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Settling Scores: Albert Namatjira's Legacy

Aboriginal Australian artist Albert Namatjira resists identification. Was Namatjira a product of Australia's assimilation, a "mimic man" who adopted a Western referential frame, or was his trajectory the product of a "split identity," as alleged during his lifetime? Can Namatjira's watercolours be viewed as a critique of Eurocentrism? This article seeks to revisit the nature of Namatjira's legacy in light of the recent retrocession of the artist's copyright.

This article examines Albert Namatjira's legacy following the retrocession of the artist's copyright in October 2017. The story of Namatjira (1902-1959) is emblematic on several grounds. One of the first Aboriginal artists to paint in the Western medium, Namatjira grew up in a Lutheran mission on Arrernte land in Central Australia. He also became one of the first Aborigines to be granted Australian citizenship, though in practice, "all it meant was that he was no longer subject to the rules and regulations that so-called full-bloods had to observe and thus, from one point of view, [it] was less an invitation to join white Australia than an excision from his own people" (Edmond ch. 9). Namatjira's legacy raises legal, artistic and politico-cultural questions. To what extent is Namatjira's work the property of his family, his community, the Australian public, and/or the art market (Brown)? To what degree can Namatjira's artistry be understood from the perspective and criteria of indigenous and/or Western aesthetics? What effects do these antagonistic and competing claims have on interpretations of Namatjira's aesthetic? In what way does Namatjira's story anticipate indigenous mobilisations from the 1970s regarding Native Title and cultural self-determination? How did Namatjira's agency as an artist challenge the assimilationist policies?

Namatjira's legacy has been the object of intense debate, turning the artist into a figurehead of Australia's "culture wars." It is part of a recent history of successful legal claims on behalf of Aboriginal artists whose work had been reproduced without permission and misappropriated, starting with the Carpets Case in 1993 (Janke). Namatjira's legal settlement and copyright transfer have further fuelled speculation about issues of intellectual property in Aboriginal art. Arguments in the media have become distorted by the polarised, binary structure of discourse on issues of race. This article calls for a deconstructionist approach by viewing Namatjira's legacy as open-ended, agreeing with the view that "in Australia Aborigine researchers speak also of the many levels of entry which must be negotiated when researchers seek information" (Smith 15). Firstly, I consider how those tensions betray anxieties regarding Australia's ambivalent positioning as a white settler colony *and* immigrant / postcolonial / multicultural nation. Postcolonialism remains problematic for indigenous peoples, considering the latter "represent the unfinished business of decolonization" (Wilmer, qtd. in Smith 7). Yet postcolonial criticism's concern also bears on Empire and its long-term aftermaths, and the responsibility of researchers is "to share the theories and analyses which inform the way knowledge and information are constructed and represented" (Smith 16).

This article actively engages with (post) colonial theory, since so much of our knowledge of Namatjira's artwork is shaped by (post) colonial discourses on indige-

neity. These cannot be brushed under the carpet but ought to be deconstructed. Secondly, I revisit Namatjira's legacy through the lens of other indigenous Australian art movements and Tracey Moffatt's artwork in particular. Its avant-garde character parallels Namatjira's unorthodox positioning as a watercolour artist of indigenous background. Their respective approaches to their craft – subjects broached, time frame or format (photo portraits for Moffatt, watercolour landscapes for Namatjira) – otherwise have little in common. Yet both reached beyond their local communities directly to the (inter) national art scene, destroying dividing lines in the process. They developed a sense of light while opting for a vivid colour palette and falsely naive representation of their subjects. A history of violent trauma and colonial desire transpires from Namatjira's quietly contemplative topographic arrangements as they find an echo in Moffatt's photo-narratives and uncanny assemblages.

Dis/cursing Namatjira

Cursing harks back to Shakespeare's figure of Caliban in *The Tempest*. Caliban curses instead of producing "proper" speech, remaining voiceless in the face of Prospero's colonisation of his island. Cursing also is a widely used "defence mechanism" in some Aboriginal English contexts (Burbank). A non-native English speaker, Namatjira did not hold the epistemological knowledge to translate himself to others, though in Edmond's biography Namatjira's voice can be heard at times. It was otherwise left to anthropologists, art critics or biographers to discuss and at times "curse" his legacy. One of Namatjira's relatives bemoans in the film documentary *Namatjira Project* (2017): "I see his painting in art galleries, in books, I didn't see Albert." Scott Rankin, writer and director of the theatrical performance *Namatjira* (2010) is also heard advising Trevor Jamieson, the Aboriginal actor playing Namatjira's part, to improve his diction for whites for there are "specific moments that whites can't hear." Namatjira's watercolours must therefore speak for themselves, potentially concealing behind the figurative representations of Central Australia secret-sacred Dreamtime stories, as well as "the manifold wounds suffered by the Arrernte during the enforced colonisation of their land" (Edmond ch. 6). Yet the herme(neu)tics surrounding Namatjira cannot be abstracted from the assimilationist discourse prevailing at the time of the artist's death, when an assessment of his legacy became opportune.

Various discourses emerged after his death that sealed off understandings of Namatjira's art. Firstly, there was Namatjira's portrayal as a "mimic man," recalling V.S. Naipaul's eponymous novel and its hero Ralph Singh, an Indo-Caribbean subject of the British Empire who changed his name from Ranjit Kripalsingh to adopt an English-sounding identity. Namatjira adopted a renaming strategy by initially "sign[ing] his works with a simple 'Albert,' the name he was christened when he was three years old" (Williams). The subsequent indigenisation of the artist's signature as "Namatjira" marked him as distinctly Aboriginal in contradiction with his appropriation of the Western pictorial tradition. As Julie Wells and Michael Christie noted: "Access to the settler economy required Aborigines like Namatjira to take on this uniform naming system. Most were given a Western, Christian first name and an Aboriginal surname" (114). Namatjira learned watercolour at the Hermannsburg Lutheran mission under white Australian artist Rex Battarbee's tutorship. This led in part to Namatjira's dismissal as a pale imitator by prominent Australian art galleries in the 1950s: "Namatjira's work is

just not up to standard [...] there are twenty or thirty white Australian watercolourists who depict Australian landscape with greater skill [...]. Curiosity, not aesthetic value has made him so popular" (Edmond ch. 10).

Secondly, the commonly held view was of a "wanderer living between two worlds" (Wells and Christie 127; see also McCoy) whose fall from grace was only a matter of time. As Wells and Christie argue: "For Namatjira's settler contemporaries [...] the 'wanderer' metaphor was compelling, largely because of the absence of a discourse in which an individual could have multiple identities based in more than one culture, or of a reality in which one could be culturally other, yet equal before the law" (127). Thus, while *The Sunday Telegraph* described Namatjira as "the Arunta tribesman who in two months *mastered* the difficult and alien technique of watercolour" (emphasis added), others viewed him as an "uppity black who had to be kept in his place" (Edmond ch. 8). Applying the term of "mastery" to praise Namatjira's artistry indirectly served to disqualify him in a White Australia, its racial undertones suggesting somehow that Namatjira sought to usurp the white man's place. Namatjira's perceived threat to the superiority of Western civilisation also constituted an opportunity to reignite debates over assimilation. T.G.H. Strehlow, a missionary's son growing up with Namatjira in Hermannsburg, viewed Namatjira's inability to access land and his premature death following imprisonment for smuggling alcohol on his community's behalf, as evidence of the fundamental "unassimilability" of Aboriginality, unless "he came on his own, free from the contaminating influences of Aranda society, as a man in whom European artistic achievements had obliterated the old stains of Aranda culture" (Strehlow, qtd. in McGregor 47). Both anti- and pro-assimilationists, like Paul Hasluck, Commonwealth Minister for Territories from 1951 to 1963, took as their point of departure (assimilation to) Western culture, whether to critique or support it, thereby preventing Namatjira's artistic mastery from providing a path to social agency and cultural autonomy.

"Mastery" also refers to the relationship between master and disciple in art and the friendship between Namatjira and Battarbee. Battarbee was quick to foresee that Namatjira's gift would lead the disciple to surpass the master: "As the tutor watched the extraordinarily rapid progress of his pupil he was filled with astonishment, that such a man [...] could, in a matter of months, understand and utilise the fundamentals of art that had taken white men years to learn" (Mountford 55). Namatjira inherited from Battarbee's tutorship his technique but imbued it with his own sensibility, both men mutually learning from one another (Edmond). Namatjira's artwork, though, was couched in cultural or racial terms by art critics such as Mountford and Strehlow, anthropologists or ethnologists by trade. Mountford was known to be a collector of *tjurunga* totemic stones whose value resided as much in the scientific knowledge they conveyed as in their aesthetic qualities. For other early art collectors like Karel Kupka, the artistic production of Aboriginals was all the more precious since it was believed Aborigines were an "endangered species." In Kupka's book *Dawn of Art* on the master-painters from Arnhem Land, "Kupka is himself the agent of this threat. He is the despoiler coming into the garden: whatever he touches will fade and rot, for in his hands he holds the *curse* of reward and fame" (Rothwell; emphasis added). Similarly evoking the trope of corruption, Namatjira's detractors regarded him as an ethnic curiosity whose work is "entirely false to his own culture and is merely a clever aping of a completely different one" (Edmond ch. 7). The film *Namatjira Project* shows a TV host, at the time

of Namatjira's visit to the Sydney zoo, making racist comments on the parallels between apes and Aborigines.

Namatjira's breakthrough and move from pokerwork to watercolour however resided in his deconstruction of the demarcation between different forms of artisanship, from the crafting of tools such as boomerangs or woomeras to artistic painting: "While woomera had sometimes previously been decorated for use in ceremonies, the idea of painting representational landscapes upon them seems to have been Albert's alone. [...] As tools they were inert, mere potentials, while as painted objects their actual function became decorative, aesthetic" (Edmond ch. 5). Legend Press's purchase of Namatjira's copyrights in 1957 was part of an early shift in the appreciation of indigenous art as a source of revenues through mass reproduction by the culture industry rather than a preserved artefact of exotic difference. The company was quicker to envision the business prospects Namatjira's watercolours offered than the Arrernte indigenous community of Hermannsburg, ill-equipped with respect to the workings of the art market in which a breach was for the first time opened. The 1957 deal with Legend Press President John Brackenreg, "now described as 'exploitative' and 'unconscionable'" was that "out of every \$8 generated by net sales of Namatjira reproductions such as prints, Christmas cards and placemats, the artist received \$1 and Legend Press received \$7" (Neill). With "only a primary-school level of written English," (Neill) Namatjira's "curse," like Caliban's, resulted from his being deprived of the discursive tools which the granting of Australian citizenship required. As Edmond concurs, "the other consequence of Albert's new status was that he could now sign away his copyright without the consent of the Northern Territory government or anyone else" (ch. 9).

Subaltern "unspeakability" does not spring from indigenous people's inability to adapt but from white Australians' ignorance of Aboriginal cultures, languages and art forms. For Linda Burney, "the reason for this ignorance is that there was a conspiracy of silence about Aboriginal Australia through all the dark years of White Australia" (17). The silencing of Namatjira's legacy is somewhat prolonged by postcolonial discourse. Although postcolonial critiques such as Burn and Stephen (1992) have contributed to seeing Namatjira in a positive light, their reversal of Hegel's dialectic of the master/slave may end up not so much displacing as reiterating old terminologies. From being condemnable, Namatjira's "unauthenticity," "mimicry," "ambivalence" or "hybridity" are to be reappraised: "For Burn and Stephen, Homi Bhabha's discourse on 'colonial mimicry' offers a key to the interpretation of 'the ambivalence presence' of Namatjira's art" (Poignant 89). One should also consider the following review of Edmond's biography: "Albert Namatjira, rather than a wanderer between worlds, was a bridge; that was what he painted and that was where he was torn apart and died; and we are still contending over the bones on the bridge that he made" (Cochrane). Namatjira's portrayal as a hyphen represents a discursive tour de force that would be nice if it were not rhetorical. That there is still contention over Namatjira's legacy is evident, but the "bridge" was arguably built, crossed and severed long ago when British settlers invaded the island-continent. Namatjira was raised on a Christian mission that not so much "replaced or displaced Indigenous religious beliefs and practices" (Brock & Van Gent 303) as created "separate systems of knowledge and behaviour" (304).

Namatjira's multiple attempts to own a patch of land and build a home reflect a willingness to settle down on his terms rather than function as a mending bridge for the

coloniser's split consciousness: "For all his material wealth, money could not buy him the one thing he wanted most: a home of his own in Alice Springs" (Edmond ch. 8). Settler colonialism, as "that violent force that makes the land unhomely" (Farred 800), constitutes a disruptive force whose far-reaching shadow can be felt in the way the signifier of Namatjira may be construed as an aporetic "Third Space" of enunciation (neither fully Australian nor indigenous, "white but not quite"). The tendency in post-colonial criticism to fetishize the coloniser-colonised relationship as an "unhomely" site of indeterminacy (Bhabha, "The World and the Home" 141) risks leaving out the antagonistic side of the relationship. Edmond emphasises zones of incommensurability between Namatjira and Battarbee, capturing the sense of injustice Namatjira must have felt at seeing his lifelong friend nicely settled in his home of Alice Springs when he was condemned to living in a wurley (Aboriginal term for a makeshift hut) on the outskirts of town. In Namatjira's words: "We are tired of walking around reserves like animals, and of living in tents like new people [...]. I would like to settle before it's too late" (Edmond ch. 8). As the Namatjira copyright dispute shows, what the colonised wants is determinate: having been unsettled, the latter desires to settle scores with the coloniser through material reparation beyond symbolic reconciliation built on apology. Frantz Fanon puts it bluntly: "There is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place" (xv).

The retrocession of Namatjira's copyright involved Australian philanthropist and businessman Richard Smith, who acted as a go-between on behalf of Namatjira's family. Smith convinced Legend Press owner's son Philip to agree to their buyback for the symbolic sum of \$1. This felicitous denouement looks like divine intervention, both men appearing magnanimous in their roles as benefactor and "white saviour." This truncated narrative however leaves aside a history of grassroots lobbying on the part of the arts performing company Big hART. Besides making a film documentary and play on Namatjira's life and opening the Iltja Ntjarra gallery in Alice Springs, the company was involved in the creation of the Namatjira Legacy Trust. As Namatjira's family declared: "We are hoping that the Trust will help us to achieve better living conditions for our families, better schooling for our kids, and better resources for our art centre" ("Namatjira Legacy Trust"). Namatjira did not only conceive his art as an aesthetic pursuit but as an economic necessity. Ultimately, he hoped for his art to buy himself and his community freedom: "Albert painted primarily because his pictures offered a means of survival in a harsh world" (Megaw 7-8, qtd. in Wells & Christie 115). His watercolours cannot be grasped without acknowledging the socio-historical conditions that continue to impact descendants of Namatjira's family, who are part of the Hermannsburg school, who have followed in the artist's footsteps and taken up watercolour painting as their source of revenue.

Un/settling Namatjira

By unsettling Namatjira's artwork from its original context, I hope to build what Bill Ashcroft calls the "material resonance" of a postcolonial aesthetic, a "moment of non-cognitive apprehension [...] that lies beyond interpretation" (419). By highlighting material resonances with other acclaimed indigenous artists, I aim to break through the discursive stranglehold that has made Namatjira's watercolours "unassimilable." According to Meaghan Morris,

There really is something *unassimilable* in the way that these utterly familiar paintings send a historical image of “our” own visual culture back to us. [...] There is also something unassimilable about ourselves *to* ourselves when we ask *why* it might seem odd to package a Namatjira painting today as an emblem of “Aboriginal Art” – and what would need to change in Australian society for that sense of oddness to vanish. (Morris)

Transpiring here is the uncanny feeling the contemplation of Namatjira’s watercolours stirs up, despite their closeness to Australians. Namatjira’s paintings are encrypted as “*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man” 126). For Sigmund Freud, the uncanny arises at the crossroads between the familiar and the exotic. As Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs explain, “one has the experience, in other words, of being in place and ‘out of place’ *simultaneously*” (171). Australia’s “tyranny of distance” derives from a sense of remoteness from its Euro-British *and* indigenous roots. The white Australian “is a permanently displaced person whether he sits under the gum tree or walks upon the *Pont Neuf*” (Smith, qtd. in McLean 20). While Australians grew up with Namatjira copies in their homes, few possess an intimate knowledge of the Outback as city-dwellers. Indeed, Namatjira’s paintings were “showing better than those of any European artist [...], the brilliant colour of Central Australia – the rich reds, the deep violet-blues, the golden-yellows – colours that Southerners find difficult to believe until they have seen them with their own eyes” (Mountford 68).

Although the Western artistic medium was initially foreign to him, Namatjira appropriated it for local purposes. He is thus a truly *native* Australian artist, although Aborigines waited till 1967 to gain legal status as citizens and subjects of the national polity. Gazing at a Namatjira painting, the Australian artist sees himself or herself copying what is a medium *borrowed* from European and US modernity and “such great painters as Constable, Turner and Winslow Homer” (Brooks 19). Namatjira conveyed mastery of the watercolour technique in his use of colours and light. Limited by their Western heritage, Australian artists from the Impressionists to the Modernists struggled to transcribe the chromatic nuances and singularities of this *Terra Incognita*. To quote from Namatjira’s mentor Rex Battarbee: “Here was a man, a full-blooded member of a race considered the lowest type in the world, who had in two weeks absorbed my colour sense” (12). White Australia’s monochromatic outlook, intolerant of shadings beyond the pale such as “half-castes,” contrasts with Namatjira’s gaudy palette, so that “his vibrant use of colour, such as purples and reds, many Europeans viewed as an exaggeration” (Williams). Battarbee however proved sensitive to Namatjira’s palette: “He [Namatjira] has got a colour sense and puts it on even stronger than I do and good light in his pictures too” (Edmond ch. 4). In their colour excess, Namatjira’s paintings served to highlight the European settlers’ limitations and short-sightedness, “his fluent toning and shadowing demonstrat[ing] his appreciation of how the light of Central Australia could darken or lighten that spirit of place” (Williams).

As Lorenzo Veracini demonstrates, the settler is limited by his liminal positioning on the cusp of two worlds: “One of these is the originating world of Europe, the Imperium – the source of its principal cultural authority. Its ‘other’ First World is that of the First Nations whose authority they not only replaced and effaced but also desired” (9). The settler, not the native, is thus a fraught, ambivalent figure. In deploying excess water to obtain the “fluent toning” characteristic of the ochreous hues of Central Australia, Namatjira metaphorically diluted red pigment otherwise supposed to remain immacu-

late (“full blooded”) under a White Australia. While “attesting to the permeability of a membrane that both reflects and allows passage” (Edmond ch. 4), Namatjira displayed his understanding of the way “a watercolor should be toward the transparent, not the opaque” (“More on Watercolor”). Namatjira’s unmatched aesthetic authority has contributed to redefining landscape painting. Initially considered a second-rate genre and thence relegated to the background, landscape painting came to the fore in the West in the late eighteenth- and throughout the nineteenth-century, coinciding with the colonial impulse to sight and map out the New World. In nineteenth-century American landscape paintings by artists such as Thomas Cole, Nature, though taking centre stage, only exists in its sublimated capacity to dwarf humans, often signalled by the presence of a miniature-sized man pitted against a majestic waterfall or mountainous crest. In Namatjira’s paintings, Nature lies unthreateningly dormant – a space that no human (or animal) presence has come to disrupt yet. Nature in its native state of “iridescence” and “immanence” (Edmond ch. 4) appears as the chief subject rather than vicarious object of Namatjira’s study.

In Namatjira’s *Ghost Gum* series, trees do not end up as an ornamental device framing the canvas and directing the viewer’s eyes towards a focal point, as is usually the case in Western painting. Instead, Namatjira adopts modern techniques of cropping and close-up inspired by photography. The ghost gum’s distinct white bark *is* the focal point, its erected verticality a formal contrivance bringing into perspective the MacDonnell Ranges at the back. It lingers as a shadowy presence, as if detached from the scenery and overbearing at once. Namatjira’s mastery resides in the care for details with which he painted it, the folds and knots of its sinewy boughs bearing anthropomorphic qualities. The quasi-human appearance of the tree’s texture might be a way for Namatjira of staging himself as embodied in the tree. The painting hereby mentioned¹ is exhibited at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, and dated circa 1948. It corresponds with the peak of Namatjira’s career. In 1944, the artist entered Australia’s *Who’s Who*, yet was “refused a grazing licence in 1949-50 and prevented in 1951 from building a house on land he bought at Alice Springs” (Kleinert). In light of this double bind, the tree’s milky envelope, beneath which hides a darkened, burnished and partially mangled skeleton, can be interpreted as holding the white mask of colonialism over brown skin, a duality enhanced by the chiaroscuro effect over its smoothened surface. The anthropomorphic dimension of Namatjira’s trees (Edmond) tempts us to see the ghost gum as a self-portrait, thereby reversing a journalist’s words shortly before Namatjira’s death: “The black skin of Albert Namatjira hides the sick heart of a white man – *a white man if ever there was one*” (qtd. in Wells and Christie 126).

In this painting, the totemic figure-tree allows for a multi-perspectival plane, enhanced by “the introduction of a side-on as opposed to a top-down view of landscape” (Edmond ch. 4) through the presence of blue sky covering over half of the canvas. It is worth here quoting Edmond at length concerning the totemic quality of Namatjira’s paintings:

In this way his paintings, and especially the paintings of the 1940s, function like *tjurunga*, those objects of painted or inscribed wood or stone that do not just embody totemic beings, but in some sense *are* those beings. In the same way, a Namatjira painting

1. For a viewing of Namatjira’s *Ghost Gum*, follow this web link: <<https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=182062>>.

can be representational of a landscape, an actual simulacrum of it and also embody equivocal presences that resemble – and perhaps are – totemic beings who are neither representations nor simulacra but partake of the essence. (ch. 6)

The overall composition makes it seem as if the viewer/painter were gazing at the tree/himself gazing at the open-space fields and mountains further into the distance. This formal *mise en abîme* helps balance the power play between the (Western) viewer, its transmogrified artist and the painted landscape behind, matching the Aboriginal appreciation of Nature as an undivided whole. As Roslyn Poignant concurs: “This *re-ordering* of the formal elements [...] creates the effect of being in the landscape, rather than outside it, ‘detached and contemplating it’” (89). The traditional relegation of trees to a cameo appearance in Western art also stems from the intimacy required to paint them. According to Leonard Brooks, “to really paint a tree, you should know it intimately. [...] How to take those thousands of twigs and leaves [...] and develop from them forms and contours which are spirited and alive” (19).

Spirituality carries a material resonance for Aboriginal artists. For Ian McLean, “Albert Namatjira’s watercolours, previously cited as exemplifying the imposition of a Western visual schema, instead are understood as images ‘anchored in the evocation of country’ and thus of ancestral beings” (Gilmour 454). At a time when colour photography was not so widespread, Namatjira’s paintings could be seen as part of the mapping of Australia and likened to the topological representation of the landscape and Dreamtime stories of creation associated with it by contemporary Central Australian artists of Papunya using dot painting or religiously significant geometric shapes as their artistic medium. This analogy requires deconstructing binaries of figuration/abstraction, indigenous/Western art to emphasise underlying correspondences and cultural syncretism. Edmond devotes a whole concluding chapter to Papunya, which “had begun at Albert Namatjira’s last home, north of Haasts Bluff, in 1971, and continues to this day” (ch. 10). On the one hand, Papunya artists used non-Western means to project their canvas onto the floor instead of using an easel, privileging a flattened-out, one-dimensional bird’s-eye view. On the other, they adopted the Western technique of painting on a hard surface with synthetic acrylic, instead of natural pigments on the sand or body. Most importantly, as custodian bearers of Dreamtime stories attached to the land, Papunya artists bear responsibility for the way stories are circulated and transmitted: “The community is dependent upon the artist being available, able, and willing to pursue the infringements, because the unauthorized use of the artist’s work has adversely affected the interests of the entire community” (Van den Bosch and Rentschler 125). Socio-economic immiseration often compels these artists to sell themselves short to tourism art, further exposing them to counterfeit and mass reproduction, a reality that was true in Namatjira’s time.

Indigenous Australian artist Tracey Moffatt manufactures Namatjira’s colour palette in her early photographic and filmic works *Something More* and *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989). The distinctly lush, red and purple hues characteristic of Namatjira’s colours can also be found in Moffatt’s comic-strip *Adventure Series* (2004). Moffatt’s transposition of Namatjira’s landscapes onto the background of her montage pays tribute to the Surrealist otherworldliness and illusory peace inhabiting Namatjira’s more lurid watercolours. It counteracts their domestication within Australian households as a quaint, *passé* postcard of a colonial rural Australia, conveying feelings of homesickness and “nostalgia” (Bernays). This archaic vision owes a great deal to the reception of Namatji-

ra's artwork. As Roslyn Poignant observed, "his entry into the art market coincided with the rise of a Modernist aesthetic that considered the "gum-tree" art typified by Heysens landscapes an anathema, and situated Aboriginal art within the discourses of primitivism" (89). However, Hans Heysens' transcendental treatment of light and inclusion of both cattle and humans, inspired by a Western, Christian pastoral tradition, can hardly be compared to Namatjira's. As Stephen Muecke argued, Namatjira "both mastered and invented conventions that present an alternative to the pastoral vision" (159). While the pastoral offers a domesticated version of Nature, Namatjira's paintings contribute to a pre-colonial imagery showcasing a pristine environment unsullied by farming and mining industries.

In the video still² from her semi-autobiographical short film *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989), Moffatt stages her female protagonist, an Aboriginal adoptee part of the Stolen Generation, against the backdrop of a Namatjira-looking landscape. As the artwork description states: "Her colour palette alludes to the watercolour landscapes of Albert Namatjira (1902–59), a popular artist who was seen as a 'traditional' Aboriginal successfully working in a western medium." Moffatt's hyperreal gloss and lunar atmosphere appear unnatural in the postmodernist fashion. Unlike Namatjira, whose colour sense was at times deemed excessive in a White Australia, Moffatt received critical acclaim for her use of colour in a multicultural era following the polemical bicentennial anniversary of Australia in 1988. Perhaps owing to its racial connotations, Battarbee confessed "[he] was very nervous about the word 'colour.' Albert's knowledge of English was limited. His main language was Arunta and strangely enough the most freely used word in that language is the word 'colour,' which occurs in almost every sentence" (11-2). The multicoloured, oily surface of the soil in Moffatt's video still allows for the free interplay between "True Blue" Australianness and brown-red Aboriginality. Yet the barren rocky ranges seamlessly jutting out from the implacably canvassed sky in the background belie the substantiality of such interplay. Laid bare in Moffatt's composition while not immediately felt in Namatjira's watercolours is this tension between fore and backgrounds, horizontal and vertical axes, and between different colour patches.

In Moffatt's work, tension builds upon the artist's mixed-race background growing up in rural Queensland in the 1960s when miscegenation was a taboo to be fought against by removing "half-caste" children from their families. The computerised-looking backdrop in Moffatt's work is set against desolate surroundings. The panorama generates a feeling of "entrapment," as stated in the artwork description, rather than of "being in the landscape" (Muecke 159), as in Namatjira's. It constitutes more of a threshold opening onto the unknown than the familiar representation of the Outback with which Namatjira's paintings are associated. It is a "post-contact" (Gilmour 454) zone, its deadly atmosphere perhaps alluding to those "frontier wars" between indigenous Australians and white settlers that marked colonial Australian history until the late 1930s. Moffatt succeeds in uncovering the colonial settler's mental state of "dis-ease," "collective malaise" and "homelessness" (McLean 20) latent in Namatjira's landscapes. Like this stooped woman leaning against a rusty shack in Moffatt's video still, one might wonder what Namatjira's gumtree, looking partially maimed and charred, bears witness to. Besides the decimating spread of tuberculosis at the Hermannsburg mission, Morris

2. For a viewing of Moffatt's video still, follow this web link: <<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/66036/>>.

recalls how “in 1928, there was a massacre of Aborigines at Coniston Station; in 1929 the railway, and thus, eventually, tourism, reached Alice Springs; in 1932 the white landscape painter Rex Battarbee and others visited Hermannsburg.” Either hidden, absent, repressed or implicit in Namatjira’s watercolours, the historical forces of colonialism that plagued and incapacitated Aboriginal cultures, while offering new outlets, return with suggestive force in Moffatt’s work.

Measuring Namatjira’s legacy through Moffatt’s eyes reaffirms Namatjira’s position as a visionary artist: “Given this framework, Namatjira’s famous and massively reproduced painting *Ghost Gum* could now be perceived as a remarkable experiment with the rules for painting his country” (Morris). Moffatt’s postcolonial/modern pastiche calls attention to Namatjira’s copyright dispute. An exemplar of “intellectual bricolage that characterizes postcolonial settlement society” (Berson 206), Moffatt “imitating” Namatjira “imitating” Western art not only generates dissonance, as a postcolonial critique would argue by stressing how “the essence of Namatjira’s practice is that it sets up a resemblance that produces its own difference” (Poignant 89). Mimicry also produces a ripple effect, to return to Ashcroft’s concept of “material resonance.” Its echo, repeated across a multiplicity of locales, emphasises intertextuality and the need to move beyond questions of cultural authority/authorship. Could Namatjira’s legacy be part of the collective commons in the same way that Namatjira shared the financial rewards from his painting with his clan? Namatjira’s earnings could amount to £7500 a year (today’s equivalent of roughly £250 000) while most Arrernte men at the mission only made a few shillings as stockmen or camel boys. As the film documentary *Namatjira Project* suggests, part of the Australian government’s rationale for granting the artist “citizenship” was to make Namatjira’s revenues taxable. Namatjira himself must have seen the opportunity for a lucrative business in the sales of parts of his copyright to Legend Press, for which the Namatjiras were originally paid 12.5 %.

Legend Press’s specialisation in print reproductions paved the way for the transformation of Namatjira’s art into an innocuous decorative ornament. Namatjira’s fight for land ownership towards the end of his life illustrates the unsettled yearning for a place to call home, from the Western Arrernte’s outstation movement in the early 1970s – “the first successful step in a journey away from the forced dependency of mission life” (Austin-Broos 76) – to the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention that effectively saw the “resettlement” of indigenous communities into “town camps” on the outskirts of Alice Springs. Namatjira’s grandson and watercolour artist Kevin was himself forcibly evicted from the Albert Namatjira’s artists’ camp at Tjuwanpa. Tjuwanpa had been an integral part of the Arrernte’s outstation movement, “understood as self-determination for Aboriginal people” (Austin-Broos 63). In a moving scene in the documentary, Kevin, along with Albert’s nephew and watercolourist Lenie, meets Queen Elizabeth II almost sixty years after Namatjira met her in Canberra. In London, Kevin admits, he is treated like “royalty” while “after I come home from seeing the Queen I’ve got no house, no car.” The journey constitutes the high point of a theatrical tour about Namatjira’s life involving acting in front of the Arrernte community in Ntaria (Hermannsburg’s Aboriginal name). By being performed there, Namatjira’s story was symbolically returned to his community.

Besides, Namatjira’s legacy is best summed up by the Queen. After seeing his paintings during her first trip overseas in 1954 and becoming fascinated by the colours in

them, the Queen is heard saying in the documentary: "No one will be able to tell me that central Australia is a dead heart." Battarbee's daughter's comment equally reveals the lingering view by white Australians of the bush as a blank slate: "There's a *stillness to the outback* that would have been very therapeutic for Battarbee" (emphasis added). Indigenous people never considered Australia as "dead still"; British colonisers did. Depicting Australia as *terra nullius* foreshadowed "cultural genocide" (Burney 21) and the crippling of Aboriginal existence, as a dead animal's skull and wheelchair suggest in Moffatt's video still. The misrepresentation of Aboriginal Australia as a cleansing haven is not lost on Moffatt, who shows an Aboriginal foster care woman caring for her disabled surrogate white Australian mother in *Night Cries*. Moffatt's acknowledgement of Namatjira's legacy however bears witness to a cross-generational indigenous dialogue extending across five generations of Arrernte watercolour artists settling scores with the art world for financial retribution and cultural recognition. Namatjira's copyright will expire in 2029 and the goal is now "to lobby to have Namatjira's copyright granted in perpetuity" (Brash and Haskin), so the fight is not over.

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