

## Thesis abstract

# Inheriting the disavowed: nuclear testing and its cultural symptoms in Australia

Annelise Roberts

Abstract of a thesis for a Doctorate of Philosophy submitted to the Australian National University

This dual creative/critical thesis examines the impact and legacy of the British nuclear testing program in Australia through the lens of a hypothesised cultural symptom called the “desultory:” a dull, avoidant half-heartedness, the signs of which, I argue, are apparent across various Australian cultural sites touched by nuclearism.

In the two-chapter scholarly dissertation, I use textual analysis to develop the concept of the desultory and suggest that its emergence can be traced to the conjunction of the existential anxieties of the nuclear era with the settler disavowal of colonial violence. The first body chapter considers the “black mist” — a phenomenon witnessed by many Aboriginal people in the wake of the first nuclear trial in 1953 — as an instance of the “nuclear uncanny.” Reading a work of life writing by nuclear witness and Anangu woman Jessie Lennon, I find that the repressed cultural material that returns in the black mist phenomenon is connected to the unfinished, disavowed business of settler colonialism. Lennon’s strong proclamation of Aboriginal survival through the work of life writing allows a clearer picture of the mechanisms of settler disavowal and obscuration to emerge, laying bare the program of the desultory. The second chapter suggests that the prevalence of Aboriginal-derived symbolism, imagery and language in representations of the nuclear project is further

evidence of a cultural process of disavowal. In government surveyor Len Beadell’s 1967 memoir and in the appropriative naming practices evident throughout the nuclear-testing operations, Aboriginality is both evoked and denied; ironically, it seems, the potential nuclear apocalypse is the only space in which the actual relationship between Indigenous and settler Australia can be faced. These two chapters provide a theoretical basis for the association between nuclear anxiety and the unacknowledged violence of Australia’s colonisation, furnishing the conceptual ground for the broader project’s theorisation of the desultory.

The creative component of the thesis, an epistolary novel called *Totem*, continues the work of theorising the desultory by other means. In *Totem*, a white nuclear veteran of the testing at Emu Field, South Australia, addresses a series of recollections to an unnamed descendant. Speaking from a *bardo* between life and death, the veteran is compelled to undertake the telling of his life story and the event at its core — his flight through the mushroom cloud of the Totem I nuclear test — by a sense that it is important for him to impart a legacy; however, he is continually hampered by his own forgetfulness, uncertainty, and fear. In the drama of the difficulty of telling his story a picture emerges of intergenerational silences, alienations and violences, and the odd cor-

responsiveness between the muteness of Canberra suburbia and the sublime emptiness of the testing site at Emu Field. Meanwhile, in a series of interludes, a woman works on a strange document — part memoir, part essay — against a backdrop of urban social dysfunction and decay. Her short treatises form a kind of return correspondence that culminates in a chronicle of an expedition to the heart of the continent in search of a foundation for her enquiry that has so far evaded her. Thematically, the novel dwells in the space where settler colonialism and nuclearism overlap; as suggested by the title — a word that refers both to an icon of Indigenous ancestry and to the first nuclear test on mainland Australia — Aboriginal

dispossession is the “ground zero” of this narrative. In *Totem*, both the shock of the nuclear event and the confronting reality of colonial violence are diffused into desultory atmospheres of dulled complicity, in which clarity is consistently elusive.

(Dr Roberts was awarded the 2022 ANU JG Crawford Prize for Interdisciplinary research.)

Dr. Annelise Roberts  
ANU, Canberra

E-mail: [Annelise.Roberts@anu.edu.au](mailto:Annelise.Roberts@anu.edu.au)

URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/249123>