



**Out there, back then: chronotopes of presence and absence in  
Outback Australia**

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## Abstract

The remote rurality encompassed in the image of ‘the Outback’ holds a central place in collective imaginings of Australia. Depicted as ‘out there’ and ‘back then’, the Outback evokes a place temporally and spatially closer to Australia’s settler-colonial frontier. With links to both the origin story of the Australian nation and the violence of settler-colonial invasion, the image of the Outback as frontier has been mobilised in contemporary debates about belonging and rights to land in Australia. Much of the scholarly writing in Australian studies has highlighted a sense of alienation among settler descendent Australians. However, for the most part, such studies are based on cultural products such as literature and rarely a sustained engagement with the life worlds of those Outback people who associate their identity with images of the frontier.

Based on ethnographic research conducted in the Outback region of North West Queensland, this thesis examines how residents in the district draw upon and construct time-space narratives (chronotopes) to express and legitimate their affective and economic relationships with place. In particular, the thesis engages with questions of how non-Indigenous residents imagine time and place in relation to settler-colonial narratives, and how people negotiate collective notions of belonging through chronotopes. I pay particular attention to the role of material and symbolic presences and absences in such chronotopes. I argue that expressions of belonging in North West Queensland involve tensions between a variety of presences and absences which take the form of ruin, haunting, and excess.

The thesis introduction situates the study in relation to anthropological literature and is divided between theoretical and methodological material. Thereafter the thesis is split into two parts. Part One of the thesis charts the settler-colonial frontier chronotope of the region, and how early settlers’ visions for the future have played out in published histories, commemorative ceremonies, popular accounts of the region’s past, and public memorials. Through studies of race relations, pastoral work, and perceptions of environmental phenomena such as drought and flood, chapters in this section examine the ways history and identity in the region have been written and performed. This section demonstrates that despite the failure of modernist frontier dreams, which envisioned settlers as coming to ‘tame’ the wilderness and replace Indigenous people, settler-colonial narratives continue to play a role in contemporary residents’ perceptions of time and space. The ruins of settler-colonial dreams of progress are physically manifest in the landscape and in reflections of cultural

identity as shifting presences and absences, which residents re-assemble into new narrative forms in order to legitimate their sense of belonging in place. Specifically, non-Indigenous residents have adopted a version of the frontier narrative to position themselves as skilled knowledge-holders of a world of excess. However, because of what they disavow, such narratives are filled with gaps and silences.

Part Two of the thesis engages with the ways in which groups of people in the region negotiate their sense of emplaced belonging. Chapters in this section examine the role of embodiment, nostalgia, and interaction with ruins in constructing narratives of belonging. This section shows that while residents express meaningful connections to place, forms of presence and absence emerge as affective charges that challenge dominant chronotopes and unsettle senses of belonging.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that a shared sense of belonging between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can begin to emerge if one enters into the physical and metaphorical ruins of the past to engage with times, places, and belongings as mutable and multiple. Attention to presence and absence, I contend, reveals a potential to mature debates about belonging in post-settler Australia by engaging with the complexities of personhood in time and space as imaginings of the past and hopes for the future. This thesis thereby contributes to contemporary discussions about multicultural relations in post-settler societies, advances anthropological perspectives of settler colonialism, and proposes a theory of chronotopes of presence and absence.