

Philip Pullman: Postcolonial Dark Materials, the Daemon and the Search for Indigenous Authenticity

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I have started searching for people's daemons everywhere. This search is a direct result of my fascination with Philip Pullman's, *His Dark Materials* (2002). While on the street I hope to catch a glimpse of a small furry head peeking out from a handbag, or that if ever I am on a morning train into the city I might spy a tail or a serpentine tongue dart out from beneath a suit jacket – a glimmer of green or red in a sea of grey and blue. In Pullman's trilogy, daemons are not wicked creatures with whom we usually associate the term but rather the inseparable life companions of every human being. Daemons take the shapes of animals, but they have the reason and the power of speech. If one is fortunate enough to have a daemon it is towards this good object that one stretches one's hands and heart. What part of this Other, I wonder, is the object of such devotion?

Indeed, Pullman's daemon figure is an intriguing, complex construction of selfhood – a creature in a continual state of metamorphosis, of multiple bodies or, if one follows a postmodernist line, an embodied *pastiche* of interiority, continually exteriorised and re-exteriorised in a climate that calls for fluidity, fragmentation and for a continually disassembling and reassembling collective self.¹ However, the daemon's shape shifting ends once its human counterpart comes of age. The settling of a daemon into a single form with the onset of adulthood, Pullman tells us, represents not simply a loss of the power to change, of flexibility and fire; it also represents a gain in the power to focus, to concentrate and to understand.

The daemon is a clear extension of its host, inseparable one from the other, and it is in its constant state of flux that Pantalaimon, the daemon of Pullman's female protagonist Lyra Belacqua, changes

¹ Donna Haraway: 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, technology and socialist feminism in the 1980s', L Nicholson, editor, *Feminism/Postmodernism*, London, 1990, 205.

throughout the trilogy – from an ermine when she is cold, to a mouse when she is fearful, to a wildcat when she is threatened, to a moth when she is of subtle mind – forever striving towards the ultimate corporeal, a body that will perfectly reflect and complete the soul of its Other who is also, paradoxically, its self. Thus, embedded in the daemon's fluid, ever-changing state is the endeavour towards self-realisation, the part of the self that helps the individual grow towards wisdom, a reaching out for the reflection of some inner truth, for a single-faced ideal; the divining of one's own 'Indigenous' person.

This discussion uses the daemon to explore Pullman's trilogy from a postcolonial perspective, from a gaze that watches as Lyra and Will Parry (Pullman's male protagonist) cross in and out of multiple universes, places that are exoticised, loved and feared all in the same moment, indeed, places orientalised; a postcolonial gaze that watches as two English children use their subtle knife to slice into alternative worlds extending from their own anglicised space, to adventure into the universe wherein lies Citagazze, the City of Magpies, made foreign with its palm trees and Mediterranean atmosphere, made dangerous by vampiric Spectres that feast on adults and their alleged conscious and informed interest in the world.² Citagazze is defined as the crossroads between universes and is, therefore, deferrable to the Oxfords of the 'Mother country,' thus granting them an aristocratic distinction within a colonial imaginary; Lyra, ever-proud to come from an Oxford 'whose scholars were the cleverest, whose coffers the richest, whose beauty the most splendid of all.'³

Moreover, Lyra and Will make sense of other worlds and other beings – bears, witches, angels, Spectres – from Western, white subject positions, potentially, therefore, revealing a latent imperialism at work in Pullman's text. Lyra's treatment of the 'gyptian' children in her own universe as urchin Others, clearly smacks of the colonial encounter as she both disdains her gyptian playmates and desires their 'otherness' as part of her Oxford antics;⁴ yearns for the arms of the Other – namely, Pullman's gyptian matriarch Ma Costa – to embrace her, press her to her breast and feed her the warm milk of an orientalist epistemology. Lyra and Will: two anglophiles embedded in

² Philip Pullman: *The Subtle Knife*, London, 1995, 292.

³ Ibid, 73.

⁴ Philip Pullman: *The Northern Lights*, London, 1995, 37.

the home country of the former colonies wherein the colonial encounter persists.

A fundamental part of the continuing colonial encounter is clearly the negotiation of the self/Other relation. As such, this analysis considers how the daemon might represent an embodied 'authenticity' and queries how this relates to the way in which the Australian Aboriginal Other is fetishised to represent the 'authentic' 'spiritual' self of the settler colonial in what Pullman sees is a godless (or God-corrupt) universe; a universe where, as Jean Baudrillard reminds us, there is no authentic, simply simulations of the real buried beneath other simulations of the real, all phenomena now reflecting hybridity and artificiality.⁵

Authenticity is clearly the opposite of such artifice; indeed, it connotes a state of purity. 'Spirituality' also involves a striving towards purification, we see this in the Buddhist idea of wisdom realising emptiness and a subsequent striving towards a pure state of enlightenment; in the Judeo-Christian tradition we see this in a desire to absolve one's self of/atone for one's sins and, therefore, to return to an authentic, unspoiled self, to a self forgiven; we see this in ritual such as Christian baptism where the body is literally and figuratively cleansed. To what extent authenticity can be taken as the spiritual lies in this shared sense of purity, a purity that belies 'essence' and purported truths and, in these truths, the sacred. Thus, I use authenticity and spirituality not as interchangeable but as interdependent.

Written in an age defined by the 'eclipse of God'⁶ – for Friedrich Nietzsche, the 'death of God', for Roland Barthes the end of the author⁷ – *His Dark Materials* offers readers a porthole into parallel universes: one where authenticity is present (in the daemon) and another (our own) where it seems that spirituality has been lost in a public sphere that sells commodified distractions like popcorn or fairy-floss ringside at its societal Big Top. Here, God is replaced with goods, communion with consumption.

⁵ Jean Baudrillard: *Simulacra and Simulation*, Michigan, 1994, 1, 2.

⁶ Mircea Eliade: 'Divinities: Art and the Divine', D Apostolos-Cappadona, editor, *Symbolism, the Sacred and the Arts*, New York, 1985, 81.

⁷ Roland Barthes: *Image, Music, Text*, New York, 1977, 142, 145.

To understand the spiritual in our universe is, therefore, to remove it from the self. Thus, as adults we place spirituality in children's literature (in fantasy), and as settler colonials trapped in a paradigm of self-hatred for the perpetration of a genocidal past – a wound we still feel open, bleeding, sore and bruised – we place conscience, purity and sacrality in the Other who is innocent of our sins and who is, in the language of Edward Said, also framed uncompromisingly as our 'surrogate and underground self,'⁸ for postcolonial feminist, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, framed uncompromisingly as 'ourselves undressed.'⁹

In the same way that Lord Asriel, Lyra's father, hungers after God's demise and the admission that He is sinful, therefore acknowledging His own self-reproach, so must the settler colonial, now safe in the discourse of postcoloniality – abstracted and inert – recognise a collective responsibility that is not necessarily about guilt or self-hatred, but about regret. For political philosopher, Raymond Gaita, it is a simple argument: no pride in the self without shame and the recognition of one's own implication in the colonial process.¹⁰

It is important to note, therefore, that in Pullman's trilogy 'dust,' a mysterious particle-like substance that we learn is the physical embodiment of knowledge, experience and consciousness and believed by the Church to be the physical manifestation of Original Sin, gathers but never settles on the child and its daemon as it does on adults after their daemons have stopped their shape-shifting. For Pullman, therefore, childhood protects the individual from the full meaning of experience, from the full meaning of Dust; it preserves one's innocence. Thus, the General Oblation Board, an arm of the Church that has, in Pullman's trilogy, begun a spectacular rise to power, designs a process called 'intercision', wherein children are physically severed from their daemons; a truly metaphysical vivisection. Intercision purports to forestall, fend off, or eliminate Dust

⁸ Edward Said: 'Orientalism', in B Ashcroft, G Griffiths and H Tiffin, editors, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, London, 1995, 89.

⁹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty: 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', in A McClintock, A Mufti and E Shohat, editors, *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*, Minnesota, 1997, 259.

¹⁰ Penny Rossiter: 'Imagining Responsibility: Who are 'we' anyway?', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, Volume 16, No. 1, 2002, 82, 83.

(Sin) entirely by the intercision of a child before his or her daemon has settled.

From a postcolonial perspective, therefore, one might argue that settler colonials resent their dealings with the continuing colonial experience and consciousness, thus intercutting themselves from their Original Sin and harvesting the innocence of an infantilised Other, guiltless of atrocities like the Stolen Generation, guiltless of such 'dark matter,' of such 'dark materials.' To nostalgify childhood innocence is analogous to romanticising a pre-colonial time – our pre-colonial infancy – wherein we divine to know the answer to one of the most banal public queries: 'tell us what it was like before us;¹¹ before the Indigene became scarred by both the symbolic and the material conditions of modern imperialism, before the Aborigine became suspect within the white social imaginary,¹² before the settler colonial was in fact the coloniser, before the settler colonial was corrupt and corrupting. Perhaps just as Lyra is to become a new Eve in an Eden-like world created after the Fall,¹³ so too does the postmodern settler colonial covet a time before biting into the apple of empire and its tools of colonisation.

Indeed, it is interesting that many of the surviving or central adult daemons in the trilogy are malevolent: Mrs. Coulter's golden monkey, Lord Boreal's serpent, the Tartar guards and their wolves – daemons who are no longer 'innocent', who represent what we do not wish to be; complicit in a present-day recolonisation of the Other. We, the Gobblers (Pullman's team of child-snatchers), have stepped out of the universe of the Northern Lights and into our own. No longer are we stealing children for the study of Dust, but rather we are thieving Indigenous spirituality and traditions that are marketable within the worlds of tourism and advertising; within the world of art where, as cultural theorist, Celia Lury, asserts, 'Dreamings [have] become the new multicultural 'high' gallery art.'¹⁴ As Gobblers, we guzzle down images of Qantas Australiana rhetoric: the company's current advertising campaign, the 'Spirit of Australia', imprinted on the bodies

¹¹ Elizabeth Povinelli, 'Settler Modernity and the Quest for an Indigenous Tradition', *Public Culture*, Volume 11, No. 1, 1999, 37.

¹² *Ibid*, 31.

¹³ Pullman, *Subtle Knife*, op cit, 328.

¹⁴ Celia Lury: 'The United Colors of Diversity: Essential and inessential culture', in S Franklin, C Lury and J Stacey, editors, *Global Nature, Global Culture*, London, 2000, 146.

of company airplanes now painted in authentic Indigenous Dreaming designs – Nalanji Dreaming, Wunala Dreaming and the most recent Yananyi Dreaming – while the real bodies of Aborigines as sites of social in[ter]cision, ‘power and knowledge’¹⁵ are displaced in national space when they do not correspond with our [post]colonial ‘fantasy’ of a ‘manageable,’ ‘multicultural’ Australia.¹⁶

To seek out the spiritual is, therefore, to seek something wayward then recovered in a socially constructed otherness, for Franz Fanon, the black body woven out of a thousand details, anecdotes and stories from the white imagination;¹⁷ religiosity in the now fragmentary bodies, desires and practices of Aboriginal persons who, taken by their own Mrs Coulter (Pullman’s villainess) to places like the Block in Redfern – taken to their own Bolvangar (Pullman’s arctic site of intercision) – have been severed from the settler colonial imaginary that fetishises non-abrasive, non-urban, non-Redfern Aboriginality.

Perhaps, therefore, the Aborigine truly does become the construction of the settler colonial’s daemon, the desire for authenticity and spirituality misplaced in the parts of the Other that are palatable and commodifiable because the digestible Other is clearly the most edible. In the settler colonial’s crisis of embodiment and (dis)connection from land, a space is constructed wherein the individual goes through an intercision of self, severed from one’s seemingly spiritual Other, a process of nostalgia without memory as one harvests the ‘Dust’ of traditions that the settler colonial never had.

From a postcolonial perspective, therefore, the daemon’s many Dreamings might represent a striving towards infallibility divined from a certain kind of otherness that is made in the image of a Western desire for lost origins, for lost religiosity where, ultimately, the white man got no dreaming.¹⁸ Indeed, we long for a ‘glimpse of our own best selves’¹⁹ in a fantastical unchanged and, therefore, ‘pure’ Other;

¹⁵ Michel Foucault: *Power/Knowledge*, London, 1980, 519.

¹⁶ Ghassan Hage: *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Sydney, 1998, 68, 128.

¹⁷ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York, 1967, 111.

¹⁸ W E H Stanner: *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays 1938-1973*, Canberra, 1979, iv.

¹⁹ Povinelli, op cit, ibid, 27.

in a daemon that ceases to metamorphose once it finds its original *materia prima* – its snow leopard, its great grey goose, its gold-hazel-eyed hare – ‘a presence...a power, an intention one can only call ‘sacred’’.²⁰

Postcolonial theorist, Gayatri Spivak, warns us, however, against this ‘nostalgia for lost origins’ which is based on dualistic conceptions of self and Other and the attribution of unchanging essences to an antiquated Other.²¹ Perhaps, therefore, one must be critical of a nostalgia for lost daemons in our universe who, as Lyra observes in Will’s Oxford, are hidden within the individual, unseeable, intangible, absent, perhaps even failing – like the urban Indigene fails at his or her own authentic Aboriginality; fails in a settler colonial culture whose reproach of ‘inauthenticity’ is directed not at its own hyperreality but at the necessary failure of Indigenous identity, spirituality and ‘real’ observances of ‘traditional’ custom.²² Indeed, while settler colonial culture is able to concede its own cultural inauthenticity, Indigenous groups, by contrast, so often fall into the trap of essentialism set for them by imperialist discourse.²³

What about when our most cherished soul betrays us with inauthenticity? Suppose the form that our daemon chooses to settle as is one that we revile? Pullman tells of the sailor whose daemon became a dolphin confining the man to the water, a man ‘never quite happy till he died and could be buried at sea’.²⁴ Thus, we might ask, as does anthropologist and Native Title expert, Elizabeth Povinelli, what are the social consequences of non-correspondence between the fantasy of traditional, spiritual otherness and the reality of an Other who is distanced from religious traditions and sacred sites,²⁵ detached from the daemon self we starve after? In our own world, some such ramifications might comprise the refusal of native title and sovereignty or the denial of national recognition and, within Lyra’s, the consequence of being rendered unfit, inauthentic, interciseable, undaemon.

²⁰ Mircea Eliade: ‘The Sacred and the Modern Artist’, D Apostolos-Cappadona, editor, *Art, Creativity and the Sacred*, New York, 1996, 182.

²¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, C Nelson and L Grossberg, editors, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London, 1988, 307.

²² Povinelli, op cit, 37.

²³ Leela Gandhi: *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Sydney, 1998, 136.

²⁴ Pullman, *Northern Lights*, op cit, 167.

²⁵ Povinelli, op cit, 19-48.

Indeed, Povinelli reminds us that Indigenous modifies 'ancient tradition' and 'traditional culture' by referring to a social practice and space that predates the settler state; Aboriginal subjects representing a social group descended from a set of people who lived in the full presence of spiritual traditions;²⁶ a group of people who continue to represent, like the armour of Pullman's great rogue mercenary polar bear, Iorek Byrnison, our most desirable soul,²⁷ for Pullman's Texan astronaut Lee Scoresby, his centre.²⁸

However, what happens when too much authenticity poses a threat to the self? Thus, within a poetics of space, Lyra's over-the-top Oxford of 'jumbled and squalid grandeur...with past and present overlapping at every spot,'²⁹ with its manifold towers and underground passages, its sepia-stained colleges built from, upon and into each other, threatens the image of the Oxford from which it was created – Will's Oxford, the real Oxford with its traffic, department stores and city noise; the Oxford touched and tainted by modernity, postmodernity. Indeed, Lyra's Oxford feels like its own living, breathing organism, a daemon in its own right, just as for Lyra the stars might even have daemons;³⁰ a spatially organised daemon that embodies the authentic mother country. Does this romanticised, Oxfordised daemon, this Other, challenge the authenticity and thus the credibility of Will's Oxford in the same way that the Indigene challenges the right and authority of the settler colonial's position in 'the true country that cannot be stolen?'³¹ As such, I can't help but wonder whether there is a point at which the Aborigine becomes too authentic, too traditional, evidence of their 'Aboriginality' too much a deviation from – and consequently a daemon, in the familiar sense of the term, for – white hegemonic ideas of normalcy and spirituality.

The resurrection of the spiritual clearly occurs in the imagination of the postmodern, postcolonial self in crisis: of disconnection from an embodied relationship to land, the settler colonial drowning in a

²⁶ Ibid, 28.

²⁷ Pullman, *Northern Lights*, op cit, 196.

²⁸ Pullman, *The Subtle Knife*, op cit, 1995, 318.

²⁹ Pullman, *The Northern Lights*, op cit, 1995, 34.

³⁰ Pullman, *Northern Lights*, op cit, 35.

³¹ Povinelli, op cit, 31.

'sweet [but unbearable] lightness of being'.³² Just as the daemon is always explicitly embodied for its human counterpart – sensing its pain, feeling the wrench of separation – so is the fetishised and antiquated Other the embodiment of a connection to the landscape from which the settler colonial is forever estranged and, therefore, somehow more 'natural', more 'spiritual', more 'interesting' than settler colonials themselves. We, as disembodied settlers, as mere breath in the landscape of the Aborigine, are desperately trying to find our place in a landscape that is not ours, that was never terra nullius, that has not had any explicit spiritual significance under our Western social imaginary.

In the *Body/Landscape Journals*, a text that attempts to locate settler writing within the Australian landscape, author Margaret Somerville gets to the crux of the matter by using shadow imagery to express how the settler body is transient, ephemeral and belonging on the land's surface, on its skin but never embedded in its flesh. Thus, Somerville argues, the settler colonial experiences an almost belonging, a liminal presence in the landscape which, for the Aborigine is of the highest spiritual import;³³ it is a place of Ancestral connection and Abiding Events. Thus, a structural place of worship for Aborigines is unnecessary when the land itself acts as this place, perhaps because the sacrality of place prefigures the construction of the sanctuary,³⁴ the sacred having 'nothing to do with the profane space of geometry.'³⁵ Somerville's use of the shadow as metaphor underscores a 'double displacement.'³⁶ a double aspect of the visible-invisible,³⁷ where, in the language of Chinese artist Wang Wei, 'things should be at once present and absent.'³⁸

Despite the settler body's invisibility, however, it is this absent form that negotiates the visibility and presence of the Other in the landscape, for Somerville, 'shadows defin[ing] the real.'³⁹ Thus, it is Lyra's moods and experiences that negotiate the form that her daemon will take and it is Pantalaimon who becomes her sacred

³² Milan Kundera: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, New York, 1984, 31.

³³ Margaret Somerville: *Body/Landscape Journals*, Melbourne, 1999, 1-17.

³⁴ Mircea Eliade: op cit, 107.

³⁵ Ibid, 105.

³⁶ Somerville, op cit, 6.

³⁷ François Cheng: *Empty and Full*, Boston, 1994, 77.

³⁸ Ibid, 76.

³⁹ Somerville, op cit, 129.

'landscape', her sanctuary in the way that the Other becomes a sanctuary from settler colonials' denaturalisation as cohabitants of this country wherein, ultimately, they do not belong; sanctuary from what Somerville calls, the Australian psyche which is characterised by the archetype of abandonment, 'ejected from a motherland to which [one] can never return.'⁴⁰

Perhaps, however, one should not confine the relationship between the daemon and its human as necessarily antithetical: human versus animal or the fact that one's daemon is always of the opposite sex to its host. Perhaps, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri suggest in *Empire*, in the present shift from older forms of colonial racism to present day 'imperial' racism, self and Other are no longer dialectically opposed, but rather embody extensions of and degrees of difference from one another. Thus, the Other is integrated into the self and its differences are affirmed and managed accordingly.⁴¹ The daemon as an actual extension of its host's corporeality substantiates Hardt and Negri's claim by suggesting that its otherness is, in fact, not so foreign, but rather human and daemon – self and Other – are fundamentally a part of each other; they are inextricable linked.

This interconnection between human and daemon in Pullman's work can be further deconstructed from within a politics of postcoloniality when addressing the idea of their reciprocal death: the fact that when one dies, so must the other. Rather than fetishising as melancholic and tragic the separation of the human from its daemon – resulting in the physical and/or psychic death of both figures – and rather than maintaining, as does Lyra, that 'a human being with no daemon [is] like someone without a face, or with their ribs laid open and their heart torn out: something unnatural and uncanny that belong[s] to the world of night-ghosts, not to the world of waking sense...Oh, to be cut from [one's daemon]!...The worst thing in the world!'⁴² perhaps we should reconsider this dissolution as being transformative. Such a 'death' might represent the end of the white social imaginary and, therefore, the necessary and corresponding demise of an imagined antiquated Other; an Other who has been cast for too long in the role of the authentic Aborigine, whose script has always been written and rewritten in the language of tradition, ritual, spirituality, purity and a

⁴⁰ Ibid, 7.

⁴¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri: *Empire*, Boston, 2001, 194, 195, 199.

⁴² Pullman: *The Northern Lights*, op cit, 215.

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mythology of otherness, given to the Aborigine to act out on the back-stage of a white nation's political theatre, but nevertheless to perform on the front-stage of a white nation's social fantasy, of a white nation's daemon Dreamings.

It is apparent, therefore, that despite Pullman's claims to atheism, one can divine a clear and present religiosity from his trilogy, particularly when exploring the negotiation between human and daemon. In this dynamic between self and Other that animates Pullman's text, one finds a quest for Indigenoussness, authenticity and, ultimately, for a lost spirituality in an age of artifice that breeds a truly postcolonial dark material.