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Chapter 10

Mapping Settler Gothic: Noir and the Shameful Histories of the Pākehā Middle Class in *The Bad Seed*

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Abstract

This chapter addresses the ways in which the New Zealand television series *The Bad Seed* (2019) narrates intersections between settler-colonial identity and social class. It makes the case that *The Bad Seed* sits within a line of storytelling in New Zealand settler Gothic which serves to secure innocence by presenting the relatively privileged Pākehā family as ‘middling’, vulnerable and at risk. The chapter progresses through an analysis of traumatogenic spaces, culminating at the isolated farmstead locale that is so generative to the settler Gothic imaginary. Ultimately, *The Bad Seed* employs mixed and hybrid genres to tell a story of Pākehā middle-class self-exculpation.

Keywords: New Zealand; social class; settler colonialism; settler Gothic; Pākehā identity; noir

Timothy Jones opens his entry on New Zealand Gothic for the Wiley-Blackwell *Encyclopedia of the Gothic* with the rather alarming statement that “the most distinct feature of the New Zealand Gothic might be the critical and popular difficulty in defining what the category describes, and which texts belong within it” (468). Some of this diffidence can be attributed to New Zealand’s relatively small and, at times, insular body of cultural theory. There is, as yet, no agreed canon of Gothic texts, no authoritative monograph on the subject, and some hesitation as to whether it is even a valuable way to frame the kinds of work that are produced here in Aotearoa. During an influential period of New Zealand’s settler cultural history in the mid twentieth century, Gothic romance and the supernatural were specifically discounted as remnants of Victorian and Edwardian sensibilities. As Jones points out, creative artists of the time were swayed by international trends which disparaged popular genres and promoted pared-down realism as a favoured form (469). A properly New Zealand idiom would portray reality as disenchanting, confined to a single, flat, materialist plane of existence.

Far from stamping out the Gothic, depictions of stagnant settler life across towns and rural areas only served to emphasise the ways in which psycho-familial disturbances are embedded in the structures of settler colonialism. As Lorenzo Veracini establishes in his book *The Settler Colonial Present* (2015), settler identity relies on a series of assertions of negative differentiation: settlers are not indigenous, not violent and usurping colonisers, not more recently arrived migrants, not bound by social class in the manner of the older, less adaptive societies that settlers left behind. The effort to bracket off a benighted colonial history from a just and moderate settler present – and the psychological contortions and rationalisations involved in this effort – have generated a line of

Gothic representations across New Zealand narrative cinema and literature. In the discussion that follows, I place the cross-genre 2019 television series *The Bad Seed* broadly within this Gothic tradition of settler self-justification, as an instructive, hybrid, and ideologically layered text.

Genre Mutations: Splicing Noir and Settler Gothic

As Craig Sisterson notes in his survey of Antipodean crime dramas, *Southern Cross Crime* (2020), New Zealand (along with Australia) arrived relatively late to the global neo-noir screen phenomenon. Over the last decade, New Zealand creators have made up for the delay with a run of quality, locally-produced productions that Sisterson, playing on a Kiwi idiom, terms ‘yeah noir.’¹ Along similar lines, *The Bad Seed* started out with considerable promise. The opening sequence is arresting: a woman comes home alone in the evening with her shopping, notices her golden retriever is whining, and is knifed to death by a masked intruder. The following day, a contractor who is netting leaves out of the backyard pool sees the dog scrabbling bloody paws on the ranch slider. The camera pans the length of an immaculate corpse, expensively dressed, her white face and staring eyes mirrored in a thick, glossy pool of blood. Not so soon after, Detective Marie Da Silva (Madeleine Sami) arrives on the scene, her grim face flared red by flashing police sirens. The victim’s neighbour and obstetrician, Dr Simon Lampton (Matt Minto), is quickly implicated in the investigation. Never mind the slightly ropey continuity – an autumn leaf in the pool in the New Zealand spring, still-uncongealed blood, the tardy arrival of the police – the first episode promised a quick-paced, visually lush thriller.

¹ Recent crime series set and produced in New Zealand include *Harry* (2013), *Top of the Lake* (2013), *Brokenwood Mysteries* (2014-), *The Gulf* (2019-), *The Sounds* (2020), and the paranormal police procedural *One Lane Bridge* (2020-). Sisterson’s neologism ‘yeah noir’ plays on the colloquialism ‘yeah nah’ which, confusingly, can mean either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ depending on the context.

By the second episode of *The Bad Seed*, the genre conventions begin to mutate. A ‘whydunit’ develops as the killer is revealed to the audience to be Simon’s brother Ford Lampton (Dean O’Gorman), later unmasked during non-fatal attack on the woman who Simon is having an affair with, Mereana (Keporah Torrance). Despite some knowing comments and intent glares, Detective Da Silva turns out to be a relatively ordinary ‘paint-by-numbers’ cop (Murray) who carries none of the tormented backstory and hardboiled grit that we expect from more conventional noir. The third and fourth episodes turn into ‘sinister soap opera’ (Hopwood, para. 11). The brothers return to the scene of their childhood trauma at an isolated farmhouse, and Simon and his wife Karen (Jodie Hillock) confront the predatory birth mother of their adopted daughter Elke – a birth mother who happens to be Roza Hallwright (Chelsie Preston Crayford), the wife of the man who is very soon to become New Zealand’s Prime Minister (played by Xavier Horan). The series finale returns to the psychological thriller format as the killer, struggling to control his own emotional disturbances, kidnaps the Lamptons’ daughter and lures the central characters back to the dilapidated farm, where the antagonists mete out their own justice before being rounded up by the police.

Clearly, the series involves some rather convoluted plotting in its genre travels from noir to police procedural to melodrama to Gothic. To be fair to the creative team behind *The Bad Seed*, working with the source material was never going to be straightforward. The series is a loose adaptation of works by Pākehā writer Charlotte Grimshaw, spanning her short story collection *Singularity* (2009) (where the characters of Ford and Simon are first introduced) to novels *The Night Book* (2010) and *Soon* (2012), which centrally concern the Lamptons’ interaction with

wealthy business family, the Hallwrights.² Criminality suffuses Grimshaw's fictional universe, yet her novels do not fit within any standard formulation of the crime genre. Grimshaw's social milieu is the Pākehā middle class, centered around the central Auckland suburb of Remuera where she grew up and now lives with her own family. Tonally, Grimshaw's novels are a slow burn: at first her style seems plain, setting out quietly enough in the mode of domestic realism. Then, almost imperceptibly, psychological pressures begin to build. The central characters' habits of mind tilt toward obsession, addiction, or paranoia; with a kind of self-gnawing energy, they spiral toward personal breakdown, finding it increasingly difficult to rationalize their own actions. Presented with a genre mix that is difficult to translate into the most readily recognizable narrative formulas of commercial television drama, the creators of *The Bad Seed* opted to ramp up the criminal elements into a full-blown murder investigation, while also intensifying the relationship between Simon and Ford into a Gothic-inflected dynamic of psychological doubling and traumatic dissociation.

Downplaying the (ultimately disappointing) line of criminal investigation in the series, I will suggest that the series carries more narrative cohesion, and more purchase as social commentary, when viewed through a Gothic lens. At a stylistic level, *The Bad Seed* conveys the trait of 'conflicted un-naturalness' which Hogle argues is 'basic to the Gothic itself' (Hogle 75). More evidently, by siting the originary trauma for the Lamptons on a ruinous farm, the scriptwriters make a very conscious allusion to a set piece of settler Gothic imagery. As in so many New Zealand 'farmstead Gothic' narratives (Jones), the ultimate trajectory of *The Bad Seed* is the

² 'Pākehā' is a contested Māori term referring to New Zealanders descended from British or Western European settlers. Many New Zealanders who fit this group do not use it as a self-designation. The term is commonly used in cultural and demographic analysis, and may carry a particular association with the intellectual middle class. For a detailed discussion on the usage of term and the question as to whether Pākehā constitute a distinct ethnic group, see Matthewman (2017).

re-unification and consolidation of the Pākehā nuclear family. The series moves beyond this trope, however, by linking the Gothic farmstead to multiple other levels and sites of social tension. Much of the plot is driven by ambitions of class mobility and usurpation, associated with psychological pathologies of identification, disidentification, doubling, and traumatic dissociation. The social world of *The Bad Seed* spans a four-tier hierarchy of social stratification: a financial élite, represented by the Hallwrights; a comfortably wealthy middle class, represented by Simon's family; a lower socio-economic tier, constitutive of Ford as the resentful bludger and Mereana as the honourable worker; and a degenerate underclass, represented by the brothers' father, Frank. This element of social allegory is framed by a political context, as the series opens in the weekend of the campaign launch for David Hallwright's conservative political party and ends on the weekend of his election triumph. Whatever its weaknesses in narrative coherence, *The Bad Seed* certainly aims a wide scope at New Zealand's social geographies, extending well beyond the tendency in contemporary noir to focus intensely on a single locale.

What, then, are the lines of traversal from Gothicized family drama to the depictions of social stratification and criminality? In the discussion that follows, I will relate *The Bad Seed* back to a social function that stems from the earliest Gothic fiction in British tradition: the narrative trajectory of endorsing a 'middling,' implicitly middle-class, self-definition. The appeal to the cultural politics of class as an analytical tool has some limitations in a contemporary New Zealand context, where considerations of ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation have taken priority, where Western conceptions of class are incompatible with traditional Māori social organization, and where ethnicity and socioeconomic status have tended to be closely aligned within settler colonial conditions (Brickell et al.; Crothers 115-118). With these caveats in mind, my specific and limited concern is the ways in which settler self-representations as 'middling' in popular

cultural narratives can mask social privilege (Borrell et al.; Bell, ‘Reverberating Historical Privilege’). Contrary to material reality in contemporary New Zealand, Kiwi Gothic tends to represent the settler middle-class family as vulnerable and at risk, beset by its own temptations and (in the case of *The Bad Seed*) by corrupting forces from both lower and higher social tiers. In making this case, I will survey the the main locations in the series, mindful of the ways in which Gothic presents a highly charged example of the ‘spatial forms and fantasies through which a culture declares its presence’ (Carter qtd. in Noyes 12). I will refer to Grimshaw’s fiction along the way, not to position the original source as authoritative but rather to set the fiction in counterpoint to the series, where each text amplifies certain aspects of the other. Ultimately, I will argue that both Grimshaw’s fiction and *The Bad Seed* employ hybrid genres to tell a story of Pākehā middle-class self-exculpation.

Remuera: Simon and Ford

The Lampton household first appears when Simon and Ford race in through the family’s double garage. The pair have been running hard through suburban streets at night, and it seems to matter very much who wins. As the brothers enter Simon’s home in their jogging gear, we see the trophies of Simon’s professional success as an obstetrician. The Lamptons’ home is spacious, comfortable, and well-lit. There is a generously-sized backyard pool – in line with the Gothic visual trope of distorting and reflecting surfaces seen throughout the series– with views over the Waitematā Harbour. Simon’s wife Karen is preparing dinner while watching the news on television; she is a stay-at-home mum who does the rounds of neighbourhood book clubs, pilates, kids’ sports, and school pick-ups. Karen is just about to heard off to a fundraising event for Hallwright’s conservative party. She does not vote for the party, but she joins the charity event because, in her

words, ‘David Hallwright’s going to be the next Prime Minister. Don’t you want to be a part of that?’. The Lamptons’ charity extends to their younger daughter, Elke, who was originally a foster child. In *The Night Book*, it is made clear that the Lamptons eventually learned to love Elke as Karen’s ‘charity case, her whim’ (16). The couple finally adopt her so that they can travel to London for Simon’s sabbatical – a gesture that might imply a full embrace of Elke within the family or, more cynically, a shift to avoid inconvenience at international borders. At the Lamptons, charity is certainly not its own reward; rather, it is tied into a circuit of professional and personal self-advancement.

The most irritating charity case in the household is Ford himself. In Grimshaw’s fiction, Simon’s older brother is a more marginal character in terms of plot progression, but as a leftist academic he is a goad to Simon’s complicity with his wife’s social climbing ambitions. In *The Bad Seed*, Ford represents the detritus, the grime, the degeneration that Simon believes he has left behind. Ford lives with the family in a spare room near the laundry. As Karen later explains to Detective Da Silva, he is ‘in between girlfriends, houses, you know. He seems to quite like it here.’ As an ‘old leftie,’ Ford embraces gestures associated with a Pākehā working-class style. He smokes rollies, sports a beard, and wears gym shoes, baggy jeans, singlet, and a checkered flannel shirt. When Ford pays for his own beer, which appears to be as infrequently as possible, he drinks from a generic can, not a craft beer bottle. His accent and use of idiom is middle New Zealand, the kind of language one would hear at a sports bar. Karen’s bare tolerance of Ford’s presence is reflected in the fact that she chooses not to mention him to her friend and neighbour, Tish. If Karen is the vector to the one per cent in the form of the Hallwrights, Ford is a vector in the inverse social direction: a visible and insistent reminder of the brothers’ impoverished childhoods.

Indeed, the first intimations of the brothers' childhood are glimpsed through flashback during their night-time runs. It seems that they are living a double moment, and that their physical exertion is some kind of somatic working through of an earlier body memory. In episode one, the camera zooms into Simon's face, and through his consciousness we see, in flashback, a boy with brown floppy hair and a checkered flannel shirt running through the bush. In a parallel flashback, reflecting Ford's consciousness, another boy is running: an older boy with dark short-cropped hair and a dark grey shirt with a roughly-cut neck. As Simon edges ahead in the race through the streets, so does the younger boy slip ahead of his brother in the flashback sequence. This is a memory that the present-day brothers hold in common but do not share, in the sense that they are blocked from being able to offer each other recognition or consolation. They remember separately, via a psychic binding that is transferred into movement, not words.

As police and media attention start to circle around Simon after the death of his neighbour, the flashback sequences become longer and more evidently distressing as Simon struggles psychically to ward off multiple sources of shame. When Simon accompanies Mereana to a South Auckland pub, his memory is triggered by a man swigging from a bottle. Simon recalls a similar movement by a shadowed man in an indistinct, dark interior space. In a further flashback, a man with a strap in hand chases two boys through trees, silhouetted along a ridge. At the end of the sequence, the disturbed extradiegetic music crescendos into the sound of a slap. In a second flashback, while the brothers are jogging, Simon's childhood trauma draws close to reflexive consciousness as the soundtrack bridges past and present: a boy's voice, then a man's, calls 'Simon', and the slap of the strap, almost like a shot, merges with the sound of the brothers' shoes slapping on the wet footpath. If Simon is trying to outrun his past, the very action of trying to do

so hysterically somatizes and repeats the traumatic origin. It nearly brings him to destruction: Ford yells out to his brother to avoid being run over by a car.

Fugue, in general, characterizes Simon's way of being and engaging with others. He is constantly on the move, between home and office in central Auckland, and Mereana's place in South Auckland. His physical elusiveness is reinforced by a visual signature that suggests duality and equivocation. Relative to other characters, Simon is more likely to be mirrored in reflective surfaces or positioned in a frame-within-the-frame within the shot, often through a glass film such as an office or car window. When Karen discovers that Simon has been having an affair, she throws a framed graduation photograph of him out of an upstairs window into the pool, and we watch it sinking underwater. Since Simon is plunging headlong into trouble while being framed by his brother, the visual metaphor is apropos in all respects. More generally, Simon is not transparent, at least not in any straightforward way. He is psychically splintered, and his blundering and self-preoccupation bring danger to others around him. Ford, by contrast, watches, listens, and waits. Iago-like, he inveigles himself into Karen's confidence. His intentions become clear in a scene that takes place when the family are out for the evening. Here, Ford helps himself to one of the expensive beers from the fridge, turns up the stereo, walks down the hallway trailed by the camera, and flops onto Simon and Karen's bed. In contradistinction to his apparent working class pride, it transpires that the ultimate point of Ford's psychotic campaign is to get into Simon's salubrious home, bed, and wife. It is by following Simon's movements in episode one that Ford discovers Simon's greatest vulnerability, his affair with Mereana, providing Ford with his next victim.

South Auckland: Mereana

The Bad Seed departs markedly from its source material in the depiction of South Auckland, and the location and psychological contours of the brothers' family trauma. It is useful to compare these representations, not necessarily to judge *The Bad Seed* as an adaptation, but rather to grasp alternate forms of stock representation and traumatogenic zones in a Gothicized Pākehā middle-class imaginary. In *The Night Book*, Mereana and Simon have a backstory. They first meet when Simon attends Mereana's delivery of her baby while she is a prisoner. Some years later, they meet again by chance at Auckland Airport, when Simon offers Mereana a ride home and subsequently learns that Mereana has lost her baby to meningitis. The affair that develops is to some extent mutually exploitative, though both know that Simon is overstepping professional boundaries. There are transactional elements: Simon offers Mereana cash and, as he is about to leave, she reminds him of her offer. While there are overtones of prostitution, this moment makes most sense when it is linked to Simon's attempt to hand \$20 to a child on the street as he drives away from a later encounter. Simon is acting out of a mix of misplaced charity and abjection associated with the compensatory psychology of middle-class guilt.

Underlying Simon's actions is a traumatic kernel: the fact that he and Ford were raised in South Auckland by his alcoholic father Aaron Harris. Later, they opt to take the name of their mother's second husband, emphasizing their efforts to obliterate the psychological stain of the past. Implicitly, the negative gravitational pull of Simon's traumatic childhood experience helps to explain how he ends up with Mereana. Simon is unconsciously drawn back to this world, with little thought for his own motivations or the consequences that his actions might have on Mereana. South Auckland drags him closer to the real of trauma, both in terms of his personal family history and in a sense of his uncomfortable awareness of his own social privilege, and he starts to experience intrusive visions of Mereana's death. These involuntary images seem in keeping with

earlier suggestions of misogyny in Simon's approach to his profession, where he usurps the power of women to give birth and shows distracted or even aggressive manner with his clients. Simon's fantasies are brought to realization in *The Bad Seed*, when Ford, drawing on the evil twin archetype, acts out the physical violence that Simon first imagines in his professional dealings with his female patients.

Evidently, this depiction of South Auckland is fraught with the risk of 'poverty porn,' and there are multiple reasons why the elaborate ironies and self-exposure of the middle class that characterizes Grimshaw's fiction would play out very differently in the politics of representation on screen. Demographically, South Auckland has high numbers of Pacifica and Māori residents. There is a comprehensive body of research showing that this population has been stigmatized through disproportionate emphasis on crime and lack of community safety in both news media ('Ofa Kolo) and reality television (Macdonald). For example, in their analysis of 388 news articles published both in print and online, Jean M. Allen and Toni Bruce find that South Auckland exists in mainstream representation as an imagined community (228); that South Aucklanders are subject to stereotypes and negative labelling; and that media stories are fundamentally 'antidialogical' in the way in which 'the people and community of South Auckland are *represented by* the mainstream media, rather than *dialogued with*' (225, emphasis in original). As evidence of efforts to recognize and provide partial redress for this structural racism, in November 2020 New Zealand media company Stuff offered a comprehensive, front page apology for the contemporary and historical portrayal of Māori in their media outlets. This landmark action is indicative of a palpable shift in the effectiveness of Māori in seizing more authority over representational power, and in the awareness of liberal Pākehā that ostensibly neutral reporting of crime rates can couch heavily racialized fears and biases.

The Bad Seed seems to manage the complexities of representing ethnicised place in a mixed way. On the one hand, South Auckland is represented as a place of imprisonment and social eccentricity. Trains rattle past Mereana's home in X, and planes regularly roar overhead, indicating that she lives near the flight path for Auckland's airport at Mangere. Throughways are closed off by chicken-wire fences and barrier arms. In Mereana's yard, there is an abandoned car inhabited by a savant named Nalf, who provides crucial though cryptic clues to the unfolding police investigation. The relationship between Mereana and Simon is sanitized to the extent that we do not know how they first met or how she lost her baby, even though Simon reassures her in episode two that she is 'a good mother.' Yet unlike her independent-spirited fictional counterpart, the televised Mereana is also needy. She follows Simon home and confronts him in his front yard, breaching the serenity of Simon's Remuera existence and alerting Karen to his double life. In terms of the ethics of representing political and gendered minorities on screen, this reduction of Mereana's role to a mere plot device does not seem to be much of a step forward. In the final episode, Mereana literally exculpates Simon by furnishing his alibi when Da Silva eventually locates her. In fact, the whole investigative chain seems to have been premised on Simon's unwillingness to acknowledge his affair with Mereana, as he chooses to lie to the police about his whereabouts on the night of the murder, leading Ford to glean a vulnerability in Simon that he can further exploit. While this plot point is a weakness in the construction of the police procedural elements of the series, in terms of Simon's class-based consciousness it suggests that a mix of shame, vanity, and an in-grained habit of deception is a potent motivating force.

The Mansion: The Hallwrights

The competition for maternal ‘ownership’ of Elke is the least evidently ‘gothicky’ element of the series. Nonetheless, I register it here for the ways in which this plot thread intensifies the toxic interweaving of shame and personal ambition that motivates Simon and Ford’s actions and is symptomatic of a broader national malaise in Grimshaw’s world. By episode three, domestic tensions are rising in the Hallwrights’ suburban mansion. David’s election campaign is reaching a critical point. His beautiful, petulant wife is causing headaches for the campaign PR team with her tasteless behaviour. Roza’s resistant character is shown, rather blatantly, by the colour design of her costume. For much of the show, she wears relentless pink, suggesting not only an act of sartorial rebellion against publicity advisors, but also a sense that she is stuck in an arrested stage of girliness. Roza herself becomes increasingly predatory through the series. A former prostitute and drug addict, Roza gives Elke up for adoption at the age of 19 (age 16 in Grimshaw’s fiction). Now Roza has hired a private investigator to shadow Elke. Under pressure from David to have a baby to complement his two children from a former marriage, she confesses her teenage secret to him, with the words: ‘You have your people, your politics, your bloody election. What say I want something of my own? Now the Lamptons have [Elke]. And I want her back.’ Teaming up together, the Hallwrights set their sights on the Lamptons’ guardianship of their teenage daughter.

To New Zealand audiences, the fictionalized election bears strong resemblances to the 2008 general election, which was won by the conservative National Party on an ‘aspirational’ economic platform under the leadership of former financial trader, John Key. Although Grimshaw has denied basing Hallwright on Key, the similarities are too strong to avoid comparison.³ Like Key, Hallwright was fast-tracked through the committee selection process. In Grimshaw’s fiction,

³ In an interview in the *New Zealand Listener*, Grimshaw (2012, p. 12) suggests that John Key grew into her fiction, rather than the other way around: ‘John Key has come along later and imitated my art, which has been an interesting move on his part, and very useful. Maybe I should send him a Christmas card.’

the spur to Hallwright's drive for personal wealth and ambition is (again like Key) to exceed and disavow his own impoverished childhood. In *Soon*, Claire says of Hallwright: 'For him the "gap between rich and poor" means more distance from his childhood' (262). As Key's political rivals, Labour Party campaigners dubbed him 'trader-in-chief', insinuating that there would be no national asset, social benefit or public good that he would not put on the table to be traded in corporate deals.

Key's tactics, like Hallwright's worked. In the 2008 election, the New Zealand electorate took a swing to the right. Significantly, Key won an increased proportion of votes in South Auckland, suggesting upwardly mobile identification both in lower socioeconomic areas and among Māori and Pacifica voters (Crothers 118-119). The Māori Party was also drawn to the politics of aspiration and entered into a coalition government with the National Party. During the campaign, Key had staged a media walkabout in the deprived area of McGehan Close, located in the electorate of Labour leader Helen Clark, and described at the time by Key as a place where 'helplessness is ingrained, a dead end, a place where rungs on the social ladder have been removed' (cited in Collins, para. 1). Once in office, however, Key presided over welfare reforms in his second term, moving away from wide-based social provision to more targeted and authoritarian approaches to welfare beneficiaries. Picking up on this political licence, stigmatizing discourse raising the spectres of 'feral families' and the 'underclass' became more prevalent in New Zealand media representations (Beddoe).

The Bad Seed blunts Grimshaw's political satire to some extent by presenting Roza, rather than David, as the character who is most haunted by a shameful past. Māori actor Xavier Horan's rendition of David Hallwright is generally less ruthless than his literary counterpart. However, he loves his wife, and he wants to win the election. Sensing the public's eagerness to consume

redemption narratives, Hallwright decides to take a gamble with the media. –He appeals to the mode of political communication that Žižek has termed ‘false self-transparency,’ in which the only matter considered scandalous for members of an élite class is the mismanagement of information, rather than any specifically damaging quality of the material (Žižek 246). – . With the help of a compliant television journalist (possibly based loosely on right-wing New Zealand media personality Mike Hosking), Hallwright ensures that Simon’s identity is leaked to the media, with the headline ‘Suspected high society killer unmasked.’ Later, he makes a call to Auckland Central police station and requests that Simon be let off all charges. When Simon is picked up from the police station by Hallwright’s PR manager after being released from arrest, he understands the implicit blackmail that Hallwright holds over him.

That evening, the Hallwrights call a meeting with the Lamptons to advise their wish to publicly announce that Roza is Elke’s birth mother. In keeping with the melodramatic trope of maternal sacrifice and struggle, the ‘good’ mother and the ‘bad’ mother square up. Karen is defiant: ‘Over my dead body will you turn her into an election issue.’ However, the Lamptons know they have been outplayed. When Karen jabs, ‘Would your adoring public still love you if they knew about the drugs?’, Roza parries: ‘Would Simon send Elke postcards from prison?’. Simon and Karen have built their middle-class nest around accumulation, in affective as well as material terms. The Hallwrights take this dynamic one step further: they belong to a class where no relationship, no matter how intimate, can be exempted from the logics of instrumentalism and exchange. Karen’s final rhetorical appeal for her daughter – ‘Do you have any idea what it takes to be a mother?’ – is met with deadpan serenity by Roza: ‘Thank you, Karen. I’m about to find out.’

The Farmstead: Frank Lampton

I have left discussion of Frank Lampton's farm until last because it is not only the location where the struggle between Simon and Ford reaches its climax, but it is also the single most iconic setting in a nation state where the appropriation and agricultural transformation of land was, and continues to be, a primary tool of colonization. As a radical departure from Grimshaw's fiction, it seems that the scriptwriters of *The Bad Seed* were deliberately keying into the representational history of a subgenre that is variously termed 'farmstead Gothic' (Jones), 'rural Gothic' (Conrich) or 'settler Gothic' (Kavka). The setting is an isolated farmhouse or shack, inhabited by a broken or destabilized nuclear family beaten down by the harsh work of breaking in the new land, where acts of crazed and unpredictable behaviour are viewed from a point of innocence, most typically through the observation of a child or teen.⁴ The psychic logic of the Gothic farmhouse is mimetic: as animals are chained, trapped, abused, and slaughtered to service an agricultural economy, so too are children treated like animals in these stories. Although Kiwi Gothic is often highly regionalized (as 'Dunedin Gothic,' 'Wellington Gothic,' 'Taranaki Gothic,' for example), this rural variant of Kiwi Gothic is very rarely set in an identifiable geographic location. Instead, farmstead Gothic appears to exist in a mythical imaginary space, perhaps attesting to its profundity and longevity as a self-founding narrative for an emergent national consciousness.

⁴ Kavka nominates Vincent Ward's *Vigil* (1984) as the 'ur-text' of settler Gothic in New Zealand cinema, and traces a line of descent through Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), Brad McGann's short film *Possum* (1997), and McGann's feature-length adaptation of the novel by Maurice Gee, *In My Father's Den* (2004). Farmstead Gothic appears again, more recently, in the first episode of the television series *The Gulf* (2019), where a mute boy escapes after years of abuse from a farmer who has kidnapped the boy and locked him in a pigpen, along with his own daughter. In literary fiction, Jones traces farmstead Gothic back to Katherine Mansfield's short story 'The Woman at the Store' (1912). Novels by Mike Johnson (*Dumb Show*, 1995) and Carl Nixon (*The Tally Stick*, 2020) most harrowingly inhabit similar terrain. Māori author Becky Manawatū includes violent farmstead scenes in *Auē* (2019), with a specifically Pākehā perpetrator. In comic mode, Rachel King's novel *Magpie Hall* (2010) blends New Zealand farmstead Gothic with a spoof of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). While acknowledging the prevalence of the farmstead Gothic trope, Erin Mercer (2017) argues that the related genre of 'slaughterhouse Gothic' is more specifically unique to New Zealand.

In this respect, *The Bad Seed* potentially serves as a reminder that *all* Pākehā cultural production stems from this specifically settler-colonial history and its ongoing consequences. As Bell has noted, ‘Structurally, present-day white New Zealanders [...] occupy the positions in our societies that were created by the labour of the early settlers. We still constitute the dominant culture of our societies, and our political and economic institutions are largely governed by people like us’ (Bell, *Relating Indigenous and Settler Identities* 6)). Yet the cultural work that New Zealand settler gothic performs is complex. The most common narrative outcome of farmstead Gothic involves the settlers’ departure from the land. In most cases, the narrative closure is achieved when the protagonist, and usually his or her family, exit from the farm to seek a life in a more civilized social and geographical zone. In doing so, they exit the mythic time of the settler, and enter the mundane, compromised, *middling* time-space of the suburb or the city. While this repeated narrative may seem to speak of failure through withdrawal from the land, it is more accurately described as a narrative of disavowal, where the historical reality of settler domination is downplayed in the project of securing settler innocence (Hardy; Lawn, ‘Domesticating Settler Gothic’). Kavka even asserts that ‘no grasp of the New Zealand Gothic is possible without an awareness of the struggle between the young nation and the longer, indigenous history of the place that is repressed in the process of building it over’ (68).⁵ Paradoxically, in this representational regime, settlers show that they have earned the right to inhabit the country by leaving the land.

The Bad Seed shows farmstead Gothic in reverse, so to speak: it opens with a privileged, seemingly happy Pākehā family, descends into family disintegration, and reaches its narrative

⁵ Kavka is writing in the context of Brad McGann’s short film *Possum* (1997). A Pākehā family lives in isolated, dense bush, where they eke a living trapping possums, which are deemed an ecological pest in New Zealand. In the climax of the film, one of the family’s children, a non-verbal, half-wild girl, herself becomes fatally caught in a possum trap. The ecological threat rebounds metaphorically on the family: like possums, they too are out of place and destructive of the local habitat. Kavka derives the broader point that much of New Zealand’s settler Gothic cinematic tradition revolves around the psychic pathologies of forging habitation in a colonised land.

climax through regression to the originary site of both personal and cultural trauma. Ford and Simon first visit the Lampton farm in episode three. As details of Simon's connections with the attacks spread in the news media, journalists start sniffing around the brothers' father with offers of cash in exchange for unsavoury details of Simon's past. At Ford's suggestion, the brothers drive overnight to their childhood home – taking Ford's ute rather than Simon's Lexus to avoid Frank's derision – in order to buy their father off by 'giv[ing] him a better offer.' In keeping with stock representations, the farm itself seems to have little economic value; it is atavistic and cruel without rationale. Dogs strain at their chains; there are flies and trash everywhere; and the carcasses of rabbits and possums swing in the breeze. Frank himself is busy skinning a rabbit; as he stabs his knife into the cutting table, it is easy to see where Ford's own handiwork with a blade comes from. As Simon might have feared, given his father's capacity for belligerence, Frank is enraged by his sons' offer of money. It seems that the farm is a zone that is exempt from the rule of exchange (both financial and social) on which Simon bases his intimate relationships as well as his work. Frank treats his sons to a dose of their childhood discipline by locking them in a shed. Ford watches Simon's frantic attempts to get out with some satisfaction; he seems to have appointed himself as baroque justice bearer, the unmasker who wears a mask, whose mission is to make Simon feel guilt, shame, and panic.

In the final episode, the original act of usurpation perpetrated by Ford is revealed through flashbacks located, unusually, in the recap sequence at the beginning of the episode. For years, Simon has been carrying the guilt of being sent to a youth detention centre for striking a girl at a party. As becomes evident, however, this is not his guilt to bear. In fact Ford hit the girl, and blamed Simon – though it remains unclear whether Ford took this action to protect Simon from their violent father, or simply to avoid taking responsibility. 'I smacked that girl,' Ford says at the

point of villainous confession, 'I got you sent away. You got the free pass, mate. You got the good life.' Frank has certainly made up his mind; he shoots and incapacitates Ford, who, almost radiant in his psychopathy by his stage, seems to have incited this moment of self-purgation. As the shot recalls and repeats the slap of Frank's strap when the brothers were young, Simon is released from his traumatic memories, and from the thrall of Ford as his shadow self.

Conclusion: Off the Hook

Simon's character arc sees him finally go through a series of exculpations; he never was the murderer, he never hit any girl in the past, he merely thought about harming his clients, he led Ford to Mereana but she survived Ford's attack. Simon has one last exculpation to receive in the form of Karen's forgiveness for his affair with Mereana. It is implied that he receives Karen's absolution when she accompanies him to the farm to rescue Claire from her kidnapper, Ford. As their car arrives at the farm, Karen gives Simon a 'now I understand everything' look. Now that she has seen where her husband grew up, Karen's pity and charity will prevail. The final shot of *The Bad Seed* shows Karen, Simon, and Claire picking up Elke from the Hallwrights. The Lamptons walk arm-in-arm away from the camera, and away from Roza, who pouts and turns from her doorstep back into her house. The Lamptons have fought off the various threats to Simon's role as father and husband, and Karen's role as mother. The Lamptons are not corrupt and dangerous; they have simply been beset by temptations which they can now recover from with better mutual understanding. In the end, they do not even seem so rich any more. They have learned humility; they are simply middling.

Could this self-consolidating and conventional form of closure have been otherwise? What if *The Bad Seed* had stayed closer to the noir-infused vision of Grimshaw's fictional world, rather

than offering a self-serving moral clarity? Grimshaw's vision dwells within a cynical, pervasive malignity of the Pākehā élite, as the social stratum that works hard, in terms of its self-representation, to secure its own innocence and deny social reality. In the character of Simon, Grimshaw provides us with a male protagonist whose emotional suffering stems from his own choices, but which he attributes wholly to victimization at the hands of his father – thereby rationalizing his own infidelities and crimes, not least of which is his alliance with a power politician whose dismissal of the lives of the poor is founded on avoiding personal emotions of social discomfort (Lawn, 'Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition,' 118). *The Bad Seed*, by contrast, offers a cautionary tale of social mobility. The introduction of a clearer line of criminal intent and investigation serves a redemptive purpose which expunges class domination, arguably buys into a conservative narrative of degeneracy, and quarantines then purges the origins and zones of criminality. Hogle has ascribed this closing over of guilty knowledge as part of a pattern of 'ideological suggesting-and-obscuring' of a traumatic kernel that underlies the Gothic itself (73). Remuera's toxic rounds of social climbing and political complacency may stink, but all that matters to Simon – to quote his first words of dialogue in the series – is that it is a *winning* stink.

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