

“Us circling round and round”: The Track of Narrative and the Ghosts of Lost Children in *Such is Life*

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I compare tracking to reading a letter written in a good business hand . . . You must no more confine yourself to actual tracks than you would expect to find each letter correctly formed. You must just lift the general meaning as you go.
Joseph Furphy, *Such is Life* (189)

There is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made.
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (4)

Tracks, navigating and mapping are fundamental in Joseph Furphy’s turn-of-the-century text *Such is Life*. The diary entries, which provide the reader with guidelines for following each chapter, commence with references to time (dates), company (people) and space (site[s]), which set up a sense of place.¹ The opening of the novel, after the preamble and first date entry, involves a description of the environment and then a positioning, more or less, of the narrator, Tom Collins, in space: “Overhead, the sun blazing wastefully and thanklessly through a rarefied atmosphere; underfoot the hot, black clay, thirsting for spring rain . . . between sky and earth, a solitary wayfarer, wisely lapt in philosophic torpor” (2). This navigation is explicitly and repeatedly conflated with the track of narrative itself: *Such is Life* is a narrative about narrative. The way that place guides the somewhat discursive opening is not incidental, but central. The passage of Collins through the Riverina is the track of the story. This intersection between narrative and place is made most explicit in chapter five, where the lost child stories are narrations about reading and writing; reading the marks left on the ground and environment, and tracing the story of the child, which is legible to the trackers.

Collins, as narrator, forswears the romance of plot for a chronicle of realism at the opening. When he deviates from his promised record of each day in a

single week after the first day, on the grounds of the alleged un-narratability of “the conversation of a group of sheep drovers”, he promises the absence of a continuous track:

The thread of narrative being thus purposely broken, no one of these short and simple analyses can have any connection with another—a point on which I congratulate the judicious reader and the no less judicious writer; for the former is thereby tacitly warned against any expectation of plot or denouement, and so secured against disappointment, whilst the latter is relieved from the (to him) impossible task of investing prosaic people with romance, and a generally haphazard economy with poetical justice. (52)

This denial of the linear is one of the running jokes of the novel. Collins consistently produces plots where there are none, as with the romance he divines for Alf Morris, by “an intransmissible power of deduction” (170). The broken thread of realist narrative, on the other hand, consistently and repeatedly knits up into plots to which Collins is oblivious, as is the case with Morris’ real romance. As Furphy pointed out in his anonymous review/advertisement in the *Bulletin*: “Underneath this obvious dislocation of anything resembling continuous narrative, run several undercurrents of plot, manifest to the reader, though ostensibly unnoticed by the author” (Barnes, *Writer* 130). The fragmentary and discursive narrative resembles and refers to Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* amongst many intertexts (Osland 227, Croft), although the individuals in Furphy’s tale ride real horses, rather than hobby horses, and there is no handy map of narrative. *Such is Life* is excessively referential and full of narratives whose “embedding evokes mystery, the mystery of hermeneusis” (Paxton 127). Furphy’s text is a haunted and haunting fiction, and the haunting lies in its narrative structure. Julian Croft points out that *Such is Life* “cannot be pinned down into one meaning, [it] endlessly retreats before you like a mirage” (3). The ostensible task set the reader, nevertheless, is to track the line of narrative, to navigate through a confusing landscape of hints and clues to locate meaning and sequence.

The conduct or misconduct of the story, identified as realist, modernist, postmodernist, picaresque and more (Croft 4, Lever 33-40), rests on navigating the country and its obstacles.² Large stretches of the novel involve intensive discussion of routes, places and campsites as well as arguments and opinions about borders and boundaries.³ Collins introduces most of the characters encountered in spatial terms according to where they have been, where they are going, how he knows them, and his own geographical intersections with them.

As in any travel narrative, Collins’ progress and its failures form the story. Arguably, however, *Such is Life* is an extreme version of the common connection between the protagonist’s travel and the narration. A great deal of the track of the story is mistrack, back-track, re-track; the novel is full of lost or mistaken individuals, and searches for people, bullocks, places, all within a space which is intermittently unreadable or mis-readable.

Central to any understanding of the novel’s narrative is the sequence of lost child stories told in chapter five. These stories not only relate multi-level tales of tracking lost children, but also trace a plot and follow a narrative trail that emphasises the method of reading and hearing; of how meaning is made and recognised and delivered; of reader and writer following the same trail.⁴ The three tales rehearse the frustrations and failures of both narrative and tracking. They play with the possible sequences of romantic and realist narrative, and something else. They also function as a kind of map of the novel as a whole.

The first lost child story is a practised tale, and the prospective hearers or tracers attempt to frustrate Steve Thompson’s desire to tell: “Thompson told a story well. I verily believe he used to practise the accomplishment mentally, as he sauntered along beside his team. He knew his own superiority here; his acquaintances knew it too, and they knew that he knew it” (186-87). The assembled bushmen attempt to deprive Thompson of the chance to display narrative skill, while they practice the fine art of not being an audience, not hearing, and not revealing any enthusiasm for the track of narrative: “The dignified indifference of the camp remained unruffled. Thompson might tell his yarn, or keep it to himself” (186),⁵ Collins comments.

Thompson’s story is the tale of the search for Mary O’Halloran. It is introduced through a discussion of the primitive nature of Bob, a man whose ability to read the landscape is represented largely as a negative trait, rather than as a skill. This encoding brings him the closest to indigeneity, which is represented here in similar terms, namely as the possession and expression of an incomprehensible primitivism. At the last moment, the desperate search for “a blackfellow” (190) turns up an Aboriginal woman, whose tracking is described in this way:

She was . . . blind of one eye; but she knew her business, and she was on the job for life or death. She picked-up the track at a glance, and run it like a bloodhound. We found that the little girl had n’t kept the sheep-pads as we expected. Generally she went straight till something blocked her; then she’d go straight again, at another angle. Very rarely—hardly ever—we could see what signs [she] was

following; but she was all right. Uncivilised . . . Nobody could yabber with her but Bob; and he kept close to her all the time. (191)

This woman is represented as having no skills, no language, and a somewhat variable level of humanity. As the successful reader of traces here, and as a representative of an extensive tradition of “Black trackers” in lost child stories (Torney), she casts doubt on the possibility of non-Aborigines reading the landscape and, by extension, of settlers being capable of reading those narratives of place and nation, or national fiction, in which Mary is figured as future heroine.

Mary’s voice is the voice of the coming “perfect Young-Australian”, (73) “that quaint dialect [which is] silent so soon” (198). Her loss is the loss of the future of the “virgin continent”, the “link between a squalid Past and a nobler Future” (198). The inability to track the voice, to locate the core of Furphy’s paeon to Australia as the virgin land of possibility and future, is an inability to place that imagined self.

The bush in this first story, then, deceives the searchers and becomes a space without direction and without the possibility of orientation. Thompson says:

[I] heard a far-away call that sounded like ‘Dad-dee!’ It seemed to be straight in front of me; and I went for it like mad. Had n’t gone far when Williamson, the narangy, was alongside me.

‘Hear anything?’ says I.

‘Yes,’ says he. ‘Sounded like “Daddy![]” I think it was out here.’

‘I think it was more this way,’ says I; and each of us went his own way.

‘When I got to where I thought was about the place, I listened again, and searched round everywhere . . . Then another call came through the stillness of the scrub, faint, but beyond mistake, “Dad-dee-e!” There was n’t a trace of terror in the tone; it was just the voice of a worn-out child, deliberately calling with all her might. Seemed to be something less than half-a-mile away, but I could n’t fix on the direction; and the scrub was very thick.’ (191-92)

The other searchers have also heard the call but believe it is in a different direction again. The real tracker, the Aboriginal woman, does not leave the track.

The second “bush-lost child” narrative (Torney), Saunders’ story, is also about a failure to locate haunting voices in the bush. Saunders’ narrative, rather than being “practised” like Thompson’s, goes repeatedly off the track. He opens with the comment that words and calls can prevent the discovery of the lost child; he has in fact interrupted Thompson’s narrative trail with

an exclamation of his own, which he explains: “Tell you what made me interrupt you, Thompson, when I foun’ fault with singin’-out after lost kids . . . Instigation o’ many a pore little (child) perishin’ unknownst” (194). By extension, words intervene in the detection of the meaning of his tale. As a trail his narrative is meandering: “No (adj.) tracks” as he says of the child (195). Saunders must be shepherded, driven back to the narrative from various excursions.

The heading off and rounding up of Saunders’ story is suitable to the men he is with, bullock drivers, fencers, boundary riders, men familiar with shepherding and policing boundaries.⁶ They drive him through to his destination. His interrupted deviations from the line of narrative include ostensibly irrelevant descriptions of a fence, a fencer, a deceptively good horse—“you’d pass her by without looking at her” (195)—a tree feller, an attempt to recollect the name of a sheep drover and the possible fate of another sheep drover. All of these narrative digressions away from the track feed into the theme of tracking, reading signs and containing. The method of driving Saunders is by sequential interjections of death, “he’s gone aloft, like the rest” (196), a natural conclusion to a realist plot. The subject of the digression is dead, hence it/he can’t be spoken about or produced: back to trailing the living child.

In between deviations Saunders describes the haunting voice of the lost child:

“I hitches myself up on a big ole black log that was layin’ about a chain past the [child’s] tracks, an’ I set there for a minit, thinkin like (sheol.)” . . .

“I begun to fancy I could hear the whimper of a kid, far away. ‘Magination, thinks I. Lis’ns fit to break my (adj.) neck. Hears it agen. Seemed to come from the bank o’ the river. Away I goes: hunts roun’; lis’ns; calls “Hen’ree!”; lis’ns again. Not a sound.” (195)

As in the previous search, the voice of the lost child is initially untraceable. The other two searchers present cannot even hear it at the same time as Saunders:

“Oh that ain’t the kid, you (adj.) fool!” says they, lookin’ as wise as Solomon, an’ not lettin’-on they could n’t hear it. But for an’ all they parted an’ rode roun’ an’ roun’, as slow as they could crawl, stoppin’ every now an’ agen, an’ listening for all they was worth. (195)

As a narrative track, this one is reduced. The child is not moving and leaving a trail. Instead, the child is trapped, still, and the narrative keeps circling back on itself in the same way the search does. The narrator is called back to his

story by indifferent voices and the undercurrent in the story is the wordless but meaningful whimpering of the lost child. The ghostly voice of the lost child haunting the searchers turns out to be embedded in the very materials of the bush like the child, Henry, who is stuck in the log Saunders has been seated on: Henry, and the point of the story, have to be cut free. The core of the bush amplifies the sound and, as in the story of Mary, makes it impossible to tell the source of the sounds, the location of the speaker. Meaning is trapped in the wood itself.⁷

Of course, much of the driving and droving of bullocks in the novel ends up with impounding. In much the same way, meaning here is contained and limited, and Saunders' excursions can be seen as anarchic and freeing; transgressive rather than wandering. Henry is located alive and is extracted from the bush, so the story has a brief moment of closure. At the very end of the tale, however, Henry's whereabouts are again unknown: "He left his ole man three year ago, to travel with a sheep drover", Saunders says in his final meander about the whereabouts of Henry, but at the very end of the story Collins declares this shepherd dead, so the boy is again "lost" (196).

The final story, Stevenson's, is, and is about, the unfinished story, the narrative without an ending. It is the tale of the disappearance of Stevenson's brother and it opens with a map of three possible narrative trails:

Bad enough to lose a youngster for a day or two, and find him alive and well; worse, beyond comparison, when he's found dead; but the most fearful thing of all is for a youngster to be lost in the bush, and never found, alive or dead. That's what happened to my brother Eddie, when he was about eight year old. (196)

What is to be done when no closure is possible? Like Saunders' narrative the story circles, but not productively to find the voice/child.

The search is not even the circling with direction of the O'Halloran search, in which Mary "kept a fairly straight course, except when she was blocked by porcupine or supple-jack; then she would swerve off, and keep another middling straight line" (189), although "Bob was continually losing the track; and us circling round and round in front" (190). The search for Eddie Stevenson is described in terms of fruitless circling, the bush full of searchers, the petering out of the search, "till no one was left but my father" (197), and finally the father locked into an endless search and cycle of grief. In the previous story death is the ending to these kinds of deviations from the main track, but in this story the absence of proof of death makes such an ending impossible. The narrative of family and property does not come to an end so much as it disintegrates: the mother ends her own story;

the father dwindles out; the children are distributed to an uncle each; the property goes “to wreck” (197); and Stevenson is left searching.

At the opening of this story, Stevenson reveals that he has been re-telling the tale to himself ever since the events: “I’ve been thinking over it every night for these five-and-twenty years” (197). He too is trapped in the narrative, a kind of endless return of the unrepressed, unable to escape the story.⁸ In fact, the story is represented as inescapable. His tone alerts his listeners to listen; the pause after Saunders’ tale is “broken by Stevenson, in a voice that brought constraint on us all” (196). They cannot decline to enter this story, as they did in Thompson’s case, and they cannot direct the story, as they did in Saunders’ narrative. Like the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which seems to be invoked here, it is the tale that must be heard, a tale of the failure of narrative.⁹

The final observations on the three stories are captured by Collins’ invocation of a railway track metaphor. This figure resembles the track of narrative I have been tracing here, but produces it as inexorably linear, consisting of choices that switch the self and story onto a different track, with no turning back and with inevitable consequences. The novel is made of, and is about, such narrative “choices” and track shifting. Yet, at the same time, the entire novel is about being lost (not always in a bad way) and about reading landscape and readers awry. These narratives of disorientation, wandering and circling are at odds with Collins’ linear track metaphor, as various commentators have observed (Barnes, “Observant” 168, Turner 50). This leaves the text precariously balanced between its own narrative theories, in the same way as it is supposedly suspended between other categories (Croft 9, 14, 33-34).

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The landscape of *Such is Life* abounds with the lost and misled. As well as the narrator Collins, who mistakes north for south, Victoria for New South Wales in chapter three, and whom we are forced to trail through various other diversions and misleadings, both physical and metaphysical, there are lost men, and tales of lost men. The one that resonates most with the lost child stories is Collins’ tale of George Murdoch. Collins spots Murdoch only because he has diverted from his track to look at an unusual tree (68). He misreads him as a sundowner and declines to disturb him. It is at this point that Collins elaborates on his railway track metaphor, and the choice between “two or more lines of action, or a line of action and a line of inaction” (69). Murdoch is waiting not for sundown but for death because, blinded by Sandy Blight, he cannot see the track. Collins’ misapprehension

of his situation means he dies. This unravelled, untold tale has been part of the impulse of Mary's fatal trek in search of her father. If Collins had had a yarn with the not-resting-but-dying Murdoch, rather than leaving him and then forgetting to tell his tale to Rory, Mary's linear but barely legible track to death might have been averted. Telling one story might have stopped the telling of another; putting one set of tracks together might have removed the confrontation with the inability to correctly read another set. This is Collins' theory anyway, but its linear logic is repeatedly disputed by the circular trajectory of the tales and the novel as a whole.

There are a number of other lost men and women in the novel. Molly Cooper is missing, believed dead; Bob and Bat are believed dead, although only one of them is (31). Nosy Alf is tracking, from a distance, the movements of Warrigal Alf; boundary riders and station hands are tracking the movements of bullock drays and trespassing bullocks. Bullock drivers are tracking strayed horses and bullocks. There are lost dogs,¹⁰ missing and stolen horses and bullocks, and other property, such as Jack Frost's saddle, is tracked and mis-taken throughout the novel. Towards the close of the novel there is an almost redeeming tale, which has a certain symmetry with the tale of Murdoch. Collins finds a man amidst the sandy blight of a howling dust storm and rescues him, grabbing him by the ankle before he can creep entirely off the track. This nameless man with the bloodshot eyes who, like Murdoch, has lost his swag, is given tobacco, water and directions by Collins. He is lost to the narrative from there, however, and with him any hint of redemption or "romantic" closure of this track is also lost (266-67).

This prevailing sense of lost-ness and the delusive, haunted tracks of wilderness in the novel find focus, or perhaps in this context, diffusion, in the lost child stories told in chapter five of Furphy's novel. Kim Torney, Peter Pierce and others have argued that one reason why lost child narratives resonate in Australian culture is that these tales stand in for lost adult stories. Pierce suggests that the tales represent various fears about settlement: if children represent the future, lost children suggest that there is no future for settlement in Australia, that the "hostile environment" of Australia will "never welcome" settlers, although Pierce also asserts, rather confusingly, that the "entic[ing]" and devouring bush is mostly "benign" (8). Torney argues that in contemporary accounts of lost children, such symbolic elements are not "explicit" (50), and that many real reports from the mid-nineteenth century show that settlers became lost because they were too at home in the bush rather than alienated from it (51).¹¹ Leigh Astbury, by contrast, sees

lost child stories as being largely about “nature which is beautiful, beckoning, yet potentially destructive and treacherous” (160). Robert Holden takes the same line: “The bush became the background against which the bushman-as-hero myth was constructed” in “an alien, unforgiving landscape—one which seemed to demand and then extract sacrifice” (59, 61). In short, representations and interpretations of lost children and adult (stories) vary widely, and Furphy’s tales show a precarious balance between the familiar and the duplicitous bush. The children are not afraid of the bush, but the adult searchers are increasingly stymied and baffled by it.

The prevailing notion of threatened settlement is over-generalising, but fictionalised lost child narratives often do register an anxiety that the environment, the supposedly familiar place, is *not* as known or knowable as many other nineteenth-century stories try to make it. This does not exclude the homelike nature of the bush Torney argues for; it adds to it its underside, the unhomelike, the uncanny. Indeed, many white lost child stories might be read in such a context as recuperative. They release the fear of an uncanny, unmapped, unmappable landscape only to write it into a story in which the bush is made to give up its secret (the child, the space, the track), and an ending provides closure: the landscape is re-told as mapped. An example of this narrative work may be found in Henry Kingsley’s, *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* (1859). The lost child is found dead by the better-oriented settler men who then use this resolution to settle their rivalry for the heart (and incidentally the property) of the squatter’s beautiful daughter, Alice Brentwood.¹²

Other lost child narratives, however, like the tales of the bush in Furphy, open up that space of anxiety and uncertainty but do not close it down. Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs in *Uncanny Australia* argue that for contemporary settler Australia this dual state is the “natural” one. Lost child stories pinpoint gaps suggesting that the maps are not complete. They register the space beyond, or beneath, the stories that cover the country. But they can also work to suppress other narratives of place and belonging. Most specifically the tales of lost white children obscure (but echo) those searching tales of lost and stolen Aboriginal children that have taken on powerful affective and political force in late twentieth century Australia. All three stories in Furphy’s tale, and the novel as a whole, are haunted by these lost and dead children, who also stand in for the inability of the narrative of Australian settlement to push unproblematically into the future. Ivor Indyk argues in relation to the Australian pastoral that it is “haunted by . . . the displacement of an indigenous population by the settlers of a colonizing power” (838). Lost

white children in Furphy's text, as elsewhere, obscure but resonate with the lost children and futures of a country founded on dispossession and stolen children. The attempt to tell this story makes the narrative, and makes it impossible.

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Because of the nature of the narrative track in *Such is Life* it is even more possible than usual for the observant reader to trace a variety of coherent narratives by reading selectively. Consider, for instance, the much-quoted "Virgin Continent" passage:

[T]his wayward diversity of spontaneous plant life bespeaks an unconfined, ungauged potentiality of resource; it unveils an ideographic prophecy . . . to be deciphered aright only by those willing to discern through the crudeness of dawn a promise of majestic day . . . Faithfully and lovingly interpreted, what is the latent meaning of it all?

Our Virgin continent! how long has she tarried her bridal day!
(65)

Here the landscape is imagined as waiting for and accessible to the masculine white settler, or at least the one who can read and interpret aright. The passage is also yoked by inference, image and proximity, to the virgin Mary O'Halloran, "a very creature of the phenomena which had environed her own dawning intelligence", "a child of the wilderness" (73).¹³ Mary is doomed to see no bridal day, majestic or otherwise, and Thompson gives a warning against any single-minded tracking of narrative in the account of the search for Mary after she goes missing:

I compare tracking to reading a letter written in a good business hand. You must n't look at what's under your eye; you must see a lot at once, and keep a general grasp of what's on ahead, besides spotting each track you pass. Otherwise, you'll be always turning back for a fresh race at it. And you must no more confine yourself to actual tracks than you would expect to find each letter correctly formed. You must just lift the general meaning as you go. Of course, our everyday tracking is not tracking at all. (189)

As a guide to reading the novel this warning is not entirely encouraging, but it is a clear caution against focusing only on what is "under your eye". Much more attention has been given to Collins' poetic flight about virgin continents because of its congruence with the other good business letters of the Australian legend. Less attention has been paid to entirely contradictory and less poetic passages such as Toby's retort when the porridge-eating Tam Armstrong accuses him of being descended from slaves in the final chapter: "Cripes! do you take *me* for a (adj.) mulatter?" growled the descendant of a

thousand kings. “Why, properly speaking, I own this here (adj.) country, as fur as the eye can reach.” (292). Croft suggests this protest is made not only because of Toby’s Aboriginal heritage but because Montgomery, the station owner, may be his father (337). In this case he would have a hybrid right to the land through both a thousand generations of Aboriginal heritage (and much more) and upstart settler acquisition.

As the annotators of *Such is Life* point out, Toby is the only character apart from Collins with a complete command of Australian colloquialisms and all the other dialects encountered (432, note 7). He can narrate in all the languages of Australia and he seems better able than Collins to “read . . . men like sign-boards” (1).¹⁴ Toby is also, arguably, a stolen child.¹⁵ It is not that Toby’s history replaces Mary’s in the novel. Rather, to read *Such is Life* for dominant narratives is to read very much against the directions given in the fiction and the “uneasy internal debate” identified by Frances Devlin-Glass and others.¹⁶ In the same way, the three lost child stories are not sequential in any easy sense. The move from found dead, to found alive, to never found is not a sequence at all, but instead forms a set in which narrative closure, successful tracking, is ultimately destabilised and denied.¹⁷

Hence, *Such is Life*’s plot of following tracks and trails forces the reader to self-consciously enact the act of reading. To the extent that the novel is produced and accepted as a national fiction, one outcome of such an act of successful narrative tracking would be to locate at the end the self as a national subject. However, the narrator as central character is a singularly poor tracker at some of the most significant moments, and is therefore no point of identification for a unified, stable national subjectivity. Similarly, most readers, though they may follow trails missed by the narrator in the early chapters,¹⁸ usually fail to notice some of the major trails. This failure of tracking is confirmed in chapter five by the assertions and demonstrations of the inadequacy of white tracking and therefore white reading in the uncanny Australian landscape. Lost white children haunt this part of the text, and by extension the whole text, perhaps because they represent exactly that impossible phantasm of the unified white future Australian subject. The hybrid Mary, whose fitness and familiarity seem assured in chapter two, is silenced by the earth. Her trace, like the trace in most lost child narratives, is ghostly and ephemeral. Animals and the weather erase her tracks; ants take her discarded food; even the direction of her voice is impossible to determine.

Nancy Armstrong has recently argued that Victorian realist fiction, which starts out attempting to posit utopian futures of individual fulfilment, is inevitably sucked back into reiterating and re-presenting the bounded possibilities of a social order based on the nuclear family as dominant, hetero-normative structure, “a realism designed to maintain the autonomy of nation, family, and individual” (3).¹⁹ In not narrating the realist closure, in representing such closure as non-narratable, *Such is Life* might just be seen to refuse this same pattern and its conclusions.²⁰

Various reasons have been proposed for the arrested narrative of *Such is Life*. Susan Lever, noting the disjunctions of realist conventions in the workings of the novel, argues that: “the novel’s failure to address the ‘other half’ of human experience [the feminine] is put before the reader as a failure of all fiction” (39). She posits the notion that “the formal structure of *Such is Life* might be seen as resisting the phallogocentric authority of the conventional realist text, and placing questions of gender representation at the centre of attention” (40).²¹ Lever might also be taken as saying that the novel is haunted by the feminine: “Furphy’s fictions are bounded by what cannot be said, what cannot be written . . . the world beyond the reach of his systematic positivism. That world is indicated as the domain of the feminine” (39). Croft, by contrast, argues for the impossibility of closure in *Such is Life* because of the mutually undermining/deconstitutive points of view of Collins and Furphy as author-function. Damien Barlow elaborates on the fundamentally disruptive queerness of the text that other critics have also noted (Rodriguez, Martin, McMahan). I am adding to this scholarly work the irruption of the haunting presence of the unrepresented/overwritten indigenous population in the traces of the search for the linear narrative.²² It is a commonplace that colonialism haunts non-indigenous settler Australian literature. Intentionally or otherwise those traces of haunting, with more profound disruptions, feature in Furphy’s inability or, as I would like to think, refusal to narrate a coherent tale of settlement and unified settler identity, with nothing resolved, the trace still being followed, and with the final avowal/disavowal that life/the novel’s “story is a tale told by a vulgarian, full of slang and blanky, signifying—nothing” (297).²³

NOTES

- ¹ For example, chapter one reads: “SUN. SEPT. 9. Thomp. Coop. &c. 10-Mile Pines. Cleo. Duff. Selec”. Like the diary entries for chapters two, six and seven, and arguably five also, chapter one includes a destination: it is a shorthand map offered to the reader.

- 2 Julian Croft identifies these various critical readings (4); Susan Lever argues that *Such is Life* “adopts realist techniques at the same time that it questions their validity”, she also identifies this technique as one “gesturing towards modernism as it does the eighteenth-century novel”, and as postmodern (37, 39).
- 3 Early in the first chapter, for instance, the debate centres on the border between New South Wales and Victoria: “Cooper was an entire stranger to me, but as he stoutly contended that Hay and Deniliquin were in Port Phillip, I inferred him to be a citizen of the mother colony” (3).
- 4 Croft argues that chapter five contains five stories involving loss (177).
- 5 G.A. Wilkes points out that Thompson is earlier identified as a poor storyteller (2).
- 6 The party includes several bullock drivers, Stevenson, a former tank sinker but currently driving horses, Ben Cartwright coming down without “any (adj.) thing”, having left his dying bullocks and cart behind because of the drought. Drover and boundary rider, Barefooted Bob, turns up briefly: he is a ghost to Collins as he had heard that the other man was dead.
- 7 Kim Torney suggests the dual nature of the hollow tree as both refuge and trap (42).
- 8 Sigmund Freud’s return of the repressed is normally associated with submerged sexual impulses erupting from the unconscious and threatening conscious functioning. Freud likened his study to a form of tracking, comparing the analyst to “a detective engaged in tracing a murder”, forced to be “satisfied with comparatively slight and obscure traces of the person you were in search of” (27). Some theories of lost child stories see the tales as the emergence or sign of repressed fears of the bush as primal mother (Holden 59). Peter Brooks tracks the connection between narrative and desire.
- 9 Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* may be one of the many intertexts of *Such is Life*. As well as the waiting virgin continent, who would make bridegrooms or at least wedding visitors, of them all, Collins refers to himself at the opening of the chapter as preparing for inaction “even to the extent of unharnessing my mind, so that when any difficulty did arise, I might be prepared to meet it as a bridegroom is supposed to meet his bride” (177). The Mariner is stopped on his way to the wedding feast, though “I am next of kin”, by the inexorable eye and story of the ancient mariner.
- 10 Pup goes missing a number of times, and the history of Sollicker’s dog is one of the novel’s embedded narratives.
- 11 Torney excludes fictional narratives and is talking more explicitly about earlier accounts in her claims (51).
- 12 In *Such is Life*, Alice would be the mother of the predatory Maud Beaudesart.

- 13 See Frances Devlin-Glass for a discussion of the way in which this passage can be seen as a rather dubious reiteration/parody of the “coming Race” debate that was ultimately excised from *Such is Life* (368).
- 14 This is not to suggest that Furphy was not racist. He was a strong supporter of the White Australia policy, although his representations, as I have been arguing, were not as consistent as Geoffrey Partington argues.
- 15 Moriarty comments: “Permit me to remind you that Mrs. Montgomery, senior, gave a blanket for you when you was little” (231).
- 16 The full sentence read: “uneasy internal debate between discourses derived from biologist/evolutionist race theories and liberal humanist discourses derived from Christian socialism”. I take it that this interpretation would be congruent with Devlin-Glass’s discussion (356). See also Lever and Croft.
- 17 Note the circularity of novel. It starts and ends at Runnymede; “half-caste” Billy, smarter than the rest, invokes God at the opening and Toby invokes God at the end. The “circling round and round” can be connected to the Aboriginal presence.
- 18 Examples include the truth of Sollicker’s son’s paternity and the source of Sollicker’s dog.
- 19 Armstrong is making her argument in relation to *Dracula*, a text that both incorporates and is antipathetic to the sacred figures of the family. Dracula’s mutability and plurality, his exposure of the cultural nature of identity, undercuts the project of the Victorian realist novel (13). Assuming Armstrong’s argument is valid, Collins, as part of the family of mutually supportive and identifying itinerant bush workers, might form some faint echo of this Dracula figure. His mutability and transgressiveness across borders of class and gender, and his revelation of the cultural nature of gender identity have all been noted (Barnes, Croft, Martin). However, as feminist commentators such as Marilyn Lake and Susan Sheridan have pointed out there are also strongly conservative elements in the particular figurations of the itinerant bushman in Australia, which may be anti-family, but hardly accord with the utopian possibilities Armstrong sees in *Dracula*.
- 20 I am using “non-narratable” in the terms outlined by Elizabeth Langland in *Nobody’s Angels*. Langland argues that at certain points in the history of the novel particular plot lines become non-narratable. Her specific example is the disappearance in Victorian fiction of the cross-class, servant girl to lord marriage.
- 21 I choose to see this disjunction as also about the colonial. Although intentionality is not the point here, Furphy’s inclusion of “clues” in his “Review” (130) indicates that the narrative was ostensibly constructed with tracking in mind.
- 22 Barnes argues that in *Such is Life* the observant reader “is implicitly invited to

assume part of the responsibility normally carried by the narrator in a work of prose fiction. Furphy intends that the reader should discover the inadequacies of the nominal narrator as an interpreter of the circumstances he records and so experience the “problem” . . . of making sense of what happens in life” (“Observant” 153). Barnes also notes that this intention, and the reliability of the narrator, changes in chapters two and five, the later chapters substituted in 1901 (157). Elsewhere Barnes further elaborates on what he sees as Furphy’s “experiment with the traditional method of narrative” (“Introduction” xvii) Manfred Mackenzie’s comments on imposture are also relevant to this debate.

- ²³ I write “disavowal” here because in full this section reads: “Such is life, my fellow-mummers—just like a poor player that bluffs and feints his hour upon the stage, and then cheapens down to mere nonentity. But let me not hear any small witticism to the further effect that its story is a tale told by a vulgarian, full of slang and blanky, signifying—nothing” (297).

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