

# Prolonged Symptoms of Cultural Anxiety: The Persistence of Narratives of Asian Invasion within Multicultural Australia

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The disjunctive relation between Australia's vast landmass and small population has long troubled the Australian settler imagination. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, in light of the Australian colonies' increasing awareness of their proximity to the relatively populous nations of Asia, fears began to be voiced concerning the possibility of Asian invasion. Paranoid predictions and warnings circulated in popular culture and an emphasis on the need to be ready for war was communicated through the writing of cautionary tales about what could happen should Australia be invaded. This initial, anxious, literary production was the beginning of what would become an enduring preoccupation of Australian popular fiction: the invasion narrative, a detailed set of discourses centring on Australian vulnerability and Asian menace. Today, there exists a sizeable body of Australian novels of Asian invasion. Yet the portrayal of white Australians as the victims of Asian invasion involves an ideological paradox not acknowledged by the novels themselves. When the colonial invaders write of their own fear of invasion, they enter a fraught narratological terrain, where meanings cannot be contained within intended trajectories. In this paper, recent invasion novels by John Marsden provide a case study for examining the subtextual configurations of meaning that underlie the proposition of Asian threat and allow insight into the historical and cultural unconscious of an anxious settler nation.

Marsden's *Tomorrow, When the War Began* (1993), and the six other novels in the *Tomorrow* series, tell the story of the invasion of contemporary Australia by an unnamed Asian country. Aimed at a young adult readership, Marsden's *Tomorrow* series has been phenomenally successful, enjoying spectacular sales and rapturous acclaim. The arc of the narrative follows the adventures of a group of resourceful rural teenagers, who take on the role of bush guerrillas, planning and executing attacks on the enemy invaders. With their parents either dead or incarcerated in prisoner-of-war camps, the teenagers must take total responsibility for their own lives, with every day a fight for survival in occupied Australia. A group of young people fending for themselves in a dangerous world is a convention of children's and young adult fiction. In Marsden's texts, the device of the group under siege enables the rehearsal of negotiations with nationalism and otherness central to generic invasion texts. Thus Marsden joins a proven plot structure of young adult fiction with the discourses of the invasion narrative to create a series of racialised novels that have evident wide-spread appeal. Yet the series has received very little critical appraisal. Adrian Caesar's four-page "Invasions of the Mind: John Marsden and the Threat From Asia" (1999) is the only article to focus solely on the *Tomorrow* texts. This is despite the fact that *Tomorrow, When the War Began* has been reprinted 33 times, and ABC Radio National's *Australia Talks Books* terms the series "a classic for a generation of Australians." As Marsden himself has said of the success of the series: "My God, this really has gone beyond my wildest dreams" (*Marsden on Marsden* 101). Despite its unprecedented popularity with Australian readers, however, Marsden's *Tomorrow* series presents not a new story, but the old story of Asian invasion that has been told many times before. Marsden's novels subscribe in remarkable detail to the tropes of the conventional Asian invasion narrative and are deeply problematic for reinvigorating old discourses of racial anxiety for young readers.<sup>1</sup>

Marsden's invasion narrative does not stand alone, but is part of a distinct body of formulaic invasion literature within the field of Australian popular fiction. Emerging in the late 1880s, the first novels of Asian invasion told of the now stereotypical "hordes from the north" spilling down and overwhelming a defenceless and underpopulated white Australia. Early invasion narratives dealt in stereotypes drawn from a lexicon of natural disaster and spoke of undifferentiated "yellow waves," "Asiatic floods" and plague-like swarming multitudes intent on slaughter and rape. In many of the novels, supplementary declarations preceding the text proper detail the author's contention that neither the government nor the Australian people

realise the peril at hand, and state that the explicit aim of the fiction is to shock Australian readers out of this complacency. These are alarmist, didactic texts that call for a massive strengthening of national defence by illustrating the ease with which Australia could be invaded under the present circumstances, and by detailing the gruesome horrors the populace would suffer at the hands of Asian invaders. This sense of desperation is evident in the titles of early invasion novels such as William Lane's "White or Yellow?" (1888), Kenneth Mackay's *The Yellow Wave* (1895), C. H. Kirmess's *The Australian Crisis* (1909), G. D. Mitchell's *The Awakening* (1937) and Erle Cox's *Fools' Harvest* (1939). In order to convince the reader of the prophetic nature of these tales, invasion narratives were intensely realistic. They aimed to be believable, to act as a means of persuasion, to be accessible popular texts capable of reaching a wide audience in order to incite nationalistic fervour and enmity against a marauding Asia.

In these stridently nationalistic texts, discourses of racial purity, anti-urbanisation and militant frontier masculinism conjoin in championing the white Australian bushman as the most powerful corrective to an imagined Asian invasion. The crisis of invasion was often attributed to Australia's failure to produce the numbers of militarily capable men required for effective defence of the nation. These novels depict, with the intention of sounding a stern warning, a feminised Australia of soft city dwellers incapable of combating a militant take over. Most often set in the near future, they portray a complacent Australia, foolishly unaware of the gathering threat. When the carefully planned invasion takes place, the Asian invaders are disciplined, organised and utterly ruthless. Conversely, Australia's city-based ruling elite is always incapable of mounting an effective counter-attack and is shown to lack any semblance of military capability. Defence is thus left in the hands of bush guerrilla groups who fight bravely, but are hopelessly outnumbered by the cunning enemy. In fact, many of these stories are essentially the same dystopian tale of the loss of white Australia, told time and time again.

Interestingly, despite the overtly racist discourse central to narratives of Asian invasion, these novels have continued to be written throughout the twentieth century and are still being produced in the present. Rather than being consigned to history, to a moment of racial anxiety preceding the Federation of the Australian Commonwealth, narratives of Asian invasion continue to circulate in the Australian consciousness. The titles of the more recent invasion narratives—such as Kap Pothan's *A Time to Die* (1967),

Michael F. Page's *A Nasty Little War* (1979), John Harper-Nelson's *The Day They Came* (1998) and Colin Mason's *Northern Approaches* (2001)—continue in the same unnerving strain as the earlier titles. Critical scholarship on Australian novels of Asian invasion, however, focuses almost exclusively on the early texts of the Federation era. The available scholarship is also small in extent and only has appeared since the bicentennial year. For the most part, the criticism tends to describe these fictions and contextualise them historically and politically rather than reading the texts theoretically.<sup>2</sup> If one considers the body of Asian invasion novels as a whole (I have located some 27 novels in all), they are remarkably repetitive in theme and style and share very similar narrative structures. Indeed, the generic invasion narrative is constructed according to a clearly discernable formula, even though from the late 1960s Australian novels of Asian invasion do begin to complexify. The majority of these texts are no longer simply didactic tracts pushing clear political directives, and are more crafted works of literary fiction. However, they continue to be structured by the tropes of the generic invasion narrative begun in the 1880s. Marsden's *Tomorrow* series adheres very closely to the established formula. But in the midst of this repetitious detailing of Asian designs on the continent of Australia are aporia of meaning that escape the frame of the texts' explicit ideological project of presenting white Australia as the victim of Asian invasion.

On a subtextual level, Australia's very fixation with the fiction of the Asian invasion generates a cultural significance of its own. The compulsive retelling of the prophecy of Asian invasion suggests specifically white cultural anxieties stemming from Australia's status as a relatively new settler society, itself born of invasion. This submerged stratum of cultural meaning in Marsden's novels has important ideological implications in terms of Australian politics of race and multiculturalism. Here, Pierre Macherey's model of symptomatic textual interpretation yields great insight into what Marsden's novels do not willingly say. A Machereyan reading allows exploration of implicit formations of textual meaning by focusing not on the dominant meanings of the text, but on the contradictions, omissions and silences engendered within the narrative itself. The object of criticism, Macherey maintains, should be to expose and question such gaps in the narrative in order to gain insight into the concealed ideological conditions of literary production. For Macherey, the text is split between what is articulated and what cannot be articulated. He proposes that what is revealed through this splitting is the "unconscious" of the text, the generative silence at the centre of the work:

By speech, silence becomes the centre and principal of expression, its vanishing point. Speech eventually has nothing more to tell us: we investigate the silence, for it is the silence that is doing the speaking. (85-86)

The value of a Machereyan reading practice is, as Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan suggest, its ability to effect a psychoanalytic reading, a “return of the repressed” as the unconscious of text is critically examined and brought to light (239). The circumstances that were repressed, in order for the conscious ideological project to be fulfilled, are thus made manifest. Within its chasms of contradiction, the text critiques its own construction and reveals the limits of ideological representation and the historical conditions of its production (239). Macherey’s model enables the illumination of the cultural and historical unconscious from which novels of Asian invasion are generated. It directs the reader’s attention to the telling silences within the generic invasion narrative. What is never mentioned in these tracts of white panic at the prospect of Asian invasion—indeed what cannot be mentioned—is that the fear of invasion may be based on the underlying anxiety produced by Australia’s own unacknowledged colonial invasion.

Arguably, it is the *hidden* invasion of colonial settlement that has led to this anxiety in the Australian unconscious. The persistence of the Asian invasion narrative indicates white Australia’s fears for security of tenure on a continent theirs for only some one or two hundred years, and demonstrates the underlying paranoia that a nation founded on invasion could possibly be lost by invasion. As Meaghan Morris argues:

Phobic narratives of Australian national space clearly worry over the possibility of at least one specific form of historical repetition ... [In this scenario] the coast is a permeable barrier against waves of *over*-population rolling in from the future (often, “Asia”). This figure operates most powerfully in a register of paranoid anticipation. However, it also carries a pressing mnemonic force (saying that invaders will come by sea, we admit it is we who came by sea) that secures a chain of displacement: something we did to others becomes something that happened to us and could happen all over again; on the beach, we replay our genocidal past as our apocalyptic future. (247)

Morris’s formulation of the coast as a liminal zone of historic repetition applies to the broader anxieties of settler consciousness manifested in the Asian invasion narrative. The replaying of the Asian invasion scenario and the continual positing of Asian threat demonstrates a desire to strengthen

white Australians' own sense of national belonging, to bolster their native authenticity and claim the land as their own. In Macherey's terms, this is the generative silence at the centre of these texts, the driving force behind their ongoing production.

The popular reception of Marsden's invasion narrative signifies the historical continuity of Australian invasion anxiety within changing cultural contexts. Australian society has certainly evolved and transformed since the time of Federation. Over the course of a century Australia embraced the White Australia Policy and then witnessed its gradual decline and replacement with the policy of multiculturalism. Since its emergence in the 1970s, multiculturalism has been officially portrayed as making a radical break with Australia's racist past. However, as current critical scholarship is demonstrating, the ideologies of white Australia were not simply extinguished with the change in government policy, but continue to exist, albeit in transformed ways, within contemporary Australia. Far from disappearing, fear for the fragility of white Australia and panic at the prospect of "Asianisation" continues to be a powerful anxiety in the present and holds enduring narrative power in the Australian literary imagination. The language of white anxiety has changed in some respects in accordance with today's postcolonial world, but in other respects it remains unchanged, as the enduring power of racialised discourses are sometimes expressed through the more politically acceptable concept of cultural difference. Marsden's contemporary invasion narrative has made this linguistic adjustment, but still old ideas of racialised threat remain firmly in place. Two textual fault-lines run through Marsden's invasion narrative and provide insight into the configurations of suppressed white anxiety in the Australian psyche. Firstly, despite Marsden's efforts towards representing contemporary multicultural Australia, slippages in his narrative reveal the persistence of white prejudice. Secondly, Marsden's emphasis on the victimisation of white Australians and the absence of reference to Aboriginal Australians reveals a disturbing logic of effacement at work in his texts.

Significantly, Marsden's narrative remains silent on the ethnic identity of the invaders. It seems curious that the characters never seek to identify the invading army and this creates an uneasy absence in the storyline. Marsden himself states: "I've tried to avoid anything xenophobic in the books and one way I've done that is to not ever suggest where the invaders come from because really that's not the issue" (*Australia Talks Books*). Yet oblique hints and deployments of stereotypes allow the reader to locate the enemies'

origin as generically Asian. In the third book of the series, the narrator Ellie's account of the invasion clearly conforms to the established discourse of Asian threat:

They came swarming across the land, like locusts, like mice, like Paterson's curse. We should have been used to plagues in our country but this was the most swift, sudden and successful plague ever. They were too cunning, too fierce, too well-organised. The more I've learnt about them, the more I can see that they must have been planning it for years. (*Third Day* 4)

Marsden's prose utilises stock-in-trade stereotypes of overcrowded Asia, spilling and swarming down upon under-populated and innocent Australia. His use of words such as "locusts" and "plagues," and his descriptions of the invaders as "cunning," "fierce" and "well organised," are drawn directly from the overtly racist vocabulary of Federation-era invasion texts. Furthermore, the announcement made by the General of the invading army, stating that the invasion is aimed at "reducing imbalances within the region," suggests that the invaders are from neighbouring Southeast Asia (*Tomorrow* 168). On hearing this announcement the teenagers' responses echo age-old concerns with Australia's vulnerable empty spaces: "We've got all this land and all these resources, and yet there's countries a crow's spit away that have people packed in like battery hens. You can't blame them for resenting it" (170). In the second book of the series, *The Dead of the Night*, the phrase "reducing imbalances within the region" is revealed to mean a highly orchestrated "colonisation" of Australia by "millions" of settlers from the invading country. Australians, Marsden writes, will then be used as "slave labour" under the new regime (38). The beginnings of colonisation are realised when Ellie and her friends see their first occupied house. To Ellie's surprise she notes that there are at least eight adults in the house: "I'd been assuming that they'd put one family on each farm, but perhaps they thought we were extravagant, having so much land between so few people" (200). Marsden's descriptions of the invaders centre on metaphors that evoke impressions of mass, teeming populations. Analogies likening the invaders to swarms of insects are scattered liberally throughout the texts, recalling William Lane's nineteenth-century theory of Asia's "swarming populations" (Walker, *Anxious Nation* 43). In the fourth book, *Darkness Be My Friend*, Ellie and company are seen too close to an occupied house whereupon "adults came teeming from the place like ants from a nest when you've dragged your toe across it" (94). In the fifth, during their attack on an airfield, Ellie states: "We were in a wasps' nest that covered one hundred and fifty hectares and we didn't have so much as a can of Mortein between us"

(54). The White Australia Policy may officially have ended, and in Marsden's novels the enemy may not be named, but the discursive construct of Asia as ruinous scourge and the generator of "waves of over-population" capable of swarming down upon Australia continues undeterred.

Just as Marsden's calculated omission of the invaders' ethnicity remains suggestive of racial overtones, the multicultural composition of his group of bush heroes remains problematic. Although Marsden's narrative attempts to acknowledge the cultural diversity of contemporary Australia, his ethnic characters are nevertheless constructed according to familiar images of multicultural difference. Marsden's ethnic characters—the Greek boy "Homer," and Thai/Vietnamese "Lee"—are both reassuringly assimilated to white Australian culture, but commensurately maintain some stereotypical ethnic attributes. Homer maintains some "woggy" qualities to do with references to "hair oil" and "tabbouli" but, as Adrian Caesar points out, it is the Asian character Lee who is defined by more disturbing stereotypes (*Tomorrow* 8; Caesar 47). Marsden's characterisation of Lee overtly conforms to orientalist stereotypes of inscrutability and sexual exoticism. Lee's face is impassive and "implacable," even when he is in the midst of strangling an enemy soldier (*Third Day* 46). Ellie finds Lee intriguing and sexually enticing but is simultaneously repelled by him, horrified by his willingness to kill in cold blood, a trait not shared by the other non-Asian teenagers. Together with the strategic withholding of the invaders' ethnicity, these narrative features reveal the pervasive racial ambivalence of Marsden's texts. Marsden's reiteration of an old narrative of white prejudice in multicultural guise can be read as symptomatic of Australian race relations, as it points to the persistence of white paranoia within Australia's supposedly "non-discriminatory" and culturally diverse society.

Faced with the invasion and colonisation of their beloved country, the group of teenagers set themselves up as a band of guerrilla fighters, based in the bush and living off the land as much as possible. The rural knowledge gained through everyday practices of country life proves indispensable to the teens turned bush guerrillas. Indeed, Ellie and her band come to embody the ideal nationalistic bushman valorised in early invasion texts. Ellie's sense of nation and national belonging is mediated through her deep attachment to the rural landscape. She feels herself a native of the land and will defend it to the end:

I knew that they could never and would never follow us through the bush. This was our natural environment. I felt as much at

home here as the possums and wombats and galahs. Let no stranger intrude here, no invader trespass. This was ours, and this we would defend. (*Dead of the Night* 63)

Thus Ellie, a white settler Australian, aligns herself with the indigenous Australian plants and animals, effectively naturalising her own native status. The Asian invaders are then cast as unnatural trespassers, aliens in the bush landscape. She later writes, "I was more at home in this environment than they'd ever be" (*Third Day* 145). Indeed by the fourth novel, not only is Ellie's body fused with the land, but she has begun to mimic Aboriginal totemic identification: "[T]his was where I belonged, this was my dreaming. I'd become a gum tree, a rock, a parrot myself" (*Darkness* 40). Yet Marsden quarantines Ellie's understanding of the landscape and national belonging from the status of Aboriginal peoples and how they may have felt and continue to feel about the British invasion of Australia. References to Aboriginal people and to the invasion of 1788 in Marsden's writing are extremely scarce. At one point, Ellie becomes enraged with the invaders, at the way they had taken over the country and denied her the right to grow up with her parents (243). But Marsden refuses to make the obvious parallel to Aboriginal experiences of colonisation. For a contemporary series of books about the invasion of Australia, a series of books marked by a great deal of philosophical questioning, the lack of consideration accorded to the Aboriginal experience of invasion makes for another telling silence in the narrative.

Ellie's deep attachment to the land and assumption of native status raises important issues concerning the logic of effacement enacted in the process of indigenising white Australians. In Marsden's texts it is no longer Aboriginal Australians who belong, who see the land as their dreaming, but rather Ellie the white Australian who is positioned as native. In doing so, Marsden effectively supplants Aboriginal Australians with a new white indigeneity that fully encompasses spiritual rights to the land. This assumption of Aboriginal spirituality does not grant Aboriginal culture significance on its own terms. Instead, it brazenly appropriates it to bolster white claims to authenticity. Ken Gelder declares of the similar sentiments expressed in Peter Read's *Belonging*:

This is postcolonialism-as-fulfilment, but only for white Australians. This is reconciliation, but only on "non-Aboriginal" Australia's terms: to make this class of people even more settled than they were before. (3)

Furthermore, Ellie's fierce and increasingly prosaic love of the rural landscape is undoubtedly fuelled by the enemy occupation. Gelder also detects in Read's

text an interesting mirroring effect where feelings of a “deep relationship with land” are often born out of the experience of dispossession. Gelder concludes that what is “shared” with Aboriginal people “is not just that ‘deep relationship’ but the very experience of dispossession that enables that relationship” (4). Alan Lawson similarly argues that in seeking to secure a sense of native authenticity, the settler subject “mimics, appropriates and desires (while seeking to efface) the authority of the indigene” (1216). This process of indigenous mimicking assumes a sinister aspect when considered in the context of the circular logic of invasion narratives. As Homi Bhabha argues, “mimicry is at once resemblance and menace” (86). Although Bhabha is referring to the power of the colonised to disrupt colonial discourse through mimicry of the colonisers, the same logic can be applied here in reverse. White mimicry of indigeneity can work almost metonymically, as a process of both appropriation and disavowal (86). In these novels the indigenisation of rural white Australians, born of the Australian bush, effectively effaces Aboriginal peoples of their indigenous status and at the same time usurps their status as victims dispossessed of their land. Born of the anxiety stemming from Australia’s unacknowledged colonial invasion, these texts enact a circular progression where whites become the victims, Asians become the invaders and Aboriginals are written out of the equation. Within the generic invasion narrative of Marsden’s novels the process of white indigenisation is then effectively complete.

Marsden dedicates the final book of the *Tomorrow* series to “the people of Tibet, East Timor and West Papua.” The ambivalence of this gesture is symptomatic of Marsden’s treatment of race throughout the series. Certainly it is laudable to acknowledge these three nations, the first invaded by China, the second and third by Indonesia. But acknowledgement of the British invasion of Australia remains noticeably absent. Just like the invasion novels of the Federation era, the reality of the colonial invasion of Australia lies concealed beneath repetitious reams of writing detailing the danger posed to the white race, discourses of white victimhood and white suffering at the hands of possible Asian invaders. In Machereyan terms, two fault-lines in Marsden’s narrative split the surface of this “whitewash” of Australian history. The first is the awkward omission of the invaders’ identity. The second is the lack of consideration accorded to the Aboriginal experience of colonial invasion (despite the possibility of doing so being provided by progressive changes in Australian culture). The first narratorial omission reveals the persistence of white anxieties and prejudices within state-sanctioned multiculturalism, despite the progression to “non-discriminatory”

terms of reference. Marsden may evade charges of overt racism by never specifying Asian threat, but it is a very thin veneer of cultural egalitarianism that coats his narrative. Beneath it, the barrage of racial stereotypes that describe the invaders—the old “plagues” and “floods” and “swarms”—are hardly concealed. The second narratorial omission is made all the more acute by Ellie’s appropriation of Aboriginal cultural conceptions of belonging to country. In this performance of white indigenisation, Marsden plays out the nativist sentiments begun in the early invasion novels. Ellie is situated in direct lineage from the men born of country, the bushmen so valorised in those germinal nationalist texts. In fact, it is remarkable how similar Ellie and her teenage band are to their literary predecessors in their courage, ingenuity and empowered bush ethos. The degree of detailed repetition that occurs in these texts, written some hundred years apart, is striking.

The Asian invasion narrative is remarkably resilient, and shows no signs of abating as Marsden continues his story of invaded Australia in an additional trilogy of novels entitled *The Ellie Chronicles* (the first of which, *While I Live*, was published in 2003 and the second, *Incurable*, in late 2005). Marsden’s *Tomorrow* series, and its unfurling sequel trilogy, bear testimony to the enduring presence of the generic invasion narrative in the Australian imagination and the valuable insights it offers (although not always willingly) into the nexus of Aboriginal, Asian and white race relations in contemporary Australia. Indeed, the fearful logic of the invasion narrative can easily be detected in the current emphasis on “border protection” and the mandatory, sometimes indefinite, imprisonment of those seeking asylum in Australia. In view of Keith Windschuttle’s recent assertions as to the absence of racialised discourses in Australian nationalism, it is imperative to examine what is repressed by these narratives of disavowal, and bring to the fore the underlying configurations of white settler anxieties so as to better understand and facilitate the move beyond them.

## NOTES

- 1 As the focus of this paper concerns Marsden’s reiteration of the generic Asian invasion narrative, it can only gesture to further critical work to be done on the implications of the *Tomorrow* series as young adult fiction. For a useful general discussion of the ideological impact of racial representations in Australian children’s literature see Bradford. For analysis of Marsden’s *Tomorrow* series as young adult fiction see Mayers, Scutter, Johnston and Michaels.

- <sup>2</sup> The foundational critical analysis of Australian novels of Asian invasion is historian David Walker's "Invasion Literature," recast as a chapter in *Anxious Nation*. The other critical works on the subject are Dixon (the most theoretically informed analysis of invasion texts), Yu, Meaney, and Blackford, Ikin and McMullen. Webb and Enstice devote three chapters to invasion texts. Reeve discusses the location of Indonesia as a source of threat. Enstice and Webb edited and introduced a new edition of Mackay's *The Yellow Wave*. See also Kato, about the fear of Japanese invasion, and Kendall for analysis of Australian narratives of Chinese invasion.

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