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A Toothy Tale: Themes of Abjection in John Marsden and Shaun Tan's Picture Story Book, *The Rabbits*

Dianne McGlasson

In this article I consider the multi-award winning, intriguing, contemporary Australian picture story book, *The Rabbits*,¹ written by John Marsden and illustrated by Shaun Tan. Published in 1998, the book has been given the Aurealis Convener's Award for Excellence, the Spectrum Gold Award for Book Illustration, and the Children's Book Council of Australia Picture Book of the Year award. While the audience for this book is notionally children and young adults (acknowledged by its inclusion in the curriculum of Australian secondary schools), the book declares itself as "a rich and haunting allegory of colonization suitable for all ages and cultures" told from the viewpoint of native animals (*The Rabbits* back cover). *The Rabbits* depicts the dispossession of small lizard and marsupial-like animals in a recognizably Australian landscape; the indigenous inhabitants are robbed of their way of life, their cultural heritage, country, and children stolen by the invading army of rabbits who arrive with all the hallmarks of European culture and, with devastating effect, ruthlessly exploit the land, displacing the indigenes. The seemingly simple narrative contains complex references that most obviously relate to the contemporary, contested notion of colonization, and warrants a serious reading.

This book's engagement with contemporary concerns relating to national identity, and the notion of colonization as a form of invasion and dispossession, demonstrates awareness of Australia's contested historical past and clearly invites a political reading; it has been the focus of such critics as Brooke Collins-Gearing and Dianne Osland whose essay, "Who Will Save Us from the Rabbits?: ReWriting the Past Allegorically" (2010), focuses on the ways in which *The Rabbits* reveals what they determine as "Australia's psychological *terra nullius*" and its perceived effect in the

invocation and creation of a collective post-Mabo Australian identity.² While a reading of *The Rabbits* from the perspective of Homi Bhabha's "unhomely moment" (9)—the moment in which personal and psychic histories violently intersect with the dislocating effect of colonialism—would also elaborate on the theme of colonization and disaffection depicted in *The Rabbits*, this essay is inspired by the title, which has immediate negative connotations (for an Australian) of bodily functions such as voracious chewing and endless coupling and birthing of progeny.³ This notion is supported by Tan's surrealistic, fantastical depictions of increasing numbers of rabbitlike invaders that devour the indigene's motherland, invoking, to my mind, a reading in which the body is privileged. Thus, in my reading of this text, I propose to explore a metaphor hitherto untested by critics, that of teeth (such as the biting, chewing teeth of the colonists).

My reading turns to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection to illuminate *The Rabbits*' toothy embodiment of the devouring nature of colonialism. Noëlle McAfee (2004) proclaims Kristeva as "one of the very few philosophers for whom the speaking being becomes a crucial constellation for understanding oral and written literature, politics and national identity, sexuality, culture and nature" (1), while Kelly Oliver (1998) suggests Kristeva's theory of abjection as "an explanation for oppression and discrimination" (81). (*Abjection* is an ambiguous term in English, referring equally to actively "abjection" and passively "being abjected": in the remainder of this paper I avoid confusion by using these verbs in preference to the distinct noun form.)

Kristeva's emphasis on the maternal body and her psychological insights into manifestations of abjection suggest her theory as an appropriate, if contested lens, through which to view this text. Kristeva's work on "body politics" has attracted criticism and sparked vigorous debate among feminist critics such as Judith Butler (79–93), who argues that by associating the maternal body with the Semiotic (preoedipal) stage, Kristeva reifies it, removing it from a cultural framework, that is, from the masculine (Symbolic) order in which culture exists. Kristeva contends that the experience of abjection aligns with the maternal because it returns the subject to a time that precedes the processes of identification with the father and heralds separation from the mother; the maternal abject endures as a persistent presence, always threatening, and, at times successful in destroying subjectivity. However, Kristeva's theory, while stressing the influence of the Semiotic experience of the maternal in subjectivity, acknowledges that the construction of subjectivity is dependent on patriarchal influence. Nevertheless, while the Semiotic emanates from the maternal experience, it is nongender specific, present in the psyche of both male and female.

Kristeva identifies the Symbolic and Semiotic as separate; once language is accessed by the child, the Semiotic impulses are sublimated into the

Symbolic order; according to Kristeva, that which is lost, repressed desire for the maternal, remains within us, manifesting universally as abjection, a way of “speaking that which cannot speak” (Harrington 139). Abjection, understood by such theorists as Patrick West (2006) “as the simultaneously horrified and ecstatic recognition by the subject that what lies without also lies within, that to be one is also to be an other” thus is both an internal and an external process in which the horrified, confused, inner recognition of the self-as-other is projected onto a perceived external threat. Tan’s disturbing depictions of anthropomorphized, rabbitish invaders, agencies of displacement for the indigenes (also depicted as anthropomorphized animals), hints at interesting consequences for processing the effects of colonization if considered from Kristeva’s position in which “the process of separating ourselves from animals [is] a process of abjection whereby we project everything beastly in ourselves outward onto animals in order to identify ourselves as “clean and proper” human beings” (Oliver, 2012).

A reading of *The Rabbits* through a Kristevan lens offers insights into the workings of the two social orders, the Symbolic and the Semiotic. Kristeva’s concerns are largely with the disturbance of order as it manifests in acts of subversion, transgression, marginality, displacement, and inaction; such themes are depicted in *The Rabbits* and, if read from a Kristevan perspective, the departure of Marsden’s and Tan’s text from the established tradition of representation of Australia’s colonial history (a nonindigenous perspective) can, importantly, be identified as challenging an established historical and social order, that, according to Kristeva, forms a cultural background from which both writer and reader draw in order to create something new; it is Kristeva’s contention that the act of writing should itself disturb the established order, whether political or literary—in *The Rabbits*, an indigenous society is represented as displaced, abjected, dejected, by a society preoccupied with consumption of land, occupation of spaces, stealing, bringing displacement, decay and death to a community that hitherto enjoyed a harmonious integration with the land.⁴

According to Kristeva, the Symbolic register as it operates in literature articulates the law, logic, and order of the father. It operates in the everyday realm of language and social organization, based on repression of the maternal experience that precedes it. As a social order it is marked by such things as evaluation, the valorization of rationality, judgments, the definition of opposites, and technology; in *The Rabbits*, the Symbolic is articulated through textual identification of two patriarchal societies—the British invaders who bring technology, rationalism, judgment, and separation, and an indigenous society with its own established traditions located within an orderly society based on strict taboos.⁵ For Kristeva, the major distinction between the

Symbolic and the Semiotic order is the presence of the dissenting voice that she identifies with the Semiotic order. It is Kristeva's contention that by permitting rhythm, color, a sense of that which is unnameable, an oscillation of opposites into one another, and a desire for jouissance emerges from the dissonance of the prevailing social order (Semiotic or Symbolic). The repressed maternal energy of the Semiotic is expressed in literature through innovative, seductive textual language; it is performative, subversive, operating in ways that reveal repressed desire for the forbidden maternal. In this picture story book, the unconscious, performative aspect of the Semiotic is evident in Tan's fantastical, surrealistic, illustrations, while the text itself can be seen as subversive, compliant with Rosemary Jackson's description of fantasy as characteristically attempting "to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural restraints," a "literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss" (3). *The Rabbits* can be argued as memorializing what is lost by making visible the abject nature of the processes of colonization.

In her book *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva writes of teeth as the agents of abjection, established by the connection of teeth to the mouth, to food, to the body, and thus to the mother (2–3, 38–39). Removed from their clean and proper place (the mouth), teeth, both real and metaphorical, become abject, objects of horror, revulsion, and distaste. Teeth are more than the mere sum of their parts; they are the representation of that which remains rooted within us, repressed yet obsessively revisited, just as the tongue revisits and worries at the aching, rotting tooth, fascinated and yet repelled, but seeking to establish union with that which is part and yet not part of ourselves—the repressed desire for the abjected, excluded, mother; from Kristeva's perspective, in order to construct an identity, we must abject the maternal, the vessel that has created us. Paradoxically, that which has been made abject is, however, always present, but suppressed through the mechanisms of repression, displacement, and sublimation. Thus, Kristeva writes that abjecting "is above all ambiguity" (4), rooted in the desire to return to the mother and expressed as a physical and emotional response to that which we instinctually recognize as abhorrent, out of place, false, or treacherous. Abjection is also the domain of pollution, decay, and rot; according to Kristeva, it is the "improper/unclean" of the body, the corpse and the maternal body (2–3, 38–39).

In literature, abjection is revealed through illustration and written text, both literal and metaphorical. In mythology, legend, folklore, and fairy tale, teeth crush and grind, rip, tear and nip, snip, cut and chew, ravage and rape, betray and beguile. Teeth are thus a powerful symbolic and metaphorical expression of aspects of abjection. For example, abjection is manifest in teeth that are lied through. Abjection is inherent in teeth that separate and divide, that uproot and expel and grimace and grin in demonstrations that, like abjection,

attract and repel. Bared, teeth are the portcullis that threatens as it defends. Gnashed, they are the expression of that which is repressed and cannot be articulated. Ground and gritted, they are the bearers of suppressed, repressed emotion. Such are the metaphorical teeth that, in my Kristevan reading of *The Rabbits*, will be extracted and examined in relation to abjection, expressed through Marsden and Tan's themes of greed, devouring, betrayal, repression, rape, alienation and pollution, and desire.

The act of abjection, for Kristeva, disturbs order, harries systems, confuses identity, flouts position, and does not respect rules (4). Abjection is concerned with the crossing of a boundary, the invasion of a border; in this sense, abjection can be recognized in *The Rabbits* through Marsden's narrative text and Tan's surrealist illustrations that relate the experience of colonization through the eyes of those abjected—oppressed, exploited, and betrayed indigenous inhabitants. In this book, powerful rabbitish (my word play on bite/British) beings invade a recognizably Australian landscape. Through the process of colonization, the land is raped, transformed, and polluted by the invasive usurpers (I deliberately employ this word to illustrate the *wrongful* nature of colonization of an indigenous society, based on the British doctrine of *Terra Nullius*). The timeless systems, identity, and order of the indigenous inhabitants are not only disturbed but desecrated by the arrival of those whose greed, trickery, and betrayal reveal an insatiable appetite as they bite with avaricious teeth into the body of the pristine (m)otherland—a land that, while alien, “other,” to the invaders, is also motherland to the indigenes—chewing over territory with the wheel ruts of civilization and leaving behind the tooth print of abjection on the formerly pristine landscape (9–10). Viewed from a Kristevan perspective, the setting of *The Rabbits*, while recognizably Australian, is nevertheless set in a parallel reality. By establishing within the text the normality of the time-honored systems of the indigenes, the narrative suggests a benevolent, harmonious patriarchal social order thrown into chaos by another patriarchal order, that of the rabbitish invaders whose laws are different; thus, the symbolic (social) order of each society is contested. Tan's illustrations of avaricious, fantastical, destabilizing invaders evoke Kristeva's Semiotic drives which, in undermining the Symbolic order of the paternal, permit a pendulum-like swing between the two psychological states (Symbolic and Semiotic); while Kristeva claims the Semiotic is the “other” of the Symbolic, she insists the two modes are always intricately entwined, their viability arising from their interaction.

Invasion and colonization of the land introduce the teeth of science, demonstrated by Tan's illustrations of rabbitlike beings and their probing, invasive, cutting, and dissecting toothed instruments. These scientific teeth record dispassionately while delivering death to the innocent and unwary, here the

helpless lizard is held by the tail and suspended above the vial, portending approaching death, but also indicating intended preservation of the corpse in the aqueous solution (11–12). For Kristeva, the corpse is abject. While the literal decomposition of a dead body is Kristeva's supreme example of abjection, she also relates it to the "interference" with death, inflicted by such processes as science that are "supposed to save me from death" (4). In this sense, a parallel can be drawn between Tan's illustration of the live lizard, its impending delivery into the scientist's test tube, and Kristeva's notion of "death infecting life" that she sees as representing the paradox that is abjection. In *The Rabbits*, death comes at the hands of the scientist who, while offering, takes. Abjection associated with wrongful doing is also suggested by the background image depicting the avaricious invader's proffering of a toothed cog to unwary indigenes who have no need or understanding of the foreign toy (11). This can be understood as the obfuscation of deceit that distracts and "toys" with what it steals, in this case, the lizard and its life.

On pages 11 and 12, scientific teeth test and taste; they chew over details. They are tools of extraction that disturb and uproot and bring death to the indigenous population. Through science's dissective/analytical modes, these teeth introduce wrongful death and desecration to the land, collecting live specimens to kill them, and making careful calculations that reduce the value of life to a mathematical formula to justify killing. In my reading, *The Rabbits* clearly articulates a Kristevan sense of abjection and its association with a model of order, science, which is supposed to save one from death but instead inflicts death in the name of science. Here, scientific eyes peer through numbered lenses and can be read as the "eye teeth" that promise vision and insight and life, but instead inflict death through ignorance and shortsightedness and cold calculation.

The rabbit scientists record their data with a peacock-feather pen; in many mythologies, the peacock feather is associated with the evil eye, thus represents the recording of evil, abject deeds. The indigenous, childlike inhabitants are distracted, confused, and disarmed by the seemingly friendly rabbits that, in surveying and exploring, take over the land in numbers macrodentic. Tan's landscape transforms over several pages from the introductory, blue-skied natural environment, filled with vibrant imagery of indigenous flora and fauna, to a palette of murky shades that, as the story progresses, begins to reflect the darkness of desolation and approaching death introduced by the investigative, scientific teeth of increasing numbers of invasive rabbits.

Kristeva writes of abjection as "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady" (4). In *The Rabbits*, introduced species can be understood as the abjecting false teeth, implanted artificially to usurp a place or position. Abjection is thus revealed by the false tooth, the tooth that masquerades as real. It is the

tooth that is artificial in its placement and that falsely displaces the original. It is the tooth that hides beneath or behind a false exterior, the tooth that is manufactured, composite, and false. The tooth that does not quite fit, that irritates, that is out of its “clean and proper place,” abjects. In *The Rabbits*, this false tooth multiplies to become teeth, able to bite, that in chewing, devour, and satisfy an ever increasing and insatiable appetite. These teeth, through indiscriminate gorging, destroy. The teeth that grin and lie are the abjecting teeth of colonization, introducing a spreading infection that threatens the well-being of the (ab)original inhabitants.

Tan’s surrealist depiction of the desolate landscape places the text in the border area that can be described as liminal and therefore analogous to the abject. Liminality is, again, discernible in the historical process of the colonization of Australia that reflects the birth of the new colony and its separation from the mother, also inherent in the birth process. The process of colonization infers a physical separation of the colonizers from the motherland; however, while this inference can be drawn from *The Rabbits*, the book foregrounds the brutal separation of the indigenous inhabitants from *their* birthright, from *their* motherland; viewed through a Kristevan lens, the abjection of the indigenes from their cultural landscape, and their subsequent relegation to the liminal wasteland, transforms each into a “deject,” which Kristeva characterizes as one who “strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing” and “the one by whom the abject exists” (8). As dejects, the indigenes in *The Rabbits* are lost, untethered, uprooted from within the desecrated spaces they inhabit.

Tan’s depiction of topography in *The Rabbits* is also abject through its association with the corporeal maternal body. In an Australian context, rabbits connote indiscriminate breeding and a devouring of the land, an endless consumption and chewing and sexual coupling and birthing analogous to Kristeva’s description of the Semiotic. The imagery of birth is evident in the cover and pages 13 and 14 of *The Rabbits*; Tan’s illustrations on these pages can be related to the Kristevan notion of abjection as separation of the child from the mother (the mother abjecting, the child being abjected). In *The Rabbits*, the dragonlike mothership, with great headlike prow and sails like sprouting wings and licking tongues, floats in a primal sea of smoky darkness, her great chest jutting protectively, breastlike, over newly birthed progeny. She has birthed/berthed, delivering the teeth of invasion; the dragon’s teeth that, when sown, will rise and multiply like the armies of myth, the powerful, death dealing Spartoi, grown from the teeth of the sacred Drakon and sown by Kadmos. According to Robin Hard, it is from the surviving Spartoi that “the military caste of the new city is formed” (296) a caste that finds echoes in Tan’s depictions of militarised topographies in *The Rabbits*.

From a Kristevan perspective, Britain represents the Symbolic order, delivering the law of the father through a penal system that banished its convicts by transportation to Britain's colonies, including Australia; however, while Britain represents the maternal, the m(other)land for those she has abjected from their native land she also brings the displacement associated with the Semiotic order to the indigenes.

In a powerfully surrealistic primal birth scene, the rabbitish invaders are disgorged from the vagina (interpreted as the hole in the belly of the ship) of the mothership and are implanted on threatening, sabrelike toothpick legs upon the shore of the land. The umbilicus of smaller boats acts as a connecting bridge between the mothership and the land in which the teeth of abjection (the rabbits) are to be sown. The paradox of abjection is its ambiguity; thus the mothership of the invaders can be read not only as the maternal container, representing her corporeality, but also as a molar tooth, the source of grinding, pulverizing power that is necessary in the digestive process that feeds the host. The process of gorging and disgorging in which teeth play a vital role is also connected to abjection, discernible in the illicit process of colonization in which the colonizers feed off the colonized, an endless process of devouring and consumption, of predator and prey.

In my reading of *The Rabbits*, the monstrous dragon mothership represents the power of the British Empire to invade and conquer, devouring those weaker than herself. Although this dragon mother might be construed as a *vagina dentata* on a superficial level, this ship exhibits Symbolic traits and is not of the Semiotic order that precedes the establishment of gender. Thus, although closely related to the mother's body, it is not feminine in the sense of being abject (Creed 22–23). The fear that issues from the dragon mothership is therefore not connected to castration anxiety, but is projected through her progeny; these are the ravening teeth that, once separated from the mother, threaten violation, invasion. Having deposited her lethal brood on the shore, the mothership exhibits the qualities of a more benign maternal vessel. Her gun ports are empty, her teeth are drawn, the empty sockets devoid of masticating power. The horror here is associated with the notion of rape, of forcing the Symbolic penis of colonization into the undefended vagina of Terra Australis.

As I suggested earlier, Tan's rabbitish creatures are implanted false teeth, usurping a place not rightly theirs. Tan's images reveal a premeditated mission of invasion that abjects by way of phallus-like guns that trumpet aggression, sabre-toothed legs that pierce the fabric of the land, and lancer-like ears, laid back in body language that displays distrust. The greed and falsity that mark abjecting can be recognized in the licking tongue of the blood red flag that appears to issue from the open, grinning maw (created by the shape of the

invader's hat), recalling Kristeva's notion of abjection as "the hatred that smiles" (4). The flag is forked, indicating the lie, the falsity of a forked tongue that epitomizes abjection. It is marked by arrows that point to all points of the compass, indicating the invaders' desire to consume everything. At the end of the flagged forked tongue, the clock indicates twenty-five past twelve, lunch time; time to eat. Within this mouth are the teeth, minutely indicating the invaders' power to devour their prey, to chew, to crush and grind and pulverize with mechanical ease all that lies before them. This is the abjection associated with violent use of power: colonization, rape, and violation. The shape of the hat again echoes the shape of a boat, alluding to the invaders who "came by water," and this, coupled with the connotations of the "cocked" (phallic) hat, worn by the invaders, is indicative of the egotistical, empirical desire to invade and conquer all, to sink the teeth into the flesh of the world, to divide, consume, rape, plunder, and devour.

The history of the invaders is imprinted on their clothing, a record revealing a personal history whose arrows point to a history of biting, manacled enslavement, and conviction (cf. Australia's convict history)—metaphoric teeth that masticate and thereby abject whatever they encounter. Tan's representation of the ears and legs of these figures as rabbitlike beings (with connotations of indiscriminate sexual couplings and multiplicity of breeding) and their guns as phallic instruments (privileging the law of the father as master of the phallus), reinforce their abjecting effect upon the colonized territory. Watching from the cusp of a hill, the indigenes, armed but not defensive, the resting (rather than hyper-alertness) position of their spears (*their* phallic instruments) suggesting Kristeva's notion of the repressed maternal, signifying biological and symbolic lack, and thus in opposition to law, order, stability, and rationality of the Symbolic order).

Marsden writes on pages 15 and 16 that "They [the invaders] made their own houses." These houses, like the artificial dentures, balance above the gums of the land on unrooted, uncemented cabriole shaped legs; such legs are a documented hallmark of colonial British cabinetry. The rounded shapes of these Queen Anne legs that support the masculine building blocks are in fact one of the strongest supports available in furniture making (McInnis; Osborne); this factor enhances Marsden's theme of the invaders as representing the strength of a mighty empire, however unsure or flimsy their right to invade may appear to be. Tan's blocks of buildings are the teeth that are uniformly alike in their perfected artificial composition; they are the jigsaw pieces of harsh enamelled separateness that reflect the false gilding, the artificial capping and crowning of a society that speaks another language, alien and false to the indigenous inhabitants whose confusion is relayed in Marsden's text: "They didn't live in the trees like we did. They made their

own houses. We couldn't understand the way they talked." Tan's illustrations depict the changes by showing the entire landscape as abject: the once pristine sky gives way to ghostly clouds of pollution and on the ground are signs of death, marked by the shattered lizard corpse whose blood is shed in the name of civilizing progress, sacrificed to the moving wheels of a gilded image. This is abjection, the "death infecting life" referred to by Kristeva (4).

On pages 19 and 20 the shadows cast by the rabbits begin to appear as the landscape is altered under the bite of "civilization." The invading teeth chew up the land, drilling and cutting, bridging and calculating: "No mountain could stop them; no desert, no river." The grinding teeth of industry further abject the landscape with the spew of industrial and human pollution. The color is sapped, drained from the landscape that is now rendered in shades of grey with pools of yellow light, pustules of scientific and industrial endeavor illustrative, in this reading, of the necrotic abscess that eats away beneath the surface until it erupts and vomits into the decay of further abjection. The invasive progress of decay is marked by suppurating debris and detritus; the landscape is worn away and transformed, the indigenes uprooted and desocketed in a destabilizing process of dedenition, loss of habitat (the indigenes are here punningly represented on pages 17 and 18 as fish out of water).

Abjection can be seen particularly in the introduced false teeth, the sheep and cattle, which devour indiscriminately that which is not rightly theirs, depriving and starving others. These nonindigenous usurpers are marked, branded, and masquerade as wolves in sheep's clothing, bringing a promise but hiding a threat. These sheep can be seen as illustrating the biblical warnings of false prophets, clothed as sheep but which, inwardly, are ravening wolves (Matthew 7:15). They are recognizable as "the animals that scared us," the imported teeth, the destabilizing, devouring threat to the vulnerable indigenes. These bicuspid fleeces the land as they also are fleeced. They are the horns of plenty that, as they fill, also empty the land, chewing up only to be chewed on; they are simultaneously abject and abjecting. These are the colonizers that "ate our grass" and also "the food that made us sick" (25–26), reflecting the abjected selves of the indigenes, that, according to Kristeva (5), manifest through loss, evident in the process of self-expulsion, repulsion, in which the body rejects what it is and what it is not; it is at this point that *The Rabbits* arguably moves beyond the simplistic portrayal of abjection as always proceeding from the invaders to a more poignant portrayal of the indigenes.

Herbivorous animals, foreign to Australian soil, are transformed into food and drink for carnivores. In *The Rabbits* (17–18), the sacrificial sheep and cattle represent abjection and are the instruments of abjection that begin to infest the land. The sheep and cattle are force fed, subdivided, their skins marked into edible components, and, like the land, milked of their wealth.

For vegetarians, who react with nausea and horror to the slaughter of animals and consumption of their flesh, meat too is abject. Sheep and cattle feed the nation and victimize the land as they are victimized and can be identified as abject through the process that marks them for death and consumption. In Tan's illustrations they also are identified as the fish out of water: the introduced species of animals that are therefore not in their rightful place (18). As such, they can be identified as that which "made us sick," the animals that, through association with food loathing, are deemed by Kristeva to be "the improper" and the "unclean" that marks abjection (2–3). Tan's pages depict the denudation of the land through the introduction of nonindigenous animals. Abjection here is embodied in the introduced species, the usurper who, in the process of colonization, wrongfully takes the bread from another's mouth and yet is itself destined to become food.

The destruction and death that accompany the invasion of the rabbitish teeth in Tan's illustrations in *The Rabbits* can be read as a condemnation of the effect of the illegal invasion of a country through colonization. This is conveyed on pages 21 and 22 through desolate sepia-colored images that project loss and desecration, war, annihilation, and death, supported by Marsden's verbal text that tells the reader "Still more of them came. Sometimes we had fights, but there were too many rabbits." The overwhelming power and number of the invaders, marked with the proclamation that "Might = Right," is powerful imagery that also proclaims its right to abject Others.

Tan's images can be read as depicting the teeth of war as the guns spit out death and the spears maim and kill. In the lacerating bite of barbed wire that divides and separates, axes that chop and hew, there is the abject act of wounding and death. The vomit of pollution into the once pristine sky and the teeth of machinery that devours, chews, spits, and spews out the polluted refuse of war and the corpses of both sides, the innocent and the guilty. All these can be read as depicting the abject process of war. The images on pages 21 and 22 present torn fragments, sepia snapshots, pieced together to form a noncohesive whole (hole); these pages reflect the tearing apart of what once was whole and natural. Here is the ripping out of teeth, the lancing of gum boils, the separation of the body; the abjecting of the self. These images can be read as depicting the death of indigenous culture and ways of life that accompanies colonialism and, in this sense, through the immorality of such acts, the colonizers are, themselves, abject.

Rape is abjecting. Violation is abjecting. The harvesting of the land is depicted in this book on pages 25 and 26 in murky surrealistic tones reminiscent of a Hieronymus Bosch vision of hell. This also is the hell of the rape victim who is ravaged and overpowered by her aggressor and of the country that is colonized. There is no warm summer imagery in these pages. Tan depicts

overpowering automata whose phallic chimneys belch forth endless plumes of noxious flatulence and exude the halitosis of decay as they devour and rape the landscape, leaving behind a denuded burial mound marked by tombstones of despair. Mechanized teeth masticate and chew the crop as frightened creatures scurry and leap away into dark uncertainty. The toothed wheels cut and kill the living grass and the arrows and chains reflect the enslavement of a conviction to a cause that brings despair. For the indigenous animals whose habitat is gone, there is nowhere to flee. Marsden's text relates "They ate our grass. They chopped down our trees and scared away our friends . . ." (25, 26) and, on pages 27 and 28, "stole our children."⁶ Kristeva contends that that which exceeds moral bounds is tainted, carrying the seeds of corruption; such acts, inflicted by the colonizers upon the indigenes, bear the taint of immorality, thus, in exceeding moral grounds the colonizers are themselves tainted by the very thing they seek to expel.

The abject evil inherent in the written act of removal of children from their parents is demonstrated in *The Rabbits* by the evil eye of the peacock pen that drips bloody tears. In Kristevan terms, this too is abjection. Depictions of the teeth of bureaucracy, clothed in the blackness of decay, also convey, through the extraordinarily phallic erections of the top hats, the sense that bureaucratic power has gone to their heads, recognizable as Kristeva's "terror that dissembles" (4) and evident in Tan's depiction of the stolen children, ruthlessly uprooted and consigned heavenwards. There, they are isolated, denatured, removed from their proper place to float, boxed in kites, while the powerless gums reveal the empty sockets where once the indigenous children were rooted. Now, they are tethered in a no-man's-land of indeterminacy, uprooted and pulled by the biting teeth of bureaucracy that inflict the infamy of wrongful law, dispensed under the flag of imperialism.

The nineteenth and twentieth century global expansion of such European powers as Britain, France, and Germany involved both cultural imperialism and colonization. The terms differ, imperialism defined as "the practice, the theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" while "colonialism, which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory" (Said 9). Said's theory of orientalism predicates the "idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (133). Consequently, there emerges within colonialism the "idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all those non-Europeans" (134). Thus, under the rule of colonialism, the notion of "otherness" frames the abjection of racial and ethnic groups. That the processes of colonization were not confined to British expansion is depicted in *The Rabbits* on pages 29 to 30; the association between the crown that sits protectively above a

vulnerable tooth and the role of the royal crown as head of state and protector of her colonies is evident in Tan's illustrations, subtly indicated by the newspaper headline "Monde." While the word "Monde" architecturally describes the decorative ball that sits atop a royal crown at the point where the two arches meet (and is also an expression of the Gothic arch that, in dentistry, indicates the shape of the upper and lower dental plates), in *The Rabbits*, the reference can be read as a comment on French colonization. Here, Tan's target becomes not merely English imperialism but European colonialism and its systematic abjection of racial and ethnic Others. Thus, German imperialistic power is indicated by the "Might = Right" slogan and a prisonlike environment, reminiscent of Nazi concentration camps. The net of barbed wire hangs in a web over the cityscape and endless chimneys belching plumes of noxious smoke and gaseous breath can be seen as images of extermination that I align with Kristeva's claim that "the abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things" (4); Tan's images here, permeated with the odor of rot, of death, reflect the abjection Kristeva identifies with extermination and death.

Again, the arrow-marked ball held in the hand of the imposing edifice representing colonial government, alludes to the role of the crown in colonization. The teeth of colonial power, the crushing might and pulverizing power of the molars, is made explicit by emblazoning "Might = Right," on the base, the roots of the edifice. Around the base sit the uprooted and dispossessed, the extracted teeth without gums that epitomize abjection, connected to the lost birthright of stolen children, indicated by the abandoned box kite. This is the immorality of abjection. The hands of the clocks have moved forward from their earlier setting, marking the passage of time, and are now set at one o'clock, still lunch time, still eating time. The indigenous ones are now the uprooted, abandoned, and exiled, whose home is a box and whose consolation is a bottle; these are the abject, the dejects of a society that is depicted as a regulated monotone of imprisonment. While Kristeva's theory focuses primarily on subjectivity and interpersonal, intersubjective experiences of abjection, her theory does provide an appropriate lens through which to view the social and (inter)national consequences of identifying Others as undesirable elements to be abjected.

This society of grey monotony is directed by arrows, timed by clocks, confined by walls, subjugated to power and polluted by industrialized growth. The tongues that appear to suck from the central canal can be seen as sucking from the jugular vein of the (m)otherland that is the life blood of all. The images on these pages spell the death of individuality, of creativity, and of freedom. A sign indicates by arrows that this is a circular journey, one with

no end in sight. A lone figure holds a minute sign that says "Think," and this, combined with a single yellow flower placed near a child (an innocent) and the sole illuminated light bulb connected to the seat of power that represents the crown, offers a tiny ray of hope in the face of overwhelming abjection. Interestingly, the rabbitlike ears of the child are the only ears in a vertical position, Tan's depiction suggestive of scissors and perhaps also the ability of children to simply cut through bureaucratic red tape, again offering a semblance of hope.

However, in this picture story book, Tan's vision of the future is primarily bleak. He depicts a vision of a holocaust, of a pattern of behavior that extracts life from the land leaving it denuded, decayed, powerless, and toothless. It is a vision of certain death conveyed in illustrative text of black, grey, and brown, the colors of caries, of death and abjection, and negativity. The raping penises of invasive industry eject their semen onto a ravished, denuded landscape that is now "bare and brown." The images visualize the consequences of rape, violation of the defenceless—pervasive abjection in which the violators cannot escape the atmosphere their actions have produced. The corpse, that for Kristeva is abjection, is lamented in Marsden's text that, on pages 33 and 34, asks the reader, "Where is the rich, dark earth, brown and moist? Where is the smell of rain dripping from gum trees? Where are the great billabongs alive with long-legged birds?" On page 35, Marsden asks, "Who will save us from the rabbits?" In a broader sense, while *The Rabbits* depicts the abject nature and effects of colonization from the indigene's perspective, those who violate, the abjectors, cannot dissociate themselves from the results of abjecting others; McAfee (1993) suggests that "somehow we have to learn to *live with* and perhaps even *use* abjection" (117), seeing it "as a process that makes selfhood possible" (124).

The underlying pattern of Marsden's words and Tan's illustrations in *The Rabbits* can be interpreted through the Kristevan theory of abjection, and extracted through the metaphor of teeth. A common theme of repressed desire for the maternal body manifests, in my reading of this picture story book, as different aspects of abjection. The sense of alienation and loss conveyed in *The Rabbits*, in a Kristevan reading, might allude to alienation from the maternal body and the notion of rape associated repressed desire for the maternal body. However, Marsden's text and Tan's illustrations demand a political reading relating to the contested view of colonization that a Kristevan reading thematizes through the elements of abjection that disturb "identity, system, order" and threaten the "death infecting life" that are other aspects of abjection. In a tale of violation, falsity, death, and separation, Kristeva's description of abjection as the "immoral . . . scheming, and shady" (4) reinforces my reading of colonization as an inherently abject process. Rosemary Jackson (4)

claims that fantasy literature traces “the unsaid and unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’”; *The Rabbits* allegorizes those silences as species of abjection.

The Rabbits contributes to the political arena by revealing to readers a subjective reality, historically suppressed over the past three centuries by the prevailing social order and hegemonic processes. Jackson and Kristeva claim that in psychological terms, libidinal drives that question the boundaries of the law are accessed by engaging with the corporeal and with “the impossible attempt to realise desire” (Jackson 4). The resulting paradox, simultaneous fear and desire, is claimed by Jackson to be political, subversive, because it generates awareness of “otherness” thus contributing to a subjective, attitudinal change provoking personal and philosophical alterations in the reader. In Kristevan terms, such “otherness” is manifest in language, experienced in social discourse and revealed in such texts as *The Rabbits* as an undercurrent that threatens and disrupts the patriarchal Symbolic order.

Just as the tongue is compelled ever to return to the aching tooth, so too is the unconscious repressed desire to return to the womb of the mother revealed in this picture story book that is fantasy at its best; subversive, revealing, hegemonic, engaging with contentious social and political issues, *The Rabbits* textually embodies the repetitious dividing, repelling, rejecting process that Kristeva interprets as the eternal human struggle to separate from the maternal, powerfully conveying the ambiguity, the fear and fascination that is the physical and emotional experience of abjection. Yet by historicizing this process and by rendering it as a national as opposed to an individual struggle, Marsden and Tan reveal the abject aspects of a national psyche, struggling to separate from the family legacy of colonialism. While Kristeva’s understanding of the human condition emphasizes struggle and suffering, she does briefly touch upon the possibility of salvation by one’s own agency. Kristeva is quite clear that salvation cannot come from outside oneself (8). Thus, the end of Marsden and Tan’s *The Rabbits* casts a gloomy light; the phrasing of the closing question, “Who will save us?” implies that only some external agency (with all its postcolonial baggage-as-legacy) could do the saving; even this rather dismal prospect is barred—and there are further overtones of guilt and despair when the “we” of this question is understood as the book’s readers. Who will save us from the Rabbits? No one, it seems, unless we seek to save ourselves.

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Notes

¹ *The Rabbits* is unpaginated; for clarity, I have numbered the pages, beginning inside front cover as page one.

² “In 1992, the Australian High Court recognised that the Murray Islanders held native title rights over their land, effectively debunking the doctrine of *terra nullius*. This became known as the Mabo Decision, as the key plaintiff was Eddie Mabo, a traditional custodian of the land. The Mabo Decision has been the most influential legal decision in this country in defining the rights of Indigenous Australians in a ‘post-colonial’ society. Hence, pre-Mabo and post-Mabo have come to signify the strong colonial framework before 1992 and the legally altered one after the decision” (Collins-Gearing & Ostland, 2010).

³ Domesticated rabbits arrived in Australia with the First Fleet in 1788. Introduced initially as a ready source of fresh meat for the new colony, they seemingly posed no threat to the indigenous flora and fauna. However, in 1859 Thomas Austin released 24 wild rabbits at his property near Geelong in Victoria (for gentlemanly sporting pleasure), with devastating results. By 1886 rabbit numbers had exploded to cover Victoria and New South Wales, reaching into the Northern Territory and Western Australia by 1900: “This wanton destruction of habitat has contributed to the demise of many native marsupial species such as the bilby and the bandicoot as their food sources were outstripped by marauding rabbits” (Animal Control Technologies).

⁴ Also, *The Rabbits* can be read as raising a variety of postcolonialisms; related from the indigenous perspective, one such concern which it signally does not raise is that of guilt.

⁵ Of course so presupposes abjection in the pre-invader indigenous society, but not a particular concern of this picture story book; it is Kristeva’s contention that “by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representative of sex and murder” (*Powers of Horror* 12–13).

⁶ Marsden’s text references the period in Australian history during which, from the eighteen nineties until the nineteen seventies, Federal law decreed the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families. Such children were relocated to children’s homes, missions or white foster families until the age of eighteen. These children are now referred to as “the stolen generations.”

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