‘Knowing This Country’:
Confronting the Nuclear Uncanny in Aboriginal Life Writing

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In the Japanese summer of 1945, eight years before the first nuclear trial on mainland Australia at Emu Field, S.A., the residents of Hiroshima watched nightly as streams of American bombers passed over their city *en route* to other targets. As Hiroshima itself was inexplicably spared aerial bombardment night after night, a sense of uneasy anticipation grew. Many people used the word *bukimi*—meaning ‘weird, ghastly, unearthly,’ (Lifton 17) or ‘ominous’ and ‘uncanny’ (Saint-Amour 60)—to describe the feeling of eerie expectation that spread throughout the population. On 6 August 1945, the reason for Hiroshima’s exceptional treatment was revealed when US forces dropped the first deployed atomic weapon, ‘Little Boy,’ over the city centre, unleashing immediate and unprecedented annihilation.

The unsettling of everyday experience evident in the *bukimi* phenomenon has been dubbed the ‘nuclear uncanny.’ Coined by anthropologist Joseph Masco in the context of his work with communities near the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, the term describes the potential of nuclear materials ‘to render everyday life strange, to shift how individuals experience a tactile relationship to their immediate environment.’ Relating the concept back to the Freudian term *unheimlich* (literally ‘unhomely,’ rendered ‘uncanny’ in English), Masco writes that the invisible threat of radiation ‘can make any space seem otherworldly, strange and dangerous’—including the human body (Masco 33–34). In an essay on Indigenous encounters with nuclearism in Oceania, Jessica Hurley further suggests that nuclearism is uncanny because it disrupts ‘two of the West’s most profound epistemological premises about time and space: the linear, cause-and-effect logic of action in time, and the separability of the individual body from its environment in space’ (Hurley 95). The mixed-up causality of the ominous *bukimi* phenomenon and the capacity of radiation to estrange the body from itself and its environment are examples of this challenge to rationalist understandings of time and space, a challenge founded on the quantum logic that made nuclear weaponry possible. With its associations with impossible causality and strange ontological entanglements (what Einstein supposedly called ‘spooky action at a distance’ [Born 158]), Hurley writes that quantum logics instigated ‘a turn to the supernatural’ that has continued to issue a challenge to Western rationalist epistemologies (Hurley 97).

In the psychoanalytic lineage of the term ‘uncanny’ is a reminder, however, that what we are dealing with is not only the strange, supernatural, or disturbing, but is defined in Freud’s original 1919 essay as ‘that class of the terrifying which leads us back to something long known to us, once very familiar’ (Freud 219). The notion of the uncanny, then, implies the psychic return of something that has been repressed. For this reason, it seems a strange term to be used in reference to aspects of the nuclear age, which generally signifies the extremities of hypermodernity, apocalypticism, and unforeseeability; but for Masco, the terrors of invisible nuclear threats are also ‘a site for the return of the repressed, a means of talking about a vast range of social, environmental and economic problems’ (Maguire 393). What it is that ‘returns’ in the uncanny nuclear event, and why it was once familiar, are the central preoccupations of this essay. I take up these questions in the context of the nuclear testing that took place in the 1950s in South Australia, which produced its own uncanny effects. Through my reading of a

work of life writing by an Anangu woman and nuclear testing survivor—Jessie Lennon's *I'm the One that Know this Country!* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2000)—I find that Lennon's Anangu perspective reveals some unexpected and incongruous lines of affinity which discursively triangulate the nuclear endeavour with both the Indigenous epistemologies which bear some resemblance to quantum logics, and with the various ongoing processes of the settler colonisation of Aboriginal country. The strange un/familiarity of this alliance generates unusual temporal and spatial effects, shockwaves from an indeterminate future in which the possibility of Aboriginal cultural continuity hangs in the balance with the possibility of complete cultural erasure. In the face of this, writing herself into the role of 'the one who knows this country' is Lennon's means for asserting the Aboriginal survival of the nuclear apocalypse.

'I didn't understand it, but I felt it': the black mist

In the Australian context the signs of the nuclear event appeared in spatial and temporal configurations that differed from those of the *bukimi* in Hiroshima; nevertheless, they manifested in a comparably eerie and ominous phenomenon. In the days following the first nuclear trial in mainland Australia, detonated at Emu Field on the morning of 15 October 1953, the predominantly Aboriginal population of the far north-west regions of South Australia watched in alarm as a strange 'black mist' rolled in from the south. Activist Yami Lester was a young boy at Wallatina Station when he witnessed a 'black-like smoke': 'I was thinking it might be a dust storm, but it was quiet, just moving, as it looks like, through the trees and above that again, you know' (Report of Royal Commission Vol 1, 174–75). Kanytji, Lester's father, reported that the smoke 'was wide, it was fairly low on the ground and it looked black and spreading out … it was coming slow with the wind pushing it' (Report Vol 1, 175). Another Wallatina resident, Eileen Brown, termed the phenomenon a 'cloud' and claimed that 'when [it] came over the top … it sort of turned white and made [our] shadows look queer' (Report Vol 1, 175). Other witnesses reported a strange smell (Cross 25–26), described by some as being similar to gunpowder (Lallie Lennon) or liquid petroleum gas (Tynan 198), and a variety of immediate after-effects: the air turning cold (Eames), water tasting unusually sweet (Cross 27), food tasting 'funny' (Cross 26).

The black mist was alleged to have serious health and environmental effects. In its wake, many people reported symptoms of illness ranging from vomiting and diarrhoea to skin irritations and respiratory complaints (Report Vol 1, 175–76). Yami Lester famously attributed his blindness to the black mist event (Lester), and according to some sources community exposure to the mist actually resulted in fatalities (Report Vol 1, 175; Ball 'Black Mist' 1; Ball 'Devil Spirit' 1). During the Royal Commission into British nuclear tests in Australia, the existence of the black mist became a topic of debate. Sir Ernest Titterton, key member of the Atomic Weapons Tests Safety Committee, argued in strong terms that the black mist was a fabrication: 'No such thing can possibly occur … If you investigate black mists you're going to get into an area where mystique is the central feature' (Barnaby 80). While the Royal Commission's final report acknowledged that Aboriginal people 'experienced radioactive fallout from Totem 1 in the form of a black mist or cloud' that 'may have made some people temporarily ill,' ultimately the Commission determined that it did not have 'sufficient evidence' to draw a conclusion about whether the black mist was responsible for other illnesses or injuries (Conclusions 17). The heightened indeterminacy of the black mist event was experienced also by those who sought to testify to its actual occurrence. In Anangu woman Manyitjanu Lennon's testimony to the Royal Commission, the inaccessibility of the black mist to quotidian modes of interpretation is underlined: 'I didn't really understand the fear, what it was about—we were all *ngurpa* [without knowledge], *ngaltutjara* [poor things]. I didn't understand it, but I felt it' (Cumpston 40).

As an instance of the nuclear uncanny, then, the black mist parallels the ominous and near inexplicable sense of foreboding of *bukimi.* But to return to the questions posed by the framing of this phenomenon as 'uncanny': what is it that is being resurrected here, and from what place or time is it returning?

The return of the Indigenous repressed: Indigenous perspectives on the nuclear uncanny

From the perspective of the world's cosmopolitan centres, although the sense of *bukimi* was a characteristic of daily experience during the Cold War (Saint-Amour 61), the threatened annihilation itself was never actualised. Indeed, in a 1984 nuclear criticism issue of *Diacritics*, Derrida argues that after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the nuclear capacity for extreme wartime devastation has been virtual, extant merely as the looming, unmanifest potential that formed the basis for the Cold War. He describes this virtuality as '*fabulously textual*, through and through' (Derrida 23, emphasis in original); the nuclear event, he suggests, exists only in discourse (although it has real political and material effects). This leads Derrida to the conclusion that what the nuclear event ultimately threatens is not only material and existential but is, in fact, cultural—and to be precise, literary. Indeed, Derrida goes on to argue that complete nuclear annihilation has always been the 'object' of literature: 'the remainderless and a-symbolic destruction of literature,' he proposes, 'is the only referent that is absolutely real […], the only subject of all possible literature, of all possible criticism, its only ultimate and a-symbolic referent' (Derrida 28). As this unrealised destruction is already incorporated into the fabric of culture, another way of thinking about the strange un/familiarity of the nuclear uncanny is suggested here.

As for the mixed-up causality of this situation in which a referent has the power of organisation before it has actualised (what critic Richard Klein calls 'the time or tense of … the already of a not yet' [77])—according to one line of argument, the atomic potential for *total* destruction of the basis of culture, meaning and interpretation itself does strange things to causation and temporality. In a literary study of the symptomology of the nuclear condition, Paul K. Saint-Amour suggests that *bukimi* could be read as 'a proleptic traumatic symptom,' a symptom that, paradoxically, 'returns from the future' (Saint-Amour 61), appearing before the event that it references; building on Derrida's argument, Saint-Amour suggests that this temporality is unique to the nuclear condition as a state in which there is a new potential for a level of destruction 'so devastating that it leaves no aftermath in which to act out or work through trauma' (Saint-Amour 65). In this scenario, the mourning happens in advance of the actual loss because 'the loss to come will permit no aftermath in which to mourn' (Saint-Amour 65). This means, of course, that the 'returned' aspect of the nuclear uncanny might not be a ghost from the past at all—but from the future.

However, the global Indigenous experience of nuclear testing provides some nuance to this conceptualisation of the nuclear uncanny. Although it has not occurred within the context of declared war, the nuclear testing that has taken place around the world since the 1950s is 'virtual' and 'proleptic' only in its framing as a test; as an actual detonation of a nuclear weapon, each test constitutes a substantive event with very serious material, political, and environmental impacts. This is particularly the case as many of the 'remote' settings in which the testing has been staged were, in fact, already the scenes of a struggle for sovereignty. From the Pacific island states blanketed by radioactive fallout from testing conducted by the U.S. and French governments (Kuletz 127–28), to the self-declared 'most bombed nation in the world,' the traditional lands of the Western Shoshone people of the U.S. southwest (Kuletz 237)—the world's nuclear testing programs have primarily been conducted on the traditional lands of

Indigenous peoples. As Odd Arne Westad observes, considering the impacts on Indigenous populations, the Cold War international nuclear conflict was in effect 'a continuation of colonialism through slightly different means' (Westad 396). Writing from the context of the Pacific, Jessica Hurley argues that 'the nuclear condition in Oceania has been one of nuclear violence in the present rather than in the future: of action rather than anticipation, of structure rather than dreaded event' (Hurley 95). On the frontline of the nuclear event, localised in empire's periphery, the distinction between the symbolic and the real breaks down.

Indeed, as this depolarisation of terms suggests, there is something uncannily charged in the relationship between nuclearism and Indigeneity. In her study of Māori literature and the nuclear uncanny, Hurley notes that the Freudian term *unheimlich* emerges directly from colonialist discourses on Indigeneity. In his original 1919 essay, Freud suggests that the experience of the uncanny occurs 'when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed' (Freud 248); the surmounting of these beliefs, he writes, consists of moving through and beyond 'a phase of individual development corresponding to that animistic stage in primitive men.' As Hurley points out in a footnote to these comments, Freud refers readers to his earlier work in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), in which he develops his ideas about 'primitive' animism and magical thinking using ethnographic material about Australian Aboriginal populations; accordingly, Hurley argues that in this definition of the uncanny, Freud is in fact describing 'the return of an Indigenous repressed.' The uncanny, Hurley suggests, could be read along these lines not only as the return of material from some earlier stage of psychological development, but more explicitly as 'the encounter with an Indigenous epistemology … that the colonial West has failed to eradicate' (Hurley 96). In the sense that it is the site of this encounter, the uncanny does not return from a temporal dimension, but from space—the space of the peripheries of the colony. Moreover, in a nuclear context, the uncanny effect is doubled. Having established the quantum spookiness of nuclear science, Hurley goes on to argue that there is, in fact, an odd kind of correspondence between nuclear science and Indigenous epistemologies:

> [W]hile the uncanny places Indigenous epistemologies outside of the boundaries of what constitutes knowledge as such, nuclear science—supposedly the ultimate achievement of Western rationalism—finds itself likewise positioned outside of Enlightenment norms and assumptions, *alongside the repressed forms of Native knowledge with which it more closely aligns*. (Hurley 97, my emphasis)

Indigenous epistemologies and quantum epistemologies, then, share a position in relation to Western rationalist epistemologies—one 'uncannily' resembles the other.

What might all of this mean for the Indigenous experience of the nuclear uncanny? For those Anangu people who were spooked and nauseated by their encounter with the black mist—was this the result of an analogous psychical situation that could be described as 'uncanny,' in which Anangu people encountered an alien phenomenon that nevertheless behaved according to patterns of temporality, causation, and spatial logic that were recognisable to Anangu epistemologies? The similarity of the mist to more familiar atmospheric phenomena like dust storms and storm clouds, or to woodfire smoke such as that from ceremonial fires, might have underscored its stranger qualities: its stickiness, the absence of a clear environmental source or cause, its immediately apparent toxicity. Or is there more to it—did something else 'return' from some possible future in that bleak and insidious mist that rolled through Anangu land? If, from the Anangu perspective, nuclear virtuality is (at least partially) actual, and the epistemological assumptions of Western rationalism are already in question, what does the

nuclear uncanny signify? And what forms of agency are available to Anangu people in the face of it?

I'm the One that Know this Country!: Jessie Lennon and spectral nuclear colonialism

To begin to think through these questions I turn to one of the most comprehensive written accounts of the black mist, found in a work of life writing by Anangu (Matutjara) Western Desert woman Jessie Lennon. Born on a sheep station in central South Australia in 1926 (Australian Indigenous Biography Archive), Lennon spent much of her life travelling around South Australia, often returning to Coober Pedy and surrounds. Her second work of life writing, *I'm the One that Know this Country!* (2000, Aboriginal Studies Press; hereafter *I'm the One*)—a collaboration with oral historian Michele Madigan—was published during a wave of Aboriginal auto/biographical and life writing in the decades following the 1960s, an era of widescale Aboriginal political mobilisation leading to major legal and social reforms. Like Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987) and Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (2007 [1988])—texts which brought the Aboriginal life narrative genre to national prominence—*I'm the One* uses the life story as 'a critical tool for building knowledge and connection' around the Aboriginal experience of colonisation (Schaffer and Smith 92). In this respect, the text is also networked into the testimonial culture that followed the publication of the *Bringing Them Home* report in the 1990s (Brewster, Kennedy, Whitlock), and it is particularly proximate to the 1984–85 Royal Commission into British nuclear tests in Australia, which also elicited a large body of victim testimony from Aboriginal people and established the events of the testing as a justice issue in the public sphere.

As Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer note, however, *I'm the One* is distinct from earlier Indigenous life narratives which tended to 'compromise[] Indigenous knowledge and experience' by using the narrative as a vehicle for various non-Aboriginal ideological agendas, and by conforming to Anglo-American/European literary conventions around genre and modes of address (96). Instead, *I'm the One* adopts a dual mode of address, speaking to a broader non-Aboriginal audience as well as to Lennon's immediate community—an effect that is achieved in part through the hybrid use of Aboriginal English and Matutjara language in the transcription of Lennon's voice, and the standardised Australian English used in Madigan's accompanying 'counter-text' (Schaffer and Smith 114). The text's firm, declarative narratorial voice, its concern with 'the politics of collaboration' (113) as well as with the themes of Aboriginal suffering and endurance, and its primary preoccupation with the ownership of knowledge and the subject position of the 'knower,' are all textual strategies that establish Lennon as a 'knowing subject[] of history' (117) in important and distinctive ways. For Schaffer and Smith, this marked 'difference in tenor, tone and tactics of transmission' (114) identifies *I'm the One* as an example of a new wave of Aboriginal life writing in which Aboriginal narrators 'moved from objective to subjective positions' and 'from victims to agents' (113).

Considered more specifically in the context of nuclear colonisation, however, *I'm the One*'s textual strategies take on a new significance. Given the level of official denial about the veracity of Anangu accounts of the black mist, and the recently resurfaced evidence of the blatant disregard for Aboriginal life and experience demonstrated throughout the testing process (Tynan, Morton), Lennon's particular form of narrative testimony seems especially political. In publicly equating the black mist with 'mystique,' Ernest Rutherford associated Aboriginal experience with mysticism in order to render it invalid; in *I'm the One*, Lennon defies and reverses this equation by invoking the settler nuclear enterprise as a spectral, ghoulish force, which pales in juxtaposition with her assertion of an Anangu epistemology that draws power

from the connection to country. The uncanniness of the black mist assumes new dimensions and properties when encountered from this angle.

Unlike many other accounts of the black mist, the status of *I'm the One* as a work of life writing enables us to track the effects of the nuclear uncanny across a biographical plane, following its impact through spheres of analysis like domesticity, labour, family-making, and ancestry, as well as through biographical narrative structures. In an aptly anachronistic move, Lennon historicises her account of the black mist phenomenon by locating the seed of the uncanny in the early moments of Anangu contact with European settlers. Lennon's biological father was a man called Nylatu, a *ngankari* or traditional healer who first encountered white people as an adult. Lennon describes one of these early meetings in the language of a haunting, noting that at the time Anangu people were 'frightened' of 'white people's faces' (13):

> And white people, they been trying to get my father. My father, Nylatu, he been run into this whitefella before. He had a cart and a horse and he been sing out. He been sing out, this man, he been sing out to my father. 'Oh pannikin, you know,' he holded up his pannikin, drinking it, showing it to him.
>
> My father, he been run away! I suppose he been thinking, '*Nyaa palatja?*—what's this?' White, you know—might be a ghost!
>
> *Uwa*—yes, Mum been telling me a lot of things like that. They been *ngulu* again—get frightened. (13)

There is a body of scholarship that describes the literature of the Australian gothic as the 'haunting' of (post)colonial Australia by the twin repressions of the knowledge of Aboriginal precedence and the genocidal violence of the European occupation (Crouch; Gelder and Jacobs; Gibson). This passage suggests that beyond the confines of settler gothic literature there was another synchronous haunting taking place: a haunting of Aboriginal country by white settlers. Various sources document that many Aboriginal people encountering white people for the first time believed that they were in the presence of either superhuman spirits or the ghosts of dead humans, 'returning from the grave with their rotting skin peeled off and underlying white flesh exposed' (Clarke 143), and the notion of the white occupation of Aboriginal land as a haunting has been developed as a trope in more recent works of fiction by Aboriginal writers like Vivienne Cleven (Mayr). However, from Lennon's anterior-facing narrative point of view ('they were frightened before' [13]), this particular haunting has qualities in line with Saint-Amour's return from the future: an omen. Like nuclear contamination, which is 'ominous' by virtue of its potential to cause harm well into the unforeseeable future, the figure of the white settler here is heavy with future potentiality.

Succeeding this ghost story, then, the bombing of Emu Field is one in a series of episodes in the Anangu history of whitefella contact that Lennon records in the text; at the same time, it is a deeply significant event in her personal life and the life of her community. Lennon was living with her family at Twelve Mile, an opal field just outside of Coober Pedy, when they were 'caught' by the bomb (95):

> The bomb been coming then. And they **knew** that—when the bomb been going to go off. They knew—the womens and mens and all. […] They heard about the bomb—the mans there talking about it, all the people. But they didn't know which way it was going. They thought nothing was going to happen to us.

> And me—I was home there; home all the time. Had my tent there, shed there; tanks, drums of water and the washing things. It was just coming on summer. I'm sitting home, not worrying about what's going on. I was just outside, young and healthy, looking after the little ones, Beaver …
>
> I siphoned the water out of the drum and I saw this shadow go past and I looked up. What was that shadow?
>
> And it started to look hazy … (95, unbracketed ellipses in original)

The advent of the bomb is thrown into ominous relief by the lilting quality of this list of domestic items and events. Then there is the moment of *bukimi*, a forewarning—a 'shadow' going past, a haziness not attached to any object. The use of ellipses in this passage—particularly at the end of the final sentence of the page—is striking, unusual in the context of the text as a whole. The ellipsis here has the connotation of an unspecified continuation or elaboration, perhaps left unsaid because of the inevitability of the sequence of events that it implies. On the other hand, perhaps it is unspecified because of its inconceivability: words drop off.

And yet, there is something to 'know' about this bomb: 'they knew,' it is repeated, 'the womens and mens and all,' and the word is stressed in bold. Lennon is excluded from the knowing; she has to ask the question: 'What was that shadow?' However, in the subsequent section, titled 'Something's wrong!,' there is the assertion that 'they didn't know.' The onset of the black mist (and, she implies, its toxic effects) is an event about which no-one has any useful foreknowledge (97):

> Going for opal, the mans, they seen that bomb. Right the way on that other part—west—they seen 'em. On top of the hill—they looked the bomb way. They didn't know. Smoke laying along, laying across; smoke and bluish smoke.
>
> And the mans came back, 'Something's **wrong!**' Headaches, hands over their head. Smoke and bluish smoke rolled over, come over us from *wilurara*—west—the mist was coming from Mabel Creek way. Came in—filled up the hills, the holes—rolled in along the ground—to the tree tops and go around then and follow the creek. Right over the top of us—cloud we can see, like a haze. Could see their **shadows**; it was different to me.
>
> […]
>
> *Pika!*—Sick!
>
> […]
>
> Yes, at Twelve Mile, the bomb came right through there—Mabel Creek. My daughter was there then. We were all picking it up, that sickness. (97)

As in other accounts of the black mist, such as Lester's (above), there is a level of tautology in the description of the smoke in space. The word 'smoke' is repeated, by now a familiar rhythmic device that heightens thematic emphasis and tension; but the effect on meaning here is not

cumulative but somehow fractured, as though each repetition refers to something slightly different. There is 'smoke' and 'bluish smoke.' Smoke 'lays along' but also 'lays across.' It fills in extant and concave spaces, 'hills' as well as 'holes,' and rolls in 'along the ground' but is also there 'in the tree tops,' going 'around then' and 'following the creek' as if forging a path. The black mist has a highly volatile position in space, perhaps indicating a shifting ontological status. It is 'right over the top' of them (Lennon and her kids, or maybe a wider community of people), a 'cloud' that could be seen, 'like a haze.' The repeated word 'haze' is interesting when understood in the context of 'could be seen,' since it is normally used to suggest a blurring or obscuration of vision, an impediment to seeing clearly. Accordingly, this smoke behaves like an object as well as an affect, or a quality of experience; the language here further suggests that it has some kind of agency. The particular referents of the final line in this paragraph are elusive: 'Could see their **shadows**; it was different to me.' Whose shadows are these, and what is it about them that requires 'shadows' to be emphasised so heavily, using this extralinguistic device? What is 'it' that is 'different' to Lennon? Perhaps this is something like the 'queer' shadows described in Eileen Brown's witness report (above). The mist, smoke or cloud is different to other phenomena that Lennon has experienced; the visual and spatial effects that it creates are disturbing, obstructive, and its manner is insinuating rather than more immediately apparent or confronting.

Alongside this poetic 'enjambment' of space is the complexity of the temporality of the passage. The unstable tense of Lennon's Aboriginal English (which moves abruptly from present to past to future tense) produces effects that are in sympathy with the *bukimi* phenomenon, the altered experience of time in the nuclear age, a time when single events are known to have impacts stretching beyond any previously conceivable timeframe (as per the endurance of radioactivity); now, the possibility of global annihilation ('end time') is here in the present, its outline perceptible in the disturbances to causality. This particular black mist event, however, still has an immediate effect in the present—'Something's **wrong**!' '*Pika!*—Sick!'

The correspondence between Indigenous and nuclear epistemologies is clearly evident in these scenes, particularly in the linguistic effects produced by the use of Aboriginal English. But considered in the context of the book as a whole, Lennon's account of the black mist also seems to be specifying something about the nature of the mist's relationship to the specific political and historical forces that shaped her life. As described in this passage, the black mist bears resemblance to other steady but insinuating processes, such as the still unfolding white colonisation of Aboriginal Australia at its various levels: cultural, microbiological, and now, atomic. Prior to the nuclearisation of colonising cultures, the growing settler colony gave forth similarly mysterious and proleptic signs of itself in advance of its own expanding perimeter. According to historian Henry Reynolds, there is evidence to suggest that the presence of European Australians was foreknown by pre-contact Aboriginal communities far from the frontier; the ominous signs of an alien arrival appeared in the form of biological pathogens, strange animals and material objects that were passed along trade routes, including books (cited in van Toorn 210). Here, a new presence also sends traces of itself forward in the form of a sign, a black mist omen, seemingly immaterial and insubstantial. This sign is both a kind of residue expelled by a distant event, and a more immediate occurrence in itself; it *forewarns*, but also actually *begins* the activity of nuclear invasion. Ultimately it pervades the Anangu environment and proves almost immediately toxic to Aboriginal people, who react with symptoms of sickness and disease, their hands over their heads. The Derridean destruction of the conditions of cultural continuity has already begun.

In the chapters following, amongst stories of her travels and the happenings of her family and community, Lennon describes a pregnancy 'gone wrong' (123); a cluster of women's cancers in the community and her own cancer diagnosis ('sick over the bomb' [135]); the removal of some of her children by 'The Welfare' ('Oh, everything went funny then…' [113]); the difficulty of obtaining compensation when papers 'get lost, long ago hospital papers' (137); and the ongoing process of waiting and searching for 'the right word' (139), the language that has the currency to speak back to power. Masco's conception of radiation as a force that estranges the spaces and matter of daily living, the processes of family-making and reproduction, and even the body, is recalled in these textual segments that follow the account of the black mist. The refrain of *ngurpa*, 'not knowing,' is threaded throughout these life events—'I don't know nothing about that sickness,' Lennon says of her cancer (135), and the women who died of cancer 'had it the wrong way … [t]hey don't know what was coming to them' (135). The text concludes with an account of the death of Lennon's second husband and testifies to Lennon's own endurance:

> Happy together we were.
>
> I'd like to sit down here and go the same way.
>
> But I'm all right though, *ini*? I'm all right. (145)

Nuclear nihilism and the 'knowing' of country

The black mist has clear analogies with other insinuating, ominous and unhealthy processes, such as the ongoing colonisation of Aboriginal Australia. While some colonial strategies were and are blatant and direct—massacres, slavery, deaths in custody, stolen generations—other adjacent arms of the colony work in a more gradual and shadowy manner to dismantle Aboriginal ways of being and knowing. Policies and socioeconomic processes of assimilation; tokenism; a dysfunctional child welfare system that continues to remove Aboriginal children from their families, cultures and country; the linguistic domination of Australian English that has been detrimental to the survival of hundreds of Indigenous languages; and the variety of other operations of settler cultural hegemony have certainly posed a threat to Aboriginal culture that bears comparison with the irrevocable cultural devastation that Derrida foresaw in full-scale atomic warfare. In Lennon's parents' lifetimes, chiefly through the operation of colonialist strategies of cultural hegemony like these, Anangu people moved from a state of pre-colonial sovereignty to a situation in which their lives were significantly structured by the operations of the settler colony. These covert aspects of colonialism, however—some of which might be classified using Gayatri Spivak's term 'epistemic violence' (Grossman)—do not manifest in sublime city-sized blazes of light and firestorms; like the black mist, their behaviour is instead disturbing, obstructive and incremental. In Lennon's autobiographical arrangement of the black mist in *I'm the One*, this slow-release toxicity is figured in the various estrangements caused by radiation, the 'making *unheimlich*' of the family, the environment, food, water, the body. It is staged in the scenes of a life overhung by the refrain of epistemological destabilisation—the *ngurpa*, 'not knowing,' that bleeds in multiple temporal directions, blooming in the wake of the mist and preceding it as an omen. The colonial mission has recruited the nuclear capacity to 'render everyday life strange.'

From the perspective of Lennon and the other Anangu witnesses of the black mist, however, another aspect of nuclear colonialism becomes evident: its desultory nihilism. In its spreading

of a noxious 'unknowingness,' the black mist could be read alongside Derrida as a figure for the unrepresentable core—the 'remainderless referent'—of all meaning-making within the culture that birthed the nuclear weapon. In this reading, the mist is the impossible bleak symbol of what can't be represented—complete destruction; it figures 'MAD' ('mutually assured destruction'), the death-driven logic that motors the nuclear endeavour and the colonialism that adjoins it. Sustained by nationalist narratives of nuclear triumph, national security and scientific progress, the colony cannot fully affirm the existence of the black mist and confront the foundation that underlies and bookends the nuclear project and which is also, according to Derrida, central to the culture that birthed it: the nothingness that lies at the heart of nuclear colonialism. For the colony, this nothingness is, in the words of Rutherford, merely 'mystique.' To Lennon, however, the nihilist heart of nuclear culture is palpable, if somewhat indistinct: 'Right over the top of us—cloud we can see, like a haze.' Perhaps it is the uncanny resonance between Aboriginal and nuclear epistemologies that allows Lennon this view.

Of course, what is also visible from the Anangu perspective on the atomic colony—and from the Indigenous critique of the nuclear uncanny more broadly—is the hyperbole of Derrida's vision of nuclear warfare as the ultimate referent of modern culture and meaning-making. The archive that Derrida imagines to be both threatened and conditioned by its relationship with the nuclear event includes 'all symbolic capacity … the "movement of survival," what I call "*survivance*," at the very heart of life' (Derrida 28). Although nuclear technology is certainly unprecedented in its capacity for destruction, in this extreme valuation of the cultural power and reach of nuclearism there is nevertheless a strange alignment with nationalist and imperialist propaganda about atomic weaponry as the peak achievement of Western civilisation. The overstatement here becomes evident in the face of Lennon's matter-of-fact depiction of Anangu survival in *I'm the One*. Nuclear 'warfare' has been ongoing on Indigenous lands since world powers first launched their atomic testing regimes, putting paid to the idea that the nuclear event operates purely in the realm of symbolism as the seat of both destruction and meaning; it is testimony like Lennon's that reveals that the nuclear event is not (or is not only) an apocalyptic horizon, but is something that has already been partially incorporated into the fabric of the present. The message here, then, is that the nuclear apocalypse could be survived; in Lennon's words: 'I'm alright though, *ini*?' The black mist figures both Anangu death, and Anangu survival; like the feeling of *bukimi*, the affective result of the tension between the possibility of Hiroshima's miraculous survival and its utter annihilation, the black mist is hazy because it is an omen that returns, paradoxically, from both possible futures.

The settler colonial process of disavowal that obscures the view of either of these futures is what *I'm the One* takes on with its strong assertion of Aboriginal survival in defiance of the awesome destructive power of the nuclear event. Apparent as the 'unknowingness' spread by the black mist, this disavowal is ultimately countered by Lennon's speaking position as 'the one who knows this country' and the endurance of Anangu epistemology, founded on a connection to country. This is the primary message of the text, and the specific form of its testimony as life writing; the work of life writing itself is the means by which the symptom of the black mist comes to be associated (perhaps therapeutically) with its event, and it is through the text that Lennon invites a witnessing community. 'And I can put it down here in a book and they believe that?' Lennon asks rhetorically in the book's prologue (5):

> *Ngayulu wangkanyi kulintjaku*—I'm talking like this so people will understand. A lot of times somebody is trying to be more than what I know. They think they know more here …

> But we fellas [are] the people that have been here longer.

The powerful poetics of Lennon's Aboriginal English, supported by fragments of Matutjara language, undergird this project.

Although *I'm the One* was partly intended as a legacy for Lennon's descendants and immediate community, Lennon also envisaged a wider audience: especially 'the latecomers' who 'don't yet know these things.' As the introduction (presumably authored by Lennon's collaborator Madigan) declares, this book was 'made' in order 'that we [the latecomers] might learn' (3). 'Well this is what I want to say,' Lennon concludes (147):

> We're the people that have been here longer. I'm an old woman now and I grew up **here**! I grew up **here**, Coober Pedy! … I'm the one who know everyway.
>
> *Ngura nyangatja nyayuku*—This is my home!

What must be learnt here is the endurance of Anangu ways of being and knowing, summed up in a strong claim of belonging to the land that both begins and ends the text. This is the clarity that is able to stand against the epistemological disruption spread by settler nuclear culture, and this is what refuses to be bound to the remainderless referent.

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