

[Opening Slide] 'Nightmares about Fossils' Huntington Script

[SLIDE] Hook

I want to start this paper with two, to my mind, interlocking, quotations. The first is taken from an interview between Hilary Mantel and Eileen Pollard, published in *Textual Practice*:

'they were haunted by their parents' pasts – they couldn't even put a name to those ghosts.'

The second is an extract from Mantel's 1994 novel *A Change of Climate* describing it's protagonist's childhood encounter with a fossil:

'A sharp pang of delight took hold of him, a feeling that was for a moment indistinguishable from fear. He had picked up a fossil: a ridged grey-green curl, glassy and damp like a descending wave. It lay in his palm: two inches across, an inch and a half at its crest. [. . .] Here was its soft body, inside this shell, with its heart and blood vessels and gills. When it died all those soft parts rotted, and the sand filled up the cavity. And then the sand compacted and turned into rock'

[SLIDE] Both quotations are concerned with children experiencing the uncanny persistence of a seemingly unknowable past within the present, with how the shape of an absence might be delineated within familial and geological histories. In doing so they gesture towards my area of exploration in this paper, the 'nightmares about fossils' which are incubated by unnameable spectres of personal, national and global pasts, spectres which are frequently, in Hilary Mantel's work, those of children.

This paper was originally envisioned as a mapping of these child spectres across Mantel's work to date (some examples can be seen on the slide here). In this shorter paper I will be examining just one instance of Mantel's use of this motif, rendered particularly interesting by its postcolonial implications (indeed the postcolonial possibilities of some of Mantel's writing remains, in my opinion, under explored), that is the spectral child in *A Change of Climate*.

[SLIDE] *A Change of Climate* is a family drama which traces three generations of the Eldred family, with a primary focus on husband and wife, Ralph and Anna Eldred. Shortly after their marriage, Anna and Ralph are sent to Apartheid South Africa to undertake missionary work. While there they come into conflict with the Apartheid regime and are briefly jailed. On their release they take on a different posting in the Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana), where Anna gives birth to twins, a boy, Matthew and a girl, Kit. A few months later both babies are abducted and though Kit is recovered Matthew is never found and it is suspected that his kidnapping has been orchestrated to facilitate a *muti* or ritual medicine murder. The family return to Norfolk where they continue their charitable work, and go on to have a further three children, Julian, Robin and Rebecca, however Matthew is never mentioned, his existence and his disappearance a closely guarded family secret. The narrative

centres around how the Eldred's lives begin to breakdown in the face of the pressure this horrifying secret exerts.

Through unpacking the significance of the multitude of missing children in *A Change of Climate* who register in the text, like Ralph's fossil, as insistently present absences which I term spectral, I propose a reading of these children as inscribing the presence of intergenerational traumas not only on a familial, but on a national and international scale. I will be doing this in the context of Derrida's conceptualisation of how we might relate to the spectre, the political and ethical possibilities inherent in that relationship, as put forward in *Spectres of Marx*. I want to put that into conversation with Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's psychoanalytic concept of the phantom and the crypt, a critical conjunction which will allow us to move more easily between the intrapsychic and the international.

[SLIDE] Intergenerational Trauma: The Phantom and the Crypt

To begin, let us return to the fossil. As my title implies the fossils in the text - Ralph goes on to become a keen fossil hunter and builds up a significant collection - act in the novel as an unsettling force. Ralph's 'delight' which is 'indistinguishable from fear' manifests in a number of Ralph's children as profound anxiety.

For these children, born after Matthew's disappearance, the present absence of the fossils is nightmarish. Mantel's use of language here provides an insight into why these seemingly innocuous objects have this effect on the children. Julian's 'peculiar' horror is underscored by its ambivalence – the fossils frighten him both in their status as 'broken traces', indicators that something has happened but not necessarily what that 'something' is and in their 'dead-and-gone'-ness. They are frightening because they both insistently try to communicate as traces *and* because they emphasise the irrevocable nature of death, its obliteration of presence. The fossils aren't just 'dead' they are 'dead-and-gone', their absence grammatically harnessed to their deadness.

[SLIDE] The nightmares about the fossils, their peculiar 'horror', are just one element of a constellation of strange compulsions and behaviors exhibited by the Eldred children, but particularly Julian. The two examples here articulate an anxiety about, and play with, absence and presence, the visible and the invisible, the knowable and articulable and the unknowable.

[SLIDE] Once Julian hits adulthood, a new compulsive behaviour emerges in his anxiety over the possibility of his younger sister Rebecca being abducted and his research into children who have disappeared in the locality (as we might expect from an author who place such emphasis on what the historical record can and cannot provide, all of the cases Julian cites are historical unsolved missing

child cases). Its striking that this description of Julian's behaviour is given in the context of it being inexplicable to his parents and to his siblings and indeed to himself. As his mother puts it 'I don't know what to say. I don't know what to say to you Julian' while Julian says of his anxiety 'I can't explain it to you any more than I have.' However, when read in light of Abraham and Torok's notions of the phantom and the crypt their significance becomes clearer.

[SLIDE] Abraham and Torok argue that certain kinds of losses (whether emerging out of bereavement or other trauma) are so catastrophic as to be inadmissible to knowledge. This means that normal processes of mourning fail and instead the result is the formation of an intrapsychic 'crypt'. As Esther Peeren puts it:

'such failure transpires when the healthy process of introjection – where the self expands itself by assimilating (or working through) its own desires as well as external objects and events – is unsuccessful and incorporation – where the self takes the object into itself whole and preserves it as a secret never to be revealed – occurs'

However, this 'secret tomb' is never fully sealed off and its contents find ways to make itself manifest, as Abraham and Torok describe:

'Sometimes, in the dead of night, when libidinal fulfillments have their way, the ghost of the crypt comes back to haunt the cemetery guard, giving him strange incomprehensible signals, making him perform bizarre acts, or subjecting him to unexpected sensations' (Abraham and Torok, p. 130)

Torok goes on to point out how 'like a commemorative monument, the incorporated object betokens the place, the date, and the circumstances in which desires were banished from introjection: they stand like tombs in the life of the ego.' (Torok, p, 114)

[SLIDE] Mantel's representation of Anna and Ralph's experience of their loss and the 'stuckness' that the secrecy around their son's abduction institutes resonates powerfully with this model. As Ralph puts it, when his son tries to ask him about his experiences in South Africa he replies 'All that part of our lives, we prefer to forget it, Anna and me. It's – we've closed the door on it.' That dash is so important in terms of the way that Matthew's loss insistently emerges in the text, even when the character's language acts attempt to erase him. [SLIDE]

[SLIDE] Interestingly, Julian is only able to move towards a letting go of the compulsions that give the phantom of Matthew house room following his encounter with a literal commemorative monument to a child. Frances Hibgame becomes another spectral child reanimated in the narrative: as you can see from this entry in Debrett's *The Peerage of the United Kingdom* she was a real person and the memorial Mantel adverts to is also real and located in Burnham Norton Church.

The crypt need not only form in the psyche of the individual or individuals who have undergone a loss and indeed, Abraham and Torok also theorise the concept of the phantom, a figure of intergenerational haunting which indicates, as Rand puts it an 'undisclosed family secret handed down to an unwitting descendent.' (Rand 16) Intergenerational trauma was originally theorised in relation to the children of holocaust survivors, many of whom displayed the kinds of incomprehensible signals and bizarre compulsive behaviours which Abraham and Torok point to. It is this kind of phantom which Matthew forms in the text, where his siblings seem to sense his absence without knowing of his existence. As Kit, Matthew's twin asks 'do you think that your body has memories that your mind doesn't have access to?' (p. 176)

What happens then if we read Julian's behaviour in light of these ideas of the crypt and the intergenerational phantom? Julian's behaviour offers an articulation of the experience of intergenerational trauma, as Julian is unwittingly being compelled to act by traumatic knowledge he does not know that he possesses. Such a reading also compels us to read Julian's behaviour as articulating something meaningful. The erasing and re-writing he takes part in as a small boy speaks to the idea, graphically enacting his mother's traumatic replaying of the night Matthew was taken, trying to reverse the sequence of events and avoid them happening. Likewise, his drawing of the tree (with its association with the family tree and the idea of heredity) complete with its subterranean components, offers a recognition that the Eldred family has grown up around a repudiated absence which Julian's drawing obliquely tries to return to knowledge.

[SLIDE]. The 'encrypting' of Matthew's disappearance is also carried out formally in Mantel's text. Early in the novel Ralph's sister, Emma visits a shrine at Walsingham where she adds an entry to the book of remembrance

This absence which Emma leaves is perplexing on first reading and its significance is only fully registered in the text's final pages when she returns to the shrine

[SLIDE] The importance of that final sentence, I argue, is in the way it tracks the erasure of Matthew, as inscribed in the use of dashes throughout the novel, through to a memorialisation which marks the beginning of a different process of mourning for this lost child.

[SLIDE] This is by no means a straightforward process. In the preceding paragraph Emma struggles to find a pen: the fountain pen she's looking for has been lost or taken, the pen she finds is a ball point, 'furred', 'leaking' 'its plastic barrel cracked, its ink silted.' Initially the pen doesn't work at all and only succeeds in creating an inscription of absence. We encounter here an image of a struggle to open the crypt, to bring into the realm of knowledge the spectral child, described in the novel as 'a shadow life',

‘the opposite of flesh’ (p. 262). However, the penultimate lines of the book, along with the idea that an anonymous ‘child’ has borrowed Emma’s good pen, point us to a wider set of implications held by the spectral children in this narrative. Once Emma has written Matthew’s name in the book of remembrance, she leaves her pen behind, on the basis that ‘you could not know what desperate soul would come along with no means of writing at all.’ (p. 342)

[SLIDE] Their futures have been taken away: Colonialism and the Spectral Child

For me, this anticipation of the subject who has no means of writing their story, of being placed within the realm of knowledge, as Matthew eventually is, acknowledges the wealth of other missing children in this narrative, not merely the cases that disturb Julian so much but crucially the black South African children that Anna and Ralph encounter on their first missionary placement and the ‘countless’ and uncountable Botswanan children who are taken or disappear into the bush every year. [SLIDE]

[SLIDE] Mantel has become known in recent years as a historical novelist and it is worth attending to the fact that all of Mantel’s novels, not merely her Tudor books, display a historicist sensibility. In *A Change of Climate* this is registered in Mantel’s articulation of how protestant missionary work in apartheid South Africa, responsible for much education and health care provision, frequently ran in a directly contradictory direction to government policy and the legal system. As Richard Elphick points out ‘the South African government, loathe to tax its white electorate to pay for services to blacks, was happy to subcontract such service to missionaries.’ (p. 3) However, the majority of English-speaking missionaries, Elphick points out, ‘had much more liberal social and political views than the majority of white settlers. Most favoured some sort of political franchise for Western educated blacks and, perhaps eventually, the right to full South African citizenship.’ (p. 4)

With the election of the Nationalist government in 1948, the perceived liberal approach of mission schools in particular was considered not to be in line with the apartheid regime and the government took control of the majority of mission schools, a move solidified by the passing of the Bantu Education Act in 1953.

[SLIDE] Mantel’s fictionalised Archbishop of Cape Town (closely based on Geoffrey Clayton, the Archbishop of Cape Town between 1948 and 1957) voices the implications of the Bantu education act to Ralph and Anna when they first visit him but it is Ralph’s response to this which is of interest here. Ralph states: ‘It seems to cut off hope for the future. [. . .] You can repeal other laws, but how will you undo the effects of this one’ (p. 75). As the Archbishop muses two pages later ‘they feel that their futures have been taken away.’ (p. 76)

Here is a recognition that a lost future might not simply be inscribed in a missing or dead child but might be affected through government policy, that whole generations might be spectralised through colonial intervention. This idea is also present in the police response to the abduction of the Eldred's children, which is that such a crime is 'unprecedented': 'we have never before in the history of this country recorded the abduction of a white child, of two white babies, and from their family's compound at night – no, Mrs Eldred, there has been nothing like it.' (p. 240) And yet later, in a letter Ralph writes to his brother in the wake of Matthew's disappearance he recalls how the local police:

'don't know how many children are stolen in a year and sold to witch doctors. Sometimes children, older children, wander into the bush. The disappearance is not reported because there is no-one to report it to. These children never come back.' (p. 243)

The Eldred's experience must be read in a context of colonialist and white supremacist attitudes whereby the disappearance of black children is not 'reportable', there is no system for recognising these disappearances, just as the Bantu education act institutes a 'disappearing' of the potential of generations of children in South Africa.

[SLIDE] Conclusion

As I hope is clear, my reading of this text understands Matthew Eldred as one in a constellation of spectral children whose disappearances serve to inscribe trauma at a familial, national and international level, however, in closing I want to think about whether the novel offers us any way to recognise and live with such spectres in a way which doesn't perpetuate their occlusion or effect their exorcism.

In *Spectres of Marx* Derrida advocates for a 'being-with spectres', a 'politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations.' (xix) Peeren glosses the character of the Derridean spectre usefully, stating that 'the spectres Derrida encourages us to live with comprise divergent collectives of the oppressed and disempowered.' That 'living with' is understood by Derrida as a kind of hospitality to absolute otherness and it is in this notion of being hospitable to the 'other' that I want to close.

[SLIDE] Towards the middle of the novel Mantel introduces the character of Melanie, a child in care who persistently runs away, has problems with drug use, has a history of self-harm and is known to be violent. Melanie comes to stay with the Eldreds as an attempt to offer her some normality outside of London, to insert her into a family narrative. Melanie is presented as thoroughly unlikeable, foul mouthed, unclean. However, Melanie is also the subject of significant neglect and abandonment, a daughter deliberately spectralised by her parents [SLIDE] Melanie runs away from the Eldred's ending

up in hospital having taken an overdose. From here she discharges herself and somehow manages to make her way to back to the Eldred's home where Anna and Ralph discover her: [SLIDE]

'Something moved – dog-height – from one of the rotting sheds. Anna said, "What's that? What on earth is it?"

A creature moved into their view, at a distance. It came slowly over the rough ground, crawling. It was a human being: its face a mask of despair, its body half-clothed in a flapping gown, its hands and knees and feet bleeding [. . .] it progressed towards them; they saw the heaving ribs, the small transparent features, the dirt-ingrained skin.

[. . .]

"We must take her in," [Ralph] said to Anna. "Or she will die."

"Yes." Anna's face was open, astonished.

[. . .]

As they approached the child, she stopped trying to crawl. She shrank into herself, her head sunk between her shoulder-blades like some dying animal. But then, as they reached out towards her, Melanie began to breathe – painfully, slowly, deeply, sucking in the air – as if breathing were something she were learning, as if she had taken a class in it, and been taught how to get it right.'

Melanie's return in a number of senses is a spectral return. Rendered socially dead by her parents and her treatment by the police and nursing staff who fail to offer any sense of Melanie as a human subject, her return into the scene is the return of a 'creature', an animal. It is also, as is clear when these two passages are read side by side, the return of the infant Kit following her abduction [CLICK]. And in the character's name, Melanie, which is derived from the Greek words for blackness and dark is inscribed a return of the trauma inflicted by colonial regimes in South Africa and Botswana which Ralph and Anna both profoundly oppose and unwittingly abet. The final pages of the novel form a constellation of acknowledgement of all of the losses the book inscribes; futures lost to racism and empire, futures lost to inexplicable acts of violence and futures lost through failures of care-giving on state and parental levels. Anna's "Yes" combines with Emma's re-inscription of Matthew's name to offer a model of what the living with ghosts advocated by Derrida might look like, an enactment of his exhortation to 'live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But with them.'