The Anxiety of Place:

Peter Read. *Haunted Earth*. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003.

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The work of historian Peter Read has, for the last ten years, focused largely on the question of non-indigenous "place belonging" in Australia. Over three critical texts, *Returning to Nothing* (1996), *Belonging* (2000), and the recent *Haunted Earth* (2003), he explores the attachments to specific sites that non-indigenous Australians feel and articulate. Informed by a postcolonial politics that admits the illegitimacy of European invasion and the devastations caused to indigenous culture and country over two centuries,[1] Read is concerned with restoring some legitimacy to settler Australian presence, attainable, his books propose, through meaningful engagements with the land over time.

Returning To Nothing examines the loss of places that have accrued such attachments, and ranges from the grief felt by a (non-indigenous) pastoralist as she transfers ownership of her property to her son, to the effects of Cyclone Tracy and other natural disasters, to the displacement of townships and individuals by force of law.[2] The experience of what Read terms "place deprivation" links these narratives, as, via interview, individuals recount the trauma of dispossession from places they have loved. The force of affect in these stories is central: loss is something deeply felt *and* con-

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nective as Read asks his reader's to recognise, through feeling, the meaning of their own loved places in these accounts of others. Various experiences of dispossession are thus collectivised and rendered accessible to those who wish to empathically feel their way into place deprivation – across localities, temporalities and singularities. *Returning to Nothing* sets the groundwork for its proceeding bedfellows. At the heart of Read's work on attachments to place is the idea that feeling can transcend difference and that diverse stories can be positioned side by side in the experience of meaning-making.

Read makes explicit the parallelling of differences in *Belonging*, which translates the interests of its predecessor into the issue of settler Australians looking for belonging in a land already marked with indigenous attachments to place. What is inferred in *Returning to Nothing* is articulated clearly here – that the significance of dispossession for colonised people can be understood in some way by the colonisers if they each share a love of country. How that love comes to be fostered is not relevant in itself. Once attachments to place are forged, their loss is commensurable, especially when the same sites hold attachments for many.

Belonging came at a time of particular settler self-consciousness in the wake of the Mabo decision, Paul Keating's famous Redfern speech, and the Stolen Generation Report of 1996. At this time, and reflected in public and political discourse, many non-indigenous Australians expressed a sense of uncertainty at being here – the issue, as Read puts it, of how to "justify our continuous presence" on the land[3] in light of the horrors of colonisation – and a self-image of shallow and tenuous belonging.[4] For Read, this anxiety of place reflected a particularly unproductive postcolonial guilt that precluded the recognition of non-indigenous Australians' real investments in place.

His intention in *Belonging* is to allay such anxiety. Read does not intend non-indigenous Australians to forget the past, but he wants them to feel comfortable in the present and future. To this end, the kind of relations with particular sites that Read explores in *Returning to Nothing* are reprised as examples of what he calls a "deep relationship" with place.[5] Depth is employed as an obvious counter to the superficial and is equated with legitimacy. Indigenous peoples have an irrefutable connection to the land that constitutes the Australian nation; they are truly "native-born."[6] The richness of their attachments has been a cause of envy and unsettlement amongst non-indigenous Australians. But by listening, by paying attention to the *feelings* that so many settler Australians *do* hold for specific sites in their lives, we can recognise "deep" attachments to place as already a part of non-indigenous culture. A "shared" depth of feeling for country, and a

"belonging-in-parallel" for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is not a dream but a reality for Read as he admits in the conclusion to *Belonging* that "My [own] sense of native-born has come – is coming."[7]

The final instalment of this trilogy, *Haunted Earth*, continues his assertion of legitimacy within difference and seeks out multiple attachments to place that can again be brought together under the banner of belonging. In this book Read articulates most clearly what it means to belong for him: in some way harmonising or being in tune with the spirit of a place. *Haunted Earth* is thus concerned with "inspirited sites" (141), structures or groundscapes that embody particularities of place and event – a "genius loci" of human energy (83). Haunting, in this context, has nothing to do with the sacred or profane. It is an imprinting, a layering of experience and meaning that produces "special country" (55) and can be accessed by those who intuit this quality. To encounter and (once again) to *feel* an inspirited site – affect rather than sensory perception is the key – is to experience being here as an historical and an immediate force, a confluence of times and actions that give depth to place.

The book is structured as if Read were tracing these sites over a twenty-four hour cycle, perhaps to evoke a concomitancy of different temporalities and events in the spirit of place, but also to assert the specificity of time and location. We initially find Read in Sydney's Gore Hill Cemetery at midnight as, to the background hum of the nearby Royal North Shore Hospital, he fruitlessly waits for an encounter with… something. Instead of finding an inspirited place amongst the graves, Read is confronted by (according to him) the general paucity of a secular (read "non-indigenous") culture that does not encourage its constituents to discern local energies. The "Darkest Hour" is the book's next chapter and the time before dawn to which haunting seems most suited. In this, as in the proceeding chapters ("Piccaninny Daylight, 1994"; "Dawn, 1987"; "Early Morning, 1979"), the experiences of a collection of non-indigenous Australians who *have* encountered inspirited places are recalled.

As if enacting *Belonging*'s parallel imagining, indigenous and settler spirits mark these sites in equal measure: the lives and "strong rituals" (176) of a diverse range of individuals and communities (the grieving parents of dead children; the sailors killed in the bombing of the *Armidale* in World War II; the apparitions of Aboriginal men, women and children who appear on a property in country New South Wales) that become "absorbed" into country (176). Read seems to envy these others who "know" haunted land, some of whom appear to have achieved not only a depth of attachment to place, but also a reconciliation with the negative energies that can seep into the ground and turn a place bad.

This conception of inspirited place as human-made, and particularly of human "energy fields" engaged with an environment to produce particular junctures of space and time (55), demonstrates a kind of ecological consciousness in Read's work. In this view of a multi-layered and multi-storied world, there is no linear history that remains in the past and some of Read's most poetic turns of phrase in this book manifest in his articulated vision of a "crosswire[d]" landscape that connects and shifts apart presences in untimely and uncertain ways. This is an inclusive vision and Read's wide-ranging sample group of hauntings and believers performs this inclusivity: Bhuddists, Anglicans, and Hindis are situated next to artists, composers, business owners, and those simply identified as parents who have lost their children.

Within this cacophony of experiences, however, the theme of indigenous dispossession and non-indigenous unsettlement maintains a persistent and anxious presence. Alan, a non-indigenous Australian, for example, has a recurring dream of being speared in the leg and of "being carried as a trophy through the bush" by Aboriginal captors (51). Another white man wakes to see the frightening form of an Aboriginal man at the foot of his bed. Though Read never admits this, it is clear from his previous work and the subsequent narratives in *Haunted Earth* that these ghosts represent the "bad" pasts that preclude the kind of certain belonging that he craves for settler Australians. Here, the experience of the supernatural points to settler Australians as being *out* of place rather than attached to it.

Read counters such stories of non-indigenous fear with other narratives that overtly signify reunion and redemption. Claire Milner, for example, a farmer from New South Wales, encounters the peaceful ghosts of an Aboriginal tribe on her property. These spectres reassure Claire and the message she takes from them is not one only of healthy coexistence but also some kind of relief from any sense of illegitimate ownership. She tells Read: "The Aborigines were saying to me 'We're here, we're part of it. It's all right.' It was better for me that [the land] had been so loved. All these different souls have been part of it. It makes it much stronger for me" (207). Again, the love and attachment that Claire professes for the land is universalised and takes the shape of a chronological chain, "deepening" her presence here through links forged over time.

Thus continuing the theme of paralleled belongings, this episode demonstrates a significant ambiguity at the heart of Read's trilogy. A central message of Claire's story is that her farmland is "shared space" rather than colonised land (206). Read's awareness of the damage done by colonisation is thus countered by a desire to even out its effects via therapeutic means. Claire's experience of indigenous ghosts is an ideal panacea to

non-indigenous anxieties: it admits and remembers, even memorialises, non-indigenous presence, but smooths out the consequences of colonisation, as well as the frictions of cultural difference, into a narrative of easeful co-habitation. She, as a settler Australian, is fortunately absolved of "bad" ghosts of the past – "It's all right," she is told – and Read is able to achieve his own reconciliation between "the supernatural or unexplainable and other forms of deep belonging" (207).

It is this re-emphasis on attaining legitimacy via resolute attachments that undoes the generative work of this book. Read's focus on the particular and the local in his stories, the conjunction of "this place and that time" that goes into the singularity of things in an environment (83), conveys a rich, relational view of place that calls for attention to difference and a sense of responsibility through connectivity to the lives of others. Read is at his best in *Haunted Earth* as he shows an Australian landscape alive with the traces of past and present. His lament for a spiritual, rather than a secular society, and more significantly, his pursuit of what he considers to be a real belonging for all Australians, in contrast represents a retreat from this inspiring modality of being in the world.

Rather than pursue the possibilities for a postcolonial nation through a view of unordered and shifting ecological relations amongst humans and non-humans, Read comes to rest on the unproductive comparison between indigenous and non-indigenous presence in place – a comparison that, in the end, requires *parallel* equivalence rather than *networked* specificity to be the tool of settler belonging. The anxiety that non-indigenous Australians live thinly on the land is what seems to most haunt this book, as it does *Returning to Nothing* and *Belonging*. It is perhaps by looking beyond depth as the site of affective meaning and towards the tremors and vibrations of the earth's surface that fear can be replaced by hope. For here, in the irreducible tactile, aural, and visual encounters that occur between self and other, the future opens up.

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NOTES

1 Peter Read is an eminent historian of Aboriginal history, particularly in regards to the "Stolen Generation" – a term that Read himself coined.

[2] Peter Read, *Returning to Nothing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[3] Peter Read, *Belonging* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 1.

[4] An example of this is scientist and Museum Director Tim Flannery's 2002 Australia Day speech in which he condemned settler Australians as persistently living as "people from *elsewhere*." Tim Flannery, "The Day, the land, the People", in *Australian Day Council New South Wales*, www.australiaday.com.au/address.html, date of access: 11 November 2004.

[5] Read, *Belonging*. p. 119.

[6] Ibid. p. 223.

[7] Ibid.