The Ghostly Experiences
Of non-Indigenous
Australians

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Statement of Originality

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There is no such thing as death,
In nature, nothing dies:
From each sad moment of decay
Some forms of life arise.¹

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Abstract

The question for man most momentous of all is whether or no he has an immortal soul; or – to avoid the word immortal, which belongs to the realm of infinities – whether or no his personality involves any element which can survive bodily death.
Frederick W.H. Myers

This thesis demonstrates the need for an interdisciplinary approach to research concerning non-Indigenous Australian ghostly phenomena. An analytical discussion focusing on the role of such experiences in relation to Australia’s multicultural society, explores suitable avenues for further research regarding the connection between experiences of such phenomena and beliefs pertaining to survival after bodily death and an afterlife.

In most societies around the world, paranormal phenomena in general and ghostly phenomena in particular are evinced in beliefs and rituals pertaining to death and an afterlife; as well as being displayed in artefacts and extant texts from humanity’s earliest days to the present. Some of these tales show that, while ‘ghosts’ may haunt the living, not all are manifestations of deceased individuals. Although Australian experiences of these phenomena mirror those from elsewhere in the world, many stories of these experiences contain events that reflect Australia’s convict past and its continuing effect on that society, even into the twenty-first century. Similar to the Indigenous population, non-Indigenous Australians have a sense of Australia’s inspirited earth; since not all their ghost stories are connected to murder nor are all their ghosts connected to death. This sense of inspirited earth has, on occasion, resulted in the destruction of buildings, or sites, in the hope of expunging the ‘ghosts’ from Australia’s convict era. Yet not all tales recount the horror of a convict past or events surrounding an untimely death. One tale at least tells of the joy felt by an entire town after the reported sighting of a ghost confirmed the death of a despised colonial leader.

The multicultural nature of Australian society has resulted in an eclectic mix of beliefs; some of which concern ghostly phenomena as well as rituals surrounding death and burial, the appeasement of a decedent’s soul/spirit, the possibility of survival after bodily death, and an afterlife. While this ‘mix’ is, in part, responsible for Australia’s vibrant and colourful society, it has also resulted in some individuals experiencing emotional conflict, especially when a family’s traditional cultural beliefs regarding death and an afterlife are ignored in favour of the ‘mixed’ cultural beliefs of the adopted country.

Although research into ghostly, paranormal and, particularly, psi phenomena has been conducted by some Australian scholars (such as those from the Sciences, especially the various branches of Psychology), this thesis contends that research that includes disciplines from the Humanities and Social Sciences – for example, Religious Studies, Folklore, English, Literary Studies, History, Sociology and Linguistics – would enable a greater understanding of the role these phenomena, and the beliefs they engender, play within Australia’s multicultural society.