

The Scene of the Crime: The Uneasy Figuring of Anglo-Australian Sovereignty in the Landscape of *Lantana*

Kirsty Duncanson

The Scene of the Crime

Lantana opens at the scene of the crime; the camera tracks across the luscious exterior of a flowering bush before plunging into its tangled interior where it holds the damaged body of a woman. This is an archetypal beginning to a cinematic thriller, prefacing the narrative with the crime at its centre. It also repeats a familiar Anglo-Australian cultural trope. Throughout European occupation of the Australian landmass there has been a regular figuring across literature, cinema, and news media of the landscape as the scene of crime. White women and children disappear into bush, deserts and mysterious rock formations, and men die, ostensibly killed by nothing but the unremitting landscape.¹ These representations parallel the doctrine of *terra nullius* which has been revealed existing throughout the practices of Anglo-Australian law and, since *Mabo and Others v the State of Queensland (No. 2)* (1992),² has been popularly configured as the 'sovereign event' of the nation (Motha 2005: 113). The doctrine assumes that the land is empty; belonging to no one. However, in the imagination of law and popular culture the emptiness is never quite complete. Rather, there is always something not quite there in the land, appearing to different

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degrees of presence, taking on shifting fantastic forms. It is an ominous nothing that does violence, inhabiting the void with almost but not quite tangible enmity. Each evocation of iconic landscape becomes a re-imagining of an interrupted claim of European sovereignty. Thus while *terra nullius* negates evidence of pre-existing sovereignty or belonging in the land, the way in which the doctrine pervades Anglo-Australian culture is always attached to the contradicting persistent presence of Indigenous nations and peoples.

This configuration of landscape is so pervasive that it is experienced as an embodied cultural memory. This is a reflexive panic felt in the bodies of white Australians responding to imaginative invocations of the haunted or criminogenic landscape. So effective is the cultural memory, local film producers regularly exploit it to induce the phenomenological *frisson* associated with thriller and horror genres (Morris 2002b). The same *frisson* is mobilised to build the mood of mystery and anxiety in the film *Lantana* (2001) and is the same embodied response that works to distinguish the film as 'resolutely Australian' (McFarlane 2002).

But *Lantana* offers a different version of this imaginative flight by relocating the scene of crime from the 'native' bushland to an introduced weed. The shifted crime scene relocates the problem of troubled sovereignty back on to the culture of the coloniser. In this article I analyse *Lantana's* cinematic depiction of the landscape as crime scene, in order to argue that the film realises a recently emerging popular anxiety concerning the colonising violence of Anglo-Australian law. My contention here is that the scene of the crime at the centre of the film metaphorically presents a crime scene imagined at the foundation of Anglo-Australian law. In doing so, the film performs the same anxiety Rush has discerned permeating Anglo-Australian law: that it has 'no ground from which to speak,' and that the crime sabotaging its legal authority is its own unlawful conduct of exerting illegitimate sovereignty over land already in a relationship of belonging (1997: 83). The film rewrites the traditional narrative to reassign criminal liability for subverted sovereignty from the persistently existing colonised to the colonisers themselves. At the same time, it reverses

the standard figuring of legitimate legal authority as a singular white man, and instead discreetly offers an Indigenous woman as the most able embodiment of law.

After a brief introduction to *Lantana*, I begin this argument with a discussion of the doctrine of *terra nullius* as it has been traced in Anglo-Australian jurisprudence and popular culture, particularly in relation to *Mabo*. I go on to explore how this has become imaginatively manifest as criminogenic scenery. From this contextual foundation I turn to *Lantana*. Using methodological tools developed through poststructuralist cinema and visual culture theory I conduct a semiotic analysis of the film. Building from this approach I read *Lantana* as a cinematic experience of ‘communication based on bodily perception’ (Sobchack 1994: 41). Its particular amalgam of sound, image and narrative conspire to arouse unease, anticipation, relief, laughter and excitement in the bodies of its audience. Following such theorists as Sobchack (1994) and Gormley (2005), I read these cinematic affects as part of the film’s production of meaning or semiotic structure. These are not ‘natural’, unprocessed responses to universally recognisable ‘frightening’ representations, but on the contrary they rely on familiarity with cultural codes and narratives of unease. Thus, although the reactions of the audience are experienced as ‘immediate’, Gormley explains that thinking about the ‘differences between affect and knowledge/meaning in purely binaristic and totalising terms is impossible’ (2005: 33). Rather, the embodied responses of the audience to the cinematic text reveal a recognition of something familiarly chilling. Further than this, experiencing such engagements as bodily and ‘immediate’, the audience is encouraged to perform a sensual agreement with the argument the film constructs through its assemblage of recognisable images, sounds and narratives. Thus, while *Lantana* mobilises customary representational configurations of landscape and sovereignty, its substitution of crime scene plant life offers a different location for embodied Anglo-Australian sovereign unease.

The purpose of investigating the iconic Anglo-Australian crime scene used in *Lantana* is to trace popular engagements with the

jurisprudence of law's foundation. Legal theorists are increasingly recognising the value of popular culture to common and institutional understandings of law.³ With film more widely acknowledged as a 'primary source of knowledge about law', analysts have investigated its texts as critical sites of popular reflection on how law works, what law means and what gives it authority (Sherwin 2000: 18). As Moran et al write, the cinema is a 'screen onto which legal issues can be projected and questioned' (2004b: xiv). MacNeil advocates a scholarly engagement with popular culture as a means of 'soliciting broad comment and input into the juridico-political issues of our day' and in this way democratising legal philosophy (2007: 157). By following this cultural turn in legal scholarship, I am exploring the cinema as a space of popular negotiation, both convergent and dissenting, with law's claims to sovereign authority. This work is a recognition of jurisprudence as extending beyond the boundaries of legal practice and academia into the 'everyday' experience of popular culture. Law takes place in the space of the 'everyday', and it is a key site in which sovereignty (legitimate or otherwise) has its effect. Through my cinematic and jurisprudential analysis of *Lantana* I identify the shift in prevailing anxieties of white Australian culture concerning the legitimate sovereignty of its law as something which is lived and experienced even in the leisure time of cinema-goers.

Introducing *Lantana*

The film's multi-stranded narrative centres on the disappearance of an American psychiatrist, Valerie Somers, who has already lost her only daughter in an unsolved urban murder. The film's protagonist is the principal police detective investigating the case, Leon Zat. His partner is Claudia Weis. Leon is at a crisis point in his life; his marriage to Sonja is disintegrating and the integrity of his police work is suffering. He is also having an affair with Jane O'May, whom he met at a Latin dance class with Sonja. Sonja has been seeing the psychiatrist Valerie. Jane is separated from her husband Pete, and she lives next door to the D'Amato family, Nic, Paula and their children.

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In his investigations Leon holds philosophical discussions with Valerie's husband John Knox, Dean of Law. Leon also investigates Patrick Phelan, another of Valerie's clients, who is having an affair with a married man. Both Valerie and Leon suspect that John is Patrick's lover, but they are both wrong. Valerie also baselessly accuses Pete of maliciously crashing into her on the street. Following this, Pete meets Leon by coincidence in a pub where they share a drink. This is a moment of male bonding between strangers. Meanwhile, Claudia develops a crush on a man who eats at the same restaurant as herself.

Then Jane observes her neighbour, Nic, throwing something into the lantana bush across the street in the dead of night. Her irrepressible curiosity leads her into the lantana to discover that the object is a shoe and a clue to the mystery of Valerie's disappearance. She calls on Pete for moral support, and the police (and thus ultimately Leon) to share her suspicions. An awkward moment ensues when Pete, Jane and Leon gather in Jane's lounge room. Finally, while held in custody Nic reveals the truth of Valerie's disappearance. Presented as a flashback, Nic explains picking Valerie up beside her broken-down car. She is in a hysterical state and he makes a vague attempt to reassure her. But she misreads him and leaps from the moving car, plunging into the roadside scrubland. Running through the bush, panicking and looking behind her, she stumbles off a cliff to her death. Her body is found suspended in a lantana plant.

In the wake of the revelation and following the conventions of the mystery genre, order is restored to the entangled narratives. Each character is given a denouement, or closing image: Leon and Sonja are reunited; Jane dances alone; Pete sits by himself in his car; the D'Amato family gather together for a picnic; Claudia's love interest joins her table at the restaurant; Patrick stands alone in the rain; and John solitarily and melancholically contemplates a panoramic vista of Australian coastline.

The narrative is set in Sydney's suburbs and explores the paradoxical intimacy and alienation of city and suburban life. In this vein it follows a genre of ensemble 'community' films that includes *Crash*

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(2004), *Magnolia* (1999) and *Short Cuts* (1993), in which the stories of disparate characters momentarily coincide for either banal or significant plot developments. However, *Lantana* bears a distinctive Australian configuration of alienation and melancholia, which is deepened by the haunting musical soundtrack and the sparse, flat dialogue. Critics have described its 'unusual level of realism' (Stratton 2001: 17) as 'a vision of Australian society that rings perfectly and brilliantly true' (Freeman 2001: no pagination).

The credibility of *Lantana's* 'Australianness' is further indicated by its unexpected local popularity. In 2001 it was initially released as a niche market, arthouse movie with limited distribution. However, its season was extended and it opened to more theatres, including a number of mainstream multiplexes where it out-grossed other, more commercial films (Zion 2001, Mangan and Heyden 2001: 8). Subsequently, it won most of the key awards presented by the Australian Film Institute (AFI)⁴ and the more populist organisation, Inside Film (IF).⁵ Its success unfolded despite minimal marketing and initial limited distribution. This suggests that the film's popularity was based strongly on word of mouth, which indicates that its success was potentially due to a significant and popularly shared engagement with the cinematic product. Audience engagement with film relies on more than narrative; there is also a reliance on shared understandings of cinematic codes and culturally specific semiotics. The narrative and cinematic techniques used to create *Lantana* fashioned a text that resonated strongly as 'Australia' and 'Australian' for its audience. Central to my argument in this article is that *Lantana's* representation of landscape repeats the iconic doctrinal play of absence-presence which strikes a cord of recognition in the white Australian imagination.

Although its reconfiguration of conventional landscape representations distinguishes it from other Australian films, *Lantana* sits within a larger local cinematic cycle which revised old established 'tropes of self-recognition' in the 1990s and early 2000s (Collins and Davis 2004: 7). Collins and Davis identify this as a 'post-*Mabo*' movement, directly influenced by the articulation of Anglo-Australian

sovereignty in relation to *terra nullius* presented in the judgement at Mabo. In this way, *Lantana* participated in local cinema as 'one of the public spaces in which Australians have been able to experience the impact of the *Mabo* decision' (Collins and Davis 2004: 8). Many post-*Mabo* films are characterised by imaginative visual invocations of the concept of *terra nullius*. Through these cinematic negotiations, Anglo-Australian sovereignty can be seen as sitting uneasily, not only for critical jurists and other scholars, but for consumers of mainstream screen products. *Lantana* epitomises this cinematically experienced unease in its manifestation as 'thriller' as well as its explicit use of the landscape as the scene of the crime. However, it is marked out from the rest of the post-*Mabo* cycle by its further use of the animus *terra nullius* landscape as a metaphor for the film's represented Anglo-Australian community.

Mabo and the Conundrum of Law's Foundation

The *Mabo* decision had a powerful impact on the collective memory of Anglo-Australian culture, refashioning the story of colonisation. *Mabo* is recognised as having 'brought about dramatic changes in ... the ... spirit of Australian jurisprudence' (Reynolds 2003: 1). But it has also been observed entering 'popular consciousness and demotic debates,' like 'no other judgment' (Rush 1997: 80). In particular, the decision brought the term *terra nullius* into mainstream Anglo-Australian culture, and shaped the ways it has been imagined there.

The decision, handed down in 1992, ended eleven years of struggle by the principal plaintiff Eddie Koiki Mabo⁶ and others of the Meriam people⁷ with the High Court of Australia concerning the rights of the Meriam people to land on the Murray Islands in the Torres Strait. The decision recognised maintained traditional connections between the Meriam people and their land through acknowledgement of their continued cultural interactions with that land. The court's decision gave them 'native title' and thus endowed upon them a right to their islands. The judgment put forward that similar native title claims might be possible for other (although not all) Indigenous nations

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within the Anglo-Australian jurisdiction. This ostensibly opened up the implication of the *Mabo* decision to disputed property claims across Australia, causing concern and anxiety to many white landowners.⁸

Central to the decision was a simultaneous identification and rejection of *terra nullius* as the justification for Anglo-Australian sovereignty. The term itself refers to an eighteenth century European legal doctrine used to 'facilitate colonisation' of land 'discovered' by European explorers and desired by European states (Hunter 1996: 6). Theoretically, in the 'international' laws of European expansion, possession of such land was dependent on conquest or voluntary cession by the previous occupants (Hunter 1996: 6). Exception was made on European 'discovery' that the land was not 'possessed' by its occupants according to European theories of property ownership and dominion (see particularly Waswo 1996). Such land was considered '*terra nullius*' (translatable as 'property of no one' or 'land belonging to no one'), and was deemed legally available to the discovering European government. In the Australian situation it is understood that the British Government 'determined' the landmass *terra nullius* (Attwood 1996b: vii-ix).⁹

In the liberal enlightenment thought of the colonisers, the Indigenous peoples were considered to have 'no concept of property because they were in the original state of nature'; they had not reaped commodities from the land through visibly marked enclosures, tilling, or planting (Attwood 1996b: ix). While such inscriptions evidence the labour of tillage and pasturage signifying ownership in Europe, they represent an understanding of land and land-use 'diametrically opposed to the Aboriginal view of land' (Haynes 1998: 24). Watson writes of the relationship between her people and other Indigenous peoples and the land as 'irreconcilable to the western legal property law system' (2002: 257). Unable to 'discern any traces of appropriation of the land by aboriginal people,' the gaze of British law failed, or refused to recognise the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the land (Hage 2003: 80).¹⁰ In the British determination to annex the land, Indigenous occupants were identified as 'uncivilised', 'primitive' or 'savage' and thus as objects rather than subjects. That is to say, they

were not recognised as legal actors having their own systems of law, but objects that might be subject to law.

As '*terra nullius*', the land is configured as 'a legal desert' (Reynolds 1996: 1). This feeds into 'many misleading public representations' that retell *terra nullius* as an 'empty' landscape (Wolfe 1999: 6). As Wolfe observes, the operation of *terra nullius* on European arrival to Australia 'did not mean that the land was uninhabited', but that the original occupants were treated as people without rights (1999: 6).¹¹ Through this misleading interpretation, the term circulates in a play of absence-presence with the landscape imagined as both occupied and empty; something persistently lurks with a nebulous threat at the edges of the terrain.

The court at *Mabo* repudiated *terra nullius*, rejecting it as a 'fiction' (*Mabo* at 42). At the same time, the judgment insisted on the maintenance of a singular sovereignty over the land of Australia as Anglo-Australian law. Thus, while the judgment rejects the 'truth' of *terra nullius* in relation to property, it reasserts the practice in 'the question of sovereignty' (Reynolds 1996: 1). Reynolds reads this in the way that the judgment simultaneously asserts the property entitlement of the Meriam people while it insists on the continuance of Anglo-Australian law as a singular sovereign system across the landmass. At the same time, while the property entitlement of the Meriam people was rendered recognisable through common law, the very invocation of common law (derived from the colonising English Crown) to find that entitlement worked to sustain the sovereignty of Anglo-Australian law over the Meriam people. The court thus rejected the possibility of dual jurisdiction or surrendering colonising control to the original people of the land.¹² In this insistence is a repetition of a *terra nullius* logic that functions to 'bury alive' Indigenous peoples, their nations and their laws.¹³ The sovereignty of the coloniser extinguishes presence and empties the terrain once again. What remains is 'buried alive,' haunting the landscape, threatening to subvert the lawfulness of colonisation.

Through the discussion within the *Mabo* decision, the movement between negation and reassertion reveals an anxiety concerning the

founding authority of Anglo-Australian law. Motha reads in the decision that the 'sovereign event' of colonisation is simultaneously and paradoxically 'preserved and disavowed' (2005: 113). In this moment, the law pulls the rug from underneath itself by simultaneously identifying its own foundations in the doctrine of *terra nullius*, and finding that doctrine to be false (or illegitimate). In Rush's (1997) work this paradox is identified as an anxiety circulating further through Anglo-Australian law. The law potentially cuts 'itself off from its ground or jurisdiction,' negating its own foundation and removing from itself a 'space from which to speak' (Rush 1997: 83). This is the anxiety that I go on to find pervading *Lantana* as an imaginary configuration replacing the native threat with an introduced species as the malevolent force threatening the colonising culture. Anglo-Australian law itself appears as the perpetrator at the scene of the crime of colonisation, and its agents, as police detective and Dean of Law, are rendered impotent in their pursuit of legal order. Instead, there is a quiet suggestion of a more legitimate legal authority in the figure of an Indigenous female police officer.

The *Mabo* decision brought *terra nullius* into popular discourses of Anglo-Australian culture, simultaneously framing the colloquial significance of the term. It is argued that prior to *Mabo* '*terra nullius* had not actually been a doctrine of Australian law' but was rather 'paradoxically claimed' in the decision only to be rejected by the court (Rush 2005: 757 n12). However, as Rush writes 'it is the invocation rather than the rejection of the doctrine that has a function' (2005: 727 n12). That is to say, the language of the judgment and the effects of the decision have significantly shaped the way in which sovereignty is imagined in popular culture, providing a framework of negated *terra nullius*. In this way, *Mabo* is located as the instigator of 'a paradigm shift of Australian historical consciousness' (Collins and Davis 2004: 3). Hage argues that together with further Indigenous struggles and critical changes in knowledge production, *Mabo* was part of an 'important transformation within Australia' which changed critical understandings of Anglo-Australian sovereignty from 'marginal radical or academic topics to a quasi-official discourse competing for prized status of "public

truth” (2003: 81). Following *Mabo*, discourses and debates about sovereignty and *terra nullius* entered the popular imagination as topics of legitimate consideration and discussion, rather than their previous presence as largely avoided or rejected eccentricities.¹⁴

The Lie of the Land

In the shadow of *Mabo*, mainstream depictions of local scenery have become infused with significances of sovereignty. Since early colonisation, Anglo-Australian representations of the landscape have been characterised by the doubled absence-presence of emptiness and malignant spectres. Following *Mabo*, these representations become recognisable as phantasmagorical manifestations of *terra nullius*. Made discernible in these images is a landscape as crime scene, figuratively describing either malevolent resistance to unlawful claims of sovereignty or nefarious challenges to European occupation. The troubled foundation of Anglo-Australian law is made retrospectively evident in already existent images. At the same time, emerging imaginative configurations of landscape are shaped by the post-*Mabo* discourse of *terra nullius*.

Empty but haunted images of Australian bushland are specifically European renderings of landscape. From arrival, British settlers and explorers represented the land through ‘patterns of prior expectation’ and established European theories and philosophies about nature and aesthetics (Haynes 1998: 24).¹⁵ This ‘manipulation of observation’ parallels the gaze of British law over the Indigenous landscape (Haynes 1998: 24). Together with that legal gaze, other Anglo-Australian discourses have persistently failed to recognise Indigenous peoples and nations, their aesthetics, law and sovereignty (Haynes 1998: 58). Instead, the land is regularly represented as a threatening ‘sublime void’ (Morris 2002b: no pagination).

Imaginative juxtapositions of European law and the nebulous, criminal, colonised other are epitomised by the penultimate image sequence in *Lantana*. It is a classic representation of white Australian

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relationships with land presented in numerous photographs of farmers or cattlemen, documentaries about struggling agricultural endeavours, and cinematic depictions of 'Australia' in which a lone man is dwarfed by the immensity of the scenery.¹⁶ It is part of the film's denouement montage showing the conclusion of each character's narrative. The sequence includes a full screen shot of Eastern Australian coastline, seen from a high cliff point and featuring thick coastal bushland. Foregrounded in the image is the solitary figure of the Dean of Law, John Knox, seen from behind. The image follows an extreme close-up of John's face. Depicted in this sequence is Anglo-Australian masculinity alone in contemplation of the vast Australian landscape.

In this finalising sequence the audience is invited to identify with the emotions suggested in the close-up of John's face, and then to share his point of view over the coastline. John's visual white male body is a body coded with a capacity for action and control; conveying autonomy and self-determination and the 'white male spirit' imagined to achieve and 'maintain empire' (Dyer 1997: 196). Imaginatively embodying the 'spirit' of the nation, active white male characters in conventional Western cinema hold the signifying potential of sovereign power.¹⁷ In *Lantana*, this masculine 'spirit' of the nation is overlaid with a further significance of legal sovereignty through the characterisation of two central male figures as representatives of the law: the protagonist police detective and the 'Dean of Law'. And in the penultimate image sequence, John represents a sovereign legal authority juxtaposed against the landscape.

At first glance, John's position in the composition above the panoramic view suggests a mastery over the land. However, due to his individual narrative of substantial grief and loss, for which the image represents a conclusion, and the condition of the depicted land as uncultivated, his relationship to the view is neither proprietorial nor sovereign. Rather, the land appears indifferent to his presence. Within the grammar of Australian cinema, the landscape is burdened with the threat of potential violence. In this image of John's narrative conclusion, the presented landscape metaphorically represents the unresolved

mysteries of his wife (Valerie) and daughter's separate deaths for which no individual killer has been identified. The law and the justice system, of which he is a symbolic reminder, fail him by neither fully restoring order, nor revealing the perpetrator. Instead, the deaths of this woman and girl, caused by 'no-one,' repeat the Anglo-Australian narrative of the deadly threat of 'nothing' in the Australian landscape.

The sequence thus presents a sublime image. It is a juxtaposition of Anglo-Australian law (embodied by the white male Dean of Law) and the familiar configuration of the criminogenic landscape. In this finalising moment, the land exists as an 'undomesticable remainder' that threatens the certainty of Anglo-Australian sovereignty (Hage 2003: 51). It is an image beset with implications of always already failed colonialism, reflecting a white Australian 'awareness of the impossibility of fully colonising the natural environment' (Hage 2003: 51). In this way, the image reiterates the aesthetic pattern of *terra nullius* discourse in which the empty landscape is haunted by a threatening but insubstantial entity.

This vision of the landscape was formed in the discourses of early colonisation and exploration, suffusing the 'analogies, metaphors and interpretations' through which ostensibly neutral impressions, explorers' records and official reports were couched (Haynes 1998: 58).¹⁸ These impressions have been repeated through fiction, art, and early photography (Gibson 1993). For example, while the self-evident truth commonly uncritically invested in photographs, particularly those taken in 'natural' light, have supported Anglo-Australian configurations of the landscape as harsh and empty, the photographers' use of available light, and the exposure of the film to that light has created the particular effects of 'reality' presented by the photographs (Gibson 1993). The resulting images are of desolate and empty spaces filled with unrelenting sun and heat. The use of light in these pictures performs the same 'manipulation of observation' that erased Indigenous nations while reinscribing an uneasy presence in an apparently self-evident image.

The same landscape circulates through contemporary mainstream culture as both fiction and fact. Menace and danger are located

in the animals and plants that surround 'factual' media coverage of disappeared and murdered white Australians and international visitors.¹⁹ Demonstrating this, Sanders found in the coverage of Azaria Chamberlain's disappearance that the menace and danger of the crime of infanticide was projected onto the dingoes, plant life and rock formations within the area of the event (Sanders 1993).²⁰ He observes the way in which the landscape is otherwise represented as predominantly unpopulated. Indigenous people are largely absent in the coverage, despite the roles they played in searching for Azaria, and in their place is a predatory and dangerous nature.

The menace of this landscape persists through white Australian culture as a collective memory. It often 'lies dormant', but is immediately aroused, or induced to 'erupt' at the evocation of a 'conforming incident' or image, such as the Chamberlain case (Haynes 1998: 59). In its arousal, the memory is experienced through the body as a 'wave of intense personal fear or anger' (Haynes 1998: 59) in a manner similar to the 'conditioned reflexes' of Bal's cultural memory (1999: vii). The intensity is so strong that it can precipitate bodily action, such as the movement Morris (2002b) describes in her response to a scene in *Mad Max* (1979). The familiarity of the fear provoked by the film's depiction of empty scrubland possibly peopled by hidden murderers and rapists caused Morris to get up from her seat and leave the theatre. This memory of the land is mobilised by other local horror and thriller films set in outback, bush or desert areas. The landscape functions as a gothic 'mindscape of ... horror' (Haynes 1998: 184). It is the harbinger of terrible violence in films like *Wake in Fright* (1971), *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974), *Shame* (1988), and *Wolf Creek* (2005), each of which also portrays white people driven to barbarity by the isolated and harsh conditions of the terrain. Wild animals, rocks and other elements of 'nature' appear to kill, abduct or disrobe white men, women and children in *Long Weekend* (1978), *Razor Back* (1984), and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975).²¹ Even the suspense of the offshore thriller *Dead Calm* (1989) is characterised by a malevolent force projected onto the 'calm' 'natural' environment of the vast unpopulated sea. These landscape memories prompt embodied anxieties and psychological

responses that build towards the action of the narrative, rendering the films satisfyingly and phenomenologically ‘horrific’ or spine-tinglingly gripping for the genre-savvy Anglo-Australian audience.²²

***Lantana’s* Mindscape of Horror**

The cultural memory as ‘familiar fear’ shapes the mood of *Lantana*. A sense of unease is founded in the opening sequence as the camera pulls through the plant’s interior to the body of the woman. This is compounded by the soundtrack which builds from silence into an overwhelming buzzing of cicada drumming. In the surround sound of cinemas, the insistent drumming combines with the oversized images of interior lantana cavities to be claustrophobic. The sound also evokes memories of the humid heat in which cicadas flourish and become noisy, and the rich sticky smells of plants in that climate. This unease and remembered discomfort is then rekindled throughout the film by the regular inclusion of the plant at the edges of sets, at the front of establishing shots, or as the scene of dramatic action.

The movement of the opening shot is significant, replaying an Australian cinematic convention in which the landscape appears to draw its victims into its depths or barren expanses. It is a tracking shot presented from the victim-character’s point-of-view and seems to follow the desire of that character into mysterious manifestations of landscape. In other examples, such as the scene of disappearance in *Picnic* or the *Mad Max* scrubland scene, the tracking shot is complimented by a series of reverse shots apparently taken from the perspective of the malevolence lurking within the flora or rocks.²³ In *Lantana*, the movement of the shot draws the audience into the mysterious interior where it reveals a damaged female body at its centre.

Equivalent cinematic compositions recur when Jane is portrayed entering the lantana to reach the evidentiary shoe. It is used again in the portrayal of Valerie running deeper into the bush to escape her imagined pursuer. Again, within each of these compositions is the memory of the enmity in earlier Australian productions, and the body

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revealed in *Lantana's* opening. In this way, each image of the bush holds in it the promise of criminal violence.

In so many iterations of this cinematic configuration it is a white woman who is simultaneously drawn in and threatened by the landscape.²⁴ Due to her symbolic proximity to the white male body within heteronormative codes of sex and reproduction, the white woman's body is coded in terms of her sex and fertility (Shome 2001). By extension, she functions to 'guarantee' the white race and the nation's 'reproduction' (Dyer 1997: 29). As such however, she also signifies 'all that is threatened' by the dangers of non-white men with whom she might procreate (Hogan 2001: 12). She thus denotes the potential of familial, racial and national contamination. By virtue of this logic, white women's bodies become the location for national and racial xenophobic anxieties, and represent the vulnerability of Western nations.

Playing the role of national signifiers, the bodies of white women in Australian texts resonate as conduits for anxieties and desires concerning the nation. Through the conventional pattern of Australian cinematic sequencing, white women's bodies present a vulnerability of Anglo-Australian nationhood, threatened by the animus of the doubled absence-presence. In these instances, anxieties about what the empty landscape actually might hold become manifest as nightmare fantasies in which its 'undomesticable remainder' overwhelms the vulnerable white nation and destroys its sovereign power over the land. Invoked by the image of the woman's body in *Lantana's* opening sequence, anxieties about jeopardised sovereignty frame the unfolding narrative of the film. In this way, the vulnerability of Anglo-Australian legal authority is foregrounded and forms a foundation for the thriller's unease.

As ever, what threatens the women and the white sovereignty they signify is indistinct in *Lantana*; it is not embodied by a substantive character, but is located in the landscape and its emptiness. While the plant portends danger, it is also attributed criminal responsibility, both as the scene of Valerie's death and through a play of alignment with Jane. This alignment is presented in an emotionally climactic scene in which the lantana is configured in various criminological roles.

Cinematically, the scene follows Jane's journey into the hollow of the plant to uncover the evidence relating to Valerie's disappearance, which she previously observed Nic throw there during the night. The screen cuts between Nic walking past and Jane squatting within the bush, and a low-angle shot of the evidentiary shoe caught between the branches (reminiscent of the body of its owner in the opening sequence). The sound of muffled cicadas is foregrounded by Jane's rustling movements and the 'flick flick' of Nic's thongs.²⁵ Nic moves towards the bush and Jane reaches for the shoe. Nic looks searchingly through the outer leaves of the bush and Jane, now holding the shoe, looks towards Nic. This last shot swings around to show Nic's feet as visible to Jane in a gap at the base of the thicket. A close-up pulls in to Jane holding the shoe to her face with branches tangling around her, fragmenting the image. The screen cuts to Nic moving away from the bush, and then back to Jane's face.

This scene comes at a mid-point in the film; the police are still looking for Valerie. Nic has been constructed as a key suspect for the audience through camera angles rendering his postures menacing. He has also been shown throwing the shoe into the lantana. Thus, in the image of Jane entangled within the bush, her narrative and signifying function interweaves momentarily with those of the plant. Jane as witness to the thrown object enters the lantana where the lantana itself bears witness by holding the shoe. At the same time the shoe, presented as an image repetition of Valerie's body held aloft in lantana, becomes victim to the floral perpetrator. The familiarly represented compulsion of Jane to enter the bush, reminiscent of earlier analogous Australian representations and pre-figuring Valerie's final flight into the bush, also configures Jane as victim and plant as predator. Jane-as-victim is also made tangible in the build of tension in Nic's portrayed proximity to her and the suggestion (emphasised by the 'flick flick' of his thongs, like the sound of an approaching killer's shoes in gravel) of his potential threat to her. And although the plant protects her from Nic's sight, it has also drawn her in to its dangerous depths.

Simultaneously, the image captures Jane finding the clue that

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unravels the central mystery. Jane has acted on her suspicions and 'detects' in a way that Leon (as a police detective) fails to do. She becomes detective, aided in her endeavours by the plant's disclosure to her of the shoe. In this scene, due to her depicted entanglement with the plant, Jane's roles are woven into its character. At the same time, however, in the ultimate absence of Nic's (and Patrick's) guilt, the role of perpetrator is once again bestowed on the plant.

However, responsibility is concomitantly complicated by the emphatic emptiness of the lantana. The figure of emptiness is reinforced in the film by vigorous demonstrations that 'nothing' threatens either Jane or Valerie. The cause of Valerie's death is revealed as the result of a series of hollow suspicions that intersect with the hollow suspicions of Jane. In the build-up to Nic's elucidation of Valerie's death is a progressive exposure of her empty paranoia. That Valerie's 'paranoia' becomes 'hysteria' is prefigured when she baselessly accuses mild-mannered Pete of abuse in the street. However, the configuration of her paranoia begins with her consultations with Patrick, in which he appears to taunt her with the details of an affair she imagines he is conducting with her husband. In the style of a thriller, the audience is encouraged to share her suspicions, which also become Leon's. Together these build to a climax in which Leon confronts Patrick, contravenes police protocol and exposes the true identity of Patrick's lover. Correspondingly, the audience's heart rates increase. But the moment of revelation is anti-climactic, instantly defusing the developed tension and abandoning the audience to the residues of their adrenaline. The lover is not John. The phenomenological play of disappointed excitement underscores the baselessness of the suspicion and stresses the emptiness of the fear.

The same play takes place in Jane's suspicion of Nic. Again Leon and the audience share the suspicion, as does the 'victim' Valerie. However, as Nic's story unfolds in flashback, Valerie is represented as misreading each of Nic's actions as he picks her up and drives her towards home. She is presented as frantic, leaping from the vehicle and plunging into the bush. The image sequence that follows shows Valerie

stumbling and turning to look back at her pursuer. In the point-of-view shot there is nothing but bush. And then a travelling shot of blurred flora represents the fall to her death. Valerie runs from the idea of a threat and not an actual threat: she dies of nothing. In the revelation of Nic's innocence, Jane's fear of him is also exposed as empty; she too was scared of nothing.

However, the condition of this 'nothing' marks a shift in the cultural memory of the originary crime. The trajectory of Valerie's hysteria reveals the anxiety at the core of *terra nullius* discourse as nothing rather than an insubstantial but definitely present something in the landscape. The narrative pattern within *terra nullius* is configured in line with Valerie's paranoia, as a self-induced and self-harming anxiety, the kernel of which is a void. The *terra nullius* of this text is troubled by a contemporary white Australian suspicion of its fiction. In *Lantana*, the haunting absent-present animus is revealed as a product of the white imagination (projected on to the body of an American immigrant). In this way, the play of empty but malevolent landscape reconfigures the insubstantial threatening presence as no-longer the irrepressible presence of Indigenous nations, but the insubstantial ground from which Anglo-Australian law attempts to speak; it bespeaks an anxiety concerning the crime of the Anglo-Australian 'sovereign event'.

The Transposed Crime Scene: Lantana as White Australia

A relocation of the same anxiety takes place in the substitution of the native Australian landscape with *lantana camara*. According to the Australian government's Natural Heritage Trust, lantana is 'a weed of national significance' (CRC Weed Management 2003: 1). Introduced from subtropical Central and South America, Mexico or the Caribbean, it was first documented by Australian records in 1841 (CRC Weed Management 2003: 3). It is a creeping plant that requires little water or attention to survive, flourishing and spreading along the east coast of Australia. Forming tall, dense and barely penetrable

thickets, lantana grows entangled over and over within itself. This creates dry, leafless pockets and tunnels hidden by the external dark green foliage and clusters of bright yellow and pink flowers. It forms a foreign and pestiferous layer that asphyxiates native bushland, reduces productivity and poisons fauna.

The plant's resemblance to colonisation stretches beyond the metaphorical parallel of its choking expansion over the terrain. It also emerges out of the stylised exploitation of the plant as analogous to the film's argument about 'community.' Critics have noted the correspondence between the structure of the plant's growth and the representation of community as claustrophobically entangled in *Lantana* (Fitzgerald 2001, Freeman 2001, Rigg 2001). However, the parallel is already indicated by the correlation between the film's title and stated theme. The promotional poster also emphasises the analogy with a depiction of an embracing couple at the centre of interwoven lantana branches. Within the context of an ensemble thriller, the plant that appears to encircle the couple suggests a stiflingly interconnected and intrusive surrounding community. And the narrative community is primarily Anglo-Australian, with one Indigenous detective at its periphery and an American psychiatrist at its symbolic centre.

The signifying manoeuvres that form the parallels between the lantana and the white community, and replace the native bush with an introduced weed, consequently also relocate liability for the originary crime from the traditionally absent-present colonised to the colonisers themselves. The reconfigured landscape metaphor is given a particular legal significance by the attribution of legal roles to specific characters. The course of these characters' narratives further demonstrates the fragility of Anglo-Australian law's authority over the territory, and suggests a more fitting sovereign authority in Indigenous legal agency.

As the protagonist and detective leading the central investigation, Leon is the principal signifier of Anglo-Australian law and national sovereignty. However, as a white man and a policeman facing a life crisis, his authority and legal competency are undermined. This is denoted by the humour of his comical flustering in front of Jane's disdain

and her possession of the shoe, following her scene in the lanterna. Leon ineffectively chastises her touching of the shoe, to which she tersely responds that she 'just did'. There is a tense pause while cuckolded Pete is ushered from the room and before Leon asks how Jane would like to 'play' this embarrassing encounter.

'Why don't you just do your job? You're a cop aren't you?' she responds. Her reply refuses to engage or facilitate his discomfort, which is in itself a cinematically uncharacteristically emasculating feminine resistance to masculine authority. But it also underscores his failure to do his job, particularly in light of her own fruitful detective work. Instead, Leon's investigations have diverged into unethical explorations of his wife's confidential therapy files; visits to the pub; following insubstantial leads; and into philosophical ruminations with the Dean of Law.

In this last cul-de-sac of Leon's detective activities, the two masculine figures of law are set against the view from John's veranda in the expensive bushland hills of outer Sydney. They appear drawn together and inactive as they drink whisky. John is presented repeatedly through the film in this kind of largely inactive resignation, which culminates in the penultimate image of his denouement, defeated by the impossibility of domesticating the landscape. Thus the two white figures of law appear overwhelmed, inadequate and impotent, their sovereign potential unsatisfied.

Contrasting with these two embodiments of law is the quietly efficient and ethical Claudia, the Indigenous woman detective. Neither her narrative, nor her character dominate the film in any way; rather, they work to offset those of Leon. Nor is her indigeneity accentuated, but is merely implied by the raced identity of the locally known actor Leah Purcell. Further than this, it is potentially obscured by her German surname 'Weiss' denoting 'white.' However, while she does not lead the investigation, nor uncover the mystery, she regularly checks Leon's excessive application of the law, infidelity and breaches of protocol. Her abilities as an officer of the law are paralleled by the trajectory of her romantic success, which also suggests her ability in

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understanding rules of social interaction. In this way, her counter-position to the white masculine policeman reveals the failure of Anglo-Australian law, exposing its excessive violence with her understated presence. Further than this, she presents a more legitimate embodiment of law as both female and Indigenous. In this way, the character of Claudia suggests the pre-eminence of Indigenous sovereignties.

The characterisation of Claudia epitomises *Lantana's* reconfiguration of the ominous presence of Indigenous spectres at the edges of traditional Anglo-Australian narratives. The Indigenous presence at the edge of the film's narrative community instead offers a more ethical exercise of legal authority and the menace is reassigned to signifiers of colonisation. In this way, the violence that haunts the *terra nullius* imaginary, rendering it the paradigmatic scene of crime, is exposed as the 'sovereign event' or foundation of Anglo-Australian law rather than the resistance of the original occupants. Thus while the *terra nullius* landscape remains the crime scene, it is the doctrine itself that commits the crime.

Conclusion

Although the crime at the centre of *Lantana* is solved, the unease of the *crime scene* remains unresolved. The body of the woman held in the bush haunts the film from its opening sequence as a raced and gendered signifier of nation threatened by the persistent absence of an identifiable perpetrator. This formless threat reiterates the persistent absence-presence of Indigenous nations and peoples haunting traditional Anglo-Australian representations of landscape. While Valerie's death from nothing repeats cinematic convention by projecting criminal responsibility onto an empty but animus 'bush,' the narrative transposition of the crime scene from local bushland to exotic lantana relocates responsibility from the 'native' to the 'introduced'. Echoed in the transposition is a white Australian anxiety concerning the 'sovereign event' of the nation. In this way, *Lantana* rewrites the traditional narrative of subverted sovereignty to reassign criminal liability for the violence of law's foundation from the colonised to the coloniser,

and articulates a concern that the law has ‘no ground from which to speak.’ *Terra nullius* is reinscribed into the land as the site of criminal violence; it is the scene of the crime of Anglo-Australian sovereignty.

Through the film’s reliance on the metaphors and techniques from ‘pre-*Mabo*’ cinema, it exploits the embodied responses of white Australian audiences to the culturally familiar codes of unease. By following the patterns of Australian thriller conventions, and mobilising the same cinematic representations of landscape to fulfil them, *Lantana* arouses an anticipated frisson in the bodies of its audience. Subsequently, through its substitution of the lantana as crime scene and its reconfiguration of the conventional malevolently absent-present force as white Australian paranoia, the film transfigures the embodied cultural memory from an anxiety concerning the persistently existing Indigenous nations to one concerning the legitimacy of Anglo-Australian sovereignty itself. In this way, the audience is invited to feel the anxiety of white sovereignty in the matter of their bodies.

Notes

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- 1 See for example Haynes (1998), Morris (2002a, 2002b), Pierce (1999), Sanders (1993), and Turner (1986).
- 2 Hereinafter *Mabo*.
- 3 See for example the collection of examinations of cinematic jurisprudence in Moran et al (2004a), MacNeil’s *Lex Populi* (2007) and Young’s *Judging the Image: Art, Value, Law* (2005).
- 4 *Lantana*’s AFI awards included Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress and Best Adapted Screenplay.

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- 5 *Lantana's* IF awards included Best Feature Film, Best Actor, Best Actress (shared by Kerry Armstrong, Daniela Farinacci, Leah Purcell, Barbara Hershey and Rachel Blake), Best Director and Best Script. While AFI awards are judged by industry figures, IF awards are based on public votes.
- 6 Eddie Mabo died before the judgment was given.
- 7 The Meriam people are of Mer, Dauar and Waier Islands (known by the Crown as the Murray Islands) in the water between the northern tip of Queensland and Papua New Guinea.
- 8 For the resonance of this anxiety in mainstream cinema see particularly MacNeil's (2004) analysis of *The Castle* (1997).
- 9 'History wars' have been waged amongst Australian academics concerning the currency of *terra nullius* in the colonising practices of the Crown. While some historians dispute claims that *terra nullius* influenced colonisation on the basis that it doesn't appear explicitly in documentation of Crown possession, other historians and legal theorists have argued that a doctrine of *terra nullius* can be traced throughout Anglo-Australian legal and political decisions and practices (see particularly Wolfe 2006).
- 10 Anglo-Australian law continues to refuse recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, requiring that Indigenous people prove their relationships with the land through processes derived from English law and European frameworks. Motha (2005) demonstrates the ways in which the law requires Indigenous people to perform their indigeneity according to Western notions of the static native whose cultures and laws do not change over time. Rush observes the way in which Indigenous Australians must 'pledge themselves as subjects of law, to experience themselves as legal subjects' (1997: 82). Ransley and Marchetti (2001) demonstrate the way in which Anglo-Australian law refuses to recognise divergent systems of knowledge and instead requires that Indigenous claimants provide their evidence through European means and systems. Indigenous claimants must reinterpret their own experience of law and land in order to make it recognisable in the gaze of an English-derived legal system.
- 11 See for an interesting example Evans's (2005) exploration of colonial indecision concerning Indigenous/British subjecthood for the purposes of criminal investigation in mid nineteenth century South Australia.
- 12 For further critical analysis of *Mabo* see for example Rush (1997, 2005), Motha (2002, 2005), Patton (2001), and Dorsett and McVeigh (2002).

- 13 I use the term 'bury alive' following Watson's critique of colonisation that she writes as a 'survivor of *terra nullius*' (Watson 2002).
- 14 This is exemplified by the centrality of the *Mabo* decision in one of the most fondly consumed comedies of recent Australian cinema *The Castle*, echoing through the favourite lines that white Australians still like to quote to each other: 'it's the Constitution; it's Mabo; it's justice; it's law; it's the vibe and ... no, that's it: it's the vibe.' See MacNeil (2004 and 2007) for a deeper exploration of the complex resonance of *Mabo* throughout the film itself and the popular consumption of the film.
- 15 See also Morris's (2002b) identification of the presence of the philosophical work on the 'sublime and beautiful' produced by Edmund Burke, in early colonial libraries and discourse.
- 16 The very opening moment of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony is an example of this. In this celebration of the nation choreographed for international consumption, a lone 'stockman' on horseback rode into the centre of the huge stadium and reared above the camera. The rest of the performance space was empty and ostensibly barren, overlaid as it was by a yellow ground cover.
- 17 See for example, Tasker (1993) and Boyle's (2005) discussions of Rambo as the embodiment of the Reaganite 'American condition' and McNamee's (2004) analysis of Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* as the 'spirit' of Englishness. I have also elaborated on this signifying function of raced and sexed bodies at work in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and the BBC's coverage of the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales (Duncanson 2008).
- 18 See also Morris (2002b).
- 19 See for example news coverage of Azaria Chamberlain's disappearance, the more recent disappearance of Peter Falconio, and the 'backpacker' murders, the story of which was translated into a generic 'white panic' horror film *Wolf Creek* (2005), which exploits the tropes of various empty and dangerous Australian landscapes.
- 20 In 1980 a nine-week-old white baby girl, Azaria Chamberlain, disappeared from a tent in a camping-ground near Ayers Rock (Uluru). Azaria's mother, Lindy was charged with her murder, although it was also thought that Azaria might have been taken by a dingo (native dog). The trials assessing Lindy's guilt went on for many years, keeping in circulation popular and media deliberations on the guilt of the Chamberlains and

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the dingo. These deliberations were fuelled both by speculations about the Chamberlain's religious beliefs and practices and the nature of the Australian environment — particularly in the area surrounding Uluru. Because of the apparent 'strangeness' of their Seventh-day Adventist beliefs, the Chamberlains were suspected of having killed their baby for the purposes of religion. A mystique is attached to images and imaginings of Uluru. In the Chamberlain case, as Haynes has written, Australian 'nature' became 'jointly represented by a wild animal and a mysterious monolith, and Uluru was suddenly recast as a place riddled with arcane pagan rituals' (1998: 265).

- 21 Hereinafter *Picnic*.
- 22 The motif of threateningly empty spaces is repeated across horror and thriller genres not specific to Australia. However, the particular, consistent and wide ranging use of the landscape as holding a deeply troubling presence-absence is especially notable throughout Anglo-Australian texts.
- 23 In *Picnic* a group of young women disappear during an excursion to a rock formation in rural Victoria. The scene referred to here depicts the moments of their disappearance. They are shown walking up and up through the rocks, apparently mesmerised. Long tracking shots are filmed over the shoulder of some of the women, while reverse shots mimic the stylistic representations of hidden observers used across mainstream cinema. The *Mad Max* scene depicts a woman with a child returning from the beach through scrubby bushland. The scene is shot partially from the woman's perspective, scanning over the brush in which no one can be seen. Spliced into the sequence are shots showing her looking. Again, partially obscured by intervening flora they give the impression of a point-of-view shot rather than the customary unobscured vision of the omnipresent cinematic gaze. This gives the appearance that she is being watched by something or someone who is concealed.
- 24 This figure is also often played by children. The child lost in the bush is yet another manifestation of *terra nullius* discourse, pervading fiction, art, and popular consciousness in the retelling of 'real' events. See particularly Torney (2005) and Pierce (1999).
- 25 'Thongs' are a form of footwear known in England and the United States as 'flipflops' and New Zealanders as 'jandles.' They are generically thin rubber soles held to the foot by two thin straps pinned between the biggest toes.

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