their common class status in the decidedly bourgeois realm of the College. Such a connection along class lines is suggested earlier in the film between Sara and Mr Whitehead, the English gardener who offers her daisies—'to give to you,' she whispers to her portrait of Miranda, betraying her melancholic denial of loss by speaking in the present tense by telling Mademoiselle de Portiers that Miranda 'likes daisies best of all.'

When Sara finally speaks of her time at the orphanage, it is revealed to us that the loss of her beloved Miranda is not simply a straightforward instance of mourning, but has the impact of a traumatic return: that of the initial abandonment by her parents, and her enforced separation from her brother as a young girl.[101] The traumatic nature of Mrs Appleyard's resolution to return her to the orphanage is therefore twofold, as she perpetuates institutional abuse as a cruel and neglectful mother figure while, jointly with Sara's absent guardian, Mr Cosgrove, she unwittingly re-enacts the original parental abandonment, the catalyst for subsequent trauma at the hands of the institution. Sara's descent into melancholia is foreshadowed on the morning of the Picnic by Miranda's gentle reproach for having made a 'bad'[102] object choice, as she instructs her younger friend to 'learn to love someone else.' The composition of the shot in which Miranda speaks this line is significant: we see her from behind, from Sara's perspective, not directly but

[101] Albert explains that he is '[a]s good as' an orphan, having been abandoned by his parents then 'clapped into the bloody orphanage' in Lindsay, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, 26.
[102] Watkin cites Freud in his characterisation of melancholia as 'the result... of a narcissistic and thus internal love object' in Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 129.

reflected in an 'overdetermination of mirrors'[103] in a visual echo of Miranda's opening voiceover, in which she (mis)quotes from Edgar Allan Poe: 'what we see and what we seem are but a dream within a dream.'[104] Miranda appears to Sara less as herself than as a manifestation of the Thing, the pathological love of which distinguishes melancholia from non-pathological mourning.[105] Our glimpse of Sara from Miranda's point of view, watching from the rooftop of the College as Mrs Appleyard hands down instructions to the girls departing for Hanging Rock, also portends her fall from the College building. The relevance of falling as an idea—importantly tied to melancholia and abjection, and literalised in both texts under discussion—is central to this study, in light of Australia's figuration as a post-traumatic 'fallen world.'[106] The moment at which we see Sara on the rooftop may be considered the point at which her figurative fall begins, for it is the last time she sees Miranda, whose loss as the Thing precipitates her fall into melancholia and her eventual suicide. In Kristeva's words, 'the Thing is the recipient that contains my dejecta and everything that results from *cadere* [Latin: to fall]—it is a waste with which, in my sadness, I merge.'[107] In abjection, moreover, 'from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver' as human waste, 'to the other side of the border, the place where I am not.'[108] Sara's melancholia is a fall, moreover, that marks her as abject commensurately with the progression of her illness—illness bearing the quality of the abject in its alignment with death. This is reflected in her treatment at the hands of Mrs Appleyard and the sycophantic Miss Lumley. The latter reacts to manifestations of Sara's illness

[103] Jonathan Rayner, *The Films of Peter Weir*, vol. 2nd (New York., NY: Continuum, 2003), 67.
[104] The line, taken from Poe's "A Dream Within a Dream" in fact reads, 'All that we see or seem/ Is but a dream within a dream.' See Edgar Allan Poe, *Edgar Allan Poe: Collected Works* (San Diego: Thunder Bay Press, 2012), 1138-39.
[105] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 128.
[106] Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 38.5.
[107] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 15.
[108] *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 3.

with an apparently hysterical anxiety; Sara is almost forgotten at the College gymnasium, strapped to a board against the wall, separate from her classmates and hidden from view for the entirety of Irma's brief and ill-fated visit. In her own defence, Miss Lumley shrieks to Mademoiselle de Portiers, 'it's for her own good! To cure her terrible stooping!' Visible on the wall of the College's 'Temple of Calisthenics' in this scene is, tellingly, a sign reading *HEALTH IS BEAUTY*. Mrs Appleyard, increasingly distressed by the impending financial consequences of numerous student withdrawals, makes of Sara her scapegoat, determined to marginalise, then to expel her on the grounds that her fees remain as yet unpaid by her guardian.[109] It would appear that the ambiguity as to whether Sara's death is by murder or suicide is a deliberate suggestion of Mrs Appleyard's responsibility for her death. Given the nausea-producing effect of abjection, it appears in light of Mrs Appleyard's instruction to Mademoiselle de Portiers, 'I shall not be coming down to luncheon, Mademoiselle, kindly tell them not to lay a place for me,' that she has been the first to find Sara's corpse in the greenhouse. Having (out)cast her as abject through her persecution, her silence with regard to Sara's death suggests her culpability for having pushed Sara figuratively beyond the limit of life into the abjection of the fallen corpse.

Sara's short life is characterised by ongoing loss, exclusion, apparent rootlessness, and ultimately the 'impoverishment' of the ego by which Freud originally characterised melancholia in opposition to mourning.[110] Recalling Pascale Casanova's characterisation of 'newer' nations as 'impoverished' in their cultural

[109] Susan Dermody, Elizabeth Jacka, and Sylvia Lawson, *The Screening of Australia*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Sydney: Currency Press, 1987), 108.
[110] Freud famously characterises melancholia (as distinct from mourning) as an 'impoverishment of [the] ego on a grand scale' in S. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Psychoanalytic Review (1913-1957)* 11 (1924): 246.

'soil,' having been uprooted from the cultural 'richness' of Europe,[111] we might see Sara as being the most 'Australian' of the girls at Appleyard College, in part due to her having become 'poor and empty' through melancholia.[112] The cultural hegemony of Britain over Australia is reproduced in the dynamic between Sara and Mrs Appleyard who, for example, forces her to memorise 'The Wreck of the Hesperus,' while ridiculing and silencing her efforts at original poetry. My claim for Sara's particular 'Australianness' also finds support in the revelation that she is in fact Albert's long-lost sister. The latter is readily characterised as the most distinctively Australian of the novel's characters, particularly in contrast with the exaggerated Englishness of Michael Fitzhubert, whose class status—particularly in juxtaposition with Albert's—replicates the hegemonic relationship between Britain and Australia. Miranda's disappearance, it is implied, makes an 'Australian' of Michael as well; we learn in the novel (though the announcement does not make the 1998 director's cut of the film) that he does not return to England, but goes instead to Queensland—Miranda's birthplace—in another suggestion of identification with the lost loved person. As Harriet Wild points out, Miranda is the 'love object *par excellence*,' and particularly following her death, is radically Other, and in her traceless disappearance attains 'the dignity of the Thing,' transcending the realm of the symbolic which, Wild argues, is literalised through her ascension of, and disappearance into, the Rock.[113] In this way she becomes truly unattainable as a love object, entering the realm of the sublime. Sara, however, meets the opposite fate, succumbing to melancholia, and ultimately to the abjection of the

[111] In Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. MB DeBevoise (2004), 82-3. Casanova paraphrases Henry James in his attribution of America's literary 'destitution' to art's being 'a flower that can only flourish in a thick soil.'
[112] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 246.
[113] Harriet Wild, "Darling Miranda: Courtly Love in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*," *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 8, no. 2-3 (2014): 127-30.

dead body, the 'arche-performance of the abject.'[114] Deprived of agency and subject to the authority of Mrs Appleyard, to the point that her own poetic efforts to bear witness to loss are prohibited, Sara's only available means to communicate her trauma and subsequent fall into melancholia is silence — that, and the abject materiality of her body itself. The irruption of the corpse into the College irrevocably disrupts the paradigmatically Victorian order Mrs Appleyard upholds, the latter's own suicide a confirmation of the College's fall and dissolution.

I have argued in this chapter that in *Picnic* and *Tom*, not only is Australia represented as a site of exile, reflecting both states of mourning and melancholia, but that 'Australianness' is associated with the related and intersecting states of abjection and melancholia. In explaining the imaginative nexus between mourning, exile and 'Australianness' apparent in the novel and film under discussion, I have touched on the role of the respective texts' central mourners as 'poet' figures, partly by virtue of their exilic status. In the next chapter I will take up the matter of the exilic 'poet' at greater length, discussing the formal qualities of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Tom is Dead* in order to demonstrate the peculiarly poetic character of the film and novel, and its bearing on the relation of language to trauma and mourning.

[114] Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 140.

2. Poetics

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.
If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not
Jerusalem above my chief joy.[115]

The abject is edged with the sublime.[116]

Picnic at Hanging Rock and *Tom is Dead* are founded on an informing absence at their centre; the manner of Tom's death is only revealed in the final paragraph of Darrieussecq's novel, and in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the fate of the disappeared remains unresolved—only Irma is found, with no memory of what took place at the Rock. Though the central ambiguity of *Picnic* has given rise to a substantial proliferation of interpretations, it would be beside the point to focus on the precise fate of the girls—particularly if we are to understand *Picnic* as a meditation on loss, like *Tom is Dead*. Weir himself has stated that 'it's within a lot of the silences that I tell my side of the story';[117] Darrieussecq has similarly claimed that silence is that which 'insists' as the very matter with which she works.[118] The silence at the centre of both texts informs the distinctive poetics of both texts, in which the central traumatic loss figures as an unspeakable void which, resisting direct articulation, can only be demarcated as such by the textual remains of the attempt to speak the unspeakable. Watkin borrows the term 'singable residue,'[119] from Paul Celan, to describe the result of the 'wanting-to-say'[120] by which Lacoue-Labarthe

[115] Ps. 137: 5-6 King James Version
[116] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 11.
[117] Peter Weir in Saviour Catania, "The Hanging Rock Piper: Weir, Lindsay, and the Spectral Fluidity of Nothing," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2012): 89.
[118] Marie Darrieussecq in Leslie Barnes, "'*J'entendais L'abîme*': Sound, Space, and Signification in Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Est Mort*," *French Forum* 40, no. 1 (2015): 81. Here I paraphrase in English the untranslated quotation 'ce qui insiste, c'est le silence. C'est toute la matière de mon travail.'
[119] Paul Celan in Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 14.
[120] Lacoue-Labarthe in ibid.

characterises poetic language, which is what remains of the inevitable 'failure to say.'[121] This failure is perhaps never so inevitable as it is in the face of death, 'the ultimate aporia.'[122] This aporia is suggested in a remarkably similar manner following the event of traumatic loss in *Picnic* and *Tom*. While Madmoiselle de Portiers, on the party's return from the picnic, falters in her explanation after announcing that 'something terrible has happened,' the narrator of *Tom* calls her mother in France and, unable to articulate that her son is not simply 'in hospital' but dead, says *'Une chose grave est arrivée.* A thing terrible has happened.'[123] The narrator claims, 'I no longer know any language between Vancouver and Sydney.'[124] Recalling Lucas' characterisation of the poet as exiled from the 'world' of the symbolic order and its language—like the mourner-melancholic in Australia—I discuss Sara in *Picnic* and the narrator of *Tom* as poet figures in this chapter, to elucidate the manner in which Weir and Darrieussecq apprehend the aporia of traumatic loss through their respective poetics of silence. For Lucas, the poet is 'the speaking or singing self… who recognises themselves as within the void of exile and let who longs for a defining elsewhere.'[125] This 'void of exile' is enfigured in *Picnic* and *Tom* as Australia, and the post-traumatic condition of 'Australianness.' Both texts, I argue, embody in their form a response to the question of the poet in the exile of mourning: 'How shall we sing the Lord's song'—or 'poem'—in a strange land?'[126]

[121] Ibid., 13.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 26.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 38.2.
[126] Lucas interprets 'The Lord's Song' as the poem or artwork in ibid.

In the title of *Tom is Dead* there is an inherent paradox: Tom is dead, and yet Tom *is*. The name Tom is a signifier whose referent is permanently absent; the central crisis of traumatic loss in the novel is therefore also a crisis of language. Echoing Derrida's claim that the name gives a 'basic, but effective'[127] subjective presence to the absent person, Watkin claims that 'the language of loss gives lasting presence to those things which are absent in our life.'[128] That the name *Tom* in Darrieussecq's novel gives such a presence to a child—a child who was once alive, but is now definitively dead—illustrates a central problem within the novel. Tom's literal fall instantiates the fall of meaning from language, of signifier from signified, with which the narrator struggles in the act of writing in response to the 'limit subject' of death in its excess to representation and 'normal, narrative resolution.'[129] As Barnes writes, 'both Tom and "Tom," that is, the word used to name him, are repeatedly swallowed up in the gap between signifier and signified.'[130] *Tom* is a novel whose structure loops around a 'gaping hole'[131] at its centre, and in doing so, demarcates it, thereby rendering the paradoxical presence and absence of the novel's informing traumatic crisis.[132] This mirrors the way in which Tom's subjective presence is conjured by the signifier *Tom*, as the latter concomitantly invokes his absence. When the narrator returns to the confrontation with the 'impossible real' in the form of her son's fallen body, her attempt to write at the site of trauma necessarily fails—this, moreover, at the point of the novel's completion.[133] As in Cathy Caruth's discussion of theory and the falling body in Paul de Man, the

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[127] Derrida in Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 16.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Wilson in Robson, "Psychic Plagiarism: The Death of a Child in Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Est Mort* and Camille Laurens's *Philippe*," 46.
[130] Barnes, "'*J'entendais L'abîme*': Sound, Space, and Signification in Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Est Mort*," 82.
[131] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 8.
[132] Barnes discusses the novel's 'circular structure' in "'*J'entendais L'abîme*': Sound, Space, and Signification in Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Est Mort*," 80.
[133] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 11.

completed novel is a work, which in failing, in *falling*, refers.[134] Derrida raises the question of whether language—the name in particular, associated with the living person—can refer to the dead, or whether after death the signifier falls from the signified, the name from the dead person who bore it in life.[135] If this is the case, the name, so central to Darrieussecq's novel, may be considered an instance of referential shortfall or excess at work.[136] The name therefore becomes poetic in that it instantiates the pure 'wanting-to-say' of the poem;[137] as Kristeva writes, the name is integrated into the poem—in this instance, in a poetic text—as a sign with an absent signified which attempts to 'reach the dead and untouchable object, to take over the unnameable being.'[138] The name, and the novel itself, fall inevitably short of doing so. The final clause, 'I saw him,' illustrates this sudden referential shortfall, the fall of signifier from signified—if Tom is dead, in seeing his dead body, does the narrator see *him*? For Paul de Man, as Caruth writes, the failure of reference has become 'inextricably bound up with the fact of literal falling'[139] as a figure for the inevitable failure of theory, whose sole medium is language, which fails particularly in the attempt to account for the body which—fallen from the window and fallen from life in this instance—is beyond the narrator's reach at the eighth-floor window and beyond the reach of signification.[140] The play on words that emerges in the discussion of literal and figurative falling may appear flippant in light of the subject matter, and this is a matter to which Darrieussecq herself draws attention in the novel, as her narrator discusses the characteristic formal play of Georges Perec, in his attempt to bear literary witness to traumatic loss after the Holocaust. In a self-

[134] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 90.
[135] Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 16.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Lacoue-Labarthe in Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 12.
[138] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 165.
[139] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 75.
[140] Ibid.

referential gesture, she has her narrator 'confuse the serious with the solemn' in finding 'the technical aspect' of Perec's *A Void* 'offensive.'[141] Darrieussecq, too, plays on words in such a way to reflect her Lacanian persuasion as a psychoanalyst: Barnes notes that 'if Darrieussecq's narrator is mourning the loss of her son, Tom, the novel itself is exploring its own experience of loss, that of "*le mot*" —the word.[142]

> Indeed, in its repeated interrogations of the expressive capacity of the written word, and in its meditations on the relationship between signifier and signified, difference and absence, the text reveals a certain metaliterary narcissism, gazing back at itself, as if in a mirror. "T-o-m" is the mirror image of "m-o-t."'[143]

What dies for Tom's mother, cast out of the world of 'other people's meaning'[144] into 'the asymbolia of the traumatic,' is therefore the word.[145] The novel embodies the process of finding a language by which to bear witness to a trauma that resists signification, particularly in ordinary language. The abject does not signify death, but embodies it; in its formal embodiment of meaning, therefore, 'its signifier is none but literature.'[146] *Tom is Dead* is a distinctly poetic text in that it embodies the traumatic loss it attempts to represent, through the absence at its centre. This absence is not only that of Tom itself, but the moment of impact, the encounter with the abject—the non-signifying and unrepresentable scream that follows, which is pure embodiment of meaning.[147] 'Not long after,' the narrator writes, *The Scream* by Munch was stolen from the National Gallery of Oslo… and, of course, the painting would never be found, given that, in the end, the world didn't remain

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[141] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 135.
[142] Barnes, "'*J'entendais L'abîme*': Sound, Space, and Signification in Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Est Mort*," 88.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 4.
[145] Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 38.6.
[146] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 5.
[147] Barnes discusses the scream, particularly as opposed to the word 'scream,' as an instance of the way in which Darrieussecq plays 'with two orders of signification' in "'*J'entendais L'abîme*': Sound, Space, and Signification in Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Est Mort*," 84.

intact.'[148] The scream at the centre of the novel, too, remains to a degree irrecoverable through representation: through Darrieussecq's manipulation of form, however, 'a hole where Tom had been' remains in its place, indicating the presence of the unrepresentable at the centre of the text.[149]

'The writer,' claims Kristeva, 'is fascinated by the abject… projects himself into it, introjects it, and as a consequence perverts language—style and content.'[150] *Tom is Dead,* in its embodiment of loss, instantiates a poetic approach to the novel which may itself be characterised as abject, in that it is 'committed to what remains.'[151] Loss is not simply thematic in *Tom*, but 'exists in the body of the text itself.'[152] Existing 'between asymbolia and symbolisation,'[153] such writing is comparable, as Watkin writes, to what Kristeva refers to as the 'dead speech' of the melancholic.[154] Watkin notes, it is not that the melancholic 'necessarily refuse[s] to speak,' but that her speech is 'outside the symbolic realm where meaning is generated.'[155] Through the symptom, Kristeva writes, 'the abject permeates me, I become abject.'[156] As Watkin points out, the symptom may permeate the 'organ' of language itself, rendering it abject.[157] For Kristeva, the 'empty' speech of the melancholic conveys 'the collapse of meaning into the unnameable where it founders, inaccessible and delightful.'[158] Emptying the mark of meaning as the body empty of life becomes a corpse, it gestures toward 'the radical unknowability of death and loss, performing

[148] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 84.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 16.
[151] Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 136.
[152] Ibid., 138.
[153] Ibid., 136.
[154] For a discussion of Kristeva's 'dead speech' and its relation to poetic language, see ibid., 135-40.
[155] Ibid., 124.
[156] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 11.
[157] Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 146.
[158] Kristeva in ibid., 136.

excess to signification rather than describing it within the rational limitations of signification.'[159] The embodiment of the word in the mark/s of the signifier evidences a 'relationship between the text corpus and the excluded corporeality of the abject.'[160] Through 'the hiatuses, the repetitions and aphasia of dead speech,' the text gestures toward the unspeakable at its centre through Darrieussecq's manipulation of form.[161] Darrieussecq gives voice to her narrator in a style that she herself has described as aporetic and unembellished: 'the sentences are short because she is not there to do poetry… this sobriety of the writing became also very rhythmical and in a way poetic maybe but in a strange way.'[162] Through its fragmented temporality, its sections and chapters unnumbered like stanzas of a poem, the text displays the disrupted, disorganised speech that Kristeva identifies in the melancholic.[163] Barnes, moreover, points out the narrative's temporal disjunction, identifying its emergence from the 'void where the son should be'—or, I would contend, the traumatic encounter with the abjection of the son's body—after which it 'assumes a circular structure and reconstructs the event and its aftermath.'[164] Darrieussecq thus enacts a textual manoeuvre that Žižek has referred to as an 'encirclement of trauma,' a 'desert' at the centre of the text reflected in its Australian setting, to recall Darrieussecq's explanation of her association of Australia with mourning.[165] Moreover, the ocean figures importantly throughout the novel as the 'unnameable domain' of the Thing from which the speaking subject has been irrevocably wrenched:[166] Gill Rye points out the

[159] Ibid.
[160] Ibid., 139.
[161] Ibid., 147.
[162] Darrieussecq, "Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Is Dead*."
[163] Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 136.
[164] Barnes, "'*J'entendais L'abîme*': Sound, Space, and Signification in Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Est Mort*," 80.
[165] Žižek in Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 38.5.
[166] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 145.

'semantic polyvalency'[167] to which the phonetic materiality of the signifier gives rise, in the 'classic French *mer/mère* [English: sea/mother] association,' upon which Darrieussecq draws.[168] The narrator's the 'reconstruction' of the event itself, however, inevitably remains incomplete, ending with the moment at which the narrator leans from the window and sees her son's body, seven floors below. As Kathryn Robson writes, this moment highlights Tom's otherness—which, Watkin writes, is never so radical than in death—[169] from the narrating mother, who is powerless to reach him at the moment of traumatic witnessing: it is this otherness she must come to accept through the process of mourning, or succumb definitively to melancholia.[170] Unable to save her son, or speak for him in the radical alterity of the death for which she was not present, she may only write her own experience of traumatic loss and its survival.[171] Indeed, the novel seems to stop just short of completion: the narrator tells us she 'saw him,' but never do we learn quite what she sees. In place of the abject materiality of the scream, in its irreducible otherness to language, is silence.

This silence at the centre of the text, stands in place of what Nerval termed 'the sighs of the saint and the screams of the fay,'[172] the belonging to the unrepresentable which poetry attempts to assimilate.[173] Kristeva draws on this line from 'El Desdichado,' to account for poetry's relation to melancholia. Darrieussecq, too, alludes to the poem early in the novel as the narrator recalls the hours after

[167] Ibid.
[168] Gill Rye, "No Dialogue? Mothers and Mothering in the Work of Marie Darrieussecq," *Dalhousie French Studies* 98 (2012): 113.
[169] Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 18.
[170] Robson, "Psychic Plagiarism: The Death of a Child in Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Est Mort* and Camille Laurens's *Philippe*," 55.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Nerval in Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 162.
[173] Ibid.

Tom's death: 'Saints sigh, and fairies scream.'[174] The unrepresentable 'black sun'[175] at the centre of the text—alluded to in Darrieussecq's description of *Tom* as 'a white hole the opposite of a black hole'—instantiates the paradoxical dialectic between presence and absence: what is absent within the text is present in its determination of the entire textual body.[176] James Krasner makes a productive comparison between the lost loved person and the phantom limb, approaching mourning in literature through the theoretical framework of disability. For Krasner, grief is also an embodied experience in which the lost loved person is comparable to an amputated limb: the suffering of the mourner is like that of the amputee in that it derives 'not from the loss but from the sufferer's belief in the limb's enduring presence.'[177] Darrieussecq demonstrates such an understanding of the physicality of mourning: not only does the narrator invoke the trope of the phantom limb itself—the novel is replete with images of the physicality of mourning which she must learn to accommodate. She compares herself, for example, 'breathless' with mourning, to 'people who survive with a bit of lung missing,' who 'say that each breath requires thought, must be calculated, planned for, as well as the movements that go with it.'[178] Although healing from the distressing sensation of the phantom limb may be comparable to mourning in Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia'—a loss recovered from through the process of reality-testing, by which the subject comes gradually to understand that the lost beloved is indeed permanently absent—it differs in that the process is not the 'smooth, slow disconnection Freud describes' but a gradual learning to anticipate

[174] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 10.
[175] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 165, 70.
[176] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 161.
[177] James Krasner, "Doubtful Arms and Phantom Limbs: Literary Portrayals of Embodied Grief," *PMLA* 119, no. 2 (2004): 224.
[178] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 44.

and accommodate the 'unexpected, even grotesque assaults of somatic memory'[179] which Krasner argues are in fact more typical of the experience of loss. We find an example of such an 'assault' of embodied memory in *Tom* is when the narrator recalls standing with her 'arms dangling' at her children's bedtime, the 'set of phantom pyjamas' in her hands where Tom's should be representing a frustrated impulse 'like unbearable pins and needles.'[180] The process of mourning is therefore not one of gradual numbing through the process of reality testing, but like the 'gradual re-establishment of neural control' by which the phantom limb may eventually heal.[181] This is an account of mourning indeed closer to Darrieussecq's than to Freud's, her narrator making the same comparison as she reflects on the phantom limb, writing that 'the brain can take an entire lifetime to learn that the arm is no longer there… There is, no doubt, neuronal work associated with mourning, detours, dead ends and short-circuits, a whole electrical system to see to, synapses to revise.'[182] In one of the novel's numerous intertextual allusions—another means by which Darrieussecq gestures to elements of the novel which elude direct reference—[183] the narrator discusses literary representations of mourning with fellow grief-support group members. She discusses Georges Perec's *A Void*, a novel written in response to the Holocaust, entirely without the letter *e*—not because it is the most common letter in the French language, the narrator points out, but due to the homophony between *sans e*: without *e,* and *sans eux*: without them. The work therefore embodies its concern with mourning through Perec's attempt to accommodate, at the level of form, the absence of the Holocaust

[179] Krasner, "Doubtful Arms and Phantom Limbs: Literary Portrayals of Embodied Grief," 224.
[180] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 70-71.
[181] Krasner, "Doubtful Arms and Phantom Limbs: Literary Portrayals of Embodied Grief," 224.
[182] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 45.
[183] Hannah Kilduff in Robson, "Psychic Plagiarism: The Death of a Child in Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Est Mort* and Camille Laurens's *Philippe*," 53.

dead. In doing so, he 'plunges language into mourning,' as Darrieussecq's narrator tells the group, 'as violently, as tangibly, as we've all been.'[184] In this way, Perec's text is like an amputated body, each sentence having to accommodate the missing *e*. The latter is rendered present, therefore, *by virtue* of its absence; the writing must accommodate the absence of the *e*—or the unspeakable site of traumatic loss—as the subject is forced to accommodate the absence of the mourned dead. As 'the staircase defines the "cripple[d]' body,'[185] in Davis' words, so the mourner finds herself in an 'unaccommodating physical environment' which determines her experience of the world, in that she is confronted repeatedly with the material evidence of the lost beloved's absence.[186] The text's embodiment of mourning, as the narrator tries to account for her grief in writing her journal, therefore makes a 'poet' of the narrator in its engagement with the materiality of the signifier. What follows in the novel is a response by one of the group members the following week, in the form of a poem displaying a similar formal experiment by excluding the letter *I*, recalling Kristeva's characterisation of abjection as 'the place where I am not.'[187] Grief, as Lucas writes, is the 'embodied experience of exile [which] confronts the subject with its own limits and dependencies.'[188] These 'limits and dependencies' pertain also to language for the subject 'suddenly and catastrophically adrift' in the post-traumatic condition of 'rupture and fragmentation'—not least that of signifier and signified, the name and its absent referent.[189] The mourner's location in the space of exile, enfigured in *Tom* as Darrieussecq's Australia, is the precondition for poetic writing which, though written in longing, requires acknowledgement of the

[184] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 135.
[185] Davis in Krasner, "Doubtful Arms and Phantom Limbs: Literary Portrayals of Embodied Grief," 219-20.
[186] Ibid., 219.
[187] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 3.
[188] Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 38.6.
[189] Ibid., 38.5-6.

irrecoverable loss of the idealised *before*. In poetic language, the 'dead' word may be resurrected through the materiality of the signifier itself, thus Kristeva's characterisation of abjection as 'a resurrection that has gone through death… a start of life, of new signifiance.'[190]

While *Tom*'s mother becomes the poet of the text by virtue of her 'singing the Lord's song' in exile, Sara is the poet figure of *Picnic* by designation, and in opposition to the film's other characters. Importantly, while the grieving mother is almost the sole speaker in *Tom*, Darrieussecq's use of dialogue being minimal, Sara's lines in the film, on the other hand, are extremely few despite her prominence in the film. The radical contrast between the two mourners' fates, I would argue, lies in this difference: while *Tom* represents the process by which the narrator finds a language to account for her loss, Sara descends into 'depressive silence and death' through overidentification with the lost object of her love, Miranda.[191] As Kristeva writes in *Black Sun,* death for the melancholic 'becomes the phantasmal experience of returning to the lost paradise.'[192] Unlike in *Tom*, Sara's status as poet is established early in the film, as is the association of poetry with abjection. As Edith says on the Rock, 'Blanche says Sara writes poetry—in the dunny! She found one there on the floor, all about Miranda.' As Wainwright points out, Mrs Appleyard rules this 'world without earth' which necessarily excludes the '"earth-closet"'[193] which, he points out, 'is aptly named—behind its closed door unspeakable acts occur… in a language that obscenely ignores the College motto:

[190] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 15.
[191] Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 38.5.
[192] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 153.
[193] Lindsay in Wainwright, "Desolation Angels—World and Earth in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*," 122.

Silence Was Golden.'[194] In other words, it is a hidden site of abjection within the College, 'reached by a secluded path edged with begonias' where poems fall from Sara as abject matter.[195] The College motto Wainwright points out in the novel exhibits a distinctly melancholic attitude, in its suggestion of longing for the prototypical 'Zion' of subjective unity with the mother, which drives the poet to writing or to death.[196] As in *Tom*, melancholia, abjection, poetry and Australianness partake in a 'chain of associations and significations' such as that Hélène Cixous posits between birds, women and writing as examples of that which is designated by the paternal law governing the symbolic order as unclean, *immonde,* therefore subject to prohibition and exclusion.[197] Accordingly, Sara is excluded and shunned from the order, the *world* of the College as determined by Mrs Appleyard, in a way commensurate with her descent into melancholia, and importantly, the increasing instability of that order. I would argue in light of this that Sara's disposition towards poetry is not incidental, and that her designation as poet—suggested also by the presence of a portrait of Byron on her dresser, as well as that of Miranda—participates in her characterisation as abject and *immonde*. Sara's melancholic position is suggested from the beginning of the film by her near-mutism, which we might attribute to the strictures of the College on dress, deportment and speech with which Sara does not—or cannot—comply, and from which any deviation is vindictively punished by Mrs Appleyard. When ordered to recite 'The Wreck of the Hesperus,' Sara claims that it 'doesn't make sense,' reflecting Kristeva's account

[194] Ibid.
[195] Wainwright, "Desolation Angels—World and Earth in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*," 122.
[196] Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 111. Here, she defends her claim, writing '[w]e only have to read the chapter in Leviticus in the Bible to realise that it is deadly serious.'
[197] Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 111-18.

of the melancholic as absented from 'other people's meaning.'[198] Instead Sara offers one of her own poetic efforts, 'An Ode to St Valentine,' which is swiftly and derisively interrupted by Mrs Appleyard after the opening lines, 'Love abounds, love surrounds,' reflecting the poet's paradigmatic disinheritance from, and longing for the 'unnameable domain' of the Thing, a 'hallucination of total love' preceding the subject/object distinction and the individuation of the subject.[199] In his analysis of Kristeva's account of the 'dead speech' of the melancholic, Watkin writes that '[t]he somatic power of language is at its most frightening when it is denied or its drive direction perverted.'[200] It is this denial exacted by Mrs Appleyard in her suppression of original poetry, and in general her interdiction on speech—recalling her instruction to Miss Lumley to prevent any 'idle gossip' on the school's 'morbid affair'—which we might ultimately see as leading to her suicide. The 'return from the brink of suicidal silence and refusal' through 'the potentially reparative work of the poem' is therefore denied to Sara.[201] What remains to her, disinherited even of poetry, is the performance of her abjected condition of melancholia through the corpse. The fallen body found among broken flowerpots, beneath the broken glass roof of the greenhouse, demonstrates an irruption of the abject into the carefully ordered world of the College. Where the embodied meaning of poetic speech is forbidden, and where ordinary language has been emptied of meaning for the melancholic, the dead body remains—irreducible to signification—to speak in the frustrated poet's place.

[198] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 4.
[199] Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 135.
[200] Ibid., 146.
[201] Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 38.10.

Though Miranda is generally understood to be the heroine of the film, and its most memorable image, I would argue in line with Harriet Wild that she is less a character *as such* than the archetypal love object.[202] This Harriet Wild argues in her interpretation of Michael's obsession with Miranda as an instance of courtly love; though Sara is denied the possibility of her love being considered 'courtly,' her love for Miranda might be best considered, in Lacan's words, as a 'poetic exercise… which couldn't have any real concrete equivalent.'[203] Notably, the moment of Michael's falling in love with Miranda constitutes a 'realisation of location,'[204] as Wild notes, at which point in the novel Michael decides that 'this was the country, where he, Michael Fitzhubert, was going to live.'[205] I would argue in line with Harriet Wild that it is at this point, even before Miranda's disappearance, that the traumatic status of Michael's love is determined; spied once, and only from a distance, she is Other to Michael from the beginning, and subject to numerous distortions and transpositions into poetic symbol, such as the recurring image of the swan, as instances of traumatic return.[206] The encounter may be considered a traumatic repetition of the originary separation from the Thing, which from this point on is embodied in Miranda, and which is necessarily unattainable. Her disappearance from the 'world' of the College into the 'earth' of the Rock, takes her otherness to the utmost degree—her status as sublime love object unspoiled by the finding of a body—elevating her to the status of the extra-linguistic and non-corporeal Thing.[207] As Lacan argues, the work of art always involves 'to a certain extent… circling the Thing,' and it is this with which Miranda has merged,

[202] Wild, "Darling Miranda: Courtly Love in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*," 127.
[203] Lacan in ibid., 128.
[204] Ibid., 127.
[205] Lindsay in ibid., 128.
[206] Ibid., 127.
[207] Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 138.

disappearing into the embodied absence of the Rock.[208] Not only Miranda, but her sublime disappearance, is an object of melancholic desire for Sara, in its reflection of her longing merge with the Thing, though she remains unmentioned in Wild's article. Instead she meets the opposite fate, in the absolute corporeality of the abjected body. That Sara is an orphan is a matter of significance, if we consider the common representation of orphans in the Victorian era in the sense that they are exiled and 'disinherited.'[209] This is how Kristeva characterises the poet and melancholic in *Black Sun,* the title taken from a line of Nerval's 'El Desdichado,' the title of a poem on 'the *Black Sun* of *Melancholia*'[210] most accurately translated, she argues, as 'The Disinherited.'[211] Sara's orphanhood and melancholia therefore reflect, in addition, the 'spiritual dispossession' Wright identifies in the Australian.[212] The object of the mourner-melancholic's disinheritance is the Thing which, as in the disinheritance of the orphan in Victorian culture, is accompanied by her exclusion from the world of the College.[213] The poet is always in exile, according to Lucas, because

> To be—were it possible—at home, in the symbolic Zion of perfection, would be to enter or return to a place in which language was no longer necessary, a space of infantile fantasy in which the self was indistinguishable from a Powerful M/Other and a retreat from the labours of life could finally occur. [214]

At best, the poem provides 'only glimpses of the lost territory of home, of the imaginary ideal,' and so, post-loss, Miranda of *Picnic* and the child in *Tom is Dead* are only glimpsed momentarily.[215] The image of the lost loved person whose

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[208] Lacan in Wild, "Darling Miranda: Courtly Love in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.", 129.
[209] John Robert Reed, *Victorian Conventions* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975), 258.
[210] Nerval in Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 141.
[211] Ibid., 144-45.
[212] Wright, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, xvii.
[213] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*.145
[214] Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 38.9.
[215] Ibid.

referent is now absent instantiates the momentary resurrection of the lost object,[216] constituting at the same time a traumatic return to the site of loss, the image itself a signifier of its absent referent, like the poet who 'takes Eurydice out of the melancholy hell and gives her back a new existence in his text/song.'[217]

Here I want to consider the final images of the lost beloved in *Picnic* and *Tom* alongside each other, in light of their striking similarity. In both, the lost loved person is imagined at the closing of the text, alive, in an irresolute parting gesture; the final image of *Picnic* is one repeated from earlier in the film, showing Miranda waving and turning from the camera in slow motion, followed by a freeze-frame of her turned head, having told Mademoiselle de Portiers not to worry, and that they 'shall only be gone a little while.' As Wild writes, 'the close of the narrative… temporarily returns the viewer to the scenes of the picnic in an epilogue that takes the disordered, almost wholly Other form of a dream.'[218] We are returned to the *before* which is permanently lost, and which is presented as absent and Other, to remain a 'spectral, momentary image.'[219] The repeated shot instantiates a return to the pre-traumatic dreamlike languor of the opening sequence, in contrast with the 'visual code' of the film's second act which is sped-up, disjointed, more exaggerated in its traditionally gothic elements and dominated by interior settings.[220] Here the viewer, not having seen Miranda since the film's first act, is captured in her own 'moment of encounter, of love,'[221] with what is lost, in a film that commemorates

[216] Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 5.
[217] Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 144.
[218] Wild, "Darling Miranda: Courtly Love in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*," 131.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Ibid.
[221] Ibid.

and celebrates human youth and beauty in its ephemerality.[222] The encounter, however, is an encounter with the Other, of the endlessly unattainable and distant Lady of courtly love.[223] In the words of John C Tibbetts, *Picnic* 'decelerates into an ambiguous silence and stasis at the end, as if veils had been drawn away, revealing finally nothing but a blank slate,' as we realise the film will end without resolution as to the fate of the girls, Miranda's image reminding us of her permanent absence.[224] Whether or not there can ever be genuine resolution to mourning, what remains to the mourning subject is the 'glancing evocation'[225] of that which is lost through the image and the poem. Weir permits us such a glimpse of the lost *before* as we are returned to the prelapsarian peace of the picnic through the repeated image of the Appleyard girls at the base of the Rock—step-printed and hazy like a memory—which can only be returned to momentarily through the poem or the artwork.[226] Our last image of Tom in Darrieussecq's novel is a similarly poetic return to the pre-traumatic *before* in which Tom appears alive, and yet whose image refers also to his death, and therefore his otherness, the acceptance of which is a precondition for the narrator's return from melancholic mutism, which opens up the possibility for writing. The narrator imagines him standing 'at mid-distance,' as in our last image of Miranda:

> [H]e doesn't hold his hand out to me, no, but he raises it a little, in a strange gesture. Neither goodbye nor wait. A small signal, at the end of his fingers. He's half turned, he doesn't come, he doesn't move away; he's there without being there. [227]

[222] Bladen, "The Rock and the Void: Pastoral and Loss in Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Peter Weir's Film Adaptation," 161.
[223] Wild, "Darling Miranda: Courtly Love in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*," 129.
[224] John C Tibbetts in Catania, "The Hanging Rock Piper: Weir, Lindsay, and the Spectral Fluidity of Nothing," 94.
[225] Lucas, "The Poet Is Always in Exile: Poetry and Mourning in Psalm 137," 38.5.
[226] Rayner, *The Films of Peter Weir*, 2nd, 82.
[227] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 170.

It is at this point, argues Robson, that Tom is recognised as Other, his death understood not as the mother's but singularly his own, and at which the narrator can begin to write—not Tom's story, but her own, of an 'identity rooted in loss,' by which she becomes both 'poet' in the act of writing, and 'Australian' in her permanent disinheritance for the lost, pre-traumatic world, the *before* of Tom's death.[228] Both Weir and Darrieussecq demarcate a space at the centre of the two texts that lies beyond the reach of signification as entirely Other, paradoxically inherent in the fabric of the two texts as an informing silence, an absent presence.

3. Ethics

Where are our lovers?
They are in the grave
They are far happier
In a more beautiful region!...
Oh white betrothed!
Oh blossoming young virgin![229]

To argue for Australia's textual character as a country of mourning requires qualification, particularly in light of the fact that *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Tom is Dead* are two texts in which Indigenous presence is minimal, tokenistic or figured as a 'resonant absence.'[230] Having demonstrated Australia's reflection of grief and the post-traumatic condition in the form and matter of the two texts, a fundamentally important question arises: for *whom* is Australia a country of mourning? On whose exclusion does this manner of representation depend? I show in this chapter that the metaphorised Australia of *Picnic* and *Tom* is the product of a white-privileging

[228] Robson, "Psychic Plagiarism: The Death of a Child in Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Est Mort* and Camille Laurens's *Philippe*," 50, 54.
[229] Gérard de Nerval in Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 154.
[230] Bladen, "The Rock and the Void: Pastoral and Loss in Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Peter Weir's Film Adaptation," 174.

imaginative nexus between Australia and the affective state of the mourner-melancholic. I argue that such representations of the continent result from the conflation of absence and loss within a transnational white imaginary.[231] Elspeth Tilley writes of the 'white vanishing trope' that its ideological function is to confer legitimacy upon white occupation of the continent; despite its racist underpinnings, the trope—of which *Picnic* is a quintessential exemplar—has persisted throughout the history of post-settlement Australian textuality. For the purposes of my anaylsis here, I use the term 'white' as Tilley does, to refer to a 'social construct' which includes migrant Australians, in line with a critical-whiteness studies view.[232] While *Tom* is less evidently a 'white-vanishing' or 'lost-child' text like *Picnic at Hanging Rock,* I argue that Darrieussecq's novel—though not an Australian text—amounts to a 'white-death' text with a similar ideological basis, demonstrating the persistence of tropes of white endangerment and victimhood in Australia into the twenty-first century, and beyond national borders.

Introducing the publication of the withheld final chapter of Lindsay's novel, three years after her death in 1984, John Taylor writes of *Picnic* as distinguished by the juxtaposition of 'mysterious and sinister events with a picture of a period drawn with loving nostalgia.'[233] Peter Weir and art director David Copping do appear to replicate this 'loving nostalgia' for the twilight years of colonial Australia in the film's distinctive aesthetic, described by Ian Hunter as 'honorary pre-Raphaelite… despite the gum trees.'[234] This is particularly evident in the voluptuous Victoriana of

[231] Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1999): 721.
[232] Elspeth Tilley, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 16.
[233] Taylor in Bladen, "The Rock and the Void: Pastoral and Loss in Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Peter Weir's Film Adaptation," 167.
[234] Dermody, Jacka, and Lawson, *The Screening of Australia*, 2, 107.

the opening sequence, wherein the girls' youthful beauty is emphasised by long, loose hair and white, flowing garments amid a *mise-en-scène* memorable for the prominence of flowers (all of introduced species). The Australian landscape, particularly as embodied in the metonymic figure of the Rock, stands beyond the walls of the College as its menacing Other, instantiating a problematic nature/civilisation binary.[235] Of particular interest in the film's nostalgic aesthetic is the presence of a print of Sir Frederick Leighton's *Flaming June* in Mrs Appleyard's study, which Rayner identifies with the character Sara.[236] Lauded in its day as 'the most wonderful painting in existence,' it faded into obscurity, later to be dismissed as mere kitsch.[237] After being sold by the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford to a private collector in 1930, it effectively disappeared until 1962, when it was allegedly found behind a false wall in outer-suburban London.[238] While the film, like the novel, tends to implicit criticism of the characteristic strictures of the Victorian era—particularly as they regulated the lives of young women—the nostalgic incorporation of works epitomising the era is rather suggestive of a sense of loss for white Australia's cultural roots in Europe. This sense of loss, I would argue, appears to be informed by a belief in white European cultural supremacy, extending to a longing for Australia's pre-federation colonial relation to Great Britain; the decline and fall of the College traced in the film's second act may be seen to foreshadow the decline of Empire, and of 'British Australia.'[239] The nostalgically idealised Victoriana of the opening scenes belong firmly to the *before* of

[235] Jonathan Rayner, "Gothic Definitions: The New Australian "Cinema of Horrors"," *Antipodes* 25, no. 1 (2011): 93.
[236] *The Films of Peter Weir*, 2nd, 77.
[237] Ken Johnson, "Review: 'Flaming June' Arrives in New York, Preceded by Its Reputation," *New York Times*, June 11 2015.
[238] Patrick Monahan, "The Strange Journey of One of the World's Most Famous Paintings," *Vanity Fair*, June 4 2015.
[239] Craig Wilcox in James Curran and Stuart Ward, *The Unknown Nation: Australia after Empire* (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 2010), 4.

trauma; following the informing traumatic crisis of the girls' disappearance, the film's aesthetic takes a distinctly gothic turn. The girls' disappearance at the Rock is suggestive of the 'anxiety that English identity will be lost' apparent throughout Australian textuality, as theorised by Robert Dixon.[240] The intensity of this anxiety, according to Steele, 'finds expression in metaphors of complete absorption or consumption' by a malevolent landscape upon which the Indigenous Other is displaced, and which stands in defining opposition to European civilisation.[241] Marek Haltof, moreover, points out Weir's 'investiture of the bush with European culture' apparent in the paintings of the Heidelberg school such as those of Frederick McCubbin, whose work *The Lost Child* (1886) was among Lindsay's influences in the writing of the novel.[242] Similar influences, Haltof notes, were likely behind the aesthetic of the film adaptation.[243] The gothicised landscape is accorded agency to strip the new 'English-but-not-English "Australian Girl"'—a textual trope identified by Tanya Dalziell—of the European mother culture in such a way as to cast the racial identity of native born white Australians into doubt.[244] This anxiety may be traced to the displacement of the Indigenous Other onto a hostile landscape, common to 'white-vanishing' texts; the girls' apparent merging with the landscape suggests an anxiety surrounding the possibility of miscegenation, alluded to in the emphasis on Edith and Irma's 'intactness' following their return from the Rock.[245] This, even though any penetration that occurs in the film would more accurately be attributed to the film's white characters, as the girls merge with the

[240] Robert Dixon inTilley, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*, 117.
[241] Ibid.
[242] Marek Haltof, *Peter Weir: When Cultures Collide* (New York: Twayne, 1996), 32-3.
[243] Ibid., 33.
[244] Kathleen Steele, "Fear and Loathing in the Australian Bush: Gothic Landscapes in 'Bush Studies' and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*," *Colloquy: Text Theory Critique* 20 (2010): 116.
[245] Tilley, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*, 117.

landscape through the metonymic Rock in an 'indigenising manoeuvre.'[246] White Australia is thus provided with a 'myth of origin' and a textual monument with which to memorialise its own suffering.[247] Howard McNaughton has discussed the way in which the 'interment of white bodies in the land'—and we may indeed see the girls' apparent disappearance into the Rock as a kind of interment—instantiates a 'paradoxical discursive indigenisation' through which the landscape is claimed for the white European.[248] The 'semiosis of the cadaver,' marks the limit of Empire itself; the Rock thereby becomes tomb-like, memorialising the limit, and therefore the ephemerality, of the British Empire.[249]

In the typical manner of the pastoral tradition, the film is distinguished by an atmosphere of melancholy, owing to a preoccupation with ephemerality and loss, but also with absence, 'the idea of a void, an unfathomable gap and absence which includes but goes beyond the loss of the girls.'[250] This, Bladen immediately and aptly identifies as evidence of a 'problematic construction of Australia as empty and blank' which 'haunts' the film.[251] This is, of course, a product of the imperial ideology underpinning *terra nullius*, the means by which invasion and subsequent occupation were rationalised by white colonisers and their descendants.[252] As Tilley points out, the threat projected onto a hostile landscape, such as we see in *Picnic* and other texts we might classify as 'Australian Gothic,' operates as 'a

[246] Ibid., 281.
[247] Kirkby in ibid., 34, 32.
[248] McNaughton in ibid., 174.
[249] Ibid.
[250] Bladen, "The Rock and the Void: Pastoral and Loss in Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Peter Weir's Film Adaptation," 172.
[251] Ibid.
[252] Ibid.

discursive tool of empire and conquest.'[253] Another such discursive tool operating in the service of colonial ideology is the conflation of absence with loss, theorised by Dominick LaCapra as a means by which the specificity of individual and collective experiences of historical and ongoing structural trauma is erased, in favour of a conception of trauma which is undiscriminating as to the specificity of traumatic experience on the part of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders.[254] These are not psychological categories, he argues, but ethical ones, the respect for which any ethical act of witness-bearing to historical trauma depends.[255] 'White-death' and 'white-vanishing' texts, however, fail to respect these distinctions, perpetuating a cultural narrative of white victimhood in a hostile landscape. To convert absence into loss, argues LaCapra, is to encourage 'misplaced nostalgia,' and it is arguably this problematic mourning for a 'lost paradise' of subjective wholeness and unity which problematises the pastoral reading of *Picnic,* in that it denies Indigenous presence before and during European occupation.[256] Bladen points out that pastoral has, from its earliest expressions, been characterised by 'an overarching political and material sense of loss,' citing as an example Virgil's *Eclogues,* which are set 'in the context of the extensive dispossession and re-distribution of land,' the celebration of natural beauty inflected with a melancholy awareness of the fragility of territorial possession as subject to 'the overwhelming political forces of empire.'[257] It would appear a matter of significance in light of this that *Picnic* is set in the year before Federation, as though the mourned loss were in part a time of imagined union with the imperial mother, represented metonymically through the

[253] Tilley in Bladen, "The Rock and the Void: Pastoral and Loss in Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Peter Weir's Film Adaptation," 172.
[254] LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," 723.
[255] Ibid., 727, 12.
[256] Ibid., 698, 706.
[257] Bladen, "The Rock and the Void: Pastoral and Loss in Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Peter Weir's Film Adaptation," 170.

looming presence of Queen Victoria's portrait at the College. After her final confrontation with Sara, Mrs Appleyard returns to her office and weeps, the camera fixing on a series of images: first that of a woman who is presumably her mother; then one of her late husband, recognisable from the cameo she wears around her neck; then to the image of Queen Victoria. As Bladen shows, the preoccupation with loss in *Picnic* is heavily 'bound up with empire': the film's prevailing sense of loss is therefore of limited relevance to any but a white audience.[258] LaCapra also identifies risk in the construal of loss as absence, which leads, he writes, to 'the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted.'[259] The employment of pastoral conventions in an Australian setting evidences a longing for a 'Golden Age,' which could only have been considered as such by the beneficiaries of colonial violence and Britain's imperial legacy.[260] The pastoral mode therefore acts here as a discursive tool by which absence—that of the imagined Golden Age—is converted into loss.[261] The gothic mode in which *Picnic* also participates, on the other hand, operates in the reverse, distinguished by the conversion of loss into absence, consisting in the elision of Indigenous presence and the nation's history of colonial violence in such a way as to perpetuate the representation of the landscape as haunted and malevolent.

Picnic at Hanging Rock does indeed demonstrate numerous characteristics peculiar to the Australian Gothic tradition, particularly that of the lost child or white vanishing

[258] Ibid., 178.
[259] LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," 698.
[260] Ibid.
[261] Ibid., 702

trope which relies on a number of displacements amounting to an 'ideologically motivated transformation of history.'[262] We might call this transformation that of loss into absence, which enables the casting of white Australians as victims of the unforgiving landscape in which they make their new home. Peter Pierce approaches his study on 'lost children anxiety' in Australian cultural history 'out of a humanist belief that the rehearsal of stories of our past… can still illumine how in Australia we came to be as we are, a people persistently fearful of where we are lodged in place and time.'[263] Tilley, however is dismissive of his assessment, partly on the view that what she prefers to term the 'white vanishing trope' would appear, on the basis of its figuration throughout Australian textuality, to be no more than a persistent 'rehearsal' perpetuated by the failure of white Australian culture to address—'properly' and 'materially'—'the legacies of colonialism that underpin it.'[264] The lack of recognition of Australia's Indigenous peoples in *Picnic* demonstrates the truth of Tilley's claim. Far from being the object of mourning, the land's original inhabitants feature in an obfuscated manner, as the object of numerous refigurations such as Tilley discusses in her chapter 'Black Displacements' in her study of white-vanishing.[265] *Picnic*'s sole Indigenous figure, the silent black tracker, is such an example of a displaced Indigenous presence: as an example of the Indigenous Australian displaced onto the indigene, the term Tilley employs to denote the white construction of the Indigenous Other.[266] Such displacements facilitate what Val Plumwood terms 'hyperseparation,'[267] serving to 'ignore or deny relationship' between white occupants and their descendants, and

[262] Turner in Tilley, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*, 329.
[263] Pierce, *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety*, xvii.
[264] Tilley, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*, 332.
[265] Ibid., 55.
[266] Ibid., *74*.
[267] Val Plumwood in ibid., 55.

Indigenous peoples.[268] Marcia Langton points out that 'the trope of the Aboriginal tracker was derived from… the attribution of essentialist and determinist traits that were thought to limit the capacity of Aborigines to adjust to "civilisation"' amounting to a form of 'romantic racism' constituting one of the 'foundational myths of Australian nationhood.'[269] The attribution of 'instinctual' knowledge to the Indigenous Other, in opposition to European learning, amounts to a dehumanising instance of hyperseparation, which uniformly privileges white subjectivity.[270] As Kathleen Steele points out, the dehumanisation of the Indigenous Other in *Picnic* is taken a step further: the replacement of the 'black tracker' with a bloodhound, when his search proves unsuccessful, demonstrates the positioning of the Indigenous Other as 'a domesticated animal of limited use.'[271] She writes that 'the deeper implications of the "black tracker"' are neglected both by Lindsay and by Weir:[272] the figure of the tracker appears only briefly in the film, and is mentioned only in passing in Lindsay's novel.[273] She argues however that 'the experiences of three girls from the College, Miranda, Irma and Sara, offer an alternative meditation on Aboriginal absence.'[274] Miranda's disappearance and Irma's traumatic encounter with '[t]he bush space,' containing 'all that is clandestine and unresolved in settler culture' are European experiences, Steele argues, which are problematic in their implication of white victimhood.[275] In Sara, on the other hand, 'one finds a possible model for the unacknowledged Other in the landscape,' she

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[268] Ibid., 58.
[269] Marcia Langton, "Out from the Shadows: Marcia Langton Considers the Significance and Traces the Development of the Aboriginal Tracker Figure in Australian Film," *Meanjin* 65, no. 1 (2006): 57-8.
[270] Tilley, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*, 58.
[271] Steele, "Fear and Loathing in the Australian Bush: Gothic Landscapes in 'Bush Studies' and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*," 47.
[272] Ibid.
[273] Lindsay, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, 66.
[274] Steele, "Fear and Loathing in the Australian Bush: Gothic Landscapes in 'Bush Studies' and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*," 47.
[275] Ibid., 48.

argues.[276] Mrs Appleyard's unnerving silence in response to Sara's death—of which, by all indications, she is already aware at the time of Mr Whitehead's announcement—indeed contrasts with the widespread and immediate traumatic status of the disappearances at the Rock. This is particularly true of the response to the vanishing of Miranda, whose 'overdetermined'[277] whiteness—visible in her blonde hair and blue eyes, her class status, her white garb—stands in contrast to Sara's dark hair, her 'disinherited' status as an orphan, and her loneliness in contrast to Miranda's popularity.[278] Even if we take Sara's presence to be acknowledgement-through-displacement of the genocide upon which the colonial society of *Picnic* is predicated, the postulation of her death's inevitability suggests a view of Australia's Indigenous peoples as 'an antediluvian race… doomed to give way to western "progress,"' as Tilley writes.[279] We see evidence of this in Irma's musing at the Rock: 'Sara reminds me of a little deer Papa brought home once. I looked after it, but it died. Mama said it was doomed.' We need not necessarily take this as a view of Lindsay's, or of Weir's, or that of scriptwriter Cliff Green: Irma is, after all, the character who is 'rejected' from the Rock, (as Dermody, Jacka and/or Lawson quip, 'perhaps her hair is the wrong colour'[280]) and the one among the girls who imagines on their approach that the Rock has been waiting 'a million years… just for us.' Even so, the displacements by which Indigenous figures are made concomitantly present and absent ultimately enable the disavowal of history and the denial of responsibility through the conversion of absence into loss. Moreover, the specificity of the historical and ongoing structural trauma of Indigenous peoples

[276] Ibid.
[277] Tilley, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*, 235.
[278] Reed, *Victorian Conventions*, 258.
[279] Tilley, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*, 166.
[280] Dermody, Jacka, and Lawson, *The Screening of Australia*, 2, 107.

is elided and incorporated into a near-exclusively white Australian narrative of trauma and mourning.

Though Darrieussecq engages more explicitly with Australia's colonial history in *Tom is Dead*, Australia's Indigenous peoples and colonial history are invoked, it appears, ultimately in the service of a specifically white, Eurocentric narrative of mourning. From the very opening page a Eurocentric view of Australia is established through the narrator's reflection on her husband Stuart's characterisation of Tom's death as the event that turned the family's life 'upside down,' in a way reflected by the continent's planetary position and the according reversal of seasons in the year.[281] British-born Marcus Clarke wrote in 1876 of the 'Weird Melancholy'[282] produced by the uncanny character of the Australian Bush, 'our trees without shade, our flowers without perfume, our birds who cannot fly, and our beasts who have not yet learned to walk on all fours,' the 'sullen despair' he perceives in the 'mountain forests' readily attributable to the characterisation of the continent as having 'no past, no story.'[283] A similar conflation of absence and loss—that of Indigenous presence in Australia—is at play in Darrieussecq's novel, her discussions of Indigenous culture and spirituality tending toward the simplistic and tokenistic, reflecting Tilley's claim that the representation of Indigenous Australians in white-vanishing texts serves 'both fatal-impact doctrine and a nostalgic impulse that memorialises and celebrates certain imagined positive aspects of a primitivised Indigenous culture and subjectivity by constructing "the indigene"

[281] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 1.
[282] Clarke borrows the term 'Weird Melancholy' from Edgar Allan Poe. Incidentally, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* opens with a voiceover of Miranda (mis)quoting from Edgar Allan Poe's 'A Dream within a Dream.'
[283] Clarke, "Preface to Gordon's *Poems* [1876]," 35-6.

as a one-dimensional sign.'[284] Further, the hyperseparation between Indigenous and European culture is a construction the purpose of which is to exclude Indigenous culture, as a world incommensurable with that of the white subject.[285] The hyperseparation Tilley discusses is evident in the narrator's reflections on the 'Dreamtime,' described as 'a time that lasts a long time': 'The creatures that inhabited it left traces. On Uluru, there are the first imprints of a red lizard that defied the rock, and the marks of combat between the bellbirds and the blue Lizardmen. Etcetera.'[286] Neither the narrator, nor Darrieussecq herself appear particularly interested in the significance of these creatures' actual role in Indigenous spirituality, nor the atemporal or extra-temporal character of what is more accurately referred to as 'the Dreaming': As Mudrooroo writes of the terms 'Dreamtime' and 'Dreaming,' however, they both refer inaccurately to 'a complex metaphysical and spiritual concept for which there is simply no adequate English rendering.'[287] Not simply a matter of translation—the word is translated into English from *'le temps du rêve'*: 'the time of the dream' rather than the alternative, *'le rêve,'* meaning 'the dream.'[288] Darrieussecq's employment of a term that constructs the Dreaming as past and historical serves a construction of white presence as natural, inevitable, and belonging to the present and future of an Australia where 'progressive' and 'evolutionary' Western time and culture prevails.[289]

In *Tom* we do not find an outright disavowal of Australia's colonial history so much as we find that Darrieussecq situates colonial violence and oppression firmly in the

[284] Tilley, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*, 56.
[285] Ibid., 58
[286] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 95.
[287] Mudrooroo in Ashok Bery, *Cultural Translation and Postcolonial Poetry* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 67.
[288] Marie Darrieussecq, *Tom Est Mort* (Paris: P.O.L., 2007), 140
[289] Tilley, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*, 24.

past, where she also seems to place Indigenous peoples and culture themselves. Though Darrieussecq acknowledges 'the Aborigines' genocide' as one of the reasons for which 'her' Australia 'became a place of mourning,'[290] Darrieussecq's attention to Indigenous peoples and culture supports Tilley's claim that white-vanishing texts, through a 'series of projections and homogenisations,' portray Indigenous figures as 'either passive and compliant or savage and hostile, but always in the past.'[291] This is apparent, for example, in the way she refers to Truganini as 'the last Tasmanian,' conflating the last full-blooded Indigenous Tasmanian—though this, too, is a problematic designation in its historical context—with the idea of the last Indigenous Tasmanian altogether.[292] A similar erasure of Indigenous presence in contemporary Australia is observable in the narrator's reflections on her own near-drowning off the coast of Tasmania: 'Maybe, in the Dreamtime, there had been Aborigines who knew a bit about the ways of this sea. But they're all dead, and the sea is empty.'[293] Darrieussecq's references to Indigenous spirituality to the end of evoking a prelapsarian *before* of traumatic loss exemplify the discursive removal of Indigenous culture 'from the here and now of white experience, displacing it to a mystical, primordial (but Judaeo-Christian-symbolism-infused) "Dreamtime" space.'[294] Moreover, the characterisation of Australia's Indigenous peoples as 'all dead' and the sea and land as 'empty,'[295] as an image of Lacanian lack, facilitates, even in the twenty-first century, a view of the continent as *terra nullius* in such a way as to legitimise and naturalise ongoing white occupation. The image of the continent, where Sydney is imagined at the fringes of

[290] Darrieussecq, "Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Is Dead*."
[291] Tilley, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*, 161, 324, 32.
[292] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 95.
[293] Ibid., 116.
[294] Tilley, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*, 69.
[295] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 116.

the desert (despite the intermediary of the bush implicitly acknowledged by the family's relocation to the Blue Mountains) and bordered by ocean warrants questioning in that they both serve as figures for the 'emptiness' at the centre of the word.[296] Darrieussecq's implication of Indigenous absence or similarly, her situation of Indigenous peoples and culture entirely in the past, enables their construction in opposition to a post-traumatic present in the 'country of mourning'—that is, post-traumatic for the white subject.[297] I would therefore argue that Darrieussecq's cursory and inaccurate references to Indigenous peoples and culture exemplifies 'the dialectic of exclusion and incorporation' by which Indigenous presence is constructed as 'always one-way, as the white text claims for itself a position of authority in constructing and controlling the indigene.'[298] Darrieussecq's situation of Indigenous peoples and culture in the past also allows, importantly, for the omission of the ongoing structural oppression perpetrated by Europe's imperial legacy.

Conclusion

In her response to the controversy surrounding the matter of 'psychic plagiarism' in France following the publication of *Tom is Dead* , Darrieussecq warns against the expectation that a text, or its characters, be morally exemplary. She states an intention to instead produce a 'shock of recognition… [which] allows us to

[296] Barnes discusses Darrieussecq's stated aim to 'uncover what is hidden beneath the word, to render the emptiness at its centre' in "'*J'entendais L'abîme*': Sound, Space, and Signification in Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Est Mort*," 79.
[297] Darrieussecq, "Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Is Dead*."
[298] Tilley uses the term 'indigene' to denote the Indigenous Australian as constructed by whites in Tilley, *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*, 56.

embrace a larger "feeling of humanity."'[299] Darrieussecq's portrayal of her narrator in the post-traumatic exile of mourning is not necessarily inauthentic. As Vanessa Castejon points out, in the 2006 edition of *Larousse*,[300] a section entitled 'From Colonisation to the Ottawa Agreement' reads: '[w]hen Australia was discovered by Cook in 1770 there were only a few thousand, not very civilised, Indigenous people,'[301] which she takes to be exemplary of a larger cultural repression in France of its own imperial history and legacy.[302] The question arises, still, as to whom Darrieussecq includes in her idea of 'humanity,' given the exclusionary manner in which she represents both Australia and mourning. As Watkin points out, though, we inhabit 'a world where some of the dead count as more than one, and probably even more count as nothing at all.'[303] There is evidence that a white death, in Darrieussecq's Australia, may indeed count as 'more than one': for example, when the thought of a single white child disappearing at Uluru seems, for the narrator, an 'immemorial justice,' as though the exchange of one white life for thousands of Aboriginal lives could restore 'justice' in the context of ongoing occupation.[304] Darrieussecq does not, in her defence, appear at pains to present us with a likeable character, rather one consumed by mourning and the solipsistic narcissism of melancholia—a character willing to claim in illustration of this that 'Tom's death rendered every genocide obsolete.'[305] Watkin, however, concludes in his study on mourning that to mourn properly and ethically is to understand mass death and atrocity as 'a series of parallel events happening to different people at different

[299] Darrieussecq, "Fiction in the First Person, or Immoral Writing," 72.
[300] *Larousse* is among the leading French encyclopaedias.
[301] Vanessa Castejon, "The Exoticism of the Musée Du Quai Branly," ed. Renata Summo-O'Connell, *Imagined Australia: Reflections around the Reciprocal Construction of Identity between Australia and Europe* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2012). 385.
[302] Ibid., 391.
[303] Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 235.
[304] Darrieussecq, *Tom Is Dead*, 96.
[305] Ibid., 95.

times with radically different results' and therefore that to appreciate each death in its singularity by going 'to the dead's place'[306] is an impossibility, therefore that mourning as we know it is inevitably unethical in its failure to do justice to the singularity of each death.[307] He argues that the very signifier 'death' seeks to undermine this singularity, claiming to signify what is ultimately irreducible to signification.[308] Darrieussecq, too, might be said to undermine the singularity of death and mourning in presenting Australia as a 'metaphor for grieving'[309], particularly in light of her claim to universality, ultimately undercut by her troping of an white-privileging, exclusionary and Eurocentric view of the continent.

Australia's figuration as a country of mourning is therefore, indeed, the product of an imaginary. To read the contemporary French novel alongside the classic Australian film reveals the trope's application to the nation's rural *and* urban spaces, as Weir and Darrieussecq draw from its bush landscapes, seascapes and history. That a French author living in Paris—the world's 'literary capital,' as Casanova would have it—should choose to set her novel in Sydney, despite her limited familiarity with the city, evidences the trope's transnational dimension.[310] Comparison of the two texts in their privileging of white subjectivity, however, reveals the trope's problematically exclusionary character. If to be 'Australian' is to be in exile—by Weir's, and particularly Darrieussecq's logic—the question arises as to what Indigenous peoples are, if not Australian. Both texts bear the mark of the European colonial legacy and its resultant structures of oppression that persist to this day. In their troping of Australia, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Tom is Dead* both

[306] Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, 233.
[307] Ibid., 229-33.
[308] Ibid., 15.
[309] Darrieussecq, "Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom Is Dead*."
[310] Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 87.

serve, therefore, as a narrative of specifically white mourning, as though the white subject in Australia had greatest cause to mourn.

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