

---

## Ghostly Children: The Spectre of Melancholy in Sonya Hartnett's *The Ghost's Child*

Michelle Preston

Images of alienation in young adult fictions are common, arguably because they mirror the cultural discourses around adolescence as displaced between two (constructed) 'knowable' states: childhood and adulthood. The connection between displacement and melancholy in texts for young adults provides a vast array of narrative symbolism that often blurs reality and fantasy as knowable versus unknowable states respectively. Sonya Hartnett's approach to adolescent introspection and states of melancholy-depression is often confrontational and her (critically acclaimed) young adult fiction interleaves often destructive narratives of incest, familial violence, murder and suicide with contemporary and historical landscapes. Novels such as *Wilful Blue* (1994), *Thursday's Child* (2000), *Forest* (2002), *Surrender* (2006), critically engage the reader with the discursive dimensions of physical and psychical space-time embodiment in ways that disturb the boundaries between what is seen/known as *real* and *imagined*.

*The Ghost's Child* (2007), is a fictionalized and historicized account of individual alienation and sadness whereby, melancholy and depression serve as powerful forces (of loss-desire) able to induce spectral presences in the life of the protagonist in ways that allow fantasy to become a means to negotiate loss and combat alienation. The overt psychological dimensions of the narrative are obviated through images of melancholy, madness, abjection and death. This paper initiates a discussion of the text's psychoanalytic connotations through the ideas of both Freud and Kristeva. However, in order to question if/how the narrative moves beyond the

traditional parameters that construct melancholy as *either* a clinical pathology *or* a useful literary/aesthetic device, melancholy is also discussed through the ideas of Gilles Deleuze. The incorporation of Deleuze's work enables a way to re-think conventional representations of the melancholic as an essentially abject and marginalised subject position.

*The Ghost's Child* offers a fictional account of alienation, loss and melancholy that combines painful (embodied and disembodied) feelings and experiences of sadness with mythic storytelling in order to give a narrative shape and form to the debilitating stasis of inexpressible melancholy. The protagonist, Matilda, begins the story as an old woman and her recollections track through her life as an anti-*bildungsroman* of chances lost. The story begins when seventy-five-year-old Matilda returns home one afternoon from walking her dog to find a young boy sitting in her lounge room. Over afternoon tea, she recalls parts of her life as a young girl, the only child of affluent but distant parents growing up in coastal Victoria at the turn of the last century. Matilda (and the reader) eventually recognizes the boy as the child she miscarried. These characters are simultaneously absent and present – the boy can be seen by Matilda and his presence motivates the framing story of the narrative. However, as the possessive apostrophe in the title suggests, Matilda is also dead (and the narrative then is a completed story). The re-telling of events takes place in an ordinary 'realistic' setting, the familiarity of the home, and involves the reconstruction of remembered *events* that include a miscarriage, a

suicide attempt and the death/loss of loved ones. The story tells of a woman who lives to old age and dies after a lifetime of loneliness and times of great unhappiness and in this respect, the narrative is structured so that the psychological, historical and cultural signifiers of alienation and melancholy are returned in the form of ghosts and phantasms, unsettling known realities with uncanny presences that traverse all these layers of existence.

The articulation of melancholia is based upon recollections and reconstructions of experiences that utilize metonymy and metaphor as representational modes of symbolic and linguistic expression. The novel deploys these modes along with the ghost as a fantasy emblem, not only for the lost child but for the protagonist's lived experiences of sadness and grief. Matilda tells her guest, that from a young age, her life was filled with so many ghosts that she 'had never been able to stop cluttering her present with her past' (p.177). Gilles Deleuze says that 'memory is the real name of the relation to oneself, or the affect on the self by the self' (1988 p.107). In this sense, Matilda's recollections and ghostly identifications exist not just as melancholic memories but as acts of creative production or events. In Deleuzian terms, an 'event', that is constitutive of *desiring-production*, is in contradistinction to traditional and accepted formulations of desire-as-loss/lack. In *The Deleuze Dictionary* (2005), an event is defined as a particular set of forces that gives rise to a 'unique instant of production in a continual flow of changes' and stands alone as an indication of 'the immanent and chaotic nature of the world' (Stagoll, 2005 pp.87-88). For Deleuze (1994) the event is not bound to a particular space or time but can be actualized in multiple ways and, as such, retains an openness to reinvention, as well as exceeds the bodies in which it is actualized. However, traditional differentiations between real and imaginary mourning, coupled with understandings of melancholy as pathologically curable or incurable, mask the ways in which melancholia

manifests as an actualization of an event (or series of events), perpetually renewed and re-articulated.

From a Freudian perspective, *The Ghost's Child* constructs desire as loss/lack that unconsciously (and unknowingly) informs the development of individuated identity: a discourse that continues to inflect contemporary debates related to child-adolescent identity formation in children's literature. Theorizations of 'child' identity still persist in constructing a trajectory of individual maturation toward a normative, assimilated 'adult' identity that occurs through the eventual loss of childhood and the majority of young adult fiction reflects this as a struggle that occurs between the states of childhood and adulthood (see McCallum, 1999, Wilkie-Stibbs, 2008). Loss is closely associated with sadness, and prolonged states of sadness (real or fictionalized) are seen as ultimately detrimental to the subject-sufferer. The Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia depends upon judgments of what constitutes 'normal' and 'abnormal' mourning as well as what constitutes a worthy/notable object to be mourned. 'Normal' mourning, or grief-work, is seen to be the regular reaction to the loss of a loved person or the loss of some abstraction while melancholia is perceived as a failure to properly mourn (Freud, 1917, [1959], p.153). The melancholic subject remains faithful to lost (and therefore equally inaccessible) objects by refusing to renounce their attachment to them and in many cases, says Freud, cannot consciously perceive what has been lost so that melancholia 'is in some way related to an unconscious loss of a love-object' (Freud, p.153). Freud notes that while any definition of melancholia is essentially 'uncertain' and cannot be reduced to any kind of unified pathology, there are similarities between mourning and melancholia which include 'a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in outside world, loss of the capacity to love, and inhibition in all activity' (p.153). The outstanding difference between the two

according to Freud is that the melancholic succumbs to 'an extraordinary fall in self esteem, an impoverishment of the ego on a grand scale' (Freud, p.155).

As a young girl, Matilda 'knew she wasn't lovely... She was no princess from a story book', and spends her youth feeling 'misfitted and out-of-place, like a jigsaw piece cut wrong' (p.38). As an older woman, Matilda becomes a successful eye doctor and appears to live an ordinary life (in the suburbs). However, she never marries or has children and so fundamentally fails to fulfill the requirements of her gendered identity according to the symbolic social order in general and the cultural mores and expectations specific to the time the novel is set. Matilda admits that 'her life had never been mystifying, as she's once girlishly wished', and that 'there were things missing from it that she's expected to have – things other people secured easily, but which she had been left without' (p.171). In these reflective moments, the text draws attention to the role of both the family and the maternal-feminine as it pertains to the concept of a normative adult subjectivity. Melancholic subjectivities are informed by social, cultural and familial ideologies as well as by the institutionalized logic of modern psychoanalysis that underpins western constructions of normal and abnormal subjectivity and the overarching dominance of the 'death-dealing' binaries that constitute the dominant linguistic system of meaning and signification based upon the inside/outside dichotomy. The debilitating and marginalizing impact psychoanalytic theory has had on the construction of individuated identity is challenged by Deleuze and Guattari, who argue that Freudian psychoanalysis '...develops a moralized, familial discourse of mental pathology, linking madness to the half-real, half imaginary dialectic of the Family' (1977, p.50).

The text offers the opportunity to contemplate both the *Freudian psychoanalytic* and the

*Deleuzian philosophical* through the trans-disciplinary approach of Julia Kristeva, whose work provides a 'passage or point of transition' that allows the movement 'from one (social) stratum or space to another' (psychoanalysis and Deleuzian nomadology). Her work provides 'a conduit for the circulation of ideas' that are essentially polarized within a binary system of signification (Grosz, 1995, p.125). Kristeva argues that all subjectivity is fundamentally melancholic based upon a 'repressed and impossible mourning for the maternal' (1989, p.9) and her interrogations into constructions of subjectivity show a particular concern with the violent but necessary split from the mother's body that psychoanalysis posits underpins all human psyche. It is pertinent to note that Kristeva perceives the subject as a 'subject-in-process', whereby subjectivity is a fluid concept, a perpetual process that produces the subject discursively, dialogically and intertextually *in and through the primacy of language*. Matilda's retelling of events to a 'lost child' draws attention to the purportedly essential condition of all individuated subjectivity as predicated upon a primary loss of, and separation from, the (m)other (Kristeva, 1987, 1989, 1995). Psychoanalysis posits the split – splitting off – from the maternal-mother as the precondition for language and *essential* to the construction of an assimilated subjective-identity based upon a recognition of the self/other distinction and a repression of the primary lost (love) object into the unconscious. In this sense, the melancholic subject persistently relives the split within the self through the recurring fantasy of the lost object (Kristeva 1989, pp.3-18).

Psychoanalytic theory is grounded in a system of binary logic, wherein a subject's failure to properly mourn and (eventually) repress the lost object is representative of an unassimilated, rather than an assimilated, identity. Clinically and culturally, melancholy is more often than not viewed as a symptom of, or pathway towards, madness and in extreme cases, death.

Despite the gap or slippage between language and narratives of fictional and material reality, both which shift and vary across spatio-temporal and socio-cultural dimensions, melancholic subjectivity is essentially viewed as unassimilated and abject: the connotations of madness are not so subtly referenced in Matilda's childhood name Maddy. As a child, Matilda is an 'outsider' relegated to the borders of cultural acceptance: 'Mostly other rejected her on the grounds that she was strange and strangeness amongst children is despised. In truth, Maddy *was* strange, the way an octopus, or anemone, or goat's eye is strange' (p.22). The dialogic structure of the narrative combined with the friendships and conversations Matilda has with a variety of mythological and fantastic creatures disturbs the inside/outside (self-other) dichotomy that, within a binary system of signification, is seen as essential to the production of individuated identity and the maintenance of hierarchical categories of difference.

Matilda's attachment to, and identification with, the ghostly configurations that inflect her story highlight Elisabeth Bronfen's claim that '...the liminal space between life and death inspires stories and produces fictions' that rely on 'a preservation and production of dead figures' (1992, p.349). In *The Outside Child* (2008) Christine Wilkie-Stibbs foregrounds how representations of otherness, both 'in and out of the book', impact individual and collective social reality through the construction of liminal and/or interstitial subject positions and the production of borderland spaces, which in turn, produce the figure she refers to as the 'borderlander' (pp.2-5). She provides a compelling and convincing analysis of the ways in which boundary-crossers are constituted as *borderland* figures, located at the margins or edges of society where, as Mary Douglas (1982) has shown, all 'things' perceived as troubling and dangerous are exiled (Wilkie-Stibbs 2008). The borderlander is relegated to, or dwells in, both

literal and metaphorical spaces defined as liminal, interstitial, or marginal, and appears, says Wilkie-Stibbs, 'to haunt the very boundaries of categories' (2008, pp.3-4). The narrative constructs Matilda as a 'boundary crosser' who lives an interiorized life based upon recollections that move seamlessly between the real and the imagined. Matilda tells of returning from her last day at boarding school and realizing she was 'neither a little girl nor a lady' but something '*inbetween*' and unsure what to do next, she feels a 'lake-like emptiness, the stillness of a held breath' (p.26). These 'feelings' manifest quite dramatically during the two most traumatic events that occur in Matilda's young adult life: the loss of both her unborn child and her lover, Feather. The point is reached where her experiences of alienation and 'aloneness', and the multiple losses and the absences they leave, produce a boy-child who arrives in her lounge-room on the day the story begins, which is also the day she dies.

The melancholic is often described or referred to as ghost-like, due to their propensity to live in and look back to the past (Pile 2005); and ghostly identifications function as a site of meaning and comfort to Matilda for the course of her life. Pile (2005) points out that while ghosts are representative of death and the past (loss and memory), they are also inexplicably connected to the physical world and the anxieties of the living. Matilda's attachment to memories, rituals and visual/physical signifiers or reminders of loss is apparent when as an older woman, she returns to her family home and unpacks a 'box full of knick-knacks': 'For a moment, gazing at these relics, everything was keenly real, and happened only yesterday' (p.168). It is through Matilda's memory of specific events, places and things she experiences as a child, adolescent and young adult that the story tracks loss and absence: the absence of a mother's love and a father's attention, to the shattering losses of an unborn child and her lover. The ambivalence of any

type of differentiation between mourning and melancholia is noted by Kristeva, who says that even if...

*...temporary sadness and melancholy stupor are clinically and nosologically different, they are nevertheless supported by intolerance for object loss and the signifier's failure to insure a compensating way out of the states of withdrawal in which the subject takes refuge to the point of inaction (pretending to be dead) or even suicide. (Kristeva 1995, p.10).*

When Matilda 'loses' her unborn child, the *intolerance for the object loss* manifests as a suicide attempt, and a subsequent period when she 'stopped thinking about anything' and dwelt in a 'thoughtless white box' for 'weeks and weeks' (p.112). When Feather leaves she goes on a journey to the Island of Stillness, indicative of another phase of stasis and/or aimless wandering. While notions of stasis and the inability to 'speak' are accepted elements of the grieving process, when or if prolonged they serve as indicators of 'madness' and a subject's unassimilated location within the symbolic order. Given that the narrative begins in Matilda's old age, when all these events are long in the past, the novel implies that her determination to cling to sadness has moved beyond the original (primary) causes. Her recollections of the 'sorrows that bleached her life' (p.145) and 'hung inside her like old lace' (p.171) suggest that she 'persists' in a life-long love of sadness itself, such that she embodies an entire personal history given over to melancholia.

Martha Westwater (2000) utilizes Kristevan theory to explore how discourses of melancholia, anxiety and despair in YA fiction correlate with experiences of melancholy-depression as a lived condition of existence. Based upon sociological research, she points out how the development of despair and

suicidal personalities in children and adolescents is found to be more prevalent among those who 'live in non-supportive environments and/or lack intimacy and affection' (Westwater, 2008, p.5). Psychological landscapes of alienation and melancholy pervade the protagonist's childhood and Matilda's conversations (dialogues) with ghosts and other mythic creatures are suggestive that 'disjunctive and/or dysfunctional intersubjective relations between self and other' contribute to the 'internal fragmentation and internalization' of loss in the melancholic-depressed subject (McCallum, 1999, p.75). This view is based upon Post-Freudian theorizations of subjectivity that focus on the importance of language in the construction of an individuated subjectivity and posit the subject as 'dialogically constructed' based upon the intersubjective relationships it forms with others (McCallum 1999, pp.3-20). In a detailed analysis of the ideological construction of subjectivity in YA fiction, Robyn McCallum (1999) utilizes Bakhtin's concept of dialogism as 'the dialogic orientation of discourses toward other discourses and toward an addressee (listener or interlocutor)' in order to explore 'the interaction between various textually constructed ideological positions' (p.5, 1999). She argues that the dialogic forms an important part of children's fiction and is constructed and represented through dialogue with others as well as through social discourses, ideologies and practices (McCallum, 1996, pp. 3-22). The narrative's dialogic structure opens up the space between the young and the old (life and death) through the conversation between an old woman and a young boy, while the reader is positioned to identify with Matilda as both an old woman and a young, adolescent girl. The text questions the validity of relegating experiences to (or defining them by) the aged categories of 'child', 'adolescent' and 'adult' and instead puts forward an image of adolescent subjectivity that accords with Kristeva's description of adolescence as 'less a developmental stage than an open psychic

structure: a structure that 'opens itself to that which has been repressed' and 'allows the psychic re-organization of the individual' (1995, p.136). Matilda's story is one in which the 'adolescent imaginary...revitalizes the depressive position' through a 'free phantasmatic development in which fantasies facilitate an alteration of the drives and signs of written and spoken language' (Kristeva, 1995, p.138). As an older woman, Matilda still voyages with 'the ghost of her father' (p.166) and converses with the West Wind, indicative of the ability to access and 'revitalize' the adolescent imaginary as an adult.

Matilda's life (story) entails a series of border transgressions instigated through a persistent and nostalgic longing for what is lost or perceived as lost, and her psychological isolation is reinforced through the liminal physical environments she inhabits, both physically and mentally. As a child, Matilda Victoria Adelaide lives along a 'pure white coastline' (p.16) where she spends most of her time wandering the beach or roaming the hills and her closest relationships are with the creatures and landscapes that inhabit the distinct Australian landscape (p.23). The state of Victoria is also home to a cave that, according to Aboriginal stories, houses a spirit known as the nargun. Introduced to young non-indigenous readers in Patricia Wrightson's *The Nargun and the Stars* (1974), the nargun is the first daughter of the Universe. A female stone-like creature, born of the stars and older than human civilization itself, she tumbled to earth as the world exploded in a violent image of displacement and separation. This dreamtime spirit appears in the novel as Matilda's closest childhood friend and confidante, and often 'rises from the banks of the billabong to trudge through the bushland beside her' (p.47). The nargun preys on travelers (as Matilda's story tells us she is), but more importantly, its power is to turn any weapon back on its owner, so it is no surprise that Matilda, who considers the nargun her friend and protector, 'folds her black

secrets against its solid black heart and carried their weight for her' (p.47). Matilda's melancholy, like the nargun's ferocity, is arguably her weapon against the hurt the world deals, especially to travellers who find what they seek only to lose it again.

Kristeva argues that women need the paternal symbolic in order to protect themselves from the lack of distinction from the mother and that 'by representing the unsymbolised, the lost maternal object as a source of sorrow and nostalgia and ritual veneration, the melancholy imagination ...gives itself a protection against collapsing into asymbolism'(1987, p.165). Matilda's own mother, is distant and awkward and appears as 'blazing, reposeful, chilling and torrid' (p.20), an unloving woman who views the world as an ugly place where 'everyone is out to snatch what they can' (p.68). This description directly precedes the nargun's introduction as a snarling, growling figure, who advises Matilda that 'if no-one cares for you, care for no-one in return' (p.24). While the nargun's ferociousness is a source of comfort and protection to Matilda, she is frightened of her mother who 'seemed to teeter forever on the crumbly threshold of fury' (p.19). Both figures may be read in terms of the monstrous, feminine-maternal that psychoanalysis posits must be completely disavowed and repressed in order for a subject to take up their proper place within the symbolic social order.

The nargun, however, as a figure of marginalization, alienation and melancholy also connects Matilda's psychological, interiorized life to Deleuze's notion of 'Absolute Memory' as that which, 'doubles the present and the outside and is one with forgetting, since it is itself endlessly forgotten and reconstituted' (1986, p.107). Melancholy as an event forms part of an infinite series of transitive relations that are always related to other events through the perpetual folding, unfolding and refolding of the symbolic, the social, the subjective and the material. Deleuze (1993) posits melancholy

as a process of ‘folding, unfolding and refolding’ that ‘release[s] the subject from the melancholy of the unrepresentable’ because ‘within the movement of the fold [...] the subject contains the world’ (1993, pp.59-60). Matilda’s story traverses symbolic landscapes and imagines spaces that exemplify the ‘non-external outside and the non-internal inside’ or the *twisted, folded* relation that Deleuze posits as ‘what cannot be thought and yet must be thought’ and is the boundary, or threshold between rational and non-rational thought (1993 pp.59-60). Throughout Matilda’s story, the reader is invited to contemplate the fold between the real and imaginary: ‘the heat of the leviathan’s roar, and the warmth between a cat’s paw’ Matilda ‘had conversed with the wind and wiped a soldier’s tears. She had made people see and seen herself in the sea’ (p.178). The ghosts that traverse Matilda’s life coincide with traumatic experiences of alienation, loss and grief and accord with Steve Pile’s psycho-geographical approach to the phantasmagoria of modern cities, in which he posits that ghosts exist and/or appear ‘at the threshold of the personal and the social, trafficking feelings and memories across borders that are never clear and never simply open or closed’ (Pile, 2005, p.139). Thus, he suggests, to be alert to the presence of ghosts requires a particular way of seeing (2005 p.139). Matilda’s lifelong attachment to ghosts and her adult commitment to the restoration of sight speak of a need to ‘see’ both the visible and invisible. According to Deleuze, melancholy, is the *trope of thresholds* and is constituted in and by the movement of the ‘fold’ as the principle that both informs and erases the ‘inside and outside’ and is the interstice, or fissure between acts of ‘seeing and speaking’. The movement of the fold is constructed, enabled and embodied though ‘the disjunction between the self and the world’ (Deleuze 1988, p.87).

The text complicates the inside/outside boundary that separates life and death, self and other in ways that speak to Deleuze’s claim that

the process of creation often involves ‘the metaphorical death of the subject as a condition of possibility of becoming other than the present self’ (1994, pp.23-29). Death is a constant presence/absence that affects individual subjectivity and the wider cultural milieu both physically and psychically as Pile’s (1995) approach to grief work and the ways in which it manifests in both objects and landscapes. In her thesis on abjection, Kristeva states that it is the corpse that is ‘ultimately loathsome in its separateness... something that if acknowledged has the power to annihilate me’ (1982, pp.2-3). The corpse as the ‘border between life and death’ is the abject other, the ‘jettisoned’ and excluded object that ‘draws one towards the place where meaning collapses’, (1982, pp.2-4). The psychoanalytic implications of the abject-other as the *stranger within*, are played out through the ghostly figures that fold into Matilda, via her story, and on a number of occasions, accompany her to the ‘very borders of her own existence’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.2). Melancholy and ghosts are often associated with particular landscapes that are perceived as spaces/places of loneliness and loss. The narrative draws explicitly and implicitly on universal tropes of chaos and oblivion as well as national mythologies and traditions that construct the Australian landscape as inherently melancholic – as both haunting and haunted.

When Matilda miscarries, she dives ‘inside herself’ (p.97) and afterwards attempts to drown herself in a pond (p.99). She recovers, only for Feather to leave her alone and isolated in the enclosed (confined) environment of the pine forest. She sails the ocean ‘without maps and compasses’, and ‘crosses the horizon’ only to find and then leave Feather in a place where there was nothing she could see that was ‘worth waking up for’ (p.145). Deleuze (1993) posits that melancholy as movement (variations in speed) produces an intermediary space that allows the release of rational thought through an exploration of ‘the limits of unreason’. Melancholy ‘unfolds the emptiness and the

plenitude of signs' so that 'memory is the necessity of renewal' (Deleuze, 1986, p.108). The vast array of symbolic myths and metaphors that dominate western representations of life and death is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Matilda's journey to find Feather, which evokes Robert Burton's (1621) definition of the melancholic subject as one 'adrift upon a vast ocean of madness'. Matilda's journey, like her melancholy, is shaped by representational images of movement and forms that equate with flows, flux, waves, surges, powerful forces, stagnation and stasis. The trajectory of a boat, says Deleuze, converts the most distant point into the nearest, while at the same time it is the 'central chamber one fills with oneself: the boat as interior of the exterior' (1986, p.123). The intertextual imagery used to describe Matilda's sea journey finds resonance in Deleuze's intriguing analysis of the fold of the Inside and Outside as it applies to 'Being':

*Force always come from...an outside that is farther away than any form of exteriority...the line of the outside itself...like Melville's line, whose two ends remain free, which envelop every boat in its complex twists and turns...and always runs the risk of sweeping some-one away with it...But however terrible this line may be, it is a line of life that can no longer be gauged by relations between forces, one that carries man [sic] beyond terror ... at the place of the fissure...the center of the cyclone...*

(Deleuze, 1995, p.122).

Matilda's sea journey goes 'against all logic' (p.136) and she recalls how 'the lunacy of her situation terrified her' when she finds herself 'floating nowhere, in the centre of nothing' (p.123).

Matilda witnesses a battle between two implacable foes, a Kraken and a Leviathan, (the ancient and the classical respectively). This

provides an example of how marginalized subjectivities simultaneously resist and are bound by 'the gravitational pull of old and established values' (Braidotti, 2005, p.2). The life and death struggle creates a huge swirling vortex that threatens to drag Matilda into oblivion; however, she is rescued by Zephyr, the West Wind, who takes her to the Island of Stillness where she 'sees and 'speaks' to Feather a final time. Matilda's expression of loss merges with Feather's absence (from her life and the remainder of the narrative) when she finds Feather content to dwell in a barren place where nothing moves and there is 'a pallor of strange deadness' (p.142). It appears that Feather has committed suicide and the event is recalled in terms of Kristeva's image of suicide as 'a merging of sadness and, beyond it, with that impossible love, never reached, always elsewhere, such as the promise of nothingness, of death' (1989, pp.12-13). However the narrative is underpinned by multiple images of death which also accord with Deleuze's claim that:

*[D]eath becomes multiplied and differentiated in order to bestow on life the particular features, and consequently the truths, which life believes arise from resisting death. What remains then if not to pass through all these deaths preceding the great limit of death itself, deaths which even afterwards continue*  
(1988, p.95).

The text merges Matilda's creative act of memory with Feather's suicidal melancholy in the intermediary, *inbetween* spaces engendered by, and through, dualistic structures of thinking and meaning-making.

Matilda survives the emotional abandonment of her parents, the shattering loss of her unborn child and Feather's departure from her life. As an old(er) woman she lives in a 'sweet-natured house in the suburbs' where every few years she 'embarks on a sea journey', mostly with 'no



company except for the ghost of her father' (p.169). Matilda's story is one that to reactivates the *depressive position of adolescence* and shows an 'acute awareness of the non-fixity of boundaries' (Braidotti, 1994, p.23), through the blurring of boundaries between the physical and the psychical, and the discourses that construct and express them.

Melancholy and depression are not just emotive states of being but function as powerful exterior forces that are asserted upon and enacted out by the individual. Matilda's life is dominated by desiring/seeking the love and affection of her father and Feather and feeling abandoned by them in ways that ensure all her energy is directed outwards, towards an idealized masculine subject that forms the locus of her conscious desire. Fundamentally, the representation of melancholia is structured by and through the institutionalized and naturalized codes of gender differentiation and the patriarchal structuring of difference. Jennifer Raddon (2000) argues that a distinct gendering of melancholia emerged during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, whereby 'mental disorder in general and certain disorders in particular, including melancholia, were increasingly diagnosed and represented as 'women's complaints' (Raddon, 2000, p.18). Matilda and Feather are 'two cheerful souls racked by melancholy' (p.90). However, it is Feather who is romanticized through the narrative's poetic language as 'a wondrous being' who speaks to birds, dines on raw fish and is aligned with the transcendent notion of 'eternal peace'. Matilda is essentially associated with the ordinary, the mundane and the immanence of 'old age' which includes becoming smelly (p.9) and absent minded (p.170)

The conclusion presents a dual image of Matilda's death which seems to point to the overarching binary system that stratifies language and the world according to hierarchies

of meaning and gives weight to Kristeva's view that '...beauty emerges as the admirable face of loss, transforming it in order to make it live" (1995, p.99). The image of an old lady in a 'stuffy room', with a dog and a ghost and a heater puffing out poisonous fumes so that 'the air that had filled her sails and kept her alive was now draining her strength and shutting her eyes' (pp.177-178) is evocative of Kristeva's abject: 'an entire body falling beyond the limit': 'the 'I who no longer expels, but is expelled' (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 3-4). Matilda's aged and decaying (dying) self, is 'death without make-up or mask' (Kristeva, 1982, p.4). This is juxtaposed against the final image of Matilda stepping 'beyond the door' (threshold) with the boy and her dog, climbing aboard a wooden boat and sailing away on an 'emerald ocean' (p.179), and as the reader closes the final page, the melancholic, the abject and the beautiful, literally fold into each other.

The *movement* between things that is enacted throughout the novel by Matilda's continued crossing of real and imagined borders, presents melancholy as a perpetual motion of flux and flows, connections and disconnections, conjunctions and disjunctions, patterns of resonance and dissonance. The narrative is one that navigates loss within a complex system of meaning and signification and offers a critique of the ongoing influence of (Freudian) psychoanalytic discourses that construct the melancholic subject as essentially unstable and unassimilated.

The Kristevan notion of abjection allows for a post-structuralist consideration of how binary language systems and categories of difference construct melancholy and melancholic subjectivity in terms of borderlands and boundary-crossings. Despite the temporal distancing of the narrative setting, the text engages with the (gendered and hierarchical) signifying and a-signifying practices to which contemporary subjects, both real and fictionalized, continue to be inextricably bound and which construct both melancholy and

adolescence as ‘inbetween’ states (of existence) According to Deleuze, ‘*Between* things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to another and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away’ (1987, p.28). *The Ghost’s Child* positions the reader to consider melancholy as an event that constitutes a ‘dynamic relations of forces’ that have the power ‘to affect others and to be affected (by others again)’ (Deleuze 1988, p.71).

The text disturbs the boundaries of conventional reality and traditional categorizations of assimilated (acceptable) and unassimilated (unacceptable) identities by challenging the reader to consider how constructions of subjectivity continue to marginalize and oppress specific identity categories through the associated negative representations of madness, melancholy and adolescence as abject subject positions.

## REFERENCES

- Braidotti, Rosi (1994) *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York, Columbia University Press.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth (1992) *Over Her Dead Body: Death, femininity and the aesthetic*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1988) *Foucault*. London, Athlone Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_(1993) *The Fold: Leibnitz and the Baroque*. London, Athlone Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix (1977) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. New York, Viking Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_(1983) *On the Line*, New York, Semiotext(e).
- \_\_\_\_\_(1989) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London, Continuum.
- \_\_\_\_\_(1994) *What is Philosophy?* New York, Columbia University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_(1997) *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press.
- Eng, David (2000) ‘Melancholy in the Late Twentieth Century’ in *Signs* 25, 4: 1275-1281.
- Freud, Sigmund (1959/1917) ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ in *Sigmund Freud: Collected Paper. Volume IV*. Trans. Joan Riviere. New York, Basic Books, pp.152-170.
- \_\_\_\_\_(1959/1919) ‘The Uncanny’ in *Sigmund Freud: Collected Papers, Volume IV*. Trans. Joan Riviere. New York, Basic Books, pp. 368-407.
- Gallop, Jane (1982) *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter’s Seduction*. London, MacMillan.
- Grosz, Elizabeth (1995) *Space, Time and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies*. St Leonards, Allen & Unwin.
- Hartnett, Sonya (2007) *The Ghost’s Child*. Penguin Group
- \_\_\_\_\_(2007) ‘Seven Impossible Things Before Breakfast’ online interview <http://blaine.org/sevenimpossiblethings/?p=701> (Accessed, 19 February).
- James, Kathryn (2006) ‘Over her Dead Body: Expelling the Monstrous-feminine in *Touching Earth Lightly*, in *Papers: Explorations into Children’s Literature*, 16, 1: 25-32.
- Kristeva, Julia (1977) *Polylogue*. Paris, Seuil.
- \_\_\_\_\_(1982) *Powers of Horror: Essays in Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York, Columbia University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_(1989) *Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia*, (trans. Leon S. Roudiez) New York, Columbia University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_(1995) 'The Adolescent Novel' in *New Maladies of the Soul*. Trans. Ross Guberman. New York, Columbia University Press.



McCallum, Robyn (1996) 'Other Selves: Subjectivity and the *Doppelganger* in Australian Adolescent Fiction', in C. Bradford (ed) *Writing the Australian Child: Texts and Contexts in Fictions for Children*. Nedlands, University of Western Australia Press, pp. 17-36.

\_\_\_\_\_(1999) *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity*. New York & London, Garland Publishing.

Parr, Adrian (ed) (2005) *The Deleuze Dictionary*. New York, Columbia University Press.

Pile, Steve (2005) *Real Cities: Modernity, Space and the Phantasmagoria of City Life*. London, Sage.

Radden, Jennifer (2000) *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Trites, Roberta (1997) *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels*. Iowa City, University of Iowa Press.

Westwater, Martha (2000) *Giant Despair meets Hopeful: Kristevan Readings in Adolescent Fiction*. Edmonton, The University of Alberta Press.

Wilkie-Stibbs, Christine (2008) *The Outside Child: In and Out of the Book*. New York, Routledge.

Wrightson, Patricia (1973) *The Nargun and the Stars*, Ringwood, Victoria.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Michelle Preston is in the final year of her Phd in Children's Literature at Deakin University (Geelong). Her thesis draws from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and explores configurations of (juvenile) nomadism in the YA fictions of Sonya Hartnett.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Bullen and Dr. Elizabeth Parsons (Deakin University) for all their help and support.