Narratives of nation-building, as attempts to impose “the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force” (Bhabha), contain the seeds of their own destruction. Certain fetishised themes in Australian non-indigenous literature, for example the vanishing explorer, can be read as working against any idea of a coherent national identity. Vanishing characters undo the colonial narrative project’s attempts to a) inscribe the imaginary landscape with markers of imperial presence and b) thereby cement both ownership of property and the identity of the coloniser. That the vanishing narrative trope persists in contemporary literature indicates not only that the discursive annexation of Australian space continues, but that questions about ownership of land are not confined to landrights battles in the courts. Rather, they pervade our culture, our everyday lives, and our sense of who we are. An important consequence is that the imperative for reconciliation extends beyond the rights of non-indigenous Australians to encompass the symbolic needs of all Australians.

In 1942, immediately after the Japanese army took Singapore and bombed Darwin, Vance Palmer wrote an essay called “Battle” that articulated a strong (non-indigenous) Australian sense of national inadequacy:

The next few months may decide not only whether we are to survive as a nation, but whether we deserve to survive. As yet none of our achievements prove it, at any rate in the sight of the outer world. We have no monuments to speak of, no dreams in stone, no Guernicas, no sacred places. We could vanish and leave singularly few signs that, for some generations, there had lived a people who had made a homeland of this Australian earth. A homeland? To how many people was it primarily that? How many penetrated the soil with their love and imagination? We have had no peasant population to cling passionately to their few acres, throw down tenacious roots, and weave a natural poetry into their lives by invoking the little gods of creek and mountain. The land has been something to exploit, to tear out a living from and then sell at a profit. Our settlements have always had a fugitive look, with their tin roofs and rubbish-heaps. … Very little to show the presence of a people with a common purpose or a rich sense of life. (1942, reprinted in Lee, Mead & Murnane, 1990, pp. 7-8).

Two decades later, on the other side of the world, Frantz Fanon penned a sentence that serves as a useful reply:

If you really wish your country to avoid regression, or at best halts and uncertainties, a rapid step must be taken from national consciousness to political and social consciousness. (1961, cited in Al-Kassim, 2001, p. 2).

Had Palmer and Fanon engaged in actual dialogue, Fanon might have addressed the regressive consequences of Palmer’s sheer blindness to indigenous achievements, monuments, “dreams in stone”, and sacred places. He may have pointed out that the Australian continent could boast at least 40,000 years of tenacious peoples who wove “natural poetry into their lives by invoking the little gods of creek and mountain”. And he would certainly have problematised the need that Palmer takes for granted, to leave visible signs of our (non-indigenous) presence that mark out a unified, singular, national identity.

The concept of national identity has lately become problematic. There have been calls for its retirement, not least because, as Hobsbawm pointed out more than a decade ago, “the ongoing removal of the flow of capital from the
control of nation-state(s) renders nationalist ideologies obsolete” (1990, cited in Balkyar, 1995, n.p.). Non-indigenous Australians, however, remain attached to the notion that the island continent also has a correspondingly islanded symbolic or cultural identity. Regular efforts to peg out that identity’s borders tend to cluster around occasions such as the Sydney Olympics, before which one organiser defined his role as “to establish, rather than reinforce, a strong vision of Australian culture” (Hassall, cited in Leishman, 1999, p. 6). Likewise, the Centenary of Federation organisers announced their intention to focus on “nationhood and what it means”, to strengthen “national confidence and identity”, and to “celebrate” national “achievements” (National Council for the Centenary of Federation, 2000, pp. 1-8).

Perhaps more so than almost any other nation on earth, however, Australia should heed Fanon’s warning; for Australian constructions of national identity are even more problematic than most. Yet Palmer-like anxiety recurs in other, far more recent, texts. Non-indigenous Australia is still worried about “vanishing” from the face of this continent, and still considers it important to struggle to make its mark as a nation.

The nature of nations

Bhabha (1990) suggests that every nation is based in phantasm; that is, every “imagined community” (a term from Anderson, 1983) has some illusory entity or idea at the centre of its culture that permeates that culture's narratives of unity with destabilising emanations. Nationalism, Bhabha writes, is by nature ambivalent (1990). The concept of phantasm comes from Freud’s and Lacan’s work on deferred interpretation, in which the phantasm is described as an event built in the consciousness by layering interpretations which take place after the supposed time of the “original” occurrence. There is considerable study that extrapolates the concept of phantasm from individual identity to collective. For example, for Foucault, “origin” is conceived as the foundation stone of nationalistic discourse; without “origin” there can be no history, no progress, and no identity. He explains in ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’ (1997) that the origin is crucial but deceptive; essential yet imimical to historical discourse:

The origin makes possible a field of knowledge whose function is to recover it, but always in a false recognition due to the excesses of its own speech. The origin lies at a place of inevitable loss, the point where the truth of things corresponded to a truthful discourse, the site of a fleeting articulation that discourse has obscured and finally lost (1977, p. 143).

A nation’s origin (and hence the “nation” itself) is a deferred quantity, "an epistemological object whose presence or absence cannot be definitively located" as Ivy wrote of Japan (1995, p. 22). To describe “Australia”, for example, as a phantasm is not to say that the continent and people who inhabit it do not exist: clearly, Australia is a “real” site with living, breathing occupants. Rather, it is to understand that the moment of conceptualisation of that land and those people as a symbolic “nation” with particular unifying characteristics exists “across a relay of temporal deferral” (Ivy, 1995, p. 22) through which an "original" or “truth” cannot be reached. That a nation is phantasmic is not necessarily problematic; except when those who narrate their own identity against that phantasm begin to confuse symbolic with real; to conflate the figurative national symbolic (arbitrary and selected features made representative of an imaginary “whole”) with the literal (the unrepresentable multiplicity of peoples, places, and spaces that makes up any nation). To be comprehensible as a singular entity, a national symbolic is necessarily exclusive. The effects of such exclusion, however, can be problematically real. When women begin to feel that they do not exist, because they do not figure in the national identity, is that not a real problem? When migrants feel that they do not belong, are somehow “amputated” (to borrow again from Fanon, 1967) because they are not represented on the national canvas, is that a problem? When
Palmer obliterates the validity of indigenous sacred places and monuments with the stroke of a pen, is that a problem? When the dead of wars fought on behalf of other nations on other continents are memorialised and honoured, yet the dead of what Reynolds has called the “Frontier Wars” on our own soil are repressed and denied, is that a problem (Reynolds, 1995, 1999)? When one group of people, gripped by nightmarish fantasies about the land swallowing their children (Pierce, 1999) nevertheless feels it legitimate practice to remove another group’s children in the service of “national interest”, is that a problem? So, do we problematically conflate the literal with the figurative here in Australia? Do we believe our own tall tales about ourselves? Are there important consequences for those whom the national symbolic excludes?

The main difficulty with national symbolics is that, while they exist on a non-real level, they have effects at a very real level. Lauren Berlant defines “national symbolic” as the “political space of the nation” (1991, p. 5). Such a space, she writes, is “is not merely juridical, territorial...genetic...linguistic or experiential, but some tangled cluster of these” (1991, p. 5). The national symbolic is a fantasy of collective identity and expression but, at the same time, it is also a powerful system of control. Berlant points out that:

There is always an official story about what the nation means, and how it works: not only in the way propaganda enacts a systematic fraud on citizen-readers, but also in the power of law to construct policy and produce commentary that governs the dominant cultural discussion of what constitutes national identity (1991, p. 11).

The national symbolic is the “official” or “objective” version of a nation’s publicly accepted history: in constructing this, however, it must control collective memory. It must actively exclude ‘counter memories’ that rebuke or discredit the dominant discourse. Berlant, borrowing from Nietzsche, calls this a “mnemotechnique—a form or technology of collective identity that harnesses individual and popular fantasy by creating juridically legitimate public memories” (1991, p. 8). Only some memories are allowed; for example in Australia Prime Minister Howard (using terminology borrowed from historian Geoffrey Blainey) has publicly condemned the “black armband” approach to history (Howard, 1998). Howard’s repeated criticisms of “people [who] essentially see Australia’s past in a negative, pejorative light” (Howard, 1998, n.p.) show mnemotechnique in action: some ways of remembering are figured as not “helpful” to the “nation’s progress”. Thus, writes Berlant, the modern nation installs itself within the memory and the conscience of citizens—in part by explicitly interpellating the citizen within a symbolic nationalist context...and in part by providing a general technology of memory that establishes the subject's "destiny" to receive her/his national inheritance (1991, p. 225).

Mnemotechnique operates everywhere; from what is collected in ‘national’ archives, galleries, and museums, to what receives government funding as suitable subject material for films or television mini-series, to what gets “celebrated” on the national stage, for example the Bicentenary of so-called “discovery” and the Centenary of Federation. And, when teamed with a system of law that, for example, recognises indigenous land claims only insofar as relationships with that land can be proven sustained “in living memory”, mnemotechnique becomes a powerful material, as well as symbolic, tool.

Postcolonial particulars

Although Australia fits as an example of a country with a strong “official story” and active mnemotechniques, these are not necessarily mechanisms unique to this country. What begins to compound Australian nationalism, however, is its postcolonial inheritance. One of
the oft-documented characteristics of postcolonial national symbolics is internal conflict. Sometimes this is called “doubling” because of the twin points of definition and conflicting systems of perception set up by a centre/periphery economy of representation (Tiffin, 1987); sometimes “uncanny” (Gelder & Jacobs, 1998) because of the ways in which the colonial encounter with the other (that had always hitherto been the unruly foil for the self) forces that self to recognise the other within itself. Whatever terminology is used, it is acknowledged that postcolonial identities (national and individual) in general contain formative inconsistencies across a number of fronts. Postcolonial nations have two “origins”; first, the unrecoverable point of loss that characterises any attempt at national conception, then a “new”, or more recent origin superimposed at the point of imperial annexure. “The settler,” Lawson writes, “seeks to establish a nation, and therefore needs to become native and to write the epic of the nation's origin” (1997, p.12). The trouble is, origin is “that which has no antecedent, so the presence of Ab-"origines is an impediment” (p. 12). Hence Palmer’s excision of the indigenous in constructing his case for the national.

**Uniquely Australian**

In Australia, the peculiarities of postcolonial inheritance are further compounded by the particularities of the formative inconsistency known as Terra Nullius. It is not necessary to examine the legal aspects of Terra Nullius in depth here. Rather, it is helpful to address it first as Alan Lawson has done, as a “cognitive dissonance” at the core of the Australian national symbolic, then as a mnemotechnique. Lawson describes Terra Nullius as "a kind of repressed knowledge" (1997, p. 4) at the heart of non-indigenous narratives of identity. It was interpreted in such a particular way that glossed the conflict between British common law, which established rights to possession through prior occupancy, and the imperial intention to annex Australia to Britain. Lawson argues that ignoring indigenous occupancy in invoking such a law created a fundamental “gap between knowledge and belief” (1997, p. 4). Its original perpetrators well knew its application to Australia to be based in fiction, yet it was subsequently treated and used as fact. Terra Nullius was a mnemotechnique which separated those memories which had legal weight (writing in an official journal about not seeing any Aborigines) from those which had purely aesthetic value (writing in a letter home a pictorial description of those Aborigines who were seen). Such conflicting versions then live ongoing lives, and have ongoing effects, within both the material and symbolic realms.

The material effects are lately becoming clearer to non-indigenous Australians as those most injured by national founding fictions appeal to courts to reverse them. The symbolic effects remain largely denied, but can be identified by examining some of the ways in which conflicts, confusions, and conflations between the literal and the figurative colour the contemporary sense of an Australian “nation” in art, literature, and media texts.

One of the chief functions of a national symbolic, a political space of the nation, is to overcome time and distance. Politics, argues Young “must be conceived as a relationship of strangers who do not understand one another in a subjective and immediate sense, relating across time and distance” (cited in Ziarek, 1995, p. 1). Without the national symbolic, Australians confront aloneness, facing the extent to which each of us is an “island” in a particularly vast space. In constructing the symbolic, then, we seek to bring space/time under our control; we label and name the geographical and historical dimensions of Australia, make connections between the disparate parts of it, tell stories to make it distinct and memorable, a “place” against which we can define our own identities.

Ironically, the vigour with which non-indigenous citizens grasp at the symbolic nation as a “rational” thing tends to make us irrational about symbolic markers of identity. Birch's study of an abortive 1989 attempt to restore Koori place names to Gariwerd (The Grampians) in western Victoria revealed among that area's non-indigenous residents a sense of insecurity and anxiety so strong and so irrational, that some felt the landscape's "features themselves [would] actually vanish" if
renamed (Birch, 1996, p. 177). Birch cites letters of protest to local newspapers which lament that "Ayers Rock is no longer," following its renaming as Uluru. The letters express fears that, similarly, after a local renaming, "familiar places or landmarks ... would disappear from the map" (p. 177). Birch described the name restoration project as an important "test of white Australia's ability to reconcile its own past, some of which it had attempted to erase from historical memory" (p. 185). The test failed, because "the people of the western district had invested so much in a history of 'white mythologies' that a challenge to it questioned the basis of their collective and individual identities" (p. 185). Gariwerd, although the same "space" (in the Cartesian sense), was not the same "place" as The Grampians. The plan to switch names activated a different narrative of place and threatened the subjectivities contained in the existing narrative. The emotive reaction to the renaming clearly indicated the vulnerability of Australian subjectivity: remove even one small marker peg in the story which created it, and the whole facade began to disappear from the imaginary. "We could vanish", as Palmer lamented in the opening quote, and no-one would know we had been here at all.

If, as McLuhan and Parker argue, "territoriality is the power of things to impose their own assumptions of time and space" (1968, p. 253), it should not come as a surprise that post-colonial de-territorialisations, even those as purely symbolic as the Gariwerd/Grampians name reinstatement, cause perceived ruptures in the fabric of "conventional" European space-time—holes into which whole mountain ranges can vanish. As Berlant writes:

Disruptions in the realm of the National Symbolic create a collective sensation of almost physical vulnerability: the subject without a nation experiences her/his own mortality and vulnerability because s/he has lost control over physical space and the historical time that marks that space as a part of her/his inheritance (p. 24).

The condition of Australianness that Palmer described was akin to subjects without a nation; or at least not one that they can depend upon not to "vanish" at the first hint of trouble. One particular trope in contemporary non-indigenous literature which illustrates such an anxiety is the Australian fascination with stories about people (children and explorers in particular) who vanish into the Australian landscape. This fascination was first noted by Hamer in 1953, then by McKeller in 1954, by Hamer again in 1955, Scheckter in 1981, Holden in 1991, and Frost in 1997. Most recently, it was the subject of a book by Pierce (1999).

These sources provide numerous examples of stories and images about lost people, but are less forthcoming with explanations for our fascination with the topic. One possible explanation which builds upon Australia’s unique conditions of conflicted national symbolism is that a fascination with vanishing articulates the ever-present sense of physical vulnerability caused by being subjects interpellated by a national symbolic that clashes with itself at every turn and is founded upon inconsistency—is so inconsistent, in fact, that every “national” occasion predicates its frenzied, not reinvention, but invention, as the Olympic arts officer declared.

Space prohibits providing here more than a token example or two as test of such a theory, although other research does bear out the pattern. The chosen cases, then, are exemplary rather than representative; they illustrate a supreme irony, which is that, in articulating the non-indigenous Australian sense of vulnerability, the stories that tell it tend to re-encode the very confusion which predicated it; a conflation of literal with figurative. The boundaries between factual and fictional narratives of vanishing in Australia are extremely blurred, as Pierce’s unsuccessful struggle in The Country of Lost Children to separate vanishing narratives into categories of “fiction” and “true stories” confirms (1999). They became particularly blurred in the discussion that surrounded the well-known novel and later film, Picnic at Hanging Rock (1967).

Picnic is a wholly fictional account of disappearance. There were never any
schoolgirls, there is no Appleyard College, and no-one has vanished at Hanging Rock in Victoria. Joan Lindsay made it all up. Yet the book made Hanging Rock into a tourist attraction, with hundreds of visitors annually combing its sides for evidence of the mysteriously vanished Miranda, and clamouring for the publishing of Lindsay’s mysterious “final chapter” to find out the “secret” (1987). Likewise other vanishing narratives, such as Carmel Bird’s novel The Bluebird Café, have been believed by readers to be partly or completely true. Bird writes, "perhaps we are ready to believe these things because deep down we think we don't belong here, and the land itself will sometimes swallow up our children to punish us" (quoted in Holden, 1991, p. 62). Such conflation may be relatively harmless in the case of a story like Picnic at Hanging Rock—although it did irritate author Joan Lindsay sufficiently to prompt a passionate denial of factual sources on her part (1975)—but it is obviously rather less harmless in a case such as the disappearance of Lindy Chamberlain’s baby daughter Azaria at, coincidentally (or not?), that symbolically and materially contested site, Uluru. Tacey has described Lindy Chamberlain as “martyred”; sacrificed on the altar of a “peculiarly Australian imperative” (1993, p. 47). Specific arguments about media representations of femininity aside, he suggests that the way in which the Chamberlain case captured so much interest showed that its elements went straight to the heart of non-indigenous Australian identity struggles. Chamberlain was scapegoated (a material effect) on the imperative of our national psychic vulnerability (a figurative affect). It was less scary, non-indigenous Australians perhaps felt at the time, to believe in an ability to do violence to each other than to perceive of the land (the space of the nation) itself (in the figure of dingo) turned violent against us.

Picnic at Hanging Rock and the Azaria Chamberlain case have in common a confusion of the literal with the figurative; a contradiction between the perceived and the imagined. Twenty years after Azaria’s disappearance, and in the face of detailed new evidence and a pardon for Lindy, Australia remains divided and discomfited by the case, as witnessed by the renewed glut of “anniversary” media coverage.

How to move forward from this space of confusion, division, and discomfort? Perhaps to abandon, as Fanon (1952/1967) urged, a particular encapsulation of the “national”, and embrace instead something in the nature of a dialectic of local and global conceptualisations of identity. Certainly to recognise that people, events, emotions, and issues cannot be repressed through a system of approved memories, but continue to circulate within and throughout texts (art, history, literary, fiction or non fiction, media or film, etc.) and to influence our reception and interpretation of current and future events. To recognise, in other words, that the national symbolic is neither as purely symbolic nor as real as it first appears.

References


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That a nation is phantasmic is not necessarily problematic; except when those who narrate their own identity against that phantasm begin to confuse symbolic with real; to conflate the figurative national symbolic (arbitrary and selected features made representative of an imaginary "whole") with the literal (the unrepresentable multiplicity of peoples, places, and spaces that makes up any nation).

Hence Palmer's excision of the indigenous in constructing his case for the national. Uniquely Australian In Australia, the peculiarities of postcolonial inheritance are further compounded by the particularities of the formative inconsistency known as Terra Nullius. It is not necessary to examine the legal aspects of Terra Nullius in depth here. Why does space exploration matter? Here are 10 reasons space exploration matters to you from HowStuffWorks.

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