

**School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts**

**A Study of the Significance of the Australian Historical Novel in the Period  
of the History Wars, 1988 — present**

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**This thesis is presented for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
of  
Curtin University**

**February 2012**

**Declaration**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature: .....

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## **Abstract**

### **Australian historical novels and the History Wars (1998-2008)**

The period of recent Australian cultural history known as the History Wars was of unprecedented significance in reshaping the relationship between the nation and its colonial past. While much of this cultural “backtracking” (Collins and Davis) was due to the groundbreaking and politically efficacious work of revisionist historians, an assessment of the role played by historical fiction during this time of unsettling and “hidden” histories is due.

This thesis takes the publically-waged debate over the suitability of novelists to render authoritative versions of significant events or periods as its starting point. From there, however, it delves deeper into the politics of form, analysing the connection between the realist modes of traditional, empiricist histories and the various explorations of the colonial past that have been figured through different historical novels. The forms of these novels range from classic realism to frontier Gothic, various Romanticisms, magical realism, and reflexive post-modernism. In particular, I investigate the relationship between politics and form in Rodney Hall’s *Captivity Captive* (1988), David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon* (1993), Kim Scott’s *Benang* (1999), Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2003), and Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* (2005) and *The Lieutenant* (2008).

The relative formal freedoms offered through historical novels offer the chance to confront the past in all of its contradiction and complexity. The terrain of the postmodern and historical sublime — of loss and uncertainty — is one in which historical fiction can perform an important political and ethical role. The immeasurably vast space which lies beyond history, that space of those who are often unrepresented, often victims, often silent, is an abyss into which fiction, particularly historical fiction, is able imaginatively and ethically to descend.

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to acknowledge the inspiring culture and resilience of the Noongar people of South Western Australia, and of other Indigenous peoples across the continent.

Completing this thesis has reminded of my good fortune.

I must thank my supervisor, Tim Dolin, whose intellectual brilliance and exceptional knowledge of so many diverse areas of scholarship have guided this project. He has been unerring in his professional and personal support. It is a fortunate event when student and teacher can combine rigorous supervision and heartfelt friendship.

My dear friend, Susan Midalia, has also been unstinting in her encouragement of my work and an invaluable proof-reader. She has nurtured my development as a writer and intellectual from before I embarked the PhD, when we were both secondary English teachers, for which I am deeply grateful. I will never forget the good fortune I had in meeting her.

I am fortunate in the many people who have taken the time to assist in this project over the years, from delivering incisive and informed opinions on drafts, inspiring and invigorating conversation, to continuing personal encouragement and support, to caring for my infant son while I worked. These people include: Maria and Vince Pantalone, Lucy Dougan, Dan Midalia, Georgie Arnott, Nathan Hollier and Paul Genoni. These people will always have my thanks and friendship.

Not all experiences of close family reflect the deepest level of devotion. I am fortunate that my experiences do. My sister, Claire, has been my companion, colleague, intellectual sparring partner and friend for thirty five years. My parents are the best and most generous of people, giving everything to ensure that we had opportunities that many do not. Their intelligence and dedication to the things that matter are a major influence on this work.

It was always my great fortune to find my husband, Matteo, who is the embodiment of honest integrity and gentleness. I also thank him for his assistance in so many things — intellectual, personal and practical. The perfect reminder of our good fortune is our son, Luca.

### **Dedication**

To my grandparents,

And my son, Luca.

**The following publications originated from sections of this thesis:**

“Dancing the Old Enlightenment: Gould’s Book of Fish, the Historical Novel and the Postmodern Sublime”. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* (Special Issue 2008):16.

“Ambivalence, absence and loss in David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*.” *Australian Literary Studies* 24.2 (2009): 14.

“History and the Novel: Refusing to Be Silent.” *Westerley* 55.2 (2011): 16. Print.

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...What seest thou else

In the dark backward and abysm of time?

If thou remember'st aught ere thou camest here,

How thou camest here thou mayst.

Prospero to Miranda, *The Tempest*, Act I, Scene 2



## Introduction

### Telling histories

This thesis investigates the cultural and political significance of the Australian historical novels written during the period known as the History Wars, in which historians, politicians, writers and commentators entered into an aggressive, at times acrimonious, debate about the nature of Australia's colonial past. This occurred, in an Australian context, from the late 1980s (the earliest novel in this study coincides with Australia's bicentenary year, 1988), and reached its dramatic heights in the early 2000s. The novels investigated in detail are, in order of publication, Rodney Hall's *Captivity Captive* (1988), David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993), Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999), Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001), and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) and *The Lieutenant* (2008).

More specifically, this thesis is an investigation of the politics of form in contemporary Australian historical fiction, and considers the ways in which, and the degrees to which, particular narrative forms can function as effective critiques of Australia's colonial past. While it proceeds on the assumption that there is no easy correspondence between a form and an ideology — that content must always be taken into account when considering the political position of a text — it nevertheless argues that in fictional treatments of a past that has been contested, effaced, celebrated or forgotten, the question of narrative form is one of deep political significance. Is any "realistic" narrative about the period philosophically and ideologically limited? Are there more formally self-conscious, non-realist modes that are more ethical and/or politically efficacious in their representation of the injustices of Australia's colonial history? The thesis also proceeds on the assumption that any consideration of the political efficacy of the contemporary Australian historical novel must take into account its historical and cultural/aesthetic contexts, both contemporaneous and

past, in which perceptions of the genre have been influenced by shifts in thinking about nation, race and the discipline of history itself.

### **The Australian History Wars: What is at stake?**

The 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of a number of significant historically revisionist studies of Australia's colonial past. These studies undertook the task of exposing incidents of violence towards Indigenous groups and the systematic government programs of annihilation, forced relocation, family separations and cultural erasure. In the two decades since Henry Reynolds and other historians questioned the reasons behind the secrecy attached to aspects of our history (qtd in *Frontier; Whispering*), and provided tangible evidence of what anthropologist W.H. Stanner in 1968 called "the secret river of blood" and the "locked cabinet" of Australian history, versions of the national past have become a matter of fierce contention. The revelation of widespread physical, psychological and sexual abuse, both open and clandestine, troubled the collective consciousness of a country which, perceiving itself as an exemplary modern state — moderate, rational, egalitarian, transparent and inclusive — has been required to adjust to knowledge of the various cruelties of prolonged and systematised discrimination, aided by government-run agencies, as well as the violence of the large-scale extermination of tribal groups, including children. There are also implications here for the predominant national narrative of endurance. The journey through, for example, the brutality of British convict masters and the difficulties of adapting European pastoral practice to challenging geographical conditions, to the threatened Japanese invasion of World War II, begins to look less heroic.<sup>12</sup>

These new understandings challenged the myth of social unity promoted by the 1988

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<sup>12</sup> Some historians have gone so far as to assert that Australians have a pervasive and affective attachment to supremacist history. For a fuller explanation see Healy ("History, Culture and Media Magic").

bicentennial celebrations,<sup>13</sup> and continued to polarise the Australian people over the following decade, as evidence of the wrongdoing of European Australia came to the fore in land rights decisions such as Mabo (1993) and Wik (1996). New information also arose from the inquiries into the official policy of child removal from the early twentieth century until the 1960s, with the release of *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, and the human rights abuses documented in the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987-1991)*. Conflicting views of history had an unprecedented impact in the sphere of public debate, with historians assuming an uncharacteristically public role, conservative public intellectuals (named “history warriors”) rising to prominence, and politicians giving voice to their own interpretations and connected race agendas (MacIntyre and Clark 2-5). The deep national scission is best epitomised in the two politically-opposed landmark speeches of the era given by the two Prime Ministers of the day: the address given by Paul Keating at Redfern Park in 1992, that openly acknowledged the European-inflicted damage on Indigenous Australians; and John Howard’s Robert Menzies Lecture (1996), in which he used the historian Geoffrey Blainey’s expression “Black Armband History”<sup>14</sup> for the first time as a term for what he regarded as an overly pessimistic interpretation of the national past that underemphasises European Australian “progress”. This interpretation shaped policy on Indigenous affairs for at least the next decade. Soon after Howard’s adoption of the epithet, a third term was coined as an ironic rejoinder — the “White Blindfold History” — by those who embrace their “black armband” status in recognition of bleak historical realities. Some historians have used this expression to deride the cultural conservatives who deny the

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<sup>13</sup> See MacIntyre and Clark’s *The History Wars*, Chapter Six.

<sup>14</sup> Blainey introduced this term during the 1993 *Sir John Latham Memorial Lecture*.

significance of these events in any evaluation of the nation's history.<sup>15</sup>

The Liberal-National Party Coalition federal government remained in power for an historic four consecutive terms (1996-2007), during which time Prime Minister Howard repeatedly refused to make an official apology to Indigenous Australians. It was a time of marked social conservatism, particularly in the arena of race-related issues (Stratton; Hage *White Nation*; Hage *Against Paranoid Nationalism*). In the final year of conservative Coalition rule, the Northern Territory National Emergency Response (2007), also called “The Intervention”, was enacted, whereby Australian infantry troops were sent into Indigenous communities to enforce immediate social reform — a response to what was described in the *Little Children Are Sacred Report: Board Of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse* as the untenable living conditions in these communities and the widespread sexual and violent abuse of Indigenous children. This dramatic action sparked controversy, particularly after ten years of conservative inaction on Indigenous issues. It was seen by some critics as politically expedient and paternalistic and, by others, as a necessary response to years of white and Indigenous mismanagement. While an official government apology quickly followed the election of the Australian Labor Party in the 2007 election, Indigenous disadvantage has been comparatively inconspicuous in public discourse since then, despite the efforts of some politicians, academics and journalists to keep it alive.<sup>16</sup> Prime Ministers Kevin Rudd, and Julia Gillard after him, refused to take a clear position in this volatile and sometimes vitriolic debate, despite the support given by the Labor Party to issues of Indigenous rights, particularly lands rights. Further, Rudd called for an end to the

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<sup>15</sup> For an astute and detailed discussion of the significance of “Black Armband” and “White Blindfold” sides of debate, see Clark (“History in Black and White”).

<sup>16</sup> This includes individuals such as Noel Pearson, Warren Mundine, Marcia Langton, Bain Atwood, Colin Tatz, David Marr, Lenore Taylor and Annabel Crabb.

History Wars in 2009, strategically distancing himself and his party from Keating's more provocative contentions of nearly two decades earlier.<sup>17</sup>

The historian Anna Clark has argued that opponents of revisionist histories such as Geoffrey Blainey and Keith Windschuttle have attempted, for their own politically conservative reasons, to discredit the intellectually vital, fully defensible process of revision, through which historical scholarship uncovers new evidence that changes prevailing views of past events. Clark claims that those who occupy the polemical extremes keep the debate alive in the public sphere, no matter where they stand, and hence serve the needs of conservatives who have re-framed historical scholarship, the core of the discipline, as politically motivated conjecture and left-wing propaganda (2-3). While Clark provides compelling evidence as to the intellectual and morally questionable tactics of some of the conservative proponents, and about the scholastic rigour and validity of most revisionist scholarship, there is another denial at work here or, at least, an evasion of the always inherently political nature of historical studies, where new evidence will not always have the status of empirical "truth" and be, to different extents, reliant on interpretation. There is an unexpected similarity to Keith Windschuttle's well-known disputation of numbers killed in Tasmania's Black War and other colonial conflicts. In the ensuing debate,<sup>18</sup> the focus was directed away from the ethical dimension of events and effectively elided the complex connections that exist between these events and the unfolding and varied situations of Indigenous disadvantage in the present.

What is at stake here is, firstly, the degree of culpability of European-descent Australians when Indigenous groups continue to experience political and economic marginalisation and substantial hardship. The binary divide over Australian history — "black

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<sup>17</sup> See articles by Manne ("Comment: The History Wars") and Jones, J. ("Refusing to Be Silent").

<sup>18</sup> As is well-known, Windschuttle's own methods and conclusions have been disputed by a number of respected historians. The most public and significant rebuttal was made by Robert Manne (*Whitewash*).

armband” versus “white blindfold” — corresponds to social liberal and social conservative positions respectively which, in turn, relate to different views about different kinds of cultural/social/economic types of atonement or reparation. The energy characterising the dispute shows how important it is to *both* sides to believe that they can exist or *belong* on this continent in a way that is ethical and authentic. The opposing positions relate to different beliefs about how to proceed as a nation. The social conservative position, put simply, advocates preserving existing legislation and social arrangements to do with Indigenous issues; the social liberal position recognises that more action needs to be taken to atone for past injustices and to change current inequities. Part of this process is the national acknowledgement that the extent and nature of European abuse was an example of genocide (Moses; Docker; Reynolds “Genocide”; Attwood *Telling the Truth*; Curthoys “Genocide”). Secondly, the limits of history as an epistemological and disciplinary category have become unsettled. The continued hostilities over decades about the significance of the historical events of colonisation are a powerful indication of the inevitably changing nature of historical interpretation and the limits of positivistic (that is, evidence-based) engagement with the past. The debate is often linked to the philosophical dialectics of the Culture Wars because of differing views about the function and form of ethically circumspect history writing within the academic ranks of the history profession itself, and the shifting conceptualisation of language, narrative and abstract philosophical categories such as truth.

### **Australia, history and the crisis of modernity**

Non-Indigenous Australia has a complex connection to first-hand experience of the kind of cataclysmic violence experienced in other parts of the world during the twentieth century. Various waves of immigrants from post-war Europe, then Cambodia, Vietnam, the Balkan States, and Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan (among others) bring knowledge of trauma with them. The general understanding, however, is that the extreme violence of large-scale conflict belongs elsewhere, as if the most destructive strains of modernity belong in places that are at a physical and cultural remove, and that those nationals who have fought in these conflicts have had to leave Australian shores to do so: Australians go away to war. Significantly, Australia's self-perception as a largely successful modern state, a triumph of progress, has as much to do with the time and mode of Australian settlement as its geographical distance from Europe. Australia, as a British penal colony, was settled in the midst of social and political changes wrought by Enlightenment thinking (Gascoigne 5-6, McIntyre *A Short History* 2).

Many of the British middle class were opposed to slavery, and early discourses of human rights had begun to take shape (Gascoigne 2, 5, 152). While revolution raged on the other side of the English Channel and the other side of the Atlantic, the first fifty years of Australian settlement coincided with the more moderate, less violent changes altering the social fabric of Britain. While the decision to establish a penal colony was partly the result of overcrowding in prisons and prison hulks, the settlement was also founded during a time of sincere belief in the redemptive capacities of humane punishment processes (Gascoigne 128-136). Through a physical and spiritual regime and isolation the criminal might be redeemed; thus a new type of more thoroughly regulated prison was built, like London's Millbank. In contrast to the North American settlements, where European colonisation was initiated over a

century earlier, the Australian colonies — under greater government regulation as penal settlements, at least in principle — were governed with some attempt to adhere to more “developed” humanitarian principles. Liberationist ideals of the Enlightenment were being adapted through systematic and positivistic processes designed to rehabilitate the criminal classes.

While the category of the Enlightenment — more particularly the British Enlightenment, as is most relevant to these British colonies — can, to an extent be explained through adherence to particular principle including rationalism, instrumentalism and utilitarianism, and a belief in the inherent value of economic self-interest and property ownership. The Enlightenment, however, must also be recognised as an complex set of diverse and, at times contradictory philosophies, combined with significance changes in the political and cultural organisation of European (and other) societies that significantly altered the material shape of people’s lives. This thesis proceeds on the understanding that the Enlightenment must be approached and interpreted as both a period of philosophical and epistemological transformation, and also social transformation manifesting as a series of lived circumstances and events. In the Australian case, there are clearly discourses that are more influential than others both in the early colonies and as European Australia moved towards and into the nation state, including theories of utility and criminal incarceration and rehabilitation, such as those by Jeremy Bentham (*Panopticon*); despite the fact that he famously opposed the practise of transportation, a conviction he explained to his brother in a letter in 1802 (*Correspondence*). Another of Australia’s Enlightenment “forefathers”, John Locke, was important to the unfolding form of the colonies as so much depended on the ownership and distribution of land. As the disputes of government and the land owning oligarchy came to the fore in the first decades of the 1800s it is impossible not to consider one of the most influential ideas of *Two Treatises on Government*; that property and political



power are inextricable. As John Gascoigne has thoroughly documented in *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia* New South Wales and later colonies, often through their leaders, can be seen to be influenced by Enlightenment philosophers and political theorists: as Gascoigne puts it, “Enlightenment thinking has become so ingrained in British elites it was a natural export to a penal colony” (6).

Even so, as competing interests unfolded in the fledgling colonies and peculiarities of emergent societies under the influence of the European or, more specifically, British Enlightenment the relationship with the Enlightenment is never straightforward. In 1988 in an article titled “Australia 1788: Foundling of the Enlightenment?”, Simon During presents various competing elements of the Enlightenment thinking and practice that shaped the particular versions of Australian modernity. He suggests that the uncertain ideological origins of the nation state are as complex of the various competing “Enlightenment” forces that co-existed, often uneasily, at this time and the decades that followed. During’s argument pre-empted Gascoigne’s later assertion that the Enlightenment in Australia took on different forms depending on the specificities of both the historical moment and location (9). The influence of Jeremy Bentham’s edicts on penal theory, for instance, would make themselves keenly felt in some areas of Van Diemen’s Land, for instance the penitentiary-style prison of Port Arthur and the high surveillance confinement of the separate prison (based on a model by Englishman John Howard, itself based on Bentham’s famous panopticon and his principles of reform and inward reflection). These practices coexisted alongside a powerful landed class intent on consolidating their power within a social hierarchy, one of the outcomes Bentham warned against in his various writings condemning penal colonies where he maintained there could be no fair distribution of power (Gascoigne 9).

While the Enlightenment developed in its own complexities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a process that historians such as Gascoigne have helped elucidate in

recent decades, it is also ethically and philosophically vital to consider our status as an Enlightenment nation in the light of the crises of modernity, a consideration that is curiously absent from Gascoigne's study. When Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote their famous critique of the twin trajectories of the Enlightenment and modernity, where they set forth capitalist-inflected versions of progress that bound science, social institutions, industry, individual subjectivity to mass destruction and dehumanisation, epitomised in twentieth-century European totalitarianisms, historical precursors existed across the globe in various colonial situations (as I explain in more detail in the following pages), not least in colonial Australia. Just as the miniature version of the panopticon — Port Arthur's separate prison — failed to rehabilitate the criminals that were incarcerated there, rather it made them more violent and/or mentally unstable as they were often brutally broken by the system, the separate settlements of colonial Australia variously unveil their humanitarian outrages in the service and progress of the state.

This thesis is indebted to the poststructuralist critiques of the Enlightenment such as that by Adorno and Horkheimer; indeed, the critical and ethical processes set in place through the representations of violent colonial events, to various extents, are set to unpack the workings of the Enlightenment in its Australian manifestations. It is vital, however, to acknowledge that this poststructuralist critique is, in and of itself, indebted to the methods and political developments of the Enlightenment. Like Lyotard's model of the immanent critique (explained further in Chapter Four), Enlightenment systems are necessarily analysed from the inside out using rational, evidence-based methods to unpack Enlightenment dialectics. This thesis, like other works dependent on philosophical developments of the post-structuralist turn, endeavours to proceed in recognition of the contradictory position of workings with Enlightenment edicts, such as the recognition of certain universal human rights, whilst it critiques their various workings and expression through history.

One could reasonably claim that Colonial Australia incorporates the ambivalence of the modern, where humanitarian and liberationist doctrines coexist with powerful manifestations of In an operation prescient of the developments of the twentieth century, these ideological concepts interacted uneasily, where humane intentions could be corrupted in application, or even manipulated to support violent or savage practices, often in the name of progress, whether in the form of convict imprisonment (particularly for those who reoffended after transportation) or in the extermination of Indigenous groups with the movement of European expansion (Gascoigne 65-66).<sup>19</sup> Australia, at certain times and in certain places, could be perceived as a laboratory of the Enlightenment where, because of the degree of control over the isolated and emergent community, various new principles and practices could be tested.<sup>20</sup>

The details of the development of the Australian nation, from the earliest years of the colonies until the present, are important in illuminating the particular relationship between the state and the Enlightenment. The perception of Australia as an Enlightenment success, a society that has seemed, until lately, morally “intact”, is the product of a conceptual schism. Firstly, distinguishably modern manifestations of violence arrived early. A relevant observation first made by Raphael Lemkin in 1944 (79) and re-emphasised by Robert Young in 1990 was that much of the violence that occurred in Europe in the twentieth century was, in a sense, the earlier race violence of the colonies “brought home” (Young 8). Particularly modern forms of violence — minority groups fell to the processes of a technologically

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<sup>19</sup> Historian John Gascoigne has outlined the ways in which the Enlightenment thinkers and principles continued to exert an important controlling influence over Australian government and leadership throughout the twentieth century.

<sup>20</sup> This is apparent in the convict institution of Port Arthur (operational from 1833-77), where emphasis was placed on rehabilitating criminals as much as punishing them. The boys were separated from the “hardened” older criminals and were taught trades. Interestingly, a small version of Bentham’s panopticon, the “separate prison”, was built at the establishment in 1853, although, rather than a place of rehabilitation, it was hated and feared and became a place of ultimate punishment for more serious repeat offenders.

superior, centrally organised pattern of annexure, for example — occurred early (although these acts did not end at this time) and often invisibly, escaping the notice of the wider European culture at large. In this circumstance, savage violence (physical, cultural, psychological) could be performed without fear of retribution or regret, because it was done in the name of a greater good, in the name of progress, and was even perceived as inevitable. Since the earliest events of colonisation, the state has enacted the “barbarism” within “civilisation”, to return to Benjamin’s formulation in *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (*Illuminations* 256), or, as Andrew McCann has put it, in “settler cultures [which] distil the essence of modernity” (*Marcus Clarke’s Bohemia* 5). Secondly, while the violence of modernity arrived early, the recognition of the failures of the Enlightenment — the danger inherent in the mantra of progress, including instrumentalism, eugenics and other virulent manifestations of bio-politics — has arrived late. A nation with a self-perception as stable and separate from the foreign chaos of war has only recently started to face the nature of the actions on which it was built.

If individuals and the Australian nation collectively wish to respond ethically to the events of the past, there are two conceptually paradoxical steps to be taken. To begin, a society, or individual, must engage the past as the limit event. To do so involves the recognition that events of the twentieth century such as the large scale extermination of the Final Solution, even when not directly experienced, were on such a cataclysmic scale that the benevolence of modern societies can never again be taken for granted. What must occur is the re-consideration of all that one has known and felt in their lived experience of a nation, which must then be re-visioned through the realities of the crises of modernity; this is utterly disorientating, where what one knows or understands is unanchored forever by the recognition of loss. The devastation of the twentieth century applies to Australia too. When we consider the undeniable truths of national history, we must face the realities of our

existence as a modern nation formed through its own particular enactment of genocide. Secondly, all experiences and events, but most particularly those involving violence and trauma, must be dealt with in their materiality and specificity. The abuse directed towards Indigenous groups and individuals was produced and reproduced by political and ideological systems at work on a global scale. The consideration of events, however, on a smaller scale and in the particular time and place of the occurrence/s, is vital in terms of recognising past injustice and for taking steps toward reparation, at least when the events themselves become known outside the experience and memories of victims, perpetrators and witnesses.

When considering the Australian situation from an international vantage point, useful comparisons can and have been made to other nations that were colonised during the powerful tide of European expansion into the new world. Analyses of the obvious commonalities (to greater and lesser extents) in the patterns of settlement, migration, and Indigenous displacement of other British-founded settler-colonial nations such as New Zealand, Canada and, to some extent, the United States, are useful in understanding the workings of imperial expansion. However, Bain Attwood and John Docker have both suggested that making the cultural/historical/social connection between Australia and nations such as Germany and South Africa, while deeply confronting, is also ethically critical (“Unsettling Pasts” 243, “Re-reading Lemkin” 81, 97-98). This includes recognising similarities between deeply culturally-embedded modes of racial separation, leading to violence and forms of extermination. These nations, also, have openly undergone processes of accountability, the first step of which is the recognition of national culpability, before the need to account systematically for abuses through legal and judicial processes such as the Nuremberg Trials of 1945-6 and the Accountability and Reparation Commission of the 1990s in South Africa.

Even as the question of how the Australian nation should deal with guilt and reparation requires an admission of guilt which links it to internationally acknowledged mass human rights abuses, it also requires a detailed analysis of the specific dimensions of the Australian settler-colonial situation. This includes the lengthy period over which Indigenous extermination and de-culturation took place — arguably from early colonisation right through to the end of the removal of children in the 1960-70s — as opposed to the concentration of events of the Final Solution, a distinction made by Raphael Lemkin in his seminal work on identifying varied expressions of genocidal practice.<sup>21</sup>

The shape of violence is influenced by the material conditions and phases of colonisation, including the geographical scale of a distinctly non-European landscape, and hence the isolation of pastoralist and other communities on the edges of settlement, increasing settler anxiety and diminishing white accountability for either small-scale murders or organised massacres. Because the indiscriminate killing of Indigenous individuals and groups was not legal, even when unofficially tolerated or known as common practice, there is a lack of conventional historical proof for these events. However, they are verified in other ways such as oral traditions, highly visible evidence of generational trauma experienced by survivors, local folklore, written examples of white resentment and common local knowledge of extermination practices. Different situations at different times in the varied regions of Australia — from the Black Wars of Tasmania in the 1830s to the Bunbuma War of the Kimberley region in the 1890s — all have their own stories that require acknowledgement and investigation (see Connor *The Australian Frontier Wars* and “Frontier Wars”).

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<sup>21</sup> John Docker (“Re-reading Lemkin”) examines the breadth of Lemkin’s ideas on genocide. He explains that his definitive work on genocide was not only formulated in response to the Holocaust but other programs for racial extinction that unfolded during European colonial expansion. The Australian situation as an example of genocide is also insightfully explained in the collection of essays, *Genocide and Settler Society*, particular the first chapter by Dirk A. Moses.

The interracial conflict, as well as introduced disease and tribal clashes over diminishing Indigenous territory, have unquestionably decimated the Indigenous population but have yet to affect the national psyche in a way similar to other bloody conflicts, even though some of these events have come to be known under the category of Frontier “warfare.” The “*whispering* in our hearts” does not have the associations of the deeply familiar, collective mourning of the remembrance of Anzac, for instance. The wreckage of war, particularly in a European context, is deeply present in the modern, including Australian, consciousness. The cultural memory is given form by both narratives and images of the armed conflicts associated with “Anzac”, such as Gallipoli and Kokoda, as well as the trench carnage of World War I, the fire-bombing infernos of London, and less prominently, Dresden, the ruined city; the piled corpses of Belsen at liberation and the red-brick crematorium chimneys of Auschwitz of World War II, to name but a few. While the experience of violence, displacement and death in Indigenous populations in Australia was smaller in terms of numbers killed, it was nevertheless devastating, both in terms of the trauma of mass death and of irretrievable cultural loss. There was/is also the prolonged pain in response to the carefully planned and staged estrangement of Indigenous people from their traditional culture and beliefs.

What one might call a particularly “Australian” conceptualisation of history and its relationship to a national past must take into account that the destruction of battles waged between European coloniser and Indigenous groups often occurred, for the most part, outside relatively quickly established metropolitan centres, moving further and further away with the action of colonial expansion (McIntyre *A Short History* 34-85). The historical “space” between violent events (of colonial times) and more widespread questioning of their morality and justice (beginning in the 1980s), marks Australia as different from many other nations that deal with culpability for race crimes; the most obvious examples are Germany and South

Africa. While in Australia there is still a perception that the devastations of modernity are somehow “outside” the immediate national space, the case in other Western societies is somewhat different. From the 1920s to the 1960s, European theorists and philosophers were assessing the failures of human history as the trajectory of progress, and the violent potentialities of the modern nation state from the various warzones in which disaster was clearly apparent. Some produced work during their flight from totalitarian persecution, in self-imposed exile or, afterwards, from among the ruins of cities and civilizations or in new, perhaps alien, nation. Walter Benjamin (*Theses*), Hannah Arendt (*Origins; Human Condition*), Emmanuel Levinas (*Existence*) and Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer (*Dialectic*), among many others, wrote about their own lived experiences when they gave expression to the philosophical and material cataclysm of the first half of the twentieth century that would transform the shape of philosophy from that time. What became known as the “limit event”<sup>22</sup> — violence on an almost unimaginable scale — redefined Western philosophy in recognition of civilisation’s terrible capacity for destruction and cruelty, aided by the technological and social “advancement” which was given one of its most devastating expressions in the Nazi death camps. In order to face its ethical responsibilities the Australian nation must accept that the world of the cataclysm — the attempted annihilation of a culture, a people — is also here (see Langer).

### **History, realism and the sublime**

The disorientating space of uncertainty that immersion in these modern occurrences entails does not sit easily within the disciplinary boundaries of history. Much of human existence occurs outside of the epistemological space of what is scientifically and positivistically

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<sup>22</sup> Lyotard gives a detailed and authoritative definition of the limit event as the ultimate, inexpressible occurrence in *The Differend*. There have also been many fruitful discussions about the concept after this time see, in particular, chapter four of Dominic LaCapra’s *History in Transit*, “Approaching Limit Events.”



knowable, particularly when it comes to investigating the past. The events of the twentieth century have been documented by modern, efficient methods of collecting, storing and organising information. However, even when detailed records exist, there is often debate over interpretation; this is why one of the reasons why Australia is not the only country to engage in “history wars.” The extensive nature of modern historical records paradoxically indicates the limits of this information and points to the very impossibility of knowing the past in a complete sense. Like a handful of sand, the more of the past we attempt to scoop up in an effort to contain it, the more we are aware of all the unrecorded, singular events and experiences that slip away and will never be available for scrutiny. There are countless people whose circumstances or premature deaths will mean that their stories are never known. More specifically, acts of extermination with no survivors, the complex dimensions of witness testimony, and the shifting nature of memory are all factors that point not necessarily to the failings of history as a discipline but certainly to its limits (see Caruth; Leys; Langer; La Capra *Representing the Holocaust, History and Memory*).

It is also vital to recognise that modern events of mass murder, performed in the name of civilisation and progress, may confound efforts to conceptualise them, even though the attempt itself is imperative. Some Holocaust theorists have even claimed that the paradigmatic event of modernity — the Nazis’ Final Solution — is of such monumental proportions it is impossible to conceptualise or communicate; it must remain a mystery.<sup>23</sup> The historian and theorist Hayden White, however, claims that the perversions of modern mass death *were* pre-empted in early-modern artistic works such as Dante’s *Inferno* and in the poetry of Milton and Blake. His argument suggests that while historical investigation is necessary, imaginative modes of representation expand the potential for engaging with the extremes of human behaviour. Beyond the territory of history there is an ethically and

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<sup>23</sup> The theorist Sarah Douglass provides a detailed examination of the various versions of this argument, such as that offered by Elie Wiesel, in *Witness and Memory* (23—24).

politically vital space of imagining that involves speculation and affect; therefore, the attempt to theorise dealings with the past outside conventional history necessarily involves an encounter with the sublime. Recent theorists have drawn on Kant's philosophical explanation of unrepresentability, a definition of the sublime distinct from Edmund Burke's well-known formulation of it (a type of pleasure producing a combination of horror and drama, often in response to the natural world). The poststructuralist theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard explains the importance of Kant's theory — the mind resisting conceptualisation thus also encounters unrepresentability — to what he calls the postmodern sublime ("The Postmodern Condition" 28-29). He claims that in a late-modern context, the sublime is attached to a profound sense of loss in response to the knowledge of the human capacity for violence and, also, the aporia encountered in rational process, which indicates the unsettling end of certainties. When applied to late-modern times, the sublime has less to do with the awe and terror that we associate with Romanticism but, rather, gives expression to loss and an unfulfillable desire for certainty. In *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White adapted this discussion specifically to a consideration of the past with the category of the historical sublime, investigating the problems of history and historiography generally, an understanding that has underpinned a number of valuable critiques of historical fiction.<sup>24</sup> In the attempt to understand history, one must concede the sublimity of the past. This is, firstly, because of all of the human experiences that remain hidden or lost and are, thus, unknowable. Secondly, it is due to the nature of historical writing, where reports of historical events are always and already mediated through narrative and, in the case of traditional history writing, the cause-and-effect linearity of conventional realist form that history shares with fiction.

White's influential problematisation of history as a discipline extends to his suspicion of the fictional form to which it is traditionally linked — the realist novel. His distrust of

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<sup>24</sup> The most notable of these are Amy Wessling's *Writing History as Prophet* and Amy Elias's *Sublime Desire*.

realism is intimately connected to the post-structuralist turn of the late 1970s and 1980s, most obviously to Catherine Belsey's Marxist cultural materialism, derived from Colin MacCabe's work on film, in her seminal work *Critical Practice* (1980). Belsey explains that realism, particularly "classic realism", encodes ideological conservatism through its creation of the illusion of verisimilitude, and that even the most socially critical examples smooth over ideological dissonance in their dramatic but inexorable movement towards resolution in the ending, for example in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* or Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Furthermore, Belsey's claim that classic realism is so enmeshed in popular culture that it dominates popular narrative texts, makes the form, in her view, even more ideologically dubious. As later critics have noted, however, while Belsey's incisive observations have a pointed relevance in the late modern period, she tends to conflate types of realism, ignoring the fact that as a literary form, it is more diverse and complex than she represents it.<sup>25</sup> The more militant realisms of the nineteenth century, such as those of Tolstoy, Flaubert or Courbet, aim to reveal troubling realities and social truths (Dolin; Widdowson). They aim to inspire the refusal, as Lukacs has it, to see the world veiled in illusions. Certainly, by late modern times, like the novel form itself, realism has encountered many phases and variations. Indeed, the process of stripping back the illusion, in itself, has arguably become a veil to reality, particularly in the province of the mass media and popular print. In a shock-fatigued culture dominated by constant revelations of human suffering, literary realism must therefore find new ways of expressing and communicating its politics in the context of a culture saturated with narratives and images of atrocities. To make a reader "see" reality anew is a different task now than it was then; however, this does not preclude any particular example or

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<sup>25</sup> Belsey underemphasises the formal and artistic complexity of these novels. Both texts while ostensibly "realist" in mode, also self-consciously engage the anti-realist modes of the gothic and the melodramatic. See also Matthew Beaumont's *Adventures in Realism*, in which he refutes the assumption that realism is "a dangerous amalgam of the philosophically innocent and ideologically deceptive"(2).

expression of realism from making an important political and/or artistic contribution. It is not my intention here to set up a realist/non-realist hierarchy but, rather, to advocate that each text should be considered within its own specific context and in relation to its individual formal and stylistic attributes. It is worth remembering here that literary devices deemed “experimental”, for example, can be used to express conservative political views, just as realist narrative can be ideologically and epistemologically confronting.

At this point in my argument, it is also vital to note that in the past decades there have been a number of significant defences made in the name of literary realism from intellectuals as diverse as Raymond Williams, George Levine, Frederick Jameson, Terry Lovell and Matthew Beaumont. One of the most significant observations is that during the dominance of postmodern critical structures within the academy, realism has not been an issue at all. Not only has realism been caricatured to the extent that all realist texts are collapsed into a simplified, unsophisticated versions of mimesis, but it has also been ignored in important introductory collections on postmodernism and literature: its absence of discussion has confirmed the continued perception of realism as irrelevant and obsolete (Beaumont 2-9). Rachel Bowlby has gone as far as to observe that the anti-realism narrative of some postmodernist theory falls into the patterns that it habitually ascribes to realism; that the rejection of realism in pursuit of literary “newness” is, in itself, indebted to the investment in modernity and progress.

The discussion of a selection of texts that follow – the novels of this study – have varied relationships to literary form, as I will explain in greater detail later. Some are unproblematically, even “classically” realist and some engage with experimental literary techniques or avant-garde moments that, significantly, often precede and follow more conventional “realist” episodes, even while the texts themselves when categorised holistically (*Gould’s Book of Fish* and *Benang* are the most obvious examples) as “avant-garde” or

“experimental” form. Indeed, the selection of texts in this study, to an extent, supports Alain Robbe-Grillet’s observation in the 1950s that intimacy between “new” literature and the “realist” texts that preceded them may be interpreted as developments in realism, rather than straightforwardly reacting against them. In the early 1980s, perhaps the most energised point of anti-realist influence within the academy, George Levine aptly noted in *The Realistic Imagination* that:

Realism exists as a process, responsive to the changing nature of reality as the culture understood it and evoking with each question another question to be questioned. (22)

Many of the novels written during the Australian History Wars are, as in Levine’s formulation, entering into a dialogue with existing historical and cultural knowledge. Knowingly entering into a political and ontologically fraught context, the choice of form is vital in encouraging new, energised ways of thinking into both the national past and present.

To an extent the central arguments of this thesis follow the postmodernist orthodoxy on realism. Certainly much of the analysis involves unravelling the shortcomings of realism as it appears in the novels under discussion. Yet, it is also vital to note that my objections are not to realism *per se* but the problems of realism when it is specifically applied to representing historical events. Many prominent realist historical novels written in Australia, during the History Wars, encounter political and ethical problems because of the political and social significance of history, particular revisionist histories, at this time. Novelists encounter the task of needing to be true to the historical record – particularly the discomfiting histories written during the late 1970s and 1980s. One of the aims of this thesis is to analyse the particular connection between this desire for reproducing a detailed “history” in a novel of realist form in this socio-political juncture.

As I discussed earlier, if an encounter with history is an encounter with the sublime, then the realist form can be ideologically problematic. Literary realism has a tendency to imagine itself in parallel to the action of history, encoding a linear, rational process similarly dependent on Enlightenment positivistic conceptual patterns, even while it sometimes works, as it did in the nineteenth century, to “de-naturalise” the workings of political and social systems. If the complexity and incomprehensibility of human existence suggest the limits of the knowable, the transfers involved in “classic” versions of realism enlisted in the representation of the past foreclose on the need to recognise the past as an often sublime space. The literary theorist Amy Elias maintains that novels which engage with the past through a self-conscious and reflexive fictional narrative are better able to confront history as the postmodern sublime. Novels that reveal the artifice of their narrative form — historiographical metafiction (Hutcheon)<sup>26</sup> — have the capacity to interrogate the Enlightenment conditions of their own formal and ideological emergence. It is particularly when “classic” realism is specifically employed in the representation of a past, when it is unknowable in a positivistic or scientific sense, that an ethical compromise can occur: that the act of writing/reading denotes specific and singular twentieth-century subjectivities as universal. This process fails to recognise the profound cultural difference of human existences separated by time; hence, a study of the significance of historical novels written during the History Wars is necessarily a study of literary form.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the terrain of the postmodern and historical sublime — of loss and uncertainty — is one in which historical

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<sup>26</sup> Hutcheon’s work anticipates Elias’s important and lengthier study of reflexive, philosophically and politically astute historical novels in *Sublime Desire: History and post 1960s Fiction*.

<sup>27</sup> As Derek Attridge stipulates, an ethical act of writing/reading recognises the existence of alterity in the details of its construction, rehearsing the need to approach the other in anticipation of the opacity of difference: every text should be approached as “alien” (*Singularity*). He maintains that the reader should experience a degree of “difficulty” in the process of interpretation; thus the self is challenged and changed by the approach constructed to difference. Of course, that which is “difficult” can take a number of forms and vary with different reading experiences.

fiction can perform an important political and ethical role. It is of central importance to this study. The space which lies beyond history, the space of those who are often unrepresented, often victims, often silent, is an abyss into which fiction, particularly historical fiction, is sometimes imaginatively, and also ethically, able to descend.

As is probably already apparent, ethics are at the core of this thesis. Underlying the discussions of particular events and experience are assumptions similar to that of Martha Nussbaum's; that literature has an important ethical and political contribution to make and that literary imaginations can be subversive ("The Literary Imagination"; *Love's Knowledge*). Following from Nussbaum's important redirection of attention to emotion and affect in literature during the ethical turn of the 1990s, Jane Adamson writes that in the way literature works "against tidiness" and with ambiguity it advocates what she calls a different "I"; where individuals can gain access into different lives, encouraging insight into "the quality and dignity of all human life." (242) While I am in basic agreement Nussbaum and Adamson, I would also assert that — and as the various contexts of this thesis aim to demonstrate — the writer, reader and critic must be cautious when attributing ethical value to emotions, such as empathy, that they not appropriate the experience or pain of others. For this reason, the theoretical dimension of this thesis is more closely aligned with the post-structuralist developments made into the field of ethics. As Simon Critchley puts it, ethics are upmost in deconstructive enterprises dealing with friendship, hospitality, racism. Drawing closely on Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (126), Critchley notes that the domain of the same retains a relation in which "I" or ego shortens the distance between the self and Other, while the self, simultaneously, must exist with the awareness of an exteriority that needs to be reduced to the same. This thesis transverses complex ethical ground in wishing to recognise the materiality of lived experience, made available to through various types of historical texts and the importance of emotional and empathetic involvement, without recourse to the type of

empathetic “absorbing” of difference that theorists such as Judith Butler (*Giving an Account*), Derek Attridge (*Singularity*) and Edith Wyschogrod (*Ethics of Remembering*) warn against.

### **The development of the historical novel: a space for fiction at the end of “history”?**

The historical novel is a vexed but vital site from which to explore the ambiguities of the Enlightenment and modernity, particularly powerful when negotiating ideas of nationhood. It is at the centre of the Australian literary canon, from Marcus Clarke and Rolf Boldrewood in the nineteenth century, and Henry Handel Richardson, Eleanor Dark and Patrick White in the early to mid-twentieth century, and it has continued to be a crucial genre through which to investigate the moral dimensions of nationhood. At the present juncture, fictional texts have become even more significant for cultural reimagining; hence the validity of Felicity Collins’ and Therese Davis’ discussion of the symbolic importance of the figure of the Aboriginal tracker, who appears in so many Australian fictionalised historical narratives,<sup>28</sup> and the way in which this cultural ‘backtracking’ has dominated fictional output in both literature and film since the late twentieth century. During this time, historical novels have paralleled the shifting and complex adjustment of perceptions of nation and race in a specifically Australian situation. In fact, the founding of the Australian colonies and the appearance of examples of the genre were almost simultaneous — the two categories have developed, as it were, together throughout various stages of modernity. The historical novel form is thus an ethically appropriate site for these negotiations in the context of a country with an especial and intimate relationship to the Enlightenment.

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<sup>28</sup> Collins and Davies observe the recurring motif of “tracking” in recent films, most notably Ralph De Heer’s 2002 film *The Tracker*, in which mainly Aboriginal characters trace over evidence to discover the nature of events or the plight of those escaped or missing. They identify the similarities to the “cultural backtracking” in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s in the light of newly available knowledge.



Since its late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century inception, the historical novel has been the nexus for three emerging modern conceptual and narrative structures: modern history; the realist novel; and the nation. Historical novels traditionally represent a period located at least forty years before the time of their writing. This previous time/place or event is allocated significance through its determining effect on the present. As Lukacs comments in his seminal analysis *The Historical Novel*, the study of history acquired its form as a consequence of the French Revolution, from which time the past was more consciously and strategically coopted to political causes (20-23). This more formalised modern area of study could “prove” or “disprove” the operation of progress and, accordingly, the tenor of the state. Particular groups or individuals were deemed morally accountable, as opposed to earlier conceptualisations of cosmic order such as the divine right of kings. The novel, certainly at this early juncture, was a popular form that, in a similar action to that of history, traces the ethical and moral development or maturation of the individual who, through experience and reflection, achieves a balance of “head” and “heart”. At the centre of European liberalism is the cultivation of the Enlightenment subject who in turn, in the individual running of each life/family/household, contributes to a functioning and just state. As in many canonical nineteenth-century examples of the Bildungsroman, the protagonists negotiate their individual relationship with the social world, learning responsibility for themselves and in the context of community. Walter Scott’s remarkably successful novel *Waverley* (1815) is commonly regarded as the first historical novel<sup>29</sup> and is the archetypal narrative for “evolutionary” rather than “revolutionary” change: it is a tale of the 1745 Jacobite uprising and ensuing conflict between the British and some factions of Scottish nobility and the highlanders. The eponymous hero of *Waverley* is the fictional embodiment of what Georg

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<sup>29</sup> Recent studies have shown that there are important forerunners to Scott’s historical novels, such as Maria Edgeworth’s national tales, although Scott’s novels have remained influential and more visible in popular culture. For a more detailed explanation, see Richard Maxwell (“Inundations of Time”).

Lukacs calls “the middle way” and, after Hegel, the “maintaining individual” (*The Historical Novel* 39). Linked to both warring camps, Waverley chooses moderate action, informed by an empathetic process of assessment and judgement that eventually aligns the inclinations of his head and heart. The right, just course is arrived at by restraining from impetuous, violent actions. This model of careful judgement and measured action was in obvious response to the perceived bloody anarchy of the French Revolution — still a major cause of anxiety across Western Europe in the early 1800s. Scott’s novels posit the British modern nation as a civilised people, equipped with the capacity for heroism and justice: a confederation of cultures arriving together at modernity not through the brutality of expansion but a system of cultural assimilation, in which the best attributes of each nation and culture integrate into the ultimate progressive state (*The Historical Novel* 26-34).<sup>30</sup> This British strain of Burkean moderation which influences Scott’s narrative — a strand of Enlightenment thinking that would prove influential in later expressions of liberal humanism — is useful in demonstrating the ambivalence of the social and philosophical developments of the Enlightenment. The *Waverley* narrative is shaped through an ideological investment in social tolerance, and Scott’s novels are well-known for the historically atypical attention given to characters of all ranks, from peasants to merchants to princes. The other side of this natural-seeming progression is what, from a viewpoint of two centuries later, is the narrative form’s clear capacity to erase difference. While universal tolerance carries within it the capacity for important humanitarian action (this era saw the outlawing of the slave trade, for instance), the incongruity between these Enlightenment ideals and the actions of a nation state ever-increasing in wealth and military might, is clearly apparent. There is a gulf between the romanticised world of *Waverley* (involving the interaction of neighbouring factions, from which the ruling classes have been intimately entwined since early modern times) and the

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<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, the influence of Scottish thinkers and politicians was apparent in England at the time, as was the romanticised adaptation of highland culture.

more confronting difference of imperial and colonial encounters, as well as the Eurocentrism of a project that frequently erupted into violent oppression in the name of the nation itself.

From our late-modern perspective, the ideological limitations of Scott's politics are clear. What is also clear is that they were read primarily as sources of entertainment or pleasure rather than as a stimulus for reflection.<sup>31</sup> The popularity of his novels and other examples of historical fiction contributed to the perception of the form as less serious, less morally "worthy" than other "serious" and "literary" realist texts.<sup>32</sup> As this perception persisted into at least the 1970s (Rehberger, Janik), it is hardly surprising that more dismissals of the historical novel as a "worthy", serious literary form have been written in the latter half of the twentieth century, and have coincided historically with a distrust in the category of the nation itself.

As national histories themselves have come under increasing, and increasingly controversial, public scrutiny, the mode of telling — "history" or "fiction" and the spaces in between — has also been more heated. A case in point is the "history and fiction" debate in Australia that occurred during the History Wars. The conflict occurred at a nexus at the "sore points" of national history, bringing together myriad political and philosophical conundrums. In Australia we are faced with the difficult situation where "facts" about history are of utmost importance, particularly to do with the events of colonisation. At the same time, History faces its own problems concerning its authority as a discipline at the very time that historical fiction is proliferating, gaining both cultural status and popularity. Inevitably another heated debate has taken place, particularly when novelists made claims for the "historical" value of their works.

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Maxwell discusses the useful example of the way Nietzsche wrote that he liked to have Scott's novels read to him when he unwell as he found them comforting (421).

<sup>32</sup> Other examples in this category include the American novelists James Fenimore Cooper, Stephen Crane and, in Australia, Marcus Clarke.

As recent debate in an Australian context shows, the historians who acknowledge the limits of history remain impassioned in defending their disciplinary territory. When novelist Kate Grenville commented on what she perceived as the “historical” value of her novel *The Secret River*, set in New South Wales in the 1820s, progressive historians Mark McKenna and Inga Clendinnen heatedly and publicly contested her claims. For all of the resulting debate (described in detail in Chapter One), not one public intellectual — historian or novelist — entered the fray at that time to discuss the shared attributes of conventional histories and novels. Obvious common ground was sidelined by the historians in the defence of disciplinary boundaries. Even though both these historians and the majority of recognised historical novelists are politically aligned with the “black armband” side of the History Wars, the historians were determined to protect the status of their discipline, including the value of evidence-based methods and, through this, history’s political efficacy. As Bain Attwood observed in 2005, it is the evidence-based nature of history and its compatibility with modern political and legal systems that has enabled it to effect social change (“Unsettling Past”).<sup>33</sup> History’s importance in these types of events (such as the Mabo decision) is perhaps one of the reasons why novelists have not been keen to dispute the historians’ limited assessment of literature. Historian and anthropologist Inga Clendinnen reflects a commonly-expressed view about historical novels when she maintains that the role of literature is “to delight”, suggesting, like Henry James a century before, that its value exists in the production of superficial pleasure, a claim that has gone largely unrefuted until very recently.<sup>34</sup> What the historians object to are the ideological implications of the classic historical novel rather than historical fiction generally, a distinction that they fail to make.

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<sup>33</sup> The defense of historical novels, at the time, was left to reviewers and journalists. While their contributions have been valuable, a study of greater length and depth than they are able to produce within constraints of broadsheet newspaper publishing is required.

<sup>34</sup> An excellent discussion has recently been published by Amanda Johnson, (“The Wreck of the Historical Novel”).

It is the intention of this thesis to fill this lacuna in current debate and argue that due to disciplinary and formal freedoms, literary fiction has the potential to approach past events that cannot be apprehended by the positivistic methods of conventional history, particularly when writers are self-consciously aware of the limitations of realist form. While the politics of asserting the validity of the historical sublime at this particular point in time are utterly fraught, the importance of recognising the value of historically invisible or irretrievable lives reveals the vital political importance of non-traditional historical representations. Many historians have devoted their careers to the attempt to bring these “unknowable” truths to the public’s attention. While it is important to recognise that many writers of history recognise the limitations of their evidence and modify their claims accordingly, they are still ultimately — and paradoxically — both confined and empowered by the fixed method of a positivistic discipline. In this sense it is vital that the “fictional” historical space exists alongside the work of historians if the national past is to be engaged in a way that is just and ethical.

An exemplar of this type of important historical/fictional representation appears in Kim Scott’s novel *Benang* and in the accompanying volume of stories, *Kayang and Me*, written with Scott’s Aunty Hazel Brown. Both texts tell of the massacre of Noongar people at the end of the nineteenth century, near the town of Ravensthorpe on the south coast of Western Australia, in the knowledge that information about the massacres is scant. There are, reportedly, bones and clothes at the site that have scattered and disintegrated during the century or so since the event. The Noongar people of this region know of the occurrence but, as most of the particular tribe involved died or left because they were unable to continue living near the site of such grief, the remnants of the past are intangible. Aunty Hazel told people visiting the site to “cover ‘em [the remains] up with sand”, as her people did not want heritage authorities to “make a museum of it” (*Kayang* 225). Surviving members of the slaughtered group, according to her story, would say that they came from Adelaide, not

wanting to be identified as one of the displaced and grieving or, one could speculate, reminded of the extent of their loss. It is easy to forget the limitations of conventional historical method in dealing with the inwardness of trauma or loss. The private nature of these emotions does not always lead to acts of testimony or, even, the most private, intimate forms of telling within families and close relationships. Scott's novel and its accompanying memoir create a space for this story that would be more difficult to represent through more conventional historical practice.

I stated earlier that it is ethically imperative to face the ambiguities of modernity and the limits of the Enlightenment in other national, historical and social contexts. The vital second step after facing the cataclysm is to attend to the events and individuals in their specificity. The twentieth century was an extreme expression of the savagery inherent within modern experience generally, and it is the mainstay of ethical response to attend to and recognise human experience, and particularly suffering, in its specificity. At first glance, this is inherently contradictory. If history is sublime — an abyss — containing much that cannot be uncovered, how can one possibly narrow one's "historical vision" to an individual experience? Considered from a different angle, however, the ungraspable nature of the limit event is so precisely because it is made up of many, many individual experiences of suffering and loss. While one cannot know each and every experience of suffering, it is still feasible to recognise and respect each existence as separate and untransferable. Paradoxically, to make this conceptual and ethical step, that one cannot completely "know" the experiences of others in history, is to make a greater investment in the materiality of events. It is ethically and intellectually limiting to conflate or universalise different experiences of suffering, a process that is qualitatively different from making a comparison. As much as victims are members of persecuted groups, lives (both of the persecuted and persecuting) are lived singly, discretely. Historical novels are often well-suited to negotiate this complex terrain, emphasising the

singular and the separate within the larger operation of history. Tales told in fiction can convey individual responses and sufferings that, while they can never convey an unmediated experience of “history”, can encourage a critical, sensitive and nuanced engagement with the individuality of a life or lives lived.

### **The politics of form in Australian historical novels**

History as a philosophical and existential abyss is long established in Australian art. It is the stuff of high modernism, including the work of visual artists Albert Tucker and Sidney Nolan. Patrick White’s canonical historical novels, *Voss* (1957) and *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), feature protagonists who strip back the layers of civilisation to discover a so-called authentic humanity. Here the Australian bush or desert is a universal symbol for bare life, the “core” of existence ostensibly separate from culture, in which truths are found through a crucible of alienation and hardship during which one may be able to redeem meaning. While these artistic representations of the past are explorations of human experience on the most dramatic and epic scale, they comply with the high modernist tendency to respond to the catastrophe of modernity by searching through its scattered remains, like T.S. Eliot’s “pair of ragged claws / scuttling across the floors of silent seas”,<sup>35</sup> scavenging from past cultural artefacts in a knowingly futile attempt at resurrection. While texts like these are artistically formidable responses to post-war disaffection in their representations of failed modernity, they are still “of” the Enlightenment in their thematic tendency towards the potent Western dichotomy of the barbaric and civilised, the raw and the cooked. The protagonists scrape together some form of self-knowledge or understanding, either through near-death experience or while on the verge of death itself. Those who are ultimately wisest live comfortably with their own physicality and interact unselfconsciously with the natural world, rather than being

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<sup>35</sup> From “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, 1917.

confused and divided by the self-estrangement of the abstract intellect. While White's particular type of high modernism addresses the failings of modernity as civilisation and progress, there is still a formal and ideological reliance on universality and on what is arguably a type of Enlightenment hubris, through which culturally specific experiences are represented as universally relevant and applicable. The historical novels of this study, written at least two decades after these two novels of White's, follow on from his lead in various ways. Some engage with the past in similarly high-modernist ways. They are narratives suspicious of the inauthenticity and the oppressiveness of modern civilisation, and express a yearning for a perceived, even mystical, pre-modern unity of humanity with nature or god. Others represent aspects of what might be called a late-modern position, where narratives are smaller and on a less "ambitious" scale, where traumatic individual experience is culturally and historically specific.

While the literary historical novel as a genre remains an important site of cultural negotiations, individual novels have marked differences, which are reflected in the texts selected for close analysis in this study. They range from narrative realism to the wide-ranging dramatic journeys that embark on formal explorations into (and are sometimes combinations of) romance, picaresque, the gothic, magic realism and fabulation. Many of the novels play with a certain shifting interchange of history and fiction, some even adapting fragments of autobiography into a wider historical narrative. The novels selected for this study are significant in their interplay between different formal characteristics of representing frontier experience and race conflict, and have been selected partly because of the variety of formal and thematic explorations of the colonial past they represent, enabling a fuller



investigation into the politics of form.<sup>36</sup> As historical novels represent the past in its complexity and material detail, it would be impossible to address all of the themes or issues considered in these five novels. There is much more to be written about each of them than can be achieved here. Therefore, each chapter deals with a key idea that contributes to the overarching aims of the thesis. It begins with the ethical dimensions of white settler guilt and continues with the limitations of liberalism when addressing the past, the hybrid complexity of Indigenous writing, ways of simultaneously criticising *and* re-radicalising the Enlightenment and, finally, revealing the insights of the gothic and discourses of transgression when applied to national colonial history .

The individual chapters in this thesis trace different formal and ideological responses to facing Australian history in its complexity. In order to trace various differences in form, I begin with the two most conventional of the novels, Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* and *The Lieutenant*. While a degree of misplaced political and didactic ambition undoubtedly accompanied the release of *The Secret River* (2005), Grenville's willingness to discuss her processes, experiences and errors of judgment openly in the public sphere is an act of humility and generosity that remains unacknowledged. Her "re-visioning" of her work includes the subsequent admission that *The Secret River* was flawed in its historiographical and political ideas. This conclusion may have influenced Grenville to publish an accompanying volume, *Searching for the Secret River* (2006), based on journals she kept while writing the novel, in an attempt to be open about her process of research and writing and, it is likely, to defend what she saw as the depth of her research and her earnest intentions. Her next historical novel, *The Lieutenant* (2008), was written in open acknowledgement of the need to be more politically and philosophically circumspect. While

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<sup>36</sup> Many of the theoretical concepts explored in this book could be usefully applied to other important historical novels published between 1988 and 2011, such as Roger McDonald's *Mr Darwin's Shooter* (1998) and *The Ballad of Desmond Kale* (1998), and Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), *Jack Maggs* (1993) and *The True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001).

*The Secret River* was acclaimed in some critical quarters,<sup>37</sup> Grenville's comments suggest she felt the need to make another offering, in which she attempts to address the problems of representing history in an ethical way.

Grenville's continued commitment to "worrying away at things" ("Kate Grenville Joins the 7.30 Report") — a statement she made on the release of *The Lieutenant* — without resolution and in the absence of certainty, is surely the first step in achieving a more ethically sustainable position. However, as I contest here, Grenville's ethics, as expressed through both her discussion and, more markedly in her writing, remain problematic. They vacillate between the uncertainty necessary for the de-limiting and expansion of the self when one approaches the Other, and the belief that certainty and intelligibility are achievable endpoints of artistic and empirical processes and self-knowledge. Grenville's investment in the form of the realist historical novel, attached to the belief in the universality afforded by empathy, forecloses her struggles with paradox and irresolution. In this sense, to journey through Grenville's historical fiction is to perceive the movement of expansion and return: a singular self reaches out to approach the Other in a justice-motivated act of generosity but, at this moment of vulnerability, when one is closest to ethics and insight, the self retracts, unable to sustain radical uncertainty, and diminishes into the safety of narrative closure and the known universal subject. The formal and theoretical dimension of representing historical events ethically draws on the theory of Judith Butler in *Making an Account of Oneself* and Edith Wyschogrod in *The Ethics of Remembering: Heterology and the Nameless Others*. The movement from self, to society, to Other, is usefully figured in the work of these two theorists in the field of ethics whose work, while starting from seemingly opposite points — the self and the Other respectively — is powerfully complementary. This movement of expansion and return has significant implications for the capacity of liberalism in an

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<sup>37</sup> She received the Commonwealth Writer's Prize and a short-listing for the Man Booker Prize.

Australian context to achieve meaningful social change when bound to an inconsistent and problematic ethics.

The ideologically problematic nature of the liberal humanist narrative is also evident in David Malouf's 1993 novel, *Remembering Babylon* (Chapter Two), which, despite its potentially morally educative effect on readers, remains limited by its reliance on the transformation of individual consciousness and yearning for a fully reconciled community as the basis for social change. This ambivalence is produced by the tension between a well-intentioned and partially effective liberalism and its limitations, notably the political and ethical problems that inhere in yearning for a fully reconciled community. This is figured in the novel through the use of the realist form and a transcendent, Romantic aesthetic. It is vital to acknowledge the efficacy of the liberal humanist discourse in *Remembering Babylon*, whilst interrogating some of its more problematic aspects. In particular, I consider the implications of the notion of "shared suffering" by discussing Malouf's representation of non-Indigenous trauma.

Malouf's comments in interviews show that he took care to avoid cultural appropriations, and deliberately did not include a central Indigenous character because he believed he was ill-qualified to write from this subject position and did not want to be interpreted as attempting to speak for Indigenous Australians ("Interview with Helen Daniel, qtd. in Mark McKenna, "Writing the Past.") His quintessentially liberal humanist belief in the power of empathy to effect social change, however, does rely to a large extent on the ability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to have a number of shared understandings, meaningful connections and cultural similarities. This kind of over-reliance on empathetic understanding arguably assumes that Indigenous Australians share in the liberal vision of reconciliation, social unity and cohesion, but fails to acknowledge that they may be justifiably suspicious of the risk of homogenisation and absorption. Thus, while there

is on the one hand a great respect in *Remembering Babylon* for Indigenous culture, Malouf seems unable to combine this respect with a politics and novelistic form that meaningfully acknowledge significant cultural differences. An ethically viable alternative is formulated in Dominick LaCapra's idea of "unsettled empathy" ("Trauma, Absence, Loss"). This category acknowledges the importance of the attempt to approach and relate to the Other but, also, the necessary acknowledgement that the recognition should never be complete or resolved. The novel also reflects what La Capra argues is a Western tendency to assume that the experience of one type of trauma provides a type of (empathetic) key to understanding another — a belief in the power of "shared suffering" represented through the figure of Gemmy Fairley. This assumption effectively erases the historical specificity that, as trauma theorists recognise, is essential to providing an effective program of social justice, as well as the ability of individuals and groups to work through the psychologically and culturally damaging effects of events.

Kim Scott's novel *Benang* (1999) (Chapter Three) was released at the height of controversy about the political dimension of race relations in the nation's past and present: in the midst of the most public and aggressive episode of the History Wars, the rise of Hansonism and anxieties over the ramifications of the Mabo and Wik decisions. While an Indigenous author may be justified in responding with anger, Kim Scott was determined to write the stories of his ancestral region and family in the spirit of moderation and understatement. This was a strategy intended firstly to further the educative aims of the novel by telling confronting tales of early colonisation without alienating non-Indigenous readers; and secondly, to convey the violent acts that affected Noongar people, including some of Scott's own ancestors, with respect and sensitivity. Scott's formal, linguistic and cultural investigation into the potential of the rhizome (a type of "hybrid") has marked similarities to

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's formulation of a minority literature, reclaiming the notion of hybridity from its pejorative association with bio-political appropriations of Darwinism.<sup>38</sup>

This particular version of a minority literature conveys history by combining formal aspects of western narrative with Indigenous modes of story-telling. These modes draw on their oral traditions and tend to be non-linear and reliant on patterns of digression and return. Adapting the form of the historical novel also involves the use of a lyrical poetic mode that draws on Western Romantic traditions. As has been explored by Andrew McCann ("Extinction"; "Obstinacy"), the aesthetic tradition in an Australian context has traditionally implied a reactionary social and racial politics, contributing substantially to the romanticisation of vanished race theories with their eugenicist overtones. Scott's depiction of Noongar and settler experience, specifically in the Esperance region of Western Australia, offers a poetics of place that attempts to capture the intensity of Romantic versions of *genius loci* without the tendency to transcendence, an aesthetic figuration that endeavours to work without the Romantic propensity to enact a dimensional and ontological shift from the material and local to the universal. In this way, the novel redeems the production of affect from the ideologically problematic terrain it has been linked to, and is an exemplar of the positive cultural and political, even therapeutic, potential of the aesthetic.

Chapter Four examines Richard Flanagan's novel *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001) as an example of the postmodern and experimental narrativisation of a colonial past which functions as a political critique of the national present. More specifically, interpreting the novel through Jean-Francois Lyotard's discussion of the postmodern sublime and a theory of bodily experience, I argue that Flanagan employs a postmodern aesthetic as a type of immanent critique in which the postmodern dialectic can be read, somewhat paradoxically, as an extension of Enlightenment thinking. In Flanagan's novel the past is shifting and, at least

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<sup>38</sup> This interpretation was first proposed by Hilary Emmett ("Rhizomatic Kinship").

in a positivistic sense, ultimately irretrievable, a sublime space of loss and unfulfilled desire at the edges of history. The complexity and abstraction of this approach is grounded in “the real” through constant reference to bodily experience, often figured as grotesque. As David Harvey and David Lowe have recognised, the traumatised human body is a reminder of the materiality of existence: it is the only stable referent. The novel’s poststructuralist critique of the present is evident in its combination of philosophical abstraction and material reality. It combines an awareness of the shifting and changing nature of perceptions of the past with an insistence on the bodily reality of individual and collective suffering. Underlying the theorising and abstraction is the desire for people’s lives, often those from marginal groups, to materially improve. Flanagan’s postmodern and poststructuralist philosophical stance is not, therefore, incompatible with his identification as a liberal social activist.

*Gould’s Book of Fish* uses a complex literary form to represent the Australian nation as a type of proto-Enlightenment state where, by self-consciously revisiting these historical instances of Enlightenment paradoxes and contradictions, the failings of modernity are exposed. Revisionist history and studies of the political formation of Australia such as John Gascoigne’s *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia* imply that Australia was a laboratory of the Enlightenment where, because of the degree of control over the isolated and emergent community, various new principles and practices could be tested — one of the key thematic explorations of the novel. The colonial Tasmania of the novel therefore incorporates the ambivalence of the modern, in which humanitarian and liberationist doctrines coexist with destructive manifestations of rationalism, instrumentalism and utilitarianism, and the belief in the inherent value of self-interest. The corruption in the novel of the ideals of reason and rationalism by the will-to-power of groups and individuals is chillingly prescient of developments in the twentieth century.

Rodney Hall's *Captivity Captive*, written in Australia's bicentennial year, is based on the unsolved "real-life" Gatton murders of 1898 and uses elements of gothic to effect its political critique. The final chapter of this thesis explores the violence and aggression that occurs on "Paradise", the Malone family farm at the crux of the paradoxes of its modernity. The world of Hall's novels is both "pre" and "post" modern, or as Todorow puts it in his discussion of horror, the "backwardness announced in the form of things to come" (20), a particularly pertinent description when we consider that the bloody events of the novel occur on the eve of the twentieth century. Hall's exploration of that which is grotesquely bloody, perverse and mad in Australia's colonial past diverges from many recent representations of colonial Australia such as Grenville's novels. The Malones' Irish Catholicism is ever-present as a subversive force within the Anglo-Protestant Australian state. Interracial conflict is not dealt with directly, even though sovereign violence at the founding moments of the nation ideologically underpins the novel. *Captivity Captive* also stands as one of bleakest confrontations with the psychic and philosophical void that can await those who attempt to find resonance and meaning in modern human experience.

The gothic frame of the novel sets in motion different types of narrative unpredictability and unsettlement. The first-person perspective of the intellectually brilliant but psychologically unstable Patrick Malone, sixth-born in a family of ten, is a tale of transgression and overreaching in which the emerging space of colonial Australia is rendered as a vexed state of modernity. Malone's narration conveys his attempt to explain and order the events preceding and during the murders of his three siblings, while simultaneously accepting the very impossibility of explanation. His story conveys the implicit realisation that the act of telling the tale in linear, realist form is inevitably an act of containment and ethical violence. For Patrick, the process of narrative proves the "enigma" (what he calls, using his Catholic frame of reference, *the mystery*) of both the self and Other (and relations with

Others) and the very impossibility of knowledge, even when it entails understanding the drives and motivations of those so similar to oneself in terms of experience and physiology. Patrick and his siblings are driven inexorably not only to transgress but to grasp at exhilaration through a version of the limit event. In the captivity of their settler colonial lives, the resonance of the pleasure/pain/elation/guilt of incest and murder is represented as a justifiable reaction to what Patrick sees as the nihilism of their existence. In a process similar to that explored by Georges Bataille, it seems that the only response to a life embedded in meaninglessness — a void of perpetual negation — is the consuming expiration of those acts which engage taboos in encounters with incestuous sex and death (*On Nietzsche; Inner Experience; Theory of Religion*). Giorgio Agamben, in a partial extension of Bataille's notion of "base matter" (human negativity or base urges that thwart aspirations to social or individual completion), has theorised that that which falls outside the *enlightened* and *rational* — "bare life" — is the object of sovereign violence on which the nation state is based. The resulting lack of distinction between inside and outside — will-to-violence and the law — can result in these acts of civilised violence, such as that perpetrated, in its most advanced form, by the fascist state (*State of Exception*). Investigating the less examined aspects of modernity, in all their grotesque violence, contributes to the unusual energy of the novel. Within the world of *Captivity Captive*, with the seeming impossibility of both communion between individuals and community generally, it would be easy to conclude that all that can be salvaged from existence is the pleasure/pain of transgression leading to the realisation that there is little purpose in engaging with the world in a broader political sense. However, in laying bare both the foundations and edifice of the modern, Hall exposes its instability and hypocrisy.

The Australian historical novels of the last twenty years are important textual sites for investigating the complex and varied political and ethical responses to a national past of



violence and abuse that has only belatedly been recognised. Breaking with the Enlightenment conceptualisations of subjectivity and nationhood requires an act of re-visioning that can be explored — even imaginatively enacted — in literature. The movement away from traditional realist form in historical novels, as a group, is a way of disentangling the “self”-centredness embedded in modernity in its repressive social and colonial formations. Some of these novels are enmeshed with Levinas’s delineation of ethical response, whereby the other must be approached in an act of expansion and where that which is ‘safely’ reconciled is jettisoned in the attempt to draw closer to difference in a way that is neither appropriative nor settled. All that can be known or approached, otherwise, is a flat reflection of the self — blind and limited — locked into the circularity of narcissism that ignores any potentiality for political, psychic or intellectual expansion. Consider *Benang*, when the traumatised “halfcaste” protagonist Harley wakes hovering about his bed, with his nose touching the ceiling, thinking himself blind when “[i]n fact, the truth was that there was nothing to see, except, right in front of my eyes — a whiteness which was surface only, with no depth and very little variation” (*Benang* 13).

This thesis argues that facing the cataclysm of modernity, and accepting the ensuing disorientation and psychic disruption, is the most ethical and politically productive way to approach history; at that this has been best achieved in the Australian historical novels of the past twenty years through a distinctly self-conscious engagement with literary form. I also argue that one must do this in recognition of the specificity of experience and events, especially if amends can be made to the groups most affected by the various expressions of violence in the expansion and maintenance of modern and colonial systems. This process is prefigured in some novelistic explorations of the events of modern and colonial Australia. The historical novel has been a site for such re-visioning.

## Chapter One

### Kate Grenville's colonial novels: An ethics of expansion and return

We begin with a response, we do it in the dark — doing without exactly knowing, making do with speaking.

Thomas Keenan (cited in Butler *Giving an Account* 11)

Kate Grenville has described the moment she decided to write about Australian colonial history and interracial conflict. She and her family were participating in the Sydney Harbour Bridge Walk for Reconciliation in 2000. She found herself exchanging a look with an Aboriginal woman who was observing the crowd and was struck by its effects. Grenville had until then been feeling what she described as a kind of contented virtue, but at this moment she felt “a sudden blade of cold [sent] into my warm inner glow” (*Searching* 13) and was spurred to a new perception of history and her position within it. The Aboriginal woman's look triggered guilt or grief which seemed, for Grenville, connected to stories she knew of her convict-turned-settler ancestor, Solomon Wiseman. In this moment these stories return changed, newly sinister or malignant. She commented:

in that instant of putting my own ancestor with this woman's ancestor, everything swivelled: the country, the place, my sense of myself in it ... until I knew it felt like nothing but willful blindness — even hypocrisy — to go through the symbolic motions. We were strolling towards Reconciliation — what I had to do was cross the hard way, through the deep water of our history. (*Searching* 13)

What Grenville describes here is a personal response to a decidedly public political moment. It reflects not only her earnest desire to improve relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, but also her willingness to look first to herself in response to changed perceptions of the national past in a quest for self- and social improvement. This encounter

demanded an ethical response. While Grenville already knew about Australia's fraught past — hence her attendance at the Bridge Walk — she had now to reassess it in light of new perceptions spurred on by this brief moment of contact. It was as if, for her, connecting with the Indigenous Other was reliant on the necessary first step of critiquing the nation in the full knowledge of the significance of founding violence, and responding anew in the pain of this fresh wound, enabling her to accept the challenging and direct look of the woman she encountered on the bridge in the light of a certain and different truth.

Like many individuals faced with the realisation of their own place in a much larger political or social reality, Grenville's moment of confronting her own complicity or culpability was not followed by any immediate or clear sense of how to respond in terms of direct political action. Interestingly, the particular call she felt to atone for her previous lack of understanding, or "blindness" as she calls it, was initially answered in the sphere of the personal and familial — to "find out about that great great great grandfather of mine" (*Searching* 13), and the details of his life and relationship with Indigenous people. As she explained afterwards, the following months and then years were spent in searching for details of her ancestor's life, during which time she resolved to use the research for a publication. After substantial speculation over the form in which to present the "Wiseman story" — it was conceived of initially as a family or local history — Grenville eventually decided on an historical novel: *The Secret River*.

The novel adapts the details of her ancestor's experiences into the story of William Thornhill, a transported convict who develops a complex and heartfelt attachment to the land in the Hawkesbury River region. On the verge of prosperity, he is driven by circumstance to participate reluctantly in a massacre of the local Indigenous tribe. Grenville's public statements on the publication of the novel, as well as on the novel itself, reveal her belief that an individual story — her own family story, valuable for both its familiarity and particularity

— can stand for something larger, and somehow negotiate the complex relationship between individuals, culture, and the national past. By making this story (or a version of it) widely available in the public sphere, the socio-cultural formation of complicit non-Indigenous individuals can thus be reenacted and revealed, and the moment of realisation or “awakening” — the “bridge moment” — provoked in the reader. In this way, Grenville proceeds with a liberal humanist faith in the literary imagination to show how critical selfhood (including formative influences such as family and history) can participate in the steady ethical transformation of the nation state.

As explained by Grenville in various public forums at the time of publication and afterwards, her intention in writing *The Secret River* was to produce a compelling, factually verifiable historical novel, drawing on actual events and historical figures, which served aesthetic, educative and political purposes. As is now well known, Grenville’s early statements about the relative value of history and literature when dealing with the national past, and the favourable reviews and support she received from newspaper journalists and reviewers, sparked a heated debate between her and a number of well-known historians, including Inga Clendinnen, Mark McKenna and John Hirst, in an exchange which became known as the History-Fiction Debate.<sup>38</sup> With hindsight, and as many have noted, one can see the naiveté of Grenville’s ambitions in her comments on *The Secret River*. However, her willingness to discuss openly in the public sphere her processes, experiences, misconception and errors, is an act of humility. She also published an accompanying volume, *Searching for the Secret River*, based on journals kept while writing the novel, in an attempt to be open about her process of research and writing and, it is likely, to defend what she saw as the depth

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<sup>38</sup> Grenville explained her motivations for the novel in a number of public forums at the time of release, the most significant of which was on Radio National’s “Books and Writing” program, broadcast on 17 September, 2005. Stella Clarke was the journalist to most actively take up the case of historical fiction writers, including Grenville, in the articles “Havoc in History House” and “Searching for the Secret River”.

of her research and the sincerity of her intentions.<sup>39</sup> The decision to release another historical novel, *The Lieutenant*, three years later, was both brave and arguably self-exculpating, particularly as Grenville had decided to acknowledge publicly the need to be more politically and philosophically circumspect than she had been in the writing of *The Secret River*. While she may have enjoyed high praise for the merits of *The Secret River* in some quarters,<sup>40</sup> she was determined to rectify that earlier novel's problems of representing history. In her continued engagement with history Grenville is, as Thomas Keenan puts it, engaged in the ethical process of "making do with speaking" (qtd. in Butler *Giving an Account* 11). She is entering into dialogue, contributing to a challenging and sometimes hostile discourse, offering up personal and social conundrums and dilemmas, and considering and sometimes accepting criticism.

In her own mind, Grenville's aim in writing another historical novel was to "worr[y] away at things",<sup>41</sup> without resolution and in the absence of certainty. This is surely the first step of any ethics. As I will argue here, however, Grenville's ethics — as expressed in her discussion and, more markedly, in her writing — are problematic. They vacillate between the uncertainty necessary for de-limiting and expanding the self when one approaches the Other, and believing that certainty and complete intelligibility are achievable endpoints of artistic and philosophical processes and the search for self-knowledge. Grenville's dedication to the realist historical novel form shuts down her struggles with paradox and irresolution, settling for a more historiographically circumspect view of the past. Thus, Grenville's historical fiction enacts the movement of expansion and retraction: a singular self reaches out to approach the Other but, at this moment of heightened vulnerability, when one is closest to

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<sup>39</sup> Adam Gall ("Taking/Taking Up") has explained that the work was originally written as a PhD exegesis.

<sup>40</sup> She received a barrage of criticism for *The Secret River* but, also, the Commonwealth Writer's Prize and a short-listing for the Miles Franklin and Man Booker Prizes.

<sup>41</sup> Grenville made this statement on September 9, 2008 ("Kate Grenville joins the 7.30 Report").

ethical insight, the self retracts and retreats into the realm of narrative closure and the known, universal subject. This movement of expansion and retraction has significant implications for the ability of liberalism — which is predicated on each individual’s willingness and ability to understand and empathise with another — to work meaningful social change when immersed in a shifting and problematic ethics. The movement between self-critique, social critique and a growing awareness of the workings of history as part of the gulf between racial and cultural difference in the present time has been a significant aspect of the Australian psyche and politic since the 1980s.

Grenville’s historical novels in the 2000s, and her discussion of them, are significant for the field of literature and ethics because of these complex negotiations of self and Other. The ethical problem is starkly illuminated by the volatility of subject matter in the highly politicised context of the History Wars and the extreme race anxiety during the final years of the Howard government. While in traditional liberal thinking the imagination is the guarantee of ethics and justice, the daily, tangible evidence of unassimilable or opaque difference brings to the fore the limits of this world-view.

## **I. From Wiseman to Thornhill:**

### **The historical novel and the search for ethics and history**

Grenville’s writing memoir *Searching for the Secret River* openly articulates the relationship between her individual, evolving politics and the historical novel form.<sup>42</sup> The three-part memoir is significant in its enactment of the role of the singular subject in the wider operation of ethics, expressed here through the consideration of how best to write a particular episode of history. The relationship between her formal decision-making process and ethics — from

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<sup>42</sup> While this publication antecedes the novel, much of the memoir was based on Grenville’s research notes and written reflections she had made in the very early stages of the “Wiseman” project.

self, to society, to Other and back — is usefully figured in the work of two theorists in the field of ethics whose work is powerfully complementary. Judith Butler’s exploration of ethics and subjectivity in the Western philosophical tradition, in her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, explicates the operation of self-critique and how it necessarily includes the conditions of one’s own emergence, inevitably extending to social critique. By contrast, Edith Wyschogrod in *The Ethics of Remembering: Heterology and the Nameless Others*, takes as her argumentative starting point the historian’s social responsibility to those whose singular stories are unrecognised in representations of past events. Grenville attempts both to “make an account of herself” and to take up the charge of the “heterologist” in her consideration of the experiences of the white colonial Other (separated from the self by history) and the Indigenous Other (also separated by ethnicity). Her responses to the interrelated tasks of critiquing oneself and facing one’s responsibly to the Other in the memoir represent an ethically sensitive approach to history and difference. The articulation of her decision to write a realist historical novel (which takes up the final two stages of the memoir), however, tends prematurely to close down the particular dynamism of her earlier investigations.

In “giving an account of herself” in Part One of the memoir, Grenville retrieves from memory the family stories about her ancestors that she had learned in childhood and in her younger adult life. She then compares these stories with the different stories and information she is able to uncover about Wiseman. The process involves the recognition of cumulative layers of identity that have contributed to the connection she feels to her familial heritage and her nation.<sup>43</sup> Grenville’s confusion about how to feel about her own cultural and familial inheritance, after discovering new knowledge and understandings about race and history,

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<sup>43</sup> Like many Australians this seems, for Grenville, to do with a shared sense of nation overcoming exile, a (perhaps Romantic) notion of the freedom and freshness of a culture distant from any European or Northern American metropolis. This notion is reflected in her statement about the advantages of being someone whose writing is enhanced by her location (“Kate Grenville joins the 7.30 Report”).

enacts Butler's theory of ethical response. Firstly, it is in the context of relations to others — such as the Indigenous woman Grenville encountered on the bridge walk, or the Other of times/cultures past — that vital moments of unknowingness about the self are formed (Butler *Giving an Account* 19). Secondly, it is in the acknowledgement of one's own opacity to oneself that one begins and sustains ethical relations. Butler describes this unknowingness as an act of denucleation, where one jettisons the stability of the settled self (*Giving an Account* 16).

In Grenville's new investigations, the affectionate, familiar intergenerational narrative of colonial ancestry is seen anew, as she profoundly registers the implications for interpreting colonial history. She recounts the stories “passed down”, tales she has been told about Solomon Wiseman by her mother and grandmother, which include his transportation for petty theft, the hard work of colonial farming, and the respect and fear that develop in the community for this by-now wealthy and cantankerous old man. The first chapter recounts a day trip to Wiseman's Point when Grenville was a child. She remembers the vast cliffs of the Hawkesbury, Wiseman's house — by now a country hotel — with its imported stone lions on the gate and dark, steep staircase down which Wisemen reputedly threw his wife. She also remembers with affection and humour her eight-year-old self and the embarrassment she felt at her mother's questioning of the hotel owner for information about Wiseman, as well as her mother's practice of stowing dried cow pats in the car boot to use later on their garden. Stories of gentle familiarity reveal the affection that exists between Grenville and her mother, an affection of which the stories have become a part. It is now up to Grenville to reassess the figure of Wiseman outside this comfortable chain of associations, addressing the likelihood that he was a man of extreme violence, a point that has been covered over by the sentimentalising effect of the family stories over generations. Even the detail of Wiseman killing his wife becomes an example of the “colour” or “drama” within the family story,



somehow distantly thrilling and encoding a casual misogyny. As Grenville considers her knowledge of the history of the Hawkesbury, it becomes more apparent that Wiseman was most probably involved in perpetrating the kind of genocidal race violence that occurred at the time. Even if he did not kill any of the traditional owners — the Darug people — he profited from their absence. Now, Grenville sees that while the family stories about Wiseman are not exactly a “cover-up”, they are less than benign — they are stories that “couldn’t be jarred open with questions” (*Searching* 17). She compares the layers of memory and meaning in the Wiseman stories to:

Grandma’s sideboard that sat out in the hall in our house throughout my childhood. It smelt of mothballs. The top was marked with a blue stain the shape of Tasmania, its wooden handles were cracked. But when I looked at it I saw a penumbra of associations, memories, stories. (*Searching* 17)

The very domesticity of these acts of telling and listening is even more troubling because of their deep familiarity. Admitting a more disturbing interpretation of cultural inheritance is a prerequisite of ethical response to the “stain” of guilt, the disorientating plunge of intellectual, psychic and physical unsettlement and confusion that began with the Bridge Walk and the “swivelling” motion of “the country, the place and my sense of myself in it” (*Searching* 16).

When Grenville considers the implications behind the actual words her family had always used in the Wiseman Story — that he had “taken up” land on the Hawkesbury — she realises the violence already and always present in the inheritance of a cultural and political narrative of which she herself, as well as her mother and grandmother, are a part:

The thing itself [violent colonial acts] lay beyond the words, an object behind a screen. Of course I’d always known that. But the lack of fit between a word and the thing it stood for had never before come to me like a punch in the stomach. (*Searching* 29)

Significantly, the darker realities of the Wiseman stories have never been totally hidden, so that, as Grenville implies, the possibility that he could have participated in the Indigenous massacres and dispossession that occurred at the same time is a connection that should have been made — yet no one in living memory seems to have made it. Like her mother and grandmother, Grenville knew of these realities but only as “an object behind a screen”, seen as “Nelson holding a telescope up to his blind eye” (*Searching* 19). Because of Grenville’s reassessment of these family stories ethical “sight” is possible, and the “lack of fit” between story and materiality is now painfully manifest. Through this narrative Grenville communicates the intellectual and emotional confusion that is part of negotiating the ongoing opacity of the self so necessary to ethical development, continually realising that not only is her knowledge wrong but also her unquestioning acceptance of it. Her new reaction is not only intellectual but emotional and visceral — a “punch in the stomach” (*Searching* 29)..The status of the stories as family knowledge makes this process all the more powerful, as Grenville’s reaction signifies her new understanding of the depth of her complicity in a violent racist history and also, perhaps even more powerfully, the complicity of those whom she loves deeply and who have been so influential in forming her own perception and subjectivity. Subjectivity and perception are, themselves, built in this system of layers, making it all the more difficult to rub back, like a palimpsest, perhaps only uncovering something smudged and illegible. Yet the act itself is ethically vital.

At this point Grenville’s reflections mirror Butler’s formulation of the ethics inherent in the attempt to explain or understand oneself: in its denucleation, its release from its familial and cultural moorings, it is made aware of the limits of its own narration. Even when we try to explain ourselves the tale can never, as Butler puts it, “catch” us, suggesting that “[t]here is that in me I cannot know” (*Giving an Account* 190). It appears that, for these

reasons, the figure of Wiseman is so crucial in Grenville's account.<sup>44</sup> Like "the object behind the screen", he is part of that which remains inside and invisible — an incubus; and thus to uncover the detail of his life is an indirect attempt to uncover the origin of her privilege, culpability, and cultural blindness. It is also a recognition that self-knowledge is inevitably and always incomplete.

When Grenville is researching Wiseman's life in libraries and archives, she represents the experience as mysterious, confusing and opaque, as she sorts through records looking for the small pieces of evidence of the details of his life. This process is gratifyingly enlivened by occasionally illuminating evidence. Grenville's experiences here are representative of her approach to difference, represented through a stark contrast in class, age and gender; Grenville is one of the middle-class, middle-aged female "cardiganed" women haunting dusty institutions, and those she "meets" are defined through the heat and energy of masculine figures — the working men — in the records. In the act of reading trial reports or letters from condemned men, Grenville thus "hears" Wiseman's court statement as that of an individual "so alive, a person frightened of death ... I could hear him breathe, feel the heat of his body as he stood in the dock of the Old Bailey" (*Searching* 23). As she reads a letter of appeal from a condemned man, "It seemed I was re-living his anguish...I could feel the sweaty terror of what was happening. The panic to end this bad dream" (*Searching* 46).<sup>45</sup> When she visits the Lightermen's Hall,<sup>46</sup> she learns of the ritual of being "bound" or officially admitted to the trade, and the intense heat of the room where older men sat in judgment on the apprentices. Grenville's connection to the past here is not one of drawing wide-scale

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<sup>44</sup> It is interesting to observe that Grenville does not have the same obsession with Jane Wiseman, her great great great great grandmother, particularly from the woman who in the 1980s wrote a feminist "revisioning" of the life of Bea Miles in *Lillian's Story* and *Dark Places* and landmark historical moments *Joan Makes History*.

<sup>45</sup> Grenville, of course is not writing in complete or literal truths. As much as she has a "sense" of Wiseman's presence, she is also communicating an imaginative process.

<sup>46</sup> Lightermen owned boats and shifted goods on the river.

conclusions, but of plunging into moments of singular lives to which, through the bond of ancestry, she feels connected to while knowing them to be vastly different from her own. The process does not seem, at this stage, to be about finding dramatic incidents for a potential novel (although one could argue that, as an established novelist, Grenville does this habitually). Rather, it is about the attempt to connect with experiences different from one's own in the knowledge that it is impossible to do so.

It is important to note that Grenville's engagement with the past is not only intellectual but also imaginative and passionate. This engagement can be understood in the terms described by Edith Wyschogrod in her book *The Ethics of Remembering*, in which she argues for the need for those who deal with history to make not only intellectual connections with lives in the past but also sensory, speculative and imaginative connections. Such engagement is of particular relevance when dealing with those whose stories go unrecorded. Wyschogrod describes this response as having an *eros* for the Other of history (i-iv), those whose stories remain unrecorded and unavoidably neglected by traditional history. These individuals often belong to racial and cultural minorities, or have lived lives of economic and political disadvantage. This "eros" is certainly evidenced in the sensual moments Grenville experiences in the library and archive. Grenville's passion for the past fulfils Wyschogrod's stipulation in a number of ways. She makes an intellectual/sensory/speculative/imaginative attempt to connect with lives that one cannot know. The process is well served by the way in which Grenville writes of her conceptual conundrums and the paradoxes of historical endeavour with the type of openness inherent in memoir. In experiencing moments of discovery of the physicality of the nineteenth-century working male, as opposed to the comparative steadiness, moderateness — even entropy — of her own twenty-first-century, middle-class subjectivity, Grenville connects with the limits of her own experience and perceptions, understanding that other potential or innate selfhoods in the web of history and

circumstance, including that of hardship and trauma, have not been released and developed through experience.

In this early part of the memoir, the complication of her own identity and self-perception has led to a more sophisticated and sensitive consideration of the Other of history. One's opacity to oneself is revealed as she admits the impossibility of knowing what she, herself, would have done in these situations. She is able to apply this understanding to the present as, for example, when she considers the lack of opportunity of impoverished migrants of Spitalfields in London (*Searching* 67) or, when back in Australia, she observes the ongoing disadvantages of Indigenous peoples. Thus, in Judith Butler's formulation, "the 'I' [of ethical self-reflection] becomes a social theorist" (*Giving an Account* 8). Grenville's memoir conveys the process of refining an ethical historical sensibility: her "Bridge moment" realisation that she is a different person than she thought, complicit in a system of ongoing oppression, including her cultural/familial connection with those individuals historically, socially and circumstantially positioned to commit the crimes. Events of a different time and place are engaged with deeply, situations imagined and re-imagined, but the urge to draw conclusions is always tempered by an understanding of the limits of information and knowledge.

In a process of self- and social analysis similar to that proposed by Butler, Dominick LaCapra describes the effort to apprehend the layers of one's subjectivity as "historical and cultural situatedness" (*History in Transit* 7), an attempt to uncover the complex and ambivalent process of cultural and material inheritance. Rather than perceiving oneself as a postmodern sum of contingent, wholly random singularities (the inverted mirror reflection of the totally stable self),<sup>47</sup> one must recognise that individual identities exist within the culturally and politically interconnected systems in which one is located. This connection

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<sup>47</sup> La Capra provides the example of a son of a well-known Nazi who, while not guilty of his father's crimes, must deal with the ideological and material inheritance of his father (5).

between these systems must be examined or even worked through. This is not to say that context is totally determining; rather, that one must negotiate one's relation to it. La Capra's description of apprehending one's own situatedness is contrasted to the unanchored postmodern self, yet Grenville's ethical insights were achieved early in her process through realising or jettisoning a self firmly attached to long established familial historical and social connections and then attempting some kind of moral recuperation by facing what one has been. Rather than "anchoring" oneself to the past, Grenville's most admirable action is that of freefall, abandoning the known self in order to be open to the unsettlement of ethical response.

In Part Three of the memoir, Grenville rejects the idea of publishing her research and writing as a memoir or family history and decides that the more appropriate form for her work is the realist historical novel. As I will contend, this decision will compel her to erase uncertainty about the past and the necessary communication of her conscious understanding of the limits of historical knowledge, so that the movement of ethical expansion falters and begins to retract. All of these important aspects of an ethical history are, to an extent, inherent in Grenville's approach to the memoir form, where the emphasis is on the processes of human existence and, sometimes, a more authentic communication of the uncertainties and confusion of consciousness, without the same generic requirements for linearity or the expectation of closure of the realist novel. Later in the memoir, when she has reached a decision about the appropriate way to present her findings in their final form (a novel), Grenville's personal quest forecloses her earlier radical undecidability, and the illuminating discussion of her individual relationship with the past retreats into conclusiveness. This is encapsulated in the final passage in which Grenville describes the landscape of the suburb where she lives and the Sydney she grew up in:

Writing *The Secret River* was the opening of a new set of eyes in my head, a new set of ears. Now I could see what was always underneath and always will be: the shape of the land, the place itself, and the spirit of the people who were here. (*Searching* 221)

Here, she conveys the idea that, after her search, the misapprehensions of the past have been put aside and she has achieved an enlightened and final understanding. This concluding reflection expresses a very earnest sense of the learning process undergone, but the impulse to narrative closure remains problematic. As Butler writes, we should suspect a coherent narrative (*Giving an Account* 63) and recognise that ethics emerge from the ongoing failures of self-narration. Accepting the ultimate inability to give a final and satisfying account of oneself is the ethical endpoint of many memoirs, in which “the opacity of ourselves incurs and sustains the most ethical bonds” (*Giving an Account* 13).

Grenville’s emerging reasons for writing a novel, as they are conveyed in the memoir, are valuable in accessing the types of ideas and notions she sees as somehow attached to the realist novel form, particularly when she was earlier convinced that the final work should not be fiction. Her comments seem to assume that a novel is a grander, more ambitious work than a memoir, more suited to a story intent on being a national allegory in which Australians perceive, to different extents, the horrific violence that underlies the growth and success of the state. This guilt troubles our enjoyment of the “triumph” of the nation no matter how hard won it was, as does the relative absence of the Indigenous peoples whom Anglo-Celtic Australians destroyed or displaced. For Grenville it is only the novel that can express the fullness or depth of response proper to her intellectual and artistic aims. The knowledge she has gained about early Australian contact stories, both of colonisers and Indigenes, has for her a greater purpose, is perhaps “epic” in scope or potential. Her conclusion owes something to a Romantic conceptualisation of the purpose and power of art, as she comments that her

plans for a non-fiction volume seem “puny and little minded,” that it was presumptuous to think that this was “her story alone,” and that her task was to “allow the story to speak for itself ...to get out of its way.” Ironically, “getting out of its way” (“it” being the real or true tale of Wiseman and settlement on the Hawkesbury, of the Darug people at the time, and the land itself) in this second part of the memoir signals her decision to tell the story in a more formally mediated way.

One of the most important ethical implications of Grenville’s choice of form is the shift from the “I” of memoir to the use of a third person narrator in the novel. The absence of the “I” of the historian/writer creates a kind of ethical lacuna, in which the distance between “now” and “then” vanishes, leaving in its stead a narrative inevitably shaped by anachronistic perception; the otherness of history is absent. Grenville’s choice to write a realist novel using third-person narration can be understood in Lukacsian terms as the desire to promote a type of seeing anew. In his seminal analysis of novelistic realism, Georg Lukacs argues that the realist form attempts to strip back the layers of false consciousness of industrial capitalism and the modern nation state (*History and Class Consciousness*). One can be exposed to the psychic devastation of lives lived behind invisible bars of political oppression, whether of the state itself or social institutions such as the family, hence the unsettling effects on nineteenth-century readers of such iconic figures as Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary or Rodion Roskolnikov. Seeing anew, in *The Secret River*, is the attempt to expose the continued denial of the culpability of the past and present Anglo-Celtic Australians in the devastation of the Indigenous peoples they displaced. In the construction of the protagonist who is both familiar and sympathetic, Grenville suggests that even informed individuals who believe in social justice (like herself on the Bridge walk) have been blind<sup>48</sup> to the extent of the founding genocidal acts on which Australia was built. While the desire to reveal the extent of genocidal

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<sup>48</sup> Sight and blindness are recurring tropes in the novel.



acts is a worthy aim, the shock of the familiar that gives realism its ethical and affective power is absent from a novel that is utterly predictable in every aspect of its construction. In its version of realism *The Secret River* is most like the classic realism investigated by Catherine Belsey and Leo Bersani in the 1970s and early 1980s. As it appears in Grenville's novel, the illusion of the real in the late modern period is so predictable in its popular orthodoxy as to undermine any subversive potential in realism.

When applied to a historical period over two hundred years ago, the painstaking research which had initially marked Grenville's experiences of this historical period as full of the passion and energy required to do justice to the lives of Others, becomes instrumental in creating a type of verisimilitude that renders an illusion of familiarity. The narrative of *The Secret River* is embedded in so much corroborative detail and is so faithful in its reproductions of the nineteenth-century life that it fetishises the "antiquarian" and, as Robert Maxwell explains in reference to the British nationalism of Walter Scott, the intricate historical details of a past that create a familiarity that cultivates intimacy across historical periods and a markedly regressive form of nostalgia. This is most evident in the third-person limited point of view of the novel, which was designed to make the narrative both compelling and believably "of the time", but not too, as Grenville calls it, "ye olde", with its combination of historical detail and occasional use of antiquated nineteenth-century language; for example the use of the word "tholepins" (row-locks) when representing the multi-faceted life on the Thames.<sup>49</sup> A description of the young William Thornhill's new life as a lighterman shows that he learns:

How to shift the oar from the rowing crutch in the bow, canting the blade with a turn of the wrist, then running along the narrow gunwhale with the oar as far as the quarter

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<sup>49</sup> Grenville explains this in an interview with Ramona Koval on *Books and Writing* in 2006.

and with a quick weigh-down in the handle, flinging it along the stern post. (*The Secret River* 28)

Grenville aims for a narrative voice that is utterly trustworthy; both authoritative and familiar. This stylistic combination attempts to make it easier for the reader to accept Thornhill as a representative Australian or proto-Australian figure, a strategy that fits the large-scale purpose of the novel. Grenville has also decided on italicised type to indicate speech, for the less formal, more immediate effect she believes it creates. There are many particularly fitting examples from Thornhill's formative years of the interaction of this "trustworthy" style and antiquarian content, such as when the blisters on his hands continually form and then burst in a painful cycle, the cost of day-long rowing on inexperienced hands:

The oar handles of the Hope were brown with blood. Mr Middleton approved of that.

*Only way to get your river hands, lad, he said. (28)*

When learning to tout for business from the gentry he:

[...] gestured grandly as he'd see them do at the music hall, *Finest boat in Christendom.*

*Not a boat on the river can come to her. (29)*

The presentation of this young man, not much more than a boy, as stoical and a hard worker, not intimidated by rank and wealth, sets the scene for his success in Australia. As comforting and familiar as this character may seem, the idea that he is representative of an "Australian" type is historically and ideologically problematic.

Derek Attridge makes the insightful claim that literary texts make stronger ethical demands on the reader when they work in unexpected ways, offering effects that estrange (*Singularity; J.M. Coetzee*). Familiar norms and habits are unsettled and given the potential to transform the self. For these reasons the realist surface of a text, when dealing with the sublimity of history, should be disrupted in its mirrored reflection and, in its strangeness,

invite an ethical approach such as that adopted when approaching the Other, reliant on what Levinas calls “hospitality” rather than recognition. The effects of *The Secret River*, however, are “settling” in their familiarity, and rather than offering any new ethical insight, remain merely part of a tradition of realist narrative about the dilemmas of early settlement where the characters and plot are so familiar that they seem representative, even allegorical. While allegory can be a challenging, confronting form, as in Walter Benjamin’s idea of *Trauerspiel*, where allegory operates through the conceptualisation of history as profound chaos and destruction, it does not work that way in Grenville’s novel. Thornton is utterly familiar. He is the “honest” convict, transported for petty crime, who “makes good.” Of course, as Grenville’s memoir (and general historical knowledge) testifies, many “Australians” did begin a life of settlement this way, but the path of the story seems so well-worn it is comfortable, and thus has the effect of effacing the horrors of the massacre it relates.

Grenville’s adaptation of her ancestor, Wiseman — unknowable, amorphous, revenant — into the character of William Thornhill reflects a conceptualisation of subjectivity that is utterly different from that generated out of her earlier unsettlement. In the relationship between the narration and the central character, the text renders history as somewhat providential, arranged in painstakingly detailed explanatory patterns that account for human identity and behaviour such that causality can be traced from the earliest moments of individual subjectivity. As a result, Thornhill’s decisions and actions are presented as wholly logical and explicable.<sup>50</sup> While Part One of the narrative, “London”, has nothing to do

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<sup>50</sup> For instance, he experiences a childhood of abject poverty in South London, where life is marked by constant hunger and boys urinate on their own bare feet for warmth. As a strong boy he is apprenticed to a lighterman and appreciates his good fortune in the chance to learn a trade; he loves his master’s daughter and strives to provide the relative comfort she is used to and that, he sees, has given her “softness” and capacity for affection. When his new-found comfort ends with the sudden death of his parents-in-law, Wiseman is flung into destitution and soon after commits a petty crime and is sentenced to hang. When his sentence is changed to transportation to the Port Phillip colony and it is decided that his family may accompany him, he grasps the chance to create a life of physical and economic security.

with the events of colonial contact, the necessity of the meticulous construction of the beginnings of a life becomes apparent in the later narrative, when Thornhill's choices and actions in Australia are causally connected to his life of deprivation in England. Therefore, when there is an opportunity to gain land on the Hawkesbury, Thornhill sees the opportunity for a better existence where, with hard work, he and his young family will not have to endure the poverty and degradation of his earlier life. Accordingly, the lengths to which Thornhill will go to keep his land are clear, rendering his violence fully explicable, even justifiable, through the implied contrast between the vividly portrayed spaces of England and Australia. The description of the filthy, cramped spaces of South London alleys, for instance, and the cheap, damp rooms Thornhill inhabits make clear the reasons for his desire for the clean crisp air of the Hawkesbury; and the extent of hunger where the boys risk injury for a turnip makes the urge to possess rich soil that holds the promise of plenty a rationally understandable act. When Thornhill ferries a gentleman — “Henry”, a man with seemingly no useful skills or purpose — and his wife over the Thames, Grenville presents, through a set of clear oppositions, overt and covert evidence of the injustices that a working man endures in a society so deeply riddled with inequality:

In any race for survival with this Henry, Thornhill knew he would have been the victor, lad though he was — shipwrecked for instance, the dandy would have pined and drooped and died while he himself would have known how to prosper... Thornhill was at the mercy of such mincing pansies, who looked at him as if he was of no more account than a bollard. (30)

Later, when Thornhill stands in the docks accused of a serious theft, he peers up at the tall white windows made of light..cousins to the ones at Christchurch. They showed, if Thornhill had doubted it, that the judge was gentry, the same way God was gentry. (61)

With this picture of deprivation and inequality, Thornhill's conclusions seem reasonable and morally intelligible when he, now in New South Wales, decides

that there could be no future for the Thornhills back in London...the Hawkesbury was the one place where no man could set himself up better than his neighbours...There a man did not have to drag his past around behind him like a dead dog. (176)

As with Grenville's account of the self in the final chapter of her memoir, the construction of character in the novel leaves nothing to undecidability or opacity; Thornhill is rendered transparent in every aspect of his inner life. In the attempt to render a human life as a scrupulously detailed linear advancement, Grenville signifies a retreat from her ethical commitment to alterity. While cause and effect shape much of human existence, the completeness of subjectivity of an individual so different from Grenville's own forecloses difference.

However, it is important to point out here that these details of early nineteenth-century experience are not without value. Doubtless these conditions are causally linked to the events on the Australian frontier, and Grenville is clearly respectful of her historical sources and insights. But to create this linear, cause-and-effect representation of human existence runs into philosophical and ethical difficulties, difficulties inherent in the realist form itself, with its certainty that the human subject, in its entirety, is within the grasp of rational understanding, and that the experience of being human, whether then or now, renders fully knowable the motivations and decisions of others — a process with worrying political implications, particularly in historical fiction when the “then” and “now” are so different. As Thornhill rides his boat up the Hawkesbury with the intention of participating in a massacre of the Darug, he is described as having “so little choice” (300), and yet “he was choosing it [this course] of his own free will” (301); however, within the linear structure of this tale, the

culpability of such an act is rendered as negligible. Despite Thornhill's reflection that "a man's heart was a deep pocket he might turn out and be amazed at what he found there" (289), there is no surprise in this novel.

Once Thornhill is at the Darug camp the narrative is filled with graphic detail in a scene of horrific massacre. Grenville is not shy about including details of various horrors of the killing taken from the historical record that, as she has explained, she found harrowing to write (Grenville "Interview by Romona Koval"). While characters such as the aptly named "Smasher Sullivan" participate with sadistic glee, Thornhill remains at a psychic remove, trying not to think of the terrible nature of the acts he is about to perform, such as the following scene when he kills "Whisker Harry", an elderly, venerable member of the tribe:

The gun was still up at Thornhill's shoulder, his finger was against the trigger, but he could not move, a man in a dream. He was aware of issuing orders to his finger to pull back the trigger but nothing happened.

[...]

The gun went off with a puff of blue smoke and a pop that sounded puny in all this air. He thought he must have missed, for Whisker Harry was still standing there with that look on his face, as if nothing could touch him.

The old man bent slowly forward until he was on his knees, holding his belly. (307)

For realism to encourage individuals to change their perceptions of themselves and the society they inhabit, the "real" needs to be represented in a way that sparks a degree of revelation. It is fair to say that a novel published in 2005 that climaxes in massacre, is not revealing anything new to the Australian nation. Since the emergence of the revisionist histories of the 1980s and the fictional texts, both written and visual, inspired by them, few individuals would be shocked or even surprised by the inclusion in the novel of the horrific details of nineteenth-century massacres. While details of the scene may be shocking in their violence and may

elicit horror, disgust and/or guilt, these acts have not been “secret” for some time. When we consider this scene and the allegorical shape of the novel, the implication is that the majority of Australians who took part in genocidal violence did so unwillingly, despite the odd aberrant sadist such as Smasher Sullivan. Doubtless some individuals did unwillingly participate in this kind of violence, but to posit this as the pervasive sentiment of white settlers is an oversimplification and another retreat from the difficulties and uncertainties of ethical expansion.

The ethically problematic nature of the novel’s allegorical function is most apparent in the final chapter, “Thornhill’s Place,” in which Grenville represents what she perceives as the depth and breadth of white Australian guilt and the effects of past violence and injustice in its entirety, the scope of which she believed could not be presented in her memoir and could only be communicated in novelistic form. In the years after the massacre in which the Darug people were decimated, Thornhill, while now a wealthy, powerful settler, is unable to enjoy his success in the way he anticipated. He spends many hours on his verandah with a telescope, compelled to look for Darug survivors in distant bush land. He is unaware of the mindset he is symbolically enacting, with the presence of the telescope distancing him from the land to which he wishes to belong. The bench on which he sits feels like that of the guildhall where he sat many years ago waiting for the judgement that he was fit to be apprenticed to a Lighterman. Now, like white Australia, he sits in judgement on himself, unable to enjoy fully the spoils of his newly amassed capital because of what Stanner would call the “whispering in our hearts” — the knowledge by non-Indigenous Australians that we enjoy “the good life” at the expense of the suffering of those first Australians. The last survivor of the Darug tribe, Jack, is a poignantly representative figure, broken and desolate, sporadically and reluctantly dependent on Thornhill’s shelter and food. When Jack, in response to a visit by Thornhill, ignores his gifts of sacks to sleep on a blanket, slapping the

ground and saying ‘This me...My place’, Thornhill knows he will never have “a place that is part of this flesh and spirit” (320). The narrative of regret is a familiar one in a post-Mabo culture, in which guilt over the poor treatment of generations of Indigenous Australians characterises the liberal response and is closely linked to the discourse of reconciliation. Within the context of the profound familiarity of this story — convict made good — Thornhill is an “Everyman,” or at least “every white Australian,” and this persistent and melancholic unease or knowledge is the secret river running coldly and quietly through the nation. While regret about the past is present in Australian culture and is reflected in important national moments like the official Apology to Indigenous Australians on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 2008, the allegorical tendencies of *The Secret River*, particularly in its final stages, inhibit more complex interpretation, their universalising impulse communicating a sentiment — regret at Stanner’s “the secret river of blood” — that can be interpreted as, again, oversimplified and historically and ontologically naïve. It is not surprising, then, that the allegorical form of the novel has attracted conflicting critical attention from the literary community. Some critics accept the allegorical function of the novel, despite reservations, and these final scenes as indicative of a widespread cultural dis-ease about the ambivalent past (Kossew; McCredden), while others are more suspicious of an all-too-easy set of connections. Eleanor Collins’s review essay, for instance, sees the “dangers of judging across difference” (44). Felicity Collins also explains that the type of allegory apparent in *The Secret River* works through a problematic, universalising impulse, particularly when contrasted to the depiction of the anarchic violence of John Hilcoat’s contemporaneous film of colonial Queensland, *The Proposition* (56-58), which works through the more radical form of *Trauerspiel*.

Sarah Pinto’s claims about the political difficulties of the experience of melancholy in *The Secret River* are particularly useful here when considered alongside the problems of



Grenville's attempt to write a type of national allegory. Adopting the Freudian model of melancholy as narcissistic obsession, Pinto claims that the particular aestheticised sadness of the final stages of the novel is where the political problems lie, rather than in the historical novel form itself. While I am in partial agreement with Pinto — the novel's melancholia is part of an ongoing narcissistic cultural obsession with its own suffering — I would maintain that this narrative aesthetic mode is inseparable from the allegorical function of novel and therefore inseparable from Grenville's particular use of the realist form. The symbiotic relationship between the historical novel as deployed by Grenville and the representation of melancholia posits the nation as suffering from a pathological sadness that it does not genuinely feel, and ignores the fact that the constitutive elements of literature — narrative, character, poetics — generate the melancholic affect itself. As Andrew McCann has repeatedly reminded us, sadness or regret have the potential to lead to (perhaps perverse) aesthetic enjoyment, an effect which has a long history in the reception of Australian literature ("Extinction"). This includes the bitter-sweetness, for example, of the sad old man called Thornhill who watches the hills around this house obsessively, in all of their moods — beautiful light playing on cliffs and forest — wishing to see traces of the tribe he helped, albeit reluctantly, to exterminate.

The conclusion to *The Secret River*, when considered as an allegory, forecloses interpretation as an ethical event (Attridge *Coetzee* 29), where the reader encounters lives and experiences that should be afforded the status of Other, or where there is little room for the reader to remain with the strangeness of history and the types of lives conveyed here. Each "event" of the encounter of writing/reading should be given space to occur in its singularity, even if the result is confusion. Judging by Attridge's formulation, there is no estrangement in this novel. In *The Secret River* the tendency towards allegory leaves no room for uncertainties, universalising in a way that removes the complexity and opacity of history.

With the Other visible and conceptually apprehendable, singularity is erased, thereby reproducing the Euro-dominated, “self”-centered politics that Grenville seeks to dissolve. For ethical writing to begin, not only should innocence be sacrificed for the flicker of unsettling and enigmatic knowledge, but responding to the opacity of the other needs to be engrossing, evoking confusion like the complexity and sublimity of human existence itself.<sup>51</sup> This humility and circumspection is present in the early sections of Grenville’s memoir, in which she seeks out the figure of Wiseman, traces of whom exist in the region’s history as an imposing figure and possible wife murderer, and stumbles through histories, records her own responses, open to uncertainty. In terms of Grenville’s *eros* for the Other of history, it has become, disappointingly, an attachment to the self-same, thus the action of expansion reverses and retracts.

Relatedly, in her work on the ethics, history and the limits of realist form, Wyschogrod stipulates that in any work relating the events of the past, the historian must remain visible in the work, for the central reason that the historian’s “present” or “now” must be acknowledged in any historical interpretation. In this volume Wyschogrod, importantly, explains her own socio-historical location and, like most post-World War II thinkers, sees the events of Nazism and the Holocaust as central in explicating her personal and political sensibility. In fact, it is the “cataclysm” that exercises on the historian the pressure to speak, spurred on by the implicit knowledge of the violence of which humanity is capable, despite the perceived Enlightenment safeguards of democracy and law. In the ruins of the Enlightenment, Wychohod sees herself as having glimpsed the nihil — the moral void, the capacity for anarchic violence so deeply entrenched in humanity that any attempt at redemption is meaningless — in so much savagery and atrocity. While this may seem

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<sup>51</sup> Attridge (*J.M. Coetzee*) uses an example from J.M. Coetzee’s *The Master of Petersburg*, where the protagonist, Dostoyevsky, writes during pre-revolutionary unrest and the waiting stillness of tension and darkness in which the Other emerges. What the Other is, exactly, is always uncertain — the ghost of his son or some dark manifestation of Russia itself.

evidence enough to abandon meaning and intelligibility, Wyschogrod, as heterological historian, sees the need to maintain an investment in meaning and reshape our relationship to the past and to the Other through a more nuanced account of intelligibility, allowing the “eros for nameless others” and a desire for justice to reshape social systems and understandings in the awareness of the shortcomings of language and Western ontology. In this sense *The Secret River* fails the Others of history. It could even be argued that Grenville’s novel, unlike the memoir, represents a particularly Australian sense of history, through which the Enlightenment project — the optimistic belief in human perfectibility and progress — is still perceived as fundamentally, unproblematically successful, as if the humanitarian outrages of the early twentieth century never happened. This optimistic conclusion is influenced by a strain of Australian nationalism that prides itself on having created a far more just, humane and equitable society than many other countries in the world. While a number of other countries that have had to deal with the guilt of a troubled past, such as Germany or South Africa, have worked in the complicated recognition of the extremities of human behaviour, Australia remains more deeply entrenched in its liberal humanist ideals, perceiving itself as an Enlightenment success, rather than the Enlightenment project hitched to totalitarianism, white supremacism and instrumental rationalism that have manifested themselves more explicitly, although differently, in other parts of the world.

## **II. The history-fiction debate: What is literature for?**

Few could have anticipated the debate that followed the release of *The Secret River*. There is nothing strikingly new about the form, content or style of this novel; the historical novel, after all, forms a large part of the Australian literary canon. Historians were also quick to note that a tale of colonial settlement and massacre was not new either, and that such narratives have had a heightened public profile since the revisionist histories of the 1970s and 1980s in

history fiction and film, and of course in the History Wars themselves. The appearance of *The Secret River* and, more so, the claims that Grenville made for it, inspired a dramatically divisive response that the novel, by virtue of its conventionality — the ordinariness of both its form and content — did not seem to warrant. Some of the well-known arguments made by historians Inga Clendinnen and Mark McKenna (“Comfort History”) argued passionately about the limitations of *The Secret River* and Grenville’s ambitions, and were particularly concerned about the novel’s assumption that experience of other times can be accessed through the acquisition of historical knowledge. Even more significantly, they demonstrated information about their own position as historians’ in this particular socio-historical context. As Clendinnen and McKenna were writing from an intensely pressured position during the heat and rancour of the History Wars, and the intense conservatism of the Howard government at the height of its cultural and electoral power, it is not surprising that there was a besieged defensiveness in response to claims for any kind of authority for historical fiction. They were keen to define themselves against such fiction, repeatedly defending the importance of scholarly rigour and the empirical process. While the historians’ claims that Grenville’s assumptions were both naïve and hubristic were justified, they also expressed their own anxiety about the rival claims of literature as a whole, particularly novels. I would claim that the greatest area of significance for this debate is the way it reveals the relationship between history and literature and the fact that even very conventional literary texts have the capacity to unsettle authoritative, empirical discourses.

Grenville’s much-discussed statement, in which she used the metaphor of a stepladder to describe the way that she, as a novelist, related to the partisan debates of the History Wars, was made shortly after the publication of the novel.<sup>52</sup> It reveals a number of conflicting perceptions about the kind of cultural and intellectual space her novel, and historical fiction

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<sup>52</sup> This interview was conducted by Romona Koval on “Books and Writing” in 2006.

generally, should occupy. She later explained that these comments were unpremeditated and ill-judged, as is sometimes the case in interviews, and were never intended to communicate the conviction that fiction was superior to history; rather, that it fulfilled a different function. Recently Grenville has mounted a detailed case about how she has been grossly misrepresented, and many of her points do indeed seem justified (“Academic Fictions”). The now (in)famous statement, when considered in context and in its entirety (as quoted below), aptly represents Grenville’s various ideas about the political and creative function of her novel and its relationship to history. She says, in response to a question about her position in the History Wars:

Mine would be up on a ladder, looking down at the history wars. I think the historians, and rightly so, have battled away about the details of exactly when and where and how many and how much, and they’ve got themselves into these polarised positions, and that’s fine, I think that’s what historians ought to be doing; constantly questioning the evidence and perhaps even each other. But a novelist can stand up on a stepladder and look down at this, outside the fray, and say there is another way to understand it. You can set two sides against each other and ask which side will win, the Windschuttles of the world or the Henry Reynoldses of the world? Which is going to win? The sport analogy, if you like, about history. Or you can go up on the stepladder and look down and say, well, nobody is going to win. There is no winner. What there can be, though, is understanding, actually experiencing what it was like, the choices that those people had. And once you can actually get inside the experience, it’s no longer a matter of who’s going to win, it’s simply a matter of: yes, now I understand both sides and, having understood, the notion of one side being right and the other side being wrong becomes kind of irrelevant. So that’s where I hope this book will be. It stands outside that polarised conflict and says, look, this is

a problem we really need, as a nation, to come to grips with. The historians are doing their thing, but let me as a novelist come to it in a different way, which is the way of empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events. Basically to think, well, what would I have done in that situation, and what sort of a person would that make me? (*Books and Writing*)

On the one hand, this statement reflects Grenville's belief in the importance of the continued emphasis on the understanding of history in Australian culture and the necessity for historical novelists to base their work, as much as possible, on both the work of historians which precedes them and their own meticulously researched historical detail, often with primary sources. On the other hand her Romanticised concept of art as offering access to transcendent "truth" posits literature as ultimately superior to historical discourse. I would suggest that, for Grenville at the time of this statement, there is slippage between this type of Romantic perception and a more politicised awareness of what literature can do differently from history: that it can perform functions or embark on explorations that history, because of its positivistic disciplinary underpinnings, cannot. A novelist like Grenville could conceivably suggest that the violent events of Australia's frontier history express moral failure, as does the nation's ignorance of these events in the century/ies that followed, and that Australians need to find a way to atone for, as well as examine and alter, the structures of Eurocentricism and whiteness that affect the past and present. For historians to suggest this would be much more fraught, for their statements must be carefully expressed in ways that maintain the evidence-based, positivistic focus of the discipline, thus ensuring a professional objectivity that would lessen the authority of their work — a process exemplified by much of the debate of the History Wars.

Arguably, Grenville is beginning to articulate the difficulties involved in making a judgment about history. Knowing the "facts" is part of this process, but so is imagination and

emotion, indicating the existence of a vexed space of history and judgment that seems the terrain of neither history nor literature but, at the same time, appropriate and necessary to both. The question “what would I have done?” (in the place of the perpetrators) has been deemed the great ethical question of the twentieth century (Douglass), and Grenville connects the question here to her novel, positing the text as written to inspire this type of self and social inwardness and interrogation. The historians are quick to point out that the problems here have to do with the novel’s assumption of universal subjectivity: with her late-modern experience Grenville cannot, no matter how much research she has performed or how many significant locations she has visited, know what it was to live a life such as that of her ancestor. I would contest, however, that there can be merit in this type of imaginative speculation. As I have already noted, theorists such as Butler and Wyschogrod, who advocate processes of judgment in relation to history, constantly invoke the need to acknowledge engaging the past as a fraught process, and this also must be considered. The subject should recognise the necessity to suspend judgment in the knowledge of the opacity of the Other (and of the self), particularly in regard to those who inhabit the past. Reflexively and paradoxically, if the subject is to countenance social responsibility, judgment of past acts must be made even in an understanding of its limitations, as it is part of the vexed and always incomplete process of understanding the self. Thus the subject understands both that he or she cannot know what she or he would have done but also, no matter what the answer to this question, that certain acts were morally wrong or compromised. It follows that although Grenville can never know if she, in Wiseman/Thornhill’s place, would have participated in a massacre, the consideration of this impossible question drives her self and social critique. Then, in attempting to discover her relationship to the nation’s founding violence, she has at least started on a path to ethical development, even while the process remains incomplete. With the suggestion that the “numbers killed” questions — what might be called the evidence

of past events of national history — are not the only questions that need to be asked of the past, Grenville begins to make an important point about history and fiction. She suggests that in considering the relationship between past and present, there is a place for imagination, speculation and judgment, even if all exploration needs to be made in the understanding of the limits of these processes.

Much of the fiction-history debate seems clouded by various instances of slippery and shifting definitions and category confusion, committed by both Grenville and the historians, particularly over notions of history itself and the place of empathy in both discourses. Grenville is the most obvious offender in blending aspects of history where, firstly, she claims authority for her novel because of the strength of its historical research, a practice aligned with traditional disciplinary History. Grenville's discussion reflects a type of territorial "bleed" from fiction/literature into history, even in the admission that she is "com[ing] to it [the past] in a different way". However, Grenville's idea about history and fiction generated a kind of covert admission of the value of emotion, including empathy, in historical studies from left-leaning historians, even though they continued to object to the type of empathy that claims full identification with the Other of history. McKenna and Clendinnen passionately defend a place for emotion — empathy or compassion — within history in a similar movement outside the traditional disciplinary boundaries, without any explanation or acknowledgment of the complications involved in doing so. In a troubling inconsistency, they attempt anxiously to defend their right as historians to claim the high authority of empiricism, while extolling the need to engage with emotional categories through non-traditional historical writing.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> The "empathetic history" stance is evident in McKenna's and Clendinnen's publications, released around the time of *The Secret River*. McKenna's study of the Eden-Monaro region in *Looking for Blackfella's Point*, for example, prefaces the story with a discussion of the complexities involved in owning a piece of land in a settler country — the "Blackfella's Point" of the title purchased by McKenna in the early 1990s. The subsequent history involves



By McKenna's and Clendinnen's admission, emotional categories such as empathy are a necessary, even inevitable, aspect of historical inquiry. There are similarities here to Hayden White's discussion of the unavoidably interested nature of history writing — always with an implied moral perspective, even when based as much as possible in empirically recoverable "facts" (content). McKenna and Clendinnen imply the need to make a judgment, even if covertly, and their own politics are often apparent: they are writing in the knowledge that history, ultimately, is about the present as much as the past. They suggest that the past can and should be judged, yet this can occur in an ethical way if one is open about the written and formal process. As McKenna puts it, "in the writing of history the writer should always be present, unlike in fiction" ("Writing the Past"). Thus he observes that the space of empathy and judgment in history — dealt with ethically — is about a certain transparency of form. The writer's time and place must be made abundantly clear, so that the reader is aware of the text as a series of mediations rather than an authoritative truth. The implication is that the writer's conclusions, as well-evidenced as they may be, are never free from the realities of contingency, and that this awareness must be visible in the text. Clendinnen's position and, even more powerfully, McKenna's, are markedly similar to Wyschogrod's definition of the historian of the Other. The "I" of the historian is always present and she or he must not erase the distance and, therefore, the difference of the subjects who lived there. In essence, what these historians are objecting to is the epistemological naiveté of realism applied to history.

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a series of well-researched histories of the groups who have lived in the region, from hard-grafting lives of whalers and pastoralists to the Indigenous groups of the area. McKenna's own position in history, and his self-conscious relationship to his ownership of land, as well as the thoroughly diverse nature of the stories he relates, are underpinned by his desire to do justice to those who are often unrepresented in more conventional histories. Matters of politics and justice, advanced through empathetic response, are deeply embedded in its content and form so that, as McKenna puts it, we are to "live in this country with our eyes wide open" (5). Similarly, Clendinnen is openly empathetic to the oppressed of history, not only in the Australian context, seen in for example *Dancing with Strangers*, but also in her acclaimed *Remembering the Holocaust*. Her writing is constructed to "tell a story" in a sense that is accessibly linear and acknowledges the limits of historical research — the "gaps" in the record.

However, there is no acknowledgement of the way History as a discipline has traditionally been reliant on invisible, authoritative modes of narration and structural linearity. As Hayden White and Robert Young have both argued, history's relationship with realism is just as intimate as that of literature: both are products of nineteenth-century positivism (*Content; Writing History*).

McKenna's statement about the "absent" writer in fiction reveals the incorrect assumption that the author/narrator of historical fiction *is* always absent. Many novels founded in real historical events of the Australian frontier could not be easily categorised as realist. They are self-conscious, highly ironic and employing the conventions of magic realism, generic hybridisation, or the hyperbolic exaggerations of picaresque. A number of the most critically successful novels, such as Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* and Kim Scott's *Benang*, flamboyantly experiment with novelistic forms. Even more conventionally realistic novels, such as Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (2005) or *True History of the Kelly Gang* ( ), Flanagan's *Wanting*( ), or Scott's *That Deadman Dance*( ), are often ironic and always self-conscious in terms of the problems of writing history, albeit in different ways and to different extents. They are examples, in Linda Hutcheon's well-known formulation, of historiographic metafiction. The epistemological sophistication of such novels thus demonstrates that the historians' criticisms of historical fiction and the alleged usurpation by *The Secret River* of historians' authority is something of a straw-man argument.

This debate also draws attention to the limits of historical processes in the consideration of that which is absent from purely evidence-based history, including the lives of the voiceless, the illiterate, the invisible. Wyschogrod, in an extension of this point, goes so far as to claim that an ethical, "heterological" historian can:

substitute that which was not in place of what she believes to have occurred [if she] does so in the fidelity to a principle or practice that is the placeholder for the pledge of veracity. (Wyschogrod 9)

Therefore, an historical “fiction” may, in principle, increase understanding or encourage a perception of events that represents an experience of the past in an ethical way and be respectful of its difference, its Otherness. A real William Thornhill did not settle along the Hawkesbury River, yet a story such as this, in which fictional details sometimes replace facts, can be written in such a way as to provide historical insights into, for instance, early nineteenth-century poverty, criminality, transportation or interracial violence. Such stories can both respect historical “facts” and attempt to engage with what cannot be known in existing historical studies, thus respecting the sublimity of history. Such a process requires “epistemic sophistication and historiographic inventiveness” (Wyschogrod 10). Imaginatively engaging or speculating about history is thus not inimical to an ethical or heterological history.

It is important to remember that at the height of these debates, revisionist historians were keen to defend their expertise in response to a climate of growing conservatism and race paranoia. It is thus understandable that McKenna and Clendinnen reacted with such passion to what they saw as Grenville’s challenges to their authority and the danger of thinking that (revisionist) “history” is “fiction”. The wider significance of the debate is the evidence it provides of the specific role that literature plays in social and political interactions, brought to the surface because of a context of heightened anxiety among historians. It is history with its foundation in “hard” evidence that carries authority in existing political and legal systems. Significantly, literature cannot help but undermine the certainty of authoritative, evidence-based discourses, even when this is explicitly not its intention. As Marc Angenot has explained, literature cannot avoid its “trouble making” character, and while it does not have any particular authority above and beyond existing authoritative discourses, it “simply shows

that discourses that claim to know it all ... don't know it at all" (224). Of course, historians who write with a degree of understanding of their own disciplinary limits, like Clendinnen and McKenna, are less vulnerable to these criticisms, because they do not "hide their stitches" (225) as Angenot puts it. Even so, they are clearly unsettled, and most unsettled, by Grenville's novel, a highly conventional realist narrative in which the author has been open about her debt to history. What this discourse shows is the extent of rupture that literature effects, even amongst the historians who recognise a certain "literariness" to their work, as it always reveals "the impossibility of saying" (224) as they, perhaps intuitively, recognise some credence to her claims.

Literature ends up in the paradoxical position of power whereby it does not offer understandings or philosophical formulations superior to those of other discourses such as history, yet its particular style of rupture shows that "this is not the whole story" (Angenot 225). It is significant that these challenges are most keenly felt by historians with left-wing political views, particularly about race relations. One might speculate that they perceive the ethical imperative of recognising the limits of their discipline which is in turn inextricably linked to the nature of power, language and textual form and "the impossibility of saying."

They are in this particular bind because of the need to maintain a commanding position in the interests of the disadvantaged groups they wish to help: perhaps an impasse. It is, however, a possibility that parts of the literary and history communities could cultivate a more supportive relationship in the light of their overwhelming political similarities. The hope remains that they may explore a degree of complementariness in the ongoing race/culture debate that continues to preoccupy party politics and the full gamut of the Australian news media, as well as the investigations of scholars and intellectuals.

Grenville's decision to write another historical novel, after the aggressive attacks on *The Secret River* and her explanatory statements, shows considerable courage. Her public

comments at the time reveal that she wanted to put a more considered and refined case before the historians and the public: that literature which represents the past has a worthwhile ethical contribution to make, rather than being an opportunistic filching of historical events for the purpose of producing a riveting tale. What is also striking about the appearance of a second historical novel, *The Lieutenant*, is its accompaniment by Grenville's public retreat from aspects of her previous understandings. The movement into (or back to) uncertainty indicates the growing sophistication of Grenville's ethical position as expressed in her public statements and publications: the admission of a degree of error not only reveals an admirable self-criticism rare in public cultural figures, but a sincere wish to keep contributing positively to cultural understanding and social justice in a national sphere.

In a television interview on a prominent current affairs program, the interviewer asked Grenville to respond to one of the more aggressive attacks on her previous novel. Two years earlier in a chapter of his book on Australian history titled "How Sorry Can We Be?", conservative historian John Hirst made a number of criticisms about *The Secret River*. He stated that Grenville's novel was an example of what he calls "liberal fantasy":

Worrying over conquest; wishing it were peaceful; feeling that somehow it has to be rectified if Australia is to be at peace with itself: these are the products of the liberal imagination. Its decency knows no bounds or thought....This mindset has perverted Aboriginal policy over the past thirty years so that has not been dealing with Aborigines as they are or may be and it raises expectations that cannot be met. (Hirst 85)

Hirst's views — what he calls the "hard realist" view of history (85) — rejects the notion of late-modern Australia having to be apologetic for violent incidents that occurred so far back in the past where, he claims, both European settlers and Indigenous groups were vastly different peoples. He suggests that this kind of well-intentioned sentiment has inhibited

opportunities for Indigenous Australians, as well as encouraging an inaccurate perception of the way people lived at this time. In short, it is more about white guilt than it is about history or improving the material state of Indigenous lives. He notes that the character Thornhill is not an eighteenth-century waterman brought up in a “hard world”; “it is herself [Grenville]” (85). Significantly, Grenville humbly recognised that Hirst made some valid points about the inefficacy of merely feeling “bad” about the past, and how it does not follow that any social change will occur. Yet, she also states that:

In my own defence to take that step into woolly good feeling is at least a step which starts a process. You may then have to step backwards and step sideways. (Grenville “Kate Grenville Joins the 7.30 Report”)

While Grenville admits that she has been “called” on her Romantic and abstract idealism, she still believes in the potential for the imaginative consideration of the past to have progressive social consequences, even if it is more problematic than she had previously believed. Her response could also be interpreted as an admission of naiveté in terms of the relationship between history, historical method and form. Stepping “backwards” and “sideways” is an apt figuration of the need continually to reassess and re-approach history from different angles in the attempt to improve one’s understanding of both the self and Other.

In *The Lieutenant*, Grenville has pushed outwards from the ontological and ethical containment of the allegorical function of *The Secret River*, even though, as I explain later, she still encounters some problems due to the empathy inherent in certain forms of realism when applied to history. The more singular story of Daniel Rooke — based on the historically actual figure William Dawes — allows her to thread her way through ethics and history in a shrewder, more circumspect manner. Her inspiration for the novel was finding the diaries that record in detail the exchanges between two “real-life” individuals: Dawes, an astronomer, linguist and mathematician, and the Cadigal girl, Patyegarang. The story ends with a heroic

act of insubordination when Dawes risks court martial and execution by criticising Governor Phillip for ordering a brutal and unjust action against the local Cadigal tribe. In this narrative, as Grenville sees it, there exists the opportunity to engage with history with less invention and intervention by her own twenty-first century consciousness. She thus believes that the narrative will not encounter the same historical and ethical pitfalls and will have a better chance of containing the type of “truths” about race contact that she wishes to convey. What is striking about her initial idea and inspiration is that in taking a narrative more directly from “the record”, there may be the potential for connecting with the singularity of individuals and historical events, requiring less mediation while also showing the ethical and political possibilities of decisions made out of conscience and principle. Grenville’s ambitions for this novel are also more modest than they were for *The Secret River*. Even as she sees the potential to tell a story of national significance, she appears more open about the limits of what she can offer. She comments, in contrast to her bolder earlier claims, “I like to write a novel out of questions” (Grenville “Kate Grenville Joins the 7.30 Report”). As Judith Butler states, ethical development depends on the willingness “to monitor, test, improve, transfer” (*Giving an Account* 18). For Grenville, this process works through attempting to understand and write a version of history. This is not only evident through her comments but in those aspects of the novel which often acknowledge, and continually reassess, the various limits of her own creative offering.

A useful lens through which to examine this more complex relation to history and the historical novel is the character of Daniel Rooke. In many ways Rooke is the ideal humanist — a polymath, distinguished since childhood by his keen intellect and who, by beginning with an extraordinary grasp of first principles and the abstract, develops sophisticated understandings of cultural difference, accompanied by emotional awakening, a highly-refined self-knowledge, and the inexpressible enrichment of his friendship with Tagaran (based on

Patyegarang). Unlike Thornhill's representative function, Rooke is distinguished by his exceptionalism. He is a rare historical figure in two senses: a man who embodies the best of the Enlightenment in his intellectual acuteness and humanitarianism, and an historical anomaly, whose daily life of obedience as a marine in the brutal, technologically-advanced, expedient and utilitarian machine of empire, instead of crushing his insights and sensibility, provides him with a crucible in which he finds his true metal. Rooke seems to embody a humanist balance of feeling and intellect that is a model for navigating the hazards of modernity, an exemplary figure whose life is represented as immeasurably richer for having plunged himself into encounters with the Other, eschewing the normalising influence of imperialism and capitalism at the expense of material reward and comfort.

While the text is thoroughly grounded in eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideals, it also bears the marks of a more informed engagement with the late twentieth-century ethical turn, most especially in its representation of the relationship between Rooke and Tagaran. The exchange of language and ideas between Dawes and Patyegarang provides convincing evidence of an affectionate, intellectually playful and mutually gratifying relationship. In Grenville's interpretation, Dawes/Rooke's motives for learning the local Indigenous language quickly change from self-interest to a sincere and altruistic concern for the welfare of the Cadigal people — a concern which is ultimately rewarded by his emotional and psychic enrichment. The emotional warmth of the developing friendship is symbolised through the observing and meeting of hands, a gesture of hospitality towards the Other, and the way it leaves one changed by venturing forward into difference. It indicates the fullness of what is exchanged, but also marks the limits of what one can know through intellectual systems and patterns. In response to Tagaran's clever teasing and his own (uncharacteristically) playful, uninhibited responses, Rooke reflects:



Well, it might be unlike Daniel Rooke, but for the person she called Kamara [friend] it seemed to come as naturally as breathing. Kamara must have existed all this time, he thought, but without the remarkable chance of the arrival of Tagaran, he would still be voiceless.

He sat on his side listening to the soft sounds of the embers creaking and collapsing, and the girls' innocent, unaware breathing. He could see the jointed silhouette swelling and subsiding. One of Tagaran's arms was flung out from beneath the blanket, the hand palm up, the fingers loosely curled around the air. He felt — what was it? — a warmth was it, in his chest? He could not locate it or name it, but he knew it was to do with Tagaran being under his roof, that trusting hand turned up towards him.

[...]

He thought there might not be any words for what was happening between himself and Tagaran. Like the language of the Cadigal he was learning, the language of his feeling for her was beyond his reach. He could only step forward blindly, in trust. (189-91)

If realist texts typically proceed on the assumption that there is a direct and unproblematic correspondence between language and what it describes, what Grenville is writing here is something markedly different, in that the relationship between the two main characters is indescribable in any direct or unproblematic way. Rooke's best way of describing this new emotion is to think in non-linguistic terms. He takes pleasure in the warm bodily presence of Tagaran and her friend sleeping on the floor of his hut as he writes. Language fails him in his attempt to describe a connection that is beyond his cultural experience and effectively ineffable. In contrast to the motif of sight in *The Secret River*, Rooke finds an experience enriching precisely because of the "blindness" of his relationship with Tagaran, all the more

rewarding because of the presence of faith and trust that comes without the guarantee of complete reciprocation.

To return to a discussion of ethics, Rooke's encounter with the Other is a delimiting or denucleation of the self, where he is irreversibly transformed from the self of his European upbringing to an individual with the potential to appreciate difference and, in turn, to achieve ethical greatness. Later in the narrative, the meeting of hands signifies both a connection with the Other and the ethical and cultural distance that has been travelled. This is evident in the final meeting before Rooke is sent back to England, when Tagaran warms her hand by the fire and presses it to his, an action described by the single Cadigan word, "putuwa". Rooke's growing sense of profound experience as linguistically inexpressible is connected to the great investment that this scientific mind, master of empirical process, has started to place on maintaining uncertainty and rejecting the notion of fixed endpoints of learning. Again, one might argue that the literary expression of ideas always unsettles authoritative knowledge systems and previously held convictions. When considering the records of his diaries, Rooke finds himself "chilled by the certainty of earlier entries" (231); accordingly his cultural, ontological surface of whiteness disperses, as do the "specs of white" flaking from a whitewashed plank of wall and he is "displaced ... by another [more ethical and authentic] man" (244). His affection for Tagaran leads to the realisation he can never have complete access to her particular understandings, motivations or way of perceiving the world, but this awareness should not prevent his making the attempt to connect with, and to "know", the racial Other.

In Grenville's particular appropriation of history in *The Lieutenant*, there is a degree of ethical progression, particularly in the episodes of the novel that intersect most directly with the complexities of real historical events and records, and most particularly the relationship between Rooke and Tagaran. However, the very structure of the novel — a

linear, causally connected plot which charts Rooke's development as subject — ironically forecloses the very ethical development championed in the novel. The degree of formal familiarity, similar to *The Secret River*, fails the laudable ethics and actions of Grenville's protagonist; while Rooke struggles with these challenges of approaching the unknowable other, the shape of Grenville's narrative subsumes the mystery of approaching difference into the knowable scope of subjectivity. Like Thornhill and the pattern of identity and action of *The Secret River*, Rooke is wholly explicable as a subject and the course of his life seems providential. His ethics are attributable to his intellectual brilliance and his childhood "outsider" status (he is marked as different by his mind), and to the perceptions that stem from the findings of a gifted observer who finds connections in the entirety of the natural and human spheres of existence.

However, Grenville's determination that the reader find Rooke a wholly virtuous character, and her filling in the gaps of his life, in terms of both his actions and interiority, is ideologically problematic. The desire to "purify" Rooke's character is evidenced by Grenville's manipulation of historical realities. It is noted among historians, for example, that there was possibly a sexual relationship between Dawes and Patyegarang, and that Patyegarang's age is unknown. (Grenville includes in her Author's Notes that she was probably between 10 and 15.) In *The Lieutenant*, the details of the text represent their relationship as platonic, including the suggestion that Tagaran is pre-pubescent, that their relationship reminds Rooke of his sister and that he engages in "normal" sexual activity with the convict women who work as prostitutes. Even this latter aspect of his behaviour is conveyed as morally unproblematic. It is significant here that Grenville goes to these lengths to preserve a kind of ethical purity to her character; and she has remarked that she did not want to suggest that there might have been anything exploitative about the relationship. It would have been possible to leave these aspects of character open and unresolved, but

Grenville's determination to make all aspects of her character's existence congruous and coherent is at odds with a more modern concept of individual identity or selfhood as complex and open-ended. Judith Butler makes the point that the "truth of a person is not told in a seamless story, but in stoppage, open-endedness, enigmatic articulations" (64); and, importantly, "that the subject has drives that are not fully narratable" (64). This "fixing" and delimiting of character is reinforced by Grenville's determination to construct Rooke as a wholly virtuous figure (evidenced by her manipulation of historical records). The novel is thus both an ethical improvement on *The Secret River* and beset with the ethical limitations of a liberal humanist concept of selfhood. It is disappointing that, as much as Grenville embraces the ethical and ontological need for uncertainty in aspects of her adaptation, her desire to control interpretations again forecloses the ethical function of the text, as well as the incomplete and fragmented nature of history itself.

Grenville's ethically limiting attachment to elements of realism connects to a type of subjectivity and idealism that arguably ignores the events and philosophical developments of the twentieth century. Daniel Rooke, although based on an historical figure, is largely compatible with what might be called desirable Australian late-twentieth-century social characteristics and liberal political sensibility. Intelligent, well-educated, middle-class and single, Rooke is relatively well placed socially to act out of a sense of conscience. The privileged position of the protagonist no doubt corresponds to Grenville's imagined middle-class reader, receptive to being influenced by her novelistic ideas. This particular vision of subjectivity, however, is demonstrably naïve, based as it is on a sentimentalised concept of human goodness uninflected by knowledge of, among other things, the moral and ethical atrocities of modern history. This is reflected in one of the novel's final scenes, in which Rooke's decision to abandon Governor Phillip's mission to capture or kill Indigenous men in reprisal for the killing of a game-keeper is represented as inspired by his profound

appreciation of the heavens. In a baptismal moment, he enters the river to metaphorically remove the corrupting influence of Phillip's mission. The symbol of the stars suggests that "beyond the chatter of human argument was their plain statement: Everything is part of every other thing now and forever" (279) and, from this moment of insight, is able to believe whole-heartedly in the natural justice of his decision. It must be said that Rooke's example is not universally accessible, with some individuals having no access to either action or choice, especially those who have lived through the most appalling degradation.

Doubtless, there is a profound connection between Grenville's perception of her own individual ethics and politics; and appears to work through these things in her novels, her way of "giving an account of herself" while attempting to retain that "Eros for the Other" that defines the heterological historian. It seems, however, that the formal and aesthetic expectations she has for fiction continue to limit or diminish the ethical positions explored in the text. The most expansive ethical moments in her depiction of the past remain the episodes characterised by enigma, even sublimity, where understandings and insights are not confined to a linear, unified form. It is when the past, like Solomon Wiseman, spectre-like, emerges somehow unexpected and unbidden. The most ethical literature, like the most ethical history, reminds us that any authoritative discourse — whether historical, journalistic, or political — is never the whole story. Like the figure of the Fool, such literature disrupts through its ability to convey complex and contradictory realities, the singularities that slip through larger and more sweeping epistemological systems and in the modesty of "small" stories.

Grenville stated on the release of *The Lieutenant* that:

the worst thing is to sort of do nothing, to have the status quo, to continue not to worry away at these problems. Worrying away at them is the imperative I think ("Kate Grenville Joins the 7.30 Report").

At the time of writing this chapter Grenville is on the verge of releasing another historical novel, based on William Thornhill's granddaughter, the third book in what is now called *The Colonial Trilogy*. The story is once again inspired by remnants and traces of history that resurface in family stories. Grenville is still "worrying away" and "making do with speaking" in the attempt to negotiate history and Otherness. Significantly, this final novel is accompanied by extensive supporting information made available on her website, including "notes for the reader," an extensive list of primary and secondary sources consulted, and two more essays mounting a defence of her earlier novels and statements ("Dispute"; "Academic Fictions"). Understandably, Grenville does not want to be the target of the historians' vitriol again and wants to state her ideas and position as unequivocally as possible. However, this action also reveals her continuing desire to communicate a tendency to control the interpretation of her work. Not only is this impossible; it also attempts to rein in the very anarchic quality that allows literary texts to rupture, to disrupt.

As Marc Angenot notes, literature is also always in the process of "try[ing] to conquer a space to be heard above the hubbub of social discourse" (225). By virtue of the content of their stories — "fictionalised" historical stories — and the surrounding debates, *The Secret River* and *The Lieutenant* have made themselves "heard" more than most works of Australian literature at this point in time. This has not happened because of any particular innovation in their writing but because of their marked topicality. The narratives touch upon a subject that troubles the national psyche, reflecting discourses that have preoccupied Australians for decades. That these stories have been read and heard by many, creating a passionate and energetic public discourse despite their highly traditional, non-confronting "readable" form, is testimony to the ability of even the most formally conventional literature to rupture and to bring national sensitivities to the surface in the "hubbub" of discourse.

## Chapter Two

### **Ambivalence, Absence and Loss in David Malouf's Remembering Babylon**

As the previous chapter showed, of Australian novels about Australian history reveal particular types of cultural desire which are complex and often contradictory. These desires can manifest themselves in representations of events and individuals as unalterably, even mysteriously, Other or different, to the belief that the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century reader can understand the responses and motivations of colonists and Indigenous peoples on the basis of universal human experiences. As has been well documented, David Malouf, like Kate Grenville, has expressed his belief that fiction can bring the reader “closer” to past events, and that the process of imaginatively “fleshing out” history creates a more insightful version of the past. Just as Grenville was later to do, Malouf remarked in a 1996 interview with Helen Daniels (McKenna “Writing the Past: History, Literature and the Public Sphere in Australia”) that “the only way of coming to terms with [our history] is by people entering into it in their imagination, not by the world of facts but by really being there. And the only thing that really puts you there in that kind of way is fiction. It’s when you’ve actually been there and become a character again in that world.” Grenville’s and Malouf’s various realisms are not identical. Compared to Grenville’s novels, Malouf’s work is more intricately poetic and dense with literary allusion — a form that could be termed “poetic realism” — yet there are important similarities in their implied politics. Once again, a liberal engagement with the past, founded on a belief in the universality of human experience and the power of empathy, as well as the capacity of the imagination to transcend historical and

cultural difference, is at the heart of one of Australia's most-loved historical fictions.<sup>54</sup>

Once again, too, this strain of liberal humanism is closely connected to the national discourse of reconciliation in the 1990s. Bain Attwood has noted the widespread belief, strengthened in the wake of revisionist histories, that “historical truth and social reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous go hand in hand,” and that, through a program of education and social justice, members of these culturally diverse groups could discover meaningful connections, resulting in greater national unity (“Unsettling Pasts” 246). While most historical novels clearly do not announce themselves as “histories” in the traditional disciplinary sense, part of their cultural significance lies in their attempt to contribute, politically and ethically, to this new engagement with the past in the name of effecting social transformation. This ambition reflects the writers’ assumption that a type of empathetic re-imagining of the events of the frontier can prompt the settler subject/reader to reflect on past injustices and violence in a way that can further a human rights agenda. David Malouf’s 1993 novel *Remembering Babylon* can be used as an exemplar of what I will argue is the ambivalence of liberal humanist narratives in Australian historical novels. This ambivalence is produced by the tension between a well-intentioned and, to an extent, politically effective liberalism, and its limitations, notably the political and ethical problems that inhere in the yearning for a fully reconciled community. In this chapter I aim to acknowledge the efficacy of the liberal humanist discourse in *Remembering Babylon*, whilst interrogating some of its more problematic aspects.<sup>55</sup> In particular, I want to examine the

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<sup>54</sup> It should be noted that the realist historical novel is the liberal humanist form *par excellence*. In terms of its narrative structure and ideology, seeks closure and coherence. It is, in effect, a formal and artistic reassertion of the primacy of the individual as the key agent of social change. Whilst *Remembering Babylon* has moments of Romantic transcendence and mysticism that are not typical of traditional realism, the linear structure and realism of the main narrative bring the novel into this category.

<sup>55</sup> It is important to note here that liberalism in an Australian context is constantly changing. In more recent years, as Mark Davis has discussed in “The Clash of Paradigms”, some prominent liberal intellectuals have begun to adjust their thinking in recognition of the



implications of the notion of “shared suffering” by discussing Malouf’s representation of non-Indigenous trauma.

Malouf’s novel has clear connections with the prevailing mood of optimism in the year of its release, a moment of triumph for a progressive liberal social agenda. In 1993 — the United Nations’ “Year of Indigenous Peoples” — a number of significant social advances were made in Australia, among the most notable being the passing of the Mabo legislation (in response to the High Court ruling made the previous year), and the then Prime Minister Keating’s Redfern Park speech, a dramatic claiming of responsibility for colonial violence which foreshadowed an official national apology to Indigenous Australians. These actions were underwritten by a powerful liberal discourse aimed squarely at redressing past injustices and promoting Indigenous rights. As Atwood points out, liberal ideology and rhetoric, like other forms of thought based on Enlightenment principles, can have distinct advantages because of their ideological compatibility with political and legal systems based upon a belief in universal values and standards, a belief which in turn underpins concepts such as equality and justice ( “Unsettling Pasts” 249-50). However, the limitations of these assumptions are evident in Malouf’s novel.

As a number of critics have noted, Malouf’s well-intentioned vision of a unified and enlightened nation demonstrates a troubling tendency to project white, Eurocentric narratives and desires onto racial and cultural Others. In *Remembering Babylon*, the Australian colonies are represented as a paradise regained, in which non-Indigenous Australians develop an authentic autochthonous identity by establishing a set of connections with the land and Indigenous cultures. This view has seemed questionable to a range of critics. The most notable examples of these early critical responses to *Remembering Babylon* are by Germaine

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problematic nature of universals (18-21). Kate Grenville, for example, responded to criticisms of liberalism in *The Secret River* (2005) by producing the more politically circumspect *The Lieutenant* (2008). I would assert that the type of liberalism conveyed by Malouf’s 1993 book remains powerful and prevalent in literary and political contexts.

Greer, Suvendrini Perera and Peter Otto. Greer focuses on what she perceives as Malouf's lack of knowledge of colonial history and Indigenous culture, arguing that this produces a Eurocentric narrative that reduces Indigenous experience to the projection of white settler fears and desires (11). Perera and Otto see the various tropes and aesthetic of the novel as evidence of its fundamental "whiteness" which, Perera argues, proceeds through a troublingly naive concept of hybridity (14-15). For Otto, the novel tends to ignore or erase cultural difference through its use of a Romantic mode that depoliticises the violence of the frontier (55-57). In this sense, the liberal narrative can erase differences that are important, and sometimes irreconcilable.

As he discussed in interviews at the time, Malouf took care to avoid cultural appropriations, and deliberately did not include a central Indigenous character because he believed he was ill-qualified to write from this subject position and, more importantly, did not want to be interpreted as attempting to speak for Indigenous Australians (*Interview*).<sup>56</sup> However, the quintessentially liberal belief in the power of empathy to effect social change does rely to a large extent on the ability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to have a number of shared understandings, meaningful connections and cultural similarities. Arguably, a kind of over-reliance on empathetic understanding assumes that Indigenous Australians share in the liberal vision of reconciliation, social unity and cohesion, but fails to acknowledge that Indigenous Australians may be justifiably suspicious of the risk of homogenisation and absorption. Thus, while there is on the one hand a great respect in *Remembering Babylon* for Indigenous culture, Malouf seems unable to combine this respect with a politics that meaningfully acknowledges significant cultural differences.

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<sup>56</sup> Malouf commented in a televised episode of ABC's *The Book Show* that he didn't include Indigenous characters in *Remembering Babylon* as he didn't "understand it well enough ... none of us do. The greatest respect to other cultures is made by us not assuming we can grasp it."

The novel reflects what Dominick LaCapra argues is a Western tendency to assume that the experience of one type of trauma provides a type of (empathetic) key to understanding another (“Trauma, Absence, Loss” 700). This assumption effectively erases the historical specificity that, as trauma theorists recognise, is essential to providing an effective program of social justice, as well as the ability of individuals and groups to work through the psychologically and culturally damaging effects of trauma. The political limitations of this belief in “shared suffering” are compounded in *Remembering Babylon* and other historical novels, such as Malouf’s *The Conversations at Curlew Creek* (1997) and Grenville’s *The Secret River*, by the linking of white and Indigenous experiences of trauma. While such novels include scenes of massacre and violence perpetrated on Indigenous, the detailed focus on white trauma reflects the tendency of white Australians to obsessively memorialise their own suffering. Ann Curthoys has recognised this as a predisposition to what she aptly calls “victimology narratives” (“Expulsion, Exodus and Exile” 3).

A discussion of trauma in *Remembering Babylon* and in Australian culture generally can usefully draw on the work of La Capra, whose views diverge from those outlined in Cathy Caruth’s foundational writings on trauma. Notably, La Capra insists on the recognition of individual responses to traumatic events. Recognising that Caruth’s important recognition of the belated and repetitive nature of trauma was being applied to a variety of late-modern experiences, including the experiences of those who have not known trauma at first hand, La Capra seeks to refocus the consideration of traumatic experience as something that is devastatingly individual, insisting that traumata must be dealt with in terms of therapy or reparation in ways that take the specificity of traumatic experience into account (*History in Transit*).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> La Capra also seeks to develop and refine a number of Caruth’s ideas which he sees as sometimes being limited to simplistic representations and binaries. (“History in Transit” 118–23) He also believes that healing and catharsis should not be conceptualised (as in Caruth’s

In his essay “Trauma, Absence, Loss”, La Capra uses the term “absence” to describe a general, and often ahistorical, foundational trauma for a culture or community in which a previous state of harmony or unity has been disrupted and is now missing. “Loss”, on the other hand, refers to a particular experience or event deeply embedded within history and involving primary witnesses. (Thus the same event might be experienced by different communities as “absence” or as “loss”) Absence operates within a metaphysical and/or mythic dimension and is tied to a founding event or story by which a culture or community structures and defines itself, such as the movement between prelapsarian grace and the fragmented state of the fallen human condition in the notion of original sin or, in Freudian terms, pre-oedipal unity with the mother (“Trauma, Absence, Loss” 703). Problems occur when the “loss”, often experienced by minority or disempowered communities, is subsumed into “absence” — the narratives which the majority or more powerful community might use to describe those historical events, as having a mythical dimension — without recognition of the specific historical circumstances of suffering. In these circumstances, there can be little chance of “working through” for those who have experienced loss because it is re-framed as absence (LaCapra “Trauma, Absence, Loss” 712). LaCapra’s emphasis on the specificity of different types of traumatic experience and on the need to examine manifestations of absence and loss suggests that careful consideration should be given to the specificities of the colonial frontier in which *Remembering Babylon* is located, and the cultural upheaval being experienced in Australia at the time of the novel’s publication. La Capra’s claims, when applied to an Australian context, can be used to demonstrate that the conflation of absence and loss has possible implications for all those who experience trauma, and is particularly

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work) as something final and absolute; rather, resolution without recourse to complete closure — “a non-totalising form of working through’ — is what is needed” (“History in Transit” 123).

detrimental to Indigenous groups whose experiences of trauma are more widespread, more devastating and more recent than those of non-Indigenous Australians.

In Malouf's novel, nineteenth-century Europe at the height of the Industrial Revolution is figured as the post-lapsarian world. It is an urban and sometimes sordid place in which time moves human beings quickly towards hardship, pain and death. Pre-colonial Australia, by contrast, is Edenic, a place in which humankind lives in a state of interconnectedness with nature. Death itself is without finality, part of a continuous and infinite cycle. In the in-between place, the frontier settlement in central Queensland where the narrative takes place, there seems to be an opportunity for those from the fallen, European world to reconnect with a mode of existence that has been lost. Experiences of belonging are figured as the complex, eventually transcendent movement between the fallen (old) world, which is in the process of being transferred to Australia in the small settlement, to a state of unity with the timeless natural world — Jerusalem, opposed to the Babylon of the old world.<sup>58</sup> The most problematic aspect of the novel is the way that access to the unfallen world and the manifestation of that world in belonging are effected through the representation of the character of the “black white man”, Gemmy Fairley. Gemmy is a kind of conduit between settler and Indigenous culture who also models belonging, or an imagined state of autochthony, for settlers. As such, the figuring of Gemmy is important to the novel's concept of individual and cultural unity, and its merging of different experiences of suffering: it is essential to recognise that the representation of Gemmy's experiences of trauma is used to *enable* his Indigenised identity.

It is through Gemmy that a complex series of elisions and connotations takes place such that the specific and individual nature of loss, in La Capra's terms, is subsumed into a general, allegorised absence. The extensive criticism of Gemmy's ideological function attests

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<sup>58</sup> One of the two epigraphs of the novel is a line from William Blake's “The Four Zoas”: “[w]hether this is Jerusalem or Babylon we know not”.

to his centrality to the problematic politics of the novel. Responses to Suvendrini Perera's early and influential claim that Gemmy embodies an ethically questionable form of "happy hybridity" (14-15) are important in analysing the complex range of ideas explored here. Don Randall observes that Gemmy cannot be a hybrid in the sense that Perera suggests, as he is unable to integrate aspects of his personal history: "it is the violence — the deep personal violation — marking Gemmy's experience of English culture that makes his English identity unassimilable" (147). Lee Spinks argues that the novel shows that if "difference is always already inscribed within the heart of identity, it also implies that the presence of a mutable and temporarily discontinuous subjectivity constitutes a grave danger to the governing premises of Enlightenment and colonialist rhetoric" (171). Both Randall and Spinks recognise that Gemmy's liminal cultural position works in a different way than is assumed (or, arguably intended) by the claim that he embodies a "happy hybridity". They both see the suffering of Gemmy's early years as the most powerful defining factor in the fraught cultural position he occupies in his later life, and there is a recognition implicit in each argument that the experience of trauma is somehow related to the status of this "in-between creature" (Randall 28). Randall and Spinks see the shifting nature of Gemmy's apparently boundary-transgressing subjectivity as something that undermines Enlightenment-based colonial epistemology.

That Gemmy is represented as a traumatised subject encourages imaginative and empathetic connections between different subject positions in a way that is humanistic. However, I believe that a more detailed consideration of trauma reveals less obvious limitations of this humanistic notion of cultural and racial subjectivity. As an orphaned boy in a London constructed as both Blakean and Dickensian, Gemmy suffers as a child worker in a saw mill; as a ratcatcher's boy he experiences an unsettling combination of affection and cruelty from his master Willet; as a kidnapped worker on a merchant ship he is systematically

abused by older boys. Gemmy's inability to form an adult identity is represented as an effect of trauma, manifested belatedly in dreams and invasive memories. The members of his tribe notice that "[t]he cries he uttered in his sleep, the terrors that assailed him, were proof that although he had the look of a man, he was not one, not yet" (Malouf *Remembering Babylon* 28). Throughout the narrative, Gemmy communicates best and feels most comfortable with children, and it is eleven-year-old Lachlan Beatty who deciphers Gemmy's muddled language and actions as he attempts to tell his story upon arriving at the settlement. Gemmy's failure to mature is consistently represented as an effect of childhood trauma.

Although these traumas are indisputably represented as profoundly damaging, within the world of the novel this cumulative trauma also has some important enabling effects: paradoxically, it is Gemmy's stasis that allows him to adapt when he joins an Indigenous tribe. Malouf shows the potentially enabling effect of trauma by representing Gemmy through a set of Romantic notions that combines the Lockean concept of the child as *tabula rasa* and the Rousseau concept of the noble savage (see Ashcroft). Gemmy is a blank slate on which, both despite and because of the traumas of the past, new identities can be developed.<sup>59</sup> In presenting Gemmy this way, Malouf posits a universal subject; this universality, in turn, allows transferences of culture and knowledge between individuals to occur.

The connection made between Gemmy's trauma as a white child, the acquisition of Indigenous identity, and the beginnings of an imagined state of autochthony for settlers is evident in the representation of Gemmy's relationships with the various members of the McIvor family. Ellen and Jock McIvor are transformed by their contact and communication with Gemmy. They perceive the evanescence and intricacies of the natural world in a way that is closely linked to Gemmy's own "Indigenised" perceptions. This is evident, Jock's new

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<sup>59</sup> We can also consider, for example, Gemmy's "white" and "blank" state when he is first discovered on the beach. The presentation of Gemmy as a *tabula rasa* occurs particularly through the textual relations that are established between his character and the creature from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

awareness of the interconnectedness of the life and energy of the natural world, represented in the metaphor of “threads” of silver water being drawn up into a bird’s beak, in a process similar to Gemmy’s perception of the land. Gemmy, his Indigenised existence renewed by a visit from his tribesmen, sees that they “spread the land out before him, gave him its waters to drink. As he took huge drafts of it, saw it light his flesh” (*Remembering Babylon* 118).

Moreover, the scenes in which Jock and Ellen notice the light-filled and iridescent natural world not only link these characters to Gemmy’s sensitivity to place, but also, and importantly, are related to the recollection of suffering. It is at least partly the McIvors’ hardships in the new world and the empathy created and sustained through these hardships that tie them to Gemmy and the type of re-visioning that their closeness to him brings.<sup>60</sup> The moment in the novel at which Jock and Ellen, together, witness the shimmering beauty of the landscape viewed from the edges of their farm is prefigured by their awareness of all that has been lost: their home in Scotland, the predictable patterns of the lives of their forebears and, also, their two infants who died a decade or so before (*Remembering Babylon* 108-12). These transcendent visions, the strengthening connection to place, and the intensification of feeling and experience, for the McIvors, is both sparked by and is balm for the lingering and painful traces of the past.

Gemmy, in different ways, transfers his insights to other settlers, affording them a transforming experience of self and place. Critics such as Randall see the character as enabling cross cultural negotiations and eventually “surpassing boundedness” in a type of liberal humanist pursuit of justice and cultural unity. However, this series of transfers between Gemmy, traumatic experience and Indigeneity seems to confer Indigenous knowledge and autochthonous status (even if only momentarily) on a settler subject. The

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<sup>60</sup> The character of Jock clearly recognises that it is Gemmy who has brought about these significant changes in his relationship to the rest of the community and the landscape he inhabits. He ponders, “Was he changed? He saw now that he must be ... When had it began? When they had agreed to take Gemmy in” (106).



various traumas of this early moment in contact history — Indigenous (through Gemmy) and settler — are aligned in a way that suggests that experiences of trauma and suffering are transferable and can be merged to strengthen the bonds between all who have suffered. As La Capra puts it, “When absence and loss are conflated ... particular historical losses may be obfuscated or rashly generalised ... as a consequence one encounters the dubious idea that everyone (including perpetrators) is a victim, that all history is trauma, or that we share a pathological public sphere or a “wound culture” (“Trauma, Absence, Loss” 712). The argument usefully highlights the problem in the representation of trauma in *Remembering Babylon*. While it is true that Malouf does not enter into a wholesale denial of settler culpability of colonial violence, in one of the key ambivalences of the novel, he conflates Gemmy’s and the Indigenous peoples’ experiences of trauma in a way that subtly partakes of that powerful victim culture that Curthoys and LaCapra describes.

Another key point at which this type of transference occurs is the episode in which Janet, eldest child of Ellen and Jock, visits a neighbour who keeps bees. On arriving at the hives that are being tended by the neighbour and Gemmy, Janet is covered by them. The bees have a complex symbolism. Gemmy has contributed to the building and breeding programming of these hives, and has fetched native bees from the bush that will eventually interbreed with the European bees. As such, Malouf uses the bees to represent the type of settler-Indigenous identity embodied by Gemmy himself — the Indigenised European who belongs, authentically and inseparably, to this new place. The experience is epiphanic for the pubescent Janet, a defining moment of initiation into the natural world: “Mrs Hutchence was only feet away. So was Gemmy. She could hear their voices calling through the din her body was making. But it made no difference now, the distance, three feet or a thousand years, no difference at all; or whether she was a girl (a woman), or a tree. She stood sleeping, upright, a

bride” (142). The moment itself is figured as a type of annunciation in which the bees are “armed angels” and “winged agents” of the divinity of the natural world.

Gemmy is central to this process, not only in his contribution to hybridising the bees but also through his mystical link to Janet’s consciousness. Janet has a dawning awareness of where she has seen herself “crusted black and bubbling” in bees “through Gemmy’s eyes” (144). Gemmy’s indigeneity, itself reliant on his experience of trauma, is transferred to Janet who, although she is never to develop an Indigenised identity in the same way as Gemmy, is permanently altered by the experience. In this way, Gemmy’s traumatised and subsequently Indigenised identity is transferred to Janet through an etherealised exchange. As La Capra notes, the shift from “loss” to “absence” often involves an etherealised discourse and a tendency to avoid problems raised by consideration of historical specificity (“Trauma, Absence, Loss”). The complex act of substitution of trauma depicted in *Remembering Babylon* creates a transcendent connection between settler, Indigenous culture and place in a way that seems to oversimplify the similarities and differences between Indigenous and settler experiences of trauma — the soteriological discourse through which these transferences are figured, in which settler belonging is assumed to be similar to a spiritual return to grace or a state of redemption, further removes the narrative from specific historical experience.

To take the notion of a rebirth into an Edenic — hence autochthonous — state back further in the chronological structure of the narrative, Gemmy’s own rebirth after the trauma of his early life is particularly telling. After Gemmy’s entry into settler life the narrative returns to a much earlier moment when he arrives on the shore, washed in soft, baptismal waves. The scene has marked similarities with Janet’s. After being thrown adrift from a merchant vessel, his vulnerable white, scarred and malnourished body is discovered by Indigenous women who drive off the tiny crabs, the “encrustation” that covers him and leaves

in “a cloud over the bubbling sand” (22-23). The women find him other-worldly, even holy, and fear committing “some impiety” by attempting to remove the sea creatures from his body as he, vulnerable and like Christ, returns from death. This process is later transferred to Janet: like the crabs that once covered Gemmy, the bubbling and seething bees peel off and bring a new or renewed identity. Gemmy’s “other life” — the experiences of trauma which are so clearly evident on his vulnerable physical form — has made him all the more receptive to a rebirth. This Rousseauan version of union with the natural world is beautiful and compelling: the “child” characters lead the way to a paradise regained. However, the Edenic trope itself, the aesthetic and ideological reliance on transcendence, arguably undermines those elements of the narrative which suggest that conflict and violence are historical, involving guilty parties, and support the assumption that the losses of colonisation are ahistorical and inevitable.

One of the dangers of conflating traumas, particularly settler and Indigenous trauma, is the tendency not only to erase the specificity of the initial trauma of contact, but also to allow readers to ignore the persistence of the trauma of colonisation. Trauma is relocated to a distant past. Even though by the end of the nineteenth century initial settler losses and hardships were being subsumed into heroic national myth, the suffering of Indigenous peoples *remains* acute and ongoing. But in universalising the traumas of settlement and colonisation, Malouf draws on what could be called late-twentieth-century, post-revisionist notions of Indigeneity that gained cultural visibility in the 1980s and 1990s. As Felicity Collins and Therese Davis note ( in *Australian Cinema after Mabo* ), a type of cultural “backtracking” has occurred as history has required reinterpretation in what was, for most non-Indigenous Australians, the light of newly available knowledge. Some of these reinterpretations were consolidated in responses to the *Bringing Them Home Report*, the recorded testimony of over 500 members of the Stolen Generations. These testimonies, as

John Frow puts it, have contributed to “opening up a new space of history” (366; see also Gail Jones “Speaking Shadows: Justice and the Poetic” 163).

The process of conflating absence and loss in *Remembering Babylon* invokes or reinforces the complex association that a modern Australian reader is likely to make between a perception of Indigenous experience prior to colonisation, the traumatic events of early colonisation, and the traumatising colonial practices of the twentieth century.<sup>61</sup> Indigeneity, in the contemporary Australian consciousness, in other words, is almost inevitably linked to trauma which is projected back to a distant past. In this way, Gemmy’s experiences of repeated trauma bring an air of authenticity to his expression of Indigenous identity, which he is then able (at least partially) to transmit to other settlers — both those who have experienced trauma, and those who have not. While the difficulties of many early colonial and settler Australians are undeniable, if we conflate them into a universalised conceptualisation of trauma and suffering which is commensurate with the violence of colonialism, and which causes the suffering of the present to be subsumed into or accounted for by a general narrative of absence, there is the very real risk of erasing the specificity of a trauma. The effects of this are undoubtedly more deeply embedded in Indigenous experience, and indeed the contemporary presence of Indigenous peoples in the modern Australian polity.

As La Capra notes, a recognition of historical specificity is important for “working through” (“Trauma, Absence, Loss” 712), or for dealing with the past in a way that does not allow for definitive closure or forgetting, but empowers those who continue to suffer from the negative effects of trauma to deal with their experiences. By way of contrast, narratives which relocate trauma to a mythic past allow for no process of healing or transformation. In La Capra’s view, absence — generalised, foundational or etherealised trauma — cannot be

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<sup>61</sup> This includes various government-sanctioned racist and eugenicist practices like the relocation of Aboriginal peoples away from their traditional country onto reserves, and the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families.

worked through in any real or meaningful sense. To subsume loss into absence in an Australian context therefore denies the most clearly traumatised groups and individuals the opportunity of working through, and relieves white Australian society of the obligation to make any form of reparation or compensation. As La Capra puts it, “the conflation of absence and loss ... facilitate[s] the appropriation of particular traumas by those who did not experience them, typically in a movement of identity formation that makes invidious and ideological use of traumatic series of events in foundational ways as symbolic capital” (“Trauma, Absence, Loss” 712).

Malouf’s novel is symptomatic of a particular strain of liberal humanism that has a long history within Australia.<sup>62</sup> He is one of a number of writers and public intellectuals to have espoused this particular valorisation of a type of imaginative understanding of difference through a version of empathy. Malouf believes that one can imaginatively enter the position of the Other — either the racial Other or the type of Otherness of those who lived at different historical and cultural moments than those of the present time — and understand their desires and motivations.<sup>63</sup> The ethical imperative that seems to follow is that because of this shared humanity, previous and existing injustices must be redressed. It is important to acknowledge that this type of approach brought about very real changes in the rights and legal power of many Indigenous Australians in the first half of the 1990s. However, the limitations of this approach have also been noted by a range of commentators. Mark Davis, a longstanding and sometimes aggressive critic of adherents of the liberal tradition, has argued that Australian liberalism provides only a “soft oppositionality” and “enact[s] a logic of whiteness as they aspire to righteous anti-racism” (19). Many similar comments have come

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<sup>62</sup> For a useful and detailed discussion of this, see Gregory Melliush’s *Cultural Liberalism in Australia*.

<sup>63</sup> This debate was reopened with Inga Clendinnen’s response to Kate Grenville’s historical novel, *The Secret River*, in the publication *Quarterly Essay*. Grenville responded in a subsequent issue.

from the ranks of left-wing intelligentsia. In 2006, Dipesh Chakrabarty (in conversation with Bain Attwood) called such developments a “crisis in liberalism”, as Aboriginal activism and claims for self-determination were increasingly and publicly posing problems for the Australian liberal tradition. Chakrabarty himself has called for the increased recognition of permanent difference (205). Similar observations were made by Henry Reynolds when he observed that the recognition of difference absent from most current liberal discourse is the only way for an effective human rights agenda to be established (“Destination Past” 112).

It is worth noting here that liberalism is often misrepresented in academic circles where, within the literary academy, radical politics is often privileged over liberalism. Amanda Anderson has observed that liberalism is not the naively optimistic and narrowly focused grouping that it is often represented to be: it is, in fact, diverse and varied. She challenges the understanding that liberalism is enamoured with “harmonious diversity” in opposition to the “formally and conceptually challenging modes associated with radicalism” (249). Liberalism, she claims, like some versions of radical post structuralism, is devoted to exploring the complexities of the examined life, of which the nineteenth-century realist novel is an exemplar. Like Malouf’s nineteenth-century realist precursors, the protagonists of *Remembering Babylon* undergo a process of hardship and self-examination that marks them as more critical, more self- and socially aware than their fellow settlers. When Jock McIvor, for instance, hears from his neighbour that Gemmy has received a visit from the “Myalls”, who delivered what the frightened settlers perceive as some kind of magical stone, Jock’s response reflects a very liberal understanding. He believes that the settlers should not be irrationally afraid of either stones or the harmless Gemmy. He begins to see the fear and capacity for violence of their community and knows he is separate from it and perceives “the knowledge there was a place out there where the self may stand alone” (107). As in Malouf’s narrative, the liberal self still has much to recommend and redeem it: empathy can spark self-

and social critique. The most productive conclusion to draw in response to the “crisis of liberalism” is to see the commonalities of the opposing sides of this discourse, such as the way that taking responsibility for self and community (from local to national) can bring about “progressive” social change, and that one must be prepared to reassess their beliefs in response to valid criticism. Recently, Mark Davis has also observed the ways in which the various Australian manifestations of liberalism have begun to develop; that a type of positive cultural reworking, epitomised for Davis in the work of Robert Manne, is beginning to emerge (20). It seems that what is required here is not a wholesale rejection of empathetic understanding, but a kind of “middle-ground”, a revisioning of empathy wherein imaginative links can be made both to those who are culturally different and to those who lived in the past.

The type of empathy that results in cultural appropriation or usurpation can be avoided by non-Indigenous people participating in a more ethically sustainable engagement, which La Capra terms “empathetic unsettlement”. This category, applied to an Australian context by Gail Jones in an important article, “Sorry-in-the-Sky: Empathetic Unsettlement, Mourning and the Stolen Generation”, demonstrates the possibility of avoiding the type of liberal empathy that conflates loss and absence and denies historical specificity. “Unsettled empathy” is a position in which the secondary witness — the subject exposed to traumatic events through reported or historical sources — is profoundly affected by the experience, but is careful not to claim for themselves primary witness or victim status (La Capra “Trauma, Absence, Loss” 722-23). The subject also resists the urge to bring about a sense of closure through recourse to ideas of absence or to discourses of sacrifice and salvation, but accepts the need to remain in a state of unsettlement. This experience is similar to a sense of haunting, where the memories and knowledge of traumatised Others recur in an insistent and compelling way. While the trope of haunting, as Jones notes, has perhaps been overused by

poststructuralist and trauma theorists in recent decades (“Sorry-in-the-Sky” 160-61), the concept is still extremely useful in figuring the type of insistently troubled psychological state that should be retained by individuals and groups who wish to respond ethically and politically to the vexed issues of past and present trauma, justice and reparation.

*Remembering Babylon*, despite its troubling connotations, does go some way towards recognising unsettlement as a necessary state, and to a degree prefigures the energetic cultural reworkings of liberal humanism that have emerged in the past decade. In this sense, the novel expresses the type of inward struggles that have typified various ambivalent manifestations of liberal humanism. On the one hand, this struggle is characterised by the real need to resist the seduction of reconciled closure; on the other, the humanistic and aesthetic urge towards unity runs the risk of becoming totality. In the closing moments of *Remembering Babylon*, for example, the character of Lachlan Beatty is metaphorically haunted by the figure of Gemmy, for whom he searches in the years following his disappearance but whose story he never conclusively resolves. Lachlan, even in later years, continues to:

have dreams in which he would stand trying ... to see the look on Gemmy’s face, and once or twice, in his dream, he walked back through the white dust, which rose in ghostly spirals around him, and went right up to where he was standing, and looked into his face. But it remained as blurred as it had been from sixty yards off, and he woke with his cheeks wet, even after so long, though he was no longer a child. (164-65)

In this moment the novel avoids the conflation of different traumas by insisting on permanent unsettlement. Lachlan, as secondary witness, is profoundly affected by his experience with Gemmy in a way that bears some similarity to traumatic memory but does not assume victim status.



Yet the novel does not end here. In the final moments of the narrative Janet (now Sister Monica) and Lachlan meet, fifty or so years on from the early narrative, in the convent that is Janet's home. Lachlan cuts a wedge from an apple in a gesture that connects with his grandson who was killed in the war. The apple is a symbol of Lachlan's profound loss and grief, and also of the shared grief of the fallen world — the knowledge that both Lachlan and Janet wordlessly share is the bittersweet experiences of loss and grief that occur throughout in a long life. Talk of Lachlan's grandson leads to talk of their shared love of Gemmy and their sadness since his disappearance. The scene is characterised by these types of connections — the commonalities of human experience. It suggests that if more individuals engaged in the liberal humanist version of love advocated here — something that binds Lachlan and Janet and that has inspired them to live good, just lives — then a unity of community, of humanity and nature, of unproblematic belonging, could be regained. This belief is rendered through the much discussed Romantic image of the final passage.<sup>64</sup> Here, a Coleridgean aesthetic which reconciles oppositions again reconnects that which was lost with the soteriological drive of ultimate reunification: “as we approach prayer, as we approach knowledge, as we approach each other” (200). This closing vision of Romantic unity takes away a necessary focus from the material realities of history and the recognition of secondary witness status.<sup>65</sup> This suggests that absence, or the lack of national or cultural unity, is part of the inevitable, universal human condition that is “cured” through gradual, organic movement towards metaphysical redemption.

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<sup>64</sup> Both Peter Otto and, more recently, Andrew McCann have discussed what they perceive as the implicit colonialism conveyed by the Romantic aesthetic of the novel. In Chapter Three I discuss the limitations of McCann's argument in relationship to *Benang*; however, I believe that, fundamentally, that it remains valid for *Remembering Babylon*.

<sup>65</sup> As Andrew Taylor has noted, this figure of ultimate unification, often in closing moments of the narrative or as characters approach death, is characteristic of Malouf's writings and occurs in a number of his novels. In particular, the closing moments of *An Imaginary Life* (1978) and the immersion in water of Carney in *The Conversations at Curlew Creek* (1997) are similar to this final passage of *Remembering Babylon*.

*Remembering Babylon* and a number of other historical novels written since Australia's bicentenary year are clearly critical of the more obvious forms of cultural appropriation. They make a number of important analytical points about the shortcomings of settler culture, and the overt and covert forms of racism that have marked white culture since the earliest moments of colonisation. Often wearing their left-leaning liberalist tendencies on their sleeve, they continue to negotiate this past in a way that accepts that social and ideological change will come about slowly and through shared understandings and empathy. Yet the need for continued critique of this powerful cultural discourse is made clear by a text like *Remembering Babylon*, in which the conflation of absence with loss, and the erasure of historical and cultural specificity, taken together reveal the limitations of humanist universals. In this way, a belief in essential human connectedness can undermine the type of social progress that relies on the recognition of difference. Replacing the model of liberal humanist empathy with something like La Capra's concept of unsettled empathy means we can do justice to both the nation's past and the existence of cultural diversity. Empathy must necessarily be unsettled, resisting the seductive closure of an all-too-easy mode of understanding and cross-cultural identification that remain embedded in some forms of realist historical novels. Ethical revisionings of the historical novel need to engage in a self-conscious way with the limits of the relationship between history and empathy and, in doing so, push beyond the traditional boundaries of realism, recognising the separateness and specificity of human existence.

### Chapter Three

#### The heart-land: History, possibility and the Romantic poetic in Kim Scott's *Benang*

There's a Noongar word for island — kurt-budjar — which roughly translates as “heart-land.” (416)

A type of paralysis accompanies the attempt to tell some stories. This can be to do with the shame or the pain of telling. It can also involve the difficulty of finding a voice with which to speak (or write) the stories of the past in a respectful, sensitive and culturally appropriate manner.<sup>66</sup> One of the Indigenous writer Kim Scott's strategies in his novel *Benang* (*Benang*), in representing the relationship between culture, place and history, is to articulate these difficulties through the narrator Harley, a light-skinned man of Indigenous descent. In one memorable episode of magic realism which comes after he learns of his Indigenous identity, Harley floats above the house in which he lives. From this vantage point he becomes, at various stages, emotionally numb, meditative, playful and insightful, and then eventually and slowly descends back to the earth in anticipation of resuming a functioning subjectivity. Yet, at the first moment of his ascent he is panicked, afraid and profoundly inarticulate:

Desperately I try to get some words flowing through my head. Fuck fuck fuck  
fuck fuck I gotta I gotta gotta I must must must I will will will oh will will Uncle  
Will what he had said and my father and what I had guessed, remembered  
imagined. (149)

Harley's desperate efforts to narrate this particular moment of his life represent the distress that accompanies being unable to tell one's story — the consequence of learning his racial identity. That his grandmother and other important kin were Noongar people (the traditional

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<sup>66</sup> *Benang* differs from most of the other novels in this study in that the central narrative is set in the present time, although much of the narrative involves telling the stories of past generations.

owners/custodians of a large region of South West Australia) was a fact that had always been hidden from him. Harley's attempt to narrate his response is thus also a search for identity. It is about the effects of being deliberately and strategically dispossessed of family and culture, and having them replaced with another that many Indigenous people find impoverished and inauthentic. It is also about attempting to find out where one belongs; where, how and with whom one can live with a sense of purpose and hope.

Kim Scott has often spoken publically about his own "in-between race" status. Like Harley, Scott grew up with no access to either Noongar language or traditional modes of storytelling. This is a common enough story in Australia's South-West, where eugenicist policies of child-removal, legislated by state governments, shaped and defined Noongar lives for at least the first half of the twentieth century (Haebich). While neither Scott nor Harley is a member of the Stolen Generations, their existence has been shaped by the influence of eugenics. Both were raised "white" and "privileged" because of the lightness of their skin. Living apart from traditional family groups, individuals such as Scott and Harley have little or no access to traditional stories and songs, including narratives of place and tribal origins and other more individual stories, sometimes orally transmitted, of the lives of their people, including experiences of more recent times. These are sometimes the types of "telling" that are called "yarning"; tales told around a campfire. *Benang* can thus be read as an exploration of the inseparable relationship between fundamental questions of racial and cultural identity and the most politically effective and appropriate way of articulating this identity. This process in itself helps to address fraught and complex questions, such as: what right do "mixed-race" individuals have to claim Indigenous identity or to tell Indigenous stories? Is being "Noongar" a matter of being raised in the culture? What does someone do who, as a result of cultural dispossession, has far greater mastery of the "coloniser's language" and forms of "telling" than the language and narrative forms in which Noongar stories are more

traditionally rendered? Can they tell their story in a way that is insightful and culturally appropriate? Harley's mediation of his own stories, as well as those of his forebears, is variously angry, frustrated, confused, despairing, elegiac, contrite and meditative, and it unfolds through a reflexive search for his origins and a functional, purposeful selfhood. There is also an implied recognition that the act of telling is itself one of the most powerful forms of resistance to the oppression of the colonising culture.

Accordingly, *Benang* suggests that finding the most appropriate aesthetic form, whether it is singing or writing, can also be a way of recovering Indigenous culture and, in turn, the self-worth often attained through a sense of family and belonging. The novel suggests that for many Indigenous people these things are a precondition of life itself. The "truth" of events for Harley, and for Scott himself, can only be presented through complex formal and linguistic negotiations and combinations. This intricate process of adaptation also implies the recognition that traditional Western modes of narration are inadequate for the types of "Indigenous" stories Scott wishes to tell. Like the women around the campfires "yarning", Scott's storytelling process is one of intellectual resourcefulness and adaptation in response to cultural erasure and dispossession. It also expresses an energy of communication and artistic creation that has sustained Noongar culture and people through the hardships of colonisation. He comments that the campfire stories of the women in particular:

provide, I think, inspiration...Looking only backwards won't work when Noongar society today has such a high proportion of young people, all of whom need to be reaching with confidence and enthusiasm beyond what they know. (*Kayang* 258)

To provide cultural narratives of Indigenous resilience and self-worth in the context of Indigenous and non-Indigenous interactions in Western Australia in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is vital, particularly as youth suicide is darkly prevalent throughout Noongar

culture. As Harley's Uncle Will comments, the colonising culture has many ways to make Noongars "hate 'emselves".<sup>67</sup> Scott's novel, like the stories of the Noongar women, also uncovers "hidden" post-colonisation histories, as well as preserving traditional cultural narratives that could so easily be lost.

The dense narrative web of stories in *Benang* also articulates the interrelatedness of form and language. The overarching narrative within the accumulation of stories in *Benang* is Harley's contemporary first person account of his own illness resulting from a serious car accident in which his father was killed, and the effects of his physical "recovery", combined with the traumatic discovery of his grandfather's meticulously kept records of his eugenicist exploits.<sup>68</sup> Harley's gradual and incomplete process of healing and cultural reconnection then involves the growing intimacy of his relationship with his Noongar uncles. Some of the stories are Harley's, some are the uncles' own stories or stories they have heard from other family members; and some Harley can recollect through a kind mystic, inherited memory. It is from here that the various contrasting modes within the narrative are generated. Harley's own personal story is conveyed through a mode that is highly intimate and personal in the openness of his confusion and pain, but the text also includes what appear as highly impersonal and bureaucratic but nevertheless telling documents. Such documents include the letters of the Chief Protector of Aborigines A.O. Neville and extracts from the archives; fragments of "local" histories that boast knowledge of "the first white man born", as the colony expanded along the coast and inland from the earliest points of European settlement in the Swan River Colony and Albany. As the various modulations of the narrative unfold, so do specific modulations of language. Harley cannot speak Noongar but he can adapt the language he knows into a mode of expression sympathetic to the aspects of culture and place

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<sup>67</sup> See Yeoman's article "Noongar stories enhance heritage" for a brief discussion of youth suicide amongst Noongars.

<sup>68</sup> Ern has married a Noongar woman with the intent of "breeding" away the characteristics of their race. Harley finds photographs, files and charts that record this process.

he wishes to communicate. A distinctly Romantic poetic thus emerges in the text as a privileged linguistic mode, used to convey the most emotionally and existentially enriching aspect of Harley's eventual reconnection with his Noongar family, culture and place.

Scott's description of himself as "one amongst those to call himself Noongar,"<sup>69</sup> rather than simply "Noongar", gives a clue to the vexed nature of his race identity and the race politics amongst Noongar people. Recognising that the formal education and advanced level of literacy which enabled him to tell important stories comes partly from his status as "successfully" assimilated — light-skinned, educated and integrated, he also struggles with the understanding that while the oppressive legacy of deracination policies shaped his identity, he has not suffered the kind of desperate marginalisation experienced by many others, including the many individuals on whom his fictional characters are based. He explains that for these reasons, some from within the Noongar community do not accept him. He is, however, welcomed by others, especially when he can explain the links of kinship he shares with them. These people insist he must tell their stories in his "wajela,"<sup>70</sup> language, making them more widely accessible to other Noongar people and non-Indigenous Australians who need to become more informed about the culture that preceded them. As long as he can tell it "from the heart" by connecting emotionally to the people and their history, writing with affection and respect.

Scott does not retreat from the complexity of contemporary Indigenous identity politics. For him, to be Noongar is less an essentialised "race" category than a political and cultural choice. When he reconnected with his Noongar heritage, the choice was put to him thus: "You can't be bit and bit. What are you, Noongar or wadjela?" (*Kayang* 14). Even though many who identify as Noongar are of mixed descent, to choose "Noongar" even when

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<sup>69</sup> This biographical information is on the inside cover of *Benang*.

<sup>70</sup> "Wadjela" is the Noongar name for the newly arrived Europeans. *Wadjela* means spirit. When the Europeans arrived on their ships, the Noongar people thought they were the spirits of their ancestors.

an individual may pass as “white” is an important political act.<sup>71</sup> The choice is an act of resistance and a recognition of one’s ancestors and family, of history, particularly of a legacy of suffering and cultural resilience. The notion of choice in racial identity politics, as Scott describes it, is a matter of privileging one aspect of one’s heritage, culture or identity over another, for a variety of purposes. For instance, to recognise past/present injustices; to honour a particular culture or a legacy of suffering; because one feels a greater sense of purpose or worth aligned with one aspect of one’s identity rather than another. When one describes racial identity as simplistically, unproblematically *hybrid*, a number of problems thus present themselves. When used in an unexamined way, the term “hybrid” implies a simple combining of two dissimilar genetic “parent” species. If we apply this to the writing of a text such as *Benang*, the concept fails to account for its complexity of representation, modes of telling and sophisticated aesthetic and poetic shifts in tone. In short, proposing a stylistic and formal definition of “hybrid” is both problematic in its conceptual similarity to the scientific categorisation of eugenics and in its oversimplification of a modulating, subtle stylistic and aesthetic mode. If we take Homi Bhabha’s explanation of hybridity in *Nation and Narration* as an influential example, it is conceived with the situation of racial diaspora in mind, where living in a “mixed” culture is more to do with temporality (the present time) than history, and in which individuals tend to be hybrid in an articulation of cultural difference and identification such as gender, race or class, in a way that de-emphasises hierarchical binaries (294). In Bhabha’s model of non-hierarchical hybridity, there is little accommodation for the subtle and shifting prioritising of modes that unfold within the narrative of *Benang*.

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<sup>71</sup> One of the implications of this discussion is that dark-skinned Noongars have a different set of choices, or perhaps no choice but to be identified as Noongar, and therefore have more obvious personal histories of oppression. For this reason, as Scott has discussed in *Kayang and Me*, they may be resentful of light-skinned descendants, not believing them to have the same understanding of suffering and marginalisation.



While Scott does not represent different race identities as reductively opposed, the situation of Noongar people, and of Scott personally, calls for the privileging of some aspects of their culture over the “bleaching” effects of the European culture in which they still participate, sometimes willingly and sometimes not. Similarly, various modes within the narrative are privileged over others, with careful choices made in the way each tale is told and in what order. Scott’s blending of style and form within the novel is clearly connected to the ongoing racial/cultural complexity that characterises Noongar experience as it necessarily operates within white culture, often forming intimate and meaningful relationships with white people but at the risk of losing traditional connection to people and place. As some elements of Noongar culture are strategically privileged, so too are particular expressive modes within the novel.

These intricacies of construction in *Benang* call for more critical attention than they have so far received. Hilary Emmett has begun this process in her perceptive discussion of *Benang* as an example of Deleuze and Guattari’s minority literature, which they argue can work to deterritorialise a dominant culture’s hold over minorities. Emmett claims that what she calls the “miscegenation” of genres alone cannot achieve this; rather, a text must produce an “intricate narrative origami” (180) — represented by the notion of the rhizome, where the root system of a plant is planar and has the ability to adapt to and join other species, rather than the more vertical structure of a tree root — in order to disrupt ideas of hierarchical political power of racial and national sovereignty. The novel is thus not simply an amalgamation of tales but is shaped by a meticulously constructed patterning of scenes and modes that invites contrast and comparison.

This chapter embarks firstly on a further investigation of textual hybridity in Scott’s novel. It extends Emmet’s thesis in order to claim that it is not only the complexity of interwoven narrative/stylist/aesthetic/formal elements of the novel but also, within this

“web”, the prioritising of particular formal and linguistic modes, that give the most politically useful insights into Scott’s artistic and political negotiations. Secondly, among the various modes within the novel, the privileging of the Romantic poetic expresses Scott’s hope for cultural retrieval and recovery; in particular, the novel connects to an early Romantic conceptualisation of *genius loci*, or the spirit of place. These moments are vital within the text because of the ways in which the dominant culture makes any vision of a positive Noongar future so difficult. Importantly, Romanticism has been perceived as problematic in Australian literature especially, because of its connection to non-Indigenous ideas of autochthony. Here I argue that there is room for particular types of Romantic negotiations of identity and space in Australian literature. Thirdly, a text such as *Benang* demonstrates the possibilities attached to re-engaging the aesthetic mode. The complex interaction between emotion, sensory perception and artistic representation, as theorists such as Isobel Anderson assert, is an important space for dealing with the damages of modernity and invoking politicised responses to them (*Radical Aesthetic* 5).

Any discussion of “hybridity” in *Benang* must take into account the power of the pseudo-scientific eugenicist discourse in the twentieth century in an Australian and specifically Western Australian context. As depicted in detail in *Benang*, many Indigenous individuals, particularly children, were categorised, separated and placed into welfare institutions according to the proportion of “white blood” and “coloured blood”; and the psychological and social damage of the eugenicist practices of the State and Federal governments continues until this day. The Chief Protector of Aborigines of Western Australia, A.O. Neville, explains in his publication *Australia’s Coloured Minorities* the importance of identifying and then separating the categories “half-caste”, “quadroon”, and

“octoroon” if one was to “breed out the colour”.<sup>72</sup> Thus it is hardly surprising that dealing with ideas of hybridity can be problematic. Western Australia was not only legally and politically geared toward assimilation but genocidally intent on “absorbing” Indigenous groups into the white population through policies that encouraged marriages between white men and Indigenous women for more than half of the twentieth century. One successful mode of resistance to this virulent form of deracination was the recording of stories through Kim Scott’s work, stories which suggest that the ultimate failure of this policy was due to the Noongar cultural capacity to creatively adapt to change and adversity, particularly through the preservation of culture by women. Although Noongar women like Fanny Benang (Harley’s great grandmother) married outside their culture, they raised their children in the traditions of their people. The act of adaptation in itself is a vitally Noongar cultural characteristic and is by no means incompatible with cultural integrity or authenticity. While these adapted and improvised ways of telling are ostensibly “hybrid”, they do justice to the complexity of the mode and the historical/cultural context from which they emerged.

Emmett’s essay on rhizomatic kinship in *Benang* provides important insights through her discussion of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of minority literatures and their claims that language and history can be deterritorialized by constructing a minor literature within a major language: thus, majority language can be used to disrupt both static, State-sanctified history and the [realist] novelistic form. Emmett claims that it is not the miscegenation of genres alone that makes a minority literature; the work must also be intrinsically *rhizomatic*, disrupting the linearity of narrative form and the continuity of character. Like the rhizomatic root structure that can be broken at any place and regrow from a fragment, often joining to other root systems, *Benang* inscribes a pattern of political and ideological resistance and cultural regeneration through a literature that, through its non-linearity and complex narrative

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<sup>72</sup> Haebich (195-96) explains the processes of “breeding out the colour”, a term used by Protectors and the eugenicist discourse of the time in various State and Territory jurisdictions.

patterning, subverts the assumptions of traditional histories. Emmet's conclusions can be extended further to account for the formal, aesthetic and political strategies of the novel, particularly the way in which some modes are allocated a type of aesthetic and moral priority. The intermittent emergence of a distinct Romantic mode during the narrative demonstrates the process that Scott articulates above. The traditional European poetic is annexed and adapted to suit the aesthetic and political purpose of the novel. Scott has stated that he seeks to:

devise an expression of spirituality from within ourselves, with whatever means at our disposal and arising from our histories. Personally, I don't think that anything need be rejected simply because it came from non-Indigenous sources.  
(*Kayang* 258)

What gives a text the ability to express the adaptive quality of the rhizome is the complex interactions between parts. Such interactions reject the fixed belief that particular cultural modes are "owned" by particular groups, but always considers instead how different modes are best combined and altered to meet a specific political need: whether it is to communicate past hardships to an ignorant outside world, or to reconnect traditional culture from a point in history where traditional expressive modes have been lost.

A pattern of shifting between moments of an intense Romantic lyrical poetic of place and starkly realist depictions of violence and bleak realities is an important and extensively used formal device characteristic of Scott's rhizomatic construction. His use of the Romantic poetic is usefully described by Chris Baldick's account of early English Romanticism as engaged in an expression of "sincerity, spontaneity and originality", centred on "creative imagination [...], and which replaces the 'mechanical' rules of conventional form with the 'organic' principle of natural growth action"(260). It is also impossible not to notice the very

Romantic connection between a poetic of place and Harley's ascent and initiation into the natural world. Scott describes this new visual perspective and its insights thus:

I rose and fell on the currents of air like a balloon, like a wind-borne seed. The horizon moved away so that the islands no longer rested on its line, but stood within the sea, and it seemed that the pulsing white at the island's tip was not a mere transformation induced by collision, but was a blossoming and wilting at some fissure where sea met land. (164)

Episodes such as these, in which individuals receive insight through a transforming experience with the natural world, emphasise the primacy of connection to place and, in another Romantic gesture, the need for poeticism — where language evokes response through sound, suggestion and complex associations — as the correct language of *genius loci*. As Geoffrey Hartman has astutely described it, the *genius loci* is the specific gravity of place combined with the inward poetic. He explains that the Romantics sought to preserve *genius loci* in a context of the rational abstractions of modernity. In keeping with this tradition, this passage evokes the beginning of Harley's new way of seeing not only the natural world but his place within it, represented in his view of the island, seemingly isolated on the horizon, rising into the emptiness of sky, to a vision of it surrounded by the endless contact of the ocean. The island, while still distant, is alive and in endless interaction with that to which it connects. Similarly, Harley has begun to see the benefit of connecting to his culture and place: the fulfilling, invigorating possibilities this entails.

Scott has explained how much of the densely sensorial poeticism of *Benang* is inspired by the richly onomatopoeic Noongar language, in which the language of place is so directly related to the sounds of specific locations (“Covered Up”). *Benang's* poetic is similar to early expressions of Romanticism in which, as Hartman notes, poetry held a privileged position, similar to the sense of place and authenticity represented by the native vernacular or

“mother tongue”. In the episodes in which Harley floats in the sky, the ideas and emotions evoked through consonantal words and a steady, gentle rhythm evoke not only the beauty but also the reassurance of a natural and cultural continuity, and which contrast markedly with Harley’s recent anguish. This is evident in the description of the incoming surf as “blossoming and wilting at some fissure where sea met land” (164), and his perception of some distant cultural memory in “the call of quails in the dune grasses, and the call of curlews crying from moonlit chalky paths” (165). After many such visions Harley slowly leaves the hazardous period of his youth where, floating on wind, he drifts uncontrollably in reckless enjoyment, risking annihilation.

Increasingly, the Romantic poetic becomes the language of Harley’s cultural reconnection as he visits the important cultural spaces of Dubitj Creek and Dolphin Cove, returning to the campfire sights of his forebears. In such locations Harley no longer experiences a sense of isolation; rather, there is always an evocation of community and ancestors in the shape of the land and sea. Harley describes a significant place as a:

small granite headland which the sea wraps around [and where] the banksia trees grow thickly on its slope. Fresh water seeps slowly from the granite, the south-west wind is kept away, and the banksia cones are like little heads looking out from between the serrated leaves. (454)

Harley’s description of the natural world illustrates his newfound appreciation for its power, beauty and vastness, and the interconnectedness of all of its elements. It is also significant that the dramatic scenes of cliffs and coast in earlier scenes give way to scenes in which a closer connection between Harley and the place is evoked. This sense of intimacy with the healing capacities of nature is expressed through the use of figurative language through which the narrator makes unusual connections — itself an expression of “seeing anew”. This is evident in the metaphor of the sea that “wraps” around a headland, for example, and in the personified

banksia cones described as being like “little heads” — all of the Noongar lives lived out in this place — that see out from their hardy shelter of “serrated” leaves. The “fresh water that seeps slowly” not only mimics the sound of water slowly trickling, employing the musical properties of language to enact nature’s power; it also symbolises the freshness of renewal. Further, such descriptions function as projections of Harley’s interior life. The use of the pathetic fallacy, through which the outer landscape symbolises the inner “landscape”, enacts Harley’s newly won sense of psychic renewal and emotional and cultural connection to his land. This connection is reinforced by the fact that Harley’s children, only recently discovered, accompany him. In this way, the novel suggests that such renewal may be enduring.

These moments of poeticism also signal Harley’s potential within his community. His role is now something like the Romantic poetic/visionary; the unworldliness of the “djanak/djangha” marks his ability to both write and sing the stories of culture, place and history in this way. It is also important to note that texts like *Benang*, in which a transcendent authenticity and the regenerative power of Noongar culture receive expression through a type of Romantic “ascent”, warrant comparison with Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s seminal notions of imaginative and poetic insight as operating at a “higher” level of reality.<sup>73</sup> Here Harley’s insights are focused by a sensory and emotional response to the natural world through which he sees himself reflected and affirmed by this specific place, at once his long time “home” but seen anew in the transporting qualities of its natural surrounds. He reflects, thinking back on his early visions about the changes about to occur:

It was indeed a very long long time after this — but it may have begun here — that

I realised that I had come back from the dead, was one of those few. I may well be

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73 McGann discusses this in response to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802. It is especially evident in Coleridge’s famous concept of the “One Life”, whereby poetic experience is seen to necessarily involve an encounter with the essential and non-contingent in human nature (McGann 69-70).

djanak, or djangha — so much so that I stumble at the correct dialect, let alone how I should spell it — but even then I had not forgotten completely who I am. I floated among the clouds, even with a bleached skin and addled memory I never-the-less saw the imprint of the wind upon the turquoise ocean. I remembered the call of quails in the dune grasses, and the call of curlews crying from moonlit chalky paths, and the footprint such a bird would leave. (164-5)

Again, the evocation of an in-between space — the space between life and death, the forgotten and remembered, the sea and the shore - is a place of transformative possibility. Harley, who perceives his insight as somehow different, even “djanak, or djangha” (ghost, spirit or devil), experiences this floating on the wind as simultaneously unsettling and enriching. In terms of his individual process of reconnecting with his culture, he absorbs its utterly regenerative capacity and, eventually, after a number of such experiences, is able to face the complexities of “grounded” life. His very “in-betweenness” — this Noongar with “bleached skin” — marks his potential for such visioning and re-visioning, but it does not mean it is fundamentally not a “Noongar” vision or insight. The capacity to survive an experience of “whiteness” and return to more traditional Indigenous visions and ways of existing is of itself deeply “Noongar”. The entry into this primordial space of his Indigenous forebears is signalled through the appearance of the curlew, the bird-symbol of the Wirlomen Noongar people, as it walks down a chalky path, leaving footprints to be followed by descendants with the ability to see a future using knowledge and intuition belonging to a traditional life which has, ostensibly, passed.

Within the rhizomatic operation of *Benang* Scott continually uses an interplay between the harshly realistic and a poetics of place to suggest the healing potential of the natural world to reinvigorate Noongar culture in the knowledge of past abuses and constant despair: it is a space of hope. The bleakness of Indigenous experience is made clear, for



example, in Harley's narration of the events before the death of Ern's first wife Kathleen. The disturbing nature of Kathleen's experiences is conveyed through the use of an intimate second person point of view, the horror intensified through its emotionally flat tone.

Kathleen, who has lived as a white woman, is now cast out to the "Black's Camp" where she is ridiculed for her "white woman" ways. Falling into dysfunction, self-blame and self-loathing, she goes to collect water in the town after curfew and is raped by police, just as she had been as a girl.

It was a long mad walk.

So mad, in fact so mad that when you felt a hand on your shoulder...you might think that, well, you had it coming. It was your own fault. The man wore a uniform like Sergeant Hall<sup>74</sup> had, and even if he looked like Sergeant Hall, this man leading you into a cell, unbuckling his belt. Well, maybe that was the way that things had to be for us, the same thing happening over and over again. (141)

By contrast, the scene which follows represents the emotionally and psychically healing potential of the natural world, expressed through a Romantic poetics of place. Here, Harley and his uncles visit a secluded part of the bush they call Harriet's place. Harriet, also Kathleen's mother, is represented as a reassuring maternal figure throughout the story, and provides physical and emotional support to those she loves. She kills rabbits to feed her family during the Depression. She cares for children in need. Harley's describes her place thus:

Within the dunes the scent of salt and the only peppermint leaves of our country, there you can sleep. You hear the many heartbeats among the rippling grasses, the many whispered voices, and your own is somewhere among them. (142)

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<sup>74</sup> Kathleen had lived with Sergeant Hall and his wife as a "domestic" since she was a girl. Sergeant Hall had repeatedly raped her and she was pregnant with his child when she married Ern.

Through the use of resonant imagery and the soft vowels and consonants in “rippling grass” and “many remembered voices”, Harley evokes the place where the telling of such stories of despair happens, yet where the place itself gives the men the reassurance of their ancestors to continue delving into the pain of the past. They then have the strength to continue their journey the next day, when they tell of other events and teach Harley of other places, in a powerful process of cultural reconnection. This pattern occurs throughout the novel; for example, the description of the event in which Sandy One and Fanny approach travellers on the road and where the Noongar women hide for fear of being raped is followed by the depiction of the warmth of the fine, soft sand next to a secluded lagoon where Will is born, the sand easing the pain of labour. Another such juxtaposition of scenes is the one which describes the brutality Sandy Two<sup>75</sup> witnesses as a boy, where a Noongar man’s head is crushed by the wheel of a cart driven by a wealthy white pastoralist, and the description of the view of the coast from Ern’s house:

The sea like the fire formed and reformed and out by the island — even at night  
— there was blossoming... Like ectoplasm, like breathing.

Here.

Here.

Here. (191)

These are moments of profound regeneration centred in particular physical spaces, early and mystical or super-natural (like the “blossoming” of “ectoplasm”) in their ability to sustain the individuals of a decimated culture through the strength of connection to place. The vertical typography of “here” emphasises the new depths of Harley’s connection as the reader’s eye follows the repetition of the word down the page. His description encourages both a sensorial

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<sup>75</sup> Sandy Two is Sandy One’s son.

and emotional response in the reader and thus allows them vicariously to experience the intensity of Harley's re-connection to the natural world.

The use of the Romantic poetic in *Benang* also demonstrates the political potential of the recently neglected category of the aesthetic — that important nexus between sensory perception, emotion, language and art. Language that works in this realm is necessarily creative and poetic, working through implication rather than any easy correlation between “signifier” and “signified.” As Wittgenstein explores, the aesthetic lies outside the realm of the language game, and thus rejects the (impossible) search for stable meaning in favour of poetic and creative expression (*Lectures on Aesthetics*). The realm of the aesthetic is an expansive exploration of the possibilities of language to connect with human affective and emotional response that is sometimes inexpressible, ineffable, sublime. The subtitle of *Benang* is “From the Heart”, and the motif of hearts and the profound need for the ability to feel is both powerfully insistent throughout the narrative and used to convey the complex interaction of knowledge, emotion and sensation. For example, when signalling the presence of long dead Noongar ancestors, their hearts are heard beating in the sound of the ocean as the sea “blossoms its heartbeat”, or in the rhythm of the wind in the grass and sand. This aesthetic realm indicates the bond between Harley and certain ancestors, signified in the title of the section about his great-great grandfather, Sandy One: “My Sandy Heart.” This is both a reference to the complexity of race — they are both ostensibly “white” yet have a powerful connection to a hidden Noongar ancestry — and Harley's affection for this gentle man he never met. Similarly, the men and women of his newfound family tap their fists on Harley's chest, asking “you feel it [his Noongar identity] here?”, “speak it from the heart” (10). Harley ends his tale with the words:

Speaking from the heart I can tell you that I am part of a much  
older story, one of a perpetual billowing from the sea, with its

rhythm of return, return and remain. (497)

Engaging with the category of aesthetic — here, speaking from the “heart” — is vital in a project of social recovery. Isobel Armstrong in *The Radical Aesthetic* claims that resistance to affect can be creatively and politically limiting and, conversely, that affect can mobilise thought (2-18). The aesthetic not only has the potential to spark radical action but also to connect experiences of place and ontologically diverse belief and value systems while positively recognising difference. Within a context where a racial minority still suffer such marginalisation, the aesthetic can thus be powerfully political.

However, any argument for the politically enabling effects of the aesthetic in *Benang* must also take into account the fraught history of literary Romanticism in an Australian context — a history powerfully and lucidly theorised by Andrew McCann (“Obstinacy”; “Extinction”; “Tuscan Garden”). His argument, like many Marxist materialist analyses of the aesthetic, is suspicious of a reliance on emotion and/or sensation. His condemnation of Romanticism in an Australian context is inflected by studies such as Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* which claims, put simply, that the aesthetic locates human experience beyond politics and material history. In a series of articles about the intimate connection between Romanticism and Australian literature, McCann explores the aesthetic dimension of the work of writers from Henry Kendall to Judith Wright, Patrick White and David Malouf. One of McCann’s key contentions is that the development of Australian literature from its very earliest moments has been characterised by a politically dubious negotiation of an authentic relationship with place. He asserts that an unsettling compatibility exists between the melancholic rendering of vanishing race narratives (for example Judith Wright’s poem “At Coololah” or Malouf’s novel *Remembering Babylon*) and a Darwinistic race trajectory that has underpinned Australian manifestations of genocide. What McCann sees as a repeated cultural trope of Romantically-rendered “settler melancholy” through a poetic exploration of

place replaces the materiality of historical effects with the reconciling effects of a transcendent poetic. Thus, he argues, the “horror of colonisation ends up generating the melancholic pleasure of elegiac literature [where] colonial investments in place manage to survive a knowledge of colonial violence” (*Extinction* 54). In McCann’s formulation, the poet is the location of a series of transfers through which the settler subject, made uneasy by the compromised circumstances of his presence, experiences the consolation of an uncannily evocative landscape. In this circumstance an aestheticised loss delivers the pleasure/pain effect like that of Romantic representations of European ruins in a landscape, or the exquisite nostalgic sadness of a mysterious yet somehow ideal world that has now past. Ultimately the individual experiences the inevitable fall from grace that is the eternal sadness of the human condition. Thus, art is able to remove the subject from the material realities of genocide and relocate him/her in an aesthetic space in which a brush with colonial violence, rather than disrupting the social/political/physical space the reader inhabits, manages to align it with European versions of authenticity and autochthony. In its most politically problematic form, such texts can thus advocate a type of settler indigenisation in which the coloniser now makes a perceived spiritual or innate connection to landscape of his/her own.

If one is to use McCann’s criteria, any expression of a Romantic aesthetic and poetic in an Australian context is inevitably compromised. However, a text like *Benang*, for which there are valid political, social, cultural and personal reasons for maintaining a connection with the land, calls for a rethinking of McCann’s critique. When an Indigenous writer such as Kim Scott wishes to explore the possibilities of the English language and its artistic traditions — *genius loci* for instance — is he necessarily involved in some kind of ethical compromise or betrayal? This widespread condemnation of Romanticism in Australia implies an insensitivity to the material realities of Indigenous Australians, many of whom have not only a vital cultural connection to place but also a greater degree of expressive control of the

language (English) in which they have been formally educated. McCann's line of reasoning leads to a type of impasse whereby Indigenous Australians are both without traditional linguistic and artistic modes and are silenced by the compromises involved in using the ones they know; exactly the kind of dilemma articulated by Scott's novel. What seems lacking in McCann's critique is both sensitivity to the diverse contexts in which literature is produced and a recognition of the complexity and ambivalence of literary texts themselves. He argues, using prominent examples from the Australian literary canon of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that our national literature is full of examples of "spurious mysticism" (*Tuscan Garden* 24) that erases the ugly materialities of the national past. While there is undoubtedly a strong connection between nation-building and a national literature, McCann pays little attention to the ideological complexities that exist in the Australian canon because, put simply, the aesthetic and political intricacies simply exist within the category of the literary itself.

While McCann's disapproval is directed at Anglo-Celtic writers as they manoeuvre to create an Indigenised relationship to land (and, clearly, Scott represents a different subject position in terms of race/culture,) Scott's work has some similarities to the writers McCann targets. Does this mean that Scott has the right to engage the Romantic poetic tradition to evoke a spirit of place but that non-Indigenous writers do not? A number of politically vexed and perhaps unanswerable questions follow. Scott's capacity to create this vivid and affective poetic comes from the light-skinned appearance that allowed him to be educated and integrated as a "white man." Is there a "Noongar blood" proportion that an individual may contain that makes it acceptable to claim an Indigenised relationship to place, and thus the right to attempt to communicate the spirit of place? Can only dark-skinned Indigenous people convey a poetic of place? And then only in their own language? This type of questioning leads to essentialising and problematic ideological terrain. I would suggest that Scott's more

politicised aesthetic demonstrates that there is a space within Australian literature for a Romantic poetic that is at once about achieving a meaningful relationship with place, perhaps having been inspired by Indigenous culture, and the circumspect acknowledgement of the fraught nature of doing so. Rather than being derived from having Indigenous “blood”, Scott’s right to engage a Romantic poetic comes from the type of novel he writes, connecting to material history through a series of aesthetic and modal shifts.

What is significant in a text such as *Benang* is that one can see a Romantic poetic operating differently from the kind of Romantic aesthetic that McCann condemns. The particular form of *genius loci* within the novel, as it works alongside other affective, aesthetic modes, is disengaged from the process of nation-making in which eighteenth-century Romanticism quickly became enmeshed. Geoffrey Hartman explains how the *genius loci* originally worked to re-ground the abstraction of modernity yet, taken up as a program and dispersed through modern communication systems, the Romantic sense of place and locality became attached to the increasingly powerfully juggernaut of nationalism (Hartman). While a “spirit of place” is ostensibly ahistorical, a text like *Benang* can be interpreted as reversing the cultural symbiosis between Romanticism and militant and colonial versions of nationalism by reconnecting a Romantic poetic of place with the horrors of colonialism enacted on its soil. Here, the dimensions of place appear together in all their contradiction and complexity. *Benang* contrasts moments of heightened insight and perception informed by an experience of the natural environment with the existence of extreme violence.

The realist/romantic juxtapositions of *Benang* powerfully evoke the materiality of history that McCann suggests are erased by the use of a Romantic poetic and the realm of the aesthetic. For Harley to disconnect from the world of the coloniser that he has until now, and uncritically, inhabited requires a mode of expression outside of, even at odds with, the type of Enlightenment ontology that always emphasises the primacy of reason. Harley’s dismantling

of Ern's house, first removing the mortar then the roof, is like his "drifting" and represents a similar distancing from the most virulent expression of colonisation — people and places. It is significant that it is also from this location that Harley drifts, his poetic narration expressing an alternative and politically preferable mode of existence.

In a highly politicised text such as *Benang*, in which the narrative constitutes an outraged protest about past and present injustice and discriminatory practices, the recourse to an aesthetic — that of the early Romanticism of writers such as Wordsworth and Coleridge — seems unusual. While the early work of these Romantic poets ostensibly constituted a retreat from the social and political realms, a Romantic poetic of place in *Benang* is grounded in the material evidence of the insensitivities of colonisation represented in built environments such as buildings and roads. It is therefore significant that the figure of Ernest Scat, Harley's eugenicist, sexually predatory grandfather, is a builder and always connected to colonised spaces.<sup>76</sup> To borrow a figure from Paul Carter's important discussion of "white" perceptions of place, the coloniser brings with him the "magnetic power of the agora: [which is] to reverse the centrifugal charge, transforming it into centripetal nostalgia" (308). As soon as the colonist ventures into a new place, he thus ventures to make it like "home." When first arriving in Australia in the 1920s Ern, in a colonising, capitalistic *terra nullius* fantasy, imagines the frontier as already mapped and divided, criss-crossed by roads and railway

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<sup>76</sup> Many of the historical documents Scott includes or adapts — discordant in their formal and bureaucratic tone and structure — give expression to the type of instrumental rationalism of the Western Australian frontier and of the Enlightenment Project where the will-to-power is legitimised through the support of social and legal hierarchies. What Harley (and Scott) want and need is a language where there is room for creative engagement away from the constriction of such formal and stylistic restraints. It needs to engage in these moments of reimagining aesthetic with the potential for imaginative expansion, as these moments contain room for profound human emotional response outside the confines of the simplified, instrumentalised version of rationalism which supported colonial expansion and the kind of frontier law that existed in such distinct and isolated locales. It is little wonder that the type of Indigenised poetic of people, history and place of *Benang* has so many common points with some versions of Romanticism.



lines, ready to be parcelled off to fortune makers.<sup>77</sup> As a builder, Ern imagines himself contributing to the development of the region, but his higher ambition is the execution and recording of his own journey of genetic colonisation. Thus, as the “white” culture assails both the natural world and Noongar people, it damages the very authenticity or integrity of experience on many levels. When Harley soars over the coast, for example, he sees the grandeur of scene as the cliffs collide with the coast, but also:

[t]he tiny town of Wirlup haven and how Grandad’s historic homestead — as if shunned — clung to the road which was sealed and heading inland. (165)

Places like the old homestead emphasise the more enriching and authentic spirit of place through the perfect interdependence of aspects of the natural world such as sand, soft vegetation, imprint of wind on “turquoise water”, the pulse of waves upon land. They also work to contrast the Romantic ascent evident in these particular scenes with the devastating social and material realities of colonisation.

Not only is *genius loci* prioritised in the novel because of its particular affinity with past Noongar traditions and ancestors, it also works as an imaginative space that is future-oriented, that envisages Noongar lives without despair. It is important not only to recognise the rhizomic strategies of *Benang* but also to examine the meaning and value behind the various modal variations within the text to achieve the specificity of place and experience Scott strives to express. The example from the Deleuze and Guattari model central to Emmett’s thesis involves a very different context from that under investigation here. However, if one speaks of the *rhizomatic* text deterritorialising a language, making it more amenable to the political and cultural needs of a minority group, what is being communicated in *Benang* is a different notion of *territory* and place than in the European context from which Deleuze and Guattari argue. They identify Kafka’s “deterritorialisation” of German in

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<sup>77</sup> Pablo Armellino provides a detailed discussion of the significance of mapping in the novel in “Australia Re-mapped and Con-Texted.”

his attempt to express the complex layers of Jewish minority existence within Czech society which, in itself, was anxious during Kafka's lifetime about its own position within the region. However, Kafka's own explorations were most often of urban European spaces that have been defined and redefined for millennia — a very different situation to the political and geographical context of remote Western Australia. Scott's project of cultural connection and revival is dependent on his ability to convey understandings and perceptions of a particular natural environment — the specificity of place. It is the richness of the experience of place, a fundamental aspect of traditional Noongar culture, conveyed through a Romantic poetic, which makes the "civilising" coloniser's mode seem so very impoverished. It is the moral and aesthetic ugliness of European culture, often represented through Ern, that makes a meaningful relationship with place not only desirable but essential. The emotional and cultural poverty of Ern's existence is particularly evident at the end of his life, when he is despairing and alone. His situation and state of mind make clear the transience of the exhilaration of dominance, shown as merely a fleeting release from the self-alienation of capitalist modernity where desire, even when it is fulfilled, is insatiable and "want" itself exponentially increases.<sup>78</sup> The material, spiritual and moral worthlessness of Ern's life is symbolised by his crumbling house, while Harley's dismantling of the house symbolises the ultimate triumph of Noongar values. The ironic nature of this process is clear: the one successful aim of Ern's life — to produce Harley, the first white man born — becomes in effect the source of the destruction of his racial identity and of colonial values in general. The process of turning this corner of Western Australia into a "home" has failed to the extent that

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<sup>78</sup> Ern, for instance, marries the young, powerless Noongar woman Kathleen, then as the child Topsy reaches puberty, casts Kathleen out and acts as if Topsy is his wife. All the while he rapes and impregnates the maids assigned to him from the various government-run institutions who train the Noongar girls who have been taken from their families as domestic help. Even though the women Ern "marries" have learned "white" ways and must submit to his every sexual urge no matter how depraved or degrading, they can never satisfy Ern's yearning for social status, shown in the way he makes them stay out of the sun and take bleach baths to lighten their skin.

the most material embodiment of his life's achievement (a grand old house) disintegrates — an ironic reminder of impermanence of the European occupation in comparison to the vast shaping power of the natural world and the continual barrage of the sea, sand and salt carried on the wind. Unlike the powerful natural cycles, Ern's life and much of his genetic and social legacy comes to an end with only one descendant — Harley — remaining alive.<sup>79</sup>

Like Romanticism in its earliest forms, the integrity of the natural world and the force of creative expression are represented as an antithesis to the troubling expansion of capitalist industrialisation. Of course, the situation of Gebalup (based on the town of Ravensthorpe) is dissimilar in many ways to those manifestations of Blake's "dark satanic mills" that were beginning to transform so many regions of Britain in the late eighteenth century. It is therefore important to remember that some manifestations of Romanticism were, in their time, intensely political, evoking the materiality of the suffering of powerless groups which, even as they represented a retreat from the world into nature, implied a critique of capitalist modernity. This critique is evident in *Benang* in its outlining of beginnings of the mining industry, which remains the major industry of the Ravensthorpe area. Scott shows how, instead of encouraging a meaningful relationship with the land, mining attracted people looking for immediate financial gratification and with no enduring connection to the land that has provided for them. Further, *Benang* arguably suggests that what the Europeans saw as the failings of the region — its isolation of resistance to conventional modes of large scale farming and urban development<sup>80</sup> — are important qualities which have enabled the Noongar culture, so intimately linked to place, to endure. The novel's critique of the capitalist exploitation of the environment is vividly illustrated by the episode in which one of its

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<sup>79</sup> The other descendants (that they know of) are dead and Harley's injuries effectively neuter him. Harley later finds out about two children that he had illegitimately fathered to Indigenous mothers before the accident.

<sup>80</sup> Harley's uncles explain to him that it was the coming of the trains that brought such pain to the Noongars of the region.

characters, the obese Daniel Coolman, is pushed down his own mine and is so firmly wedged into the shaft that he dies: a symbol of his own greed and sloth. In contrast to this expression of corpulent, deteriorating white bodies and the desolate end of empty lives, the Romantic mode gives hope for human existence outside of the paradigms of Enlightenment modernity and the frightening, destructive effects of industrialisation.

Another source of political protest expressed in the novel, even and especially in some of its more traumatic scenes, is the extension of the *genius loci* to *prospopoeia*, in which the land is represented as responding in a process of dramatic animation to violence to evoke the shocking materiality of history.<sup>81</sup> Susan Gubar has noted how *prosopopoeia* is often used in the attempt to communicate extremes of violence; that which is sublime in its horror “conveying what it means for the incomprehensible to occur” (194). One extremely graphic episode in the novel shows the process at work: the episode in which Harley’s great great grandparents Sandy One and Fanny Benang become involved in the events of a massacre. The settlers at the Gebalup station claim that it is retribution for a murder but, as Fanny finds out, the killing of the white man itself was retribution for the continued molestation of the women of the local Noongar group and the abuse of captured Noongar individuals confined there, sometimes in chains. Sandy One is forced to ride out with the settler party, although he does not kill, and Sandy One and Fanny escape the scene as soon as they can. Bodies of Noongar men hanging from a tree can be seen as they approach the station. The white men shoot at the bodies in grotesque sport. As they attempt to pass, the wheels of their cart turn too slowly, making “a sucking sound...the mud filled the space between the wheels spokes,” as if attempting to stop them from passing, forcing them to bear witness to what has happened and is about to occur that very night: the escalation of the settlers’ actions into extreme and savage sadism, as they cut flesh from the bodies as trophies. The animation of

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<sup>81</sup> This is explained by Karen Patricia Pera (*Poetry and the Realm of the Public Intellectual*) in relation to Indigenous cultures world wide.

the natural environment as a dramatic response to these atrocities is shown in the description of the dawn after the night of massacre as “a red stain spread upwards and across the sky” (186). The political importance of this animation of the natural environment is reinforced by the fact that Fanny and Sandy cannot speak in their shock and despair. Rather than the “spirit of place” signalling a retreat from worldly corruption, the land itself appears to Harley and the ancestors as morally animated. Certainly a number of events in the novel evoke a type of mysticism that is not the “spurious” transcendent aesthetic to which McCann refers in his critique of the use of Romanticism in Australian literature. Events such as these are necessarily depicted by engaging with a type of sublimity or transcendence to evoke both the extent of the violence and the materiality of such incidents.

To conclude, I return to the recurring symbol of the telling of stories around the campfire as both resistant to the colonising culture and also an inspiring act that conveys profound connectedness to place and community. A sense of joy is communicated in the act of telling and in finding the best way of telling — in terms of mode, form, poetic: this is so important in communities that can be paralysed by despair. This sporadic return to joy occurs most often for Harley in what are Romantic moments of inspiration — singing and writing: the joy of articulation and communication. As Harley sings imperfectly in the ashes of the campfire, still learning Noongar songs, Harley’s need to sing suggests how the energy of communication and artistic creation had also sustained Noongar culture and its people through the many hardships they have faced. Scott connects Harley here with one of the most famous Romantic tropes — Shelley’s claim in *A Defense of Poetry* that “the mind on creation is as a fading coal”(line 53). Harley discovers the value of the intense and assuring glow of creative expression (and Scott of poetic expression), even if it is only momentarily. This is not only through singing but through the act of writing Harley refers to the “tap..tap” of the keyboard (27) as a manifestation of the satisfying “tap..tap” (26) at the walls, expressing the

exhilaration of writing stories that dismantle the structures of colonialisation, just as Harley demolished the coloniser's house. In this way writing becomes a political act, an act of dissent (*Kayang and Me*).

Through a Romantic poetic Scott thus finds a mode whose vitality comes from its connection to fundamental human desires — purpose, hope, joy — derived for Scott and others through a connection to place. The reconnection to traditional culture that this evokes also envisions a Noongar future where the past is recognised and respected without the despair that leads to self-destruction, and which creatively articulates what one knows and feels is a personal and cultural imperative.

At the centre of the artistic and aesthetic vision of *Benang* is the powerfully political uncovering of hidden histories, layers of violence and identity confusion within colonial and modern Australian society; within town communities, within families, within individual subjects. In this process of uncovering, the confusion about racial identity is represented as potentially politically enabling; it suggests a permeability of the individual subject which gives rise to opportunity. Like the narrator Harley, one has an important vantage point if one has access to more than one culture and can creatively adapt elements of both to survive and thrive in the world, even when one has been so deeply damaged. Significantly Scott does not believe that non-Indigenous people should be closed off from access to Noongar culture and place, believing the right to revision and adaptation is not race-specific but universal. If Noongar culture does this well, he implies, why should it not set the example for those who wish to follow?

To take a broader view, what Scott does provide is a Noongar-based vision for surviving late-modernity; when all one values seems lost, there is space for political and imaginative engagement and also for *re-visioning*. This partly involves acts of retrieval not only from one's own cultures but also from other cultures, other histories, as long as one is

circumspect, strategic, creative. Scott does not believe that non-Indigenous people should be excluded from this process, provided that they, in a distinctly non-Western manner, walk lightly down the sandy beach paths of traditional country without ambition and hubris, open, like the curlew, to the sense of connection and identity offered by the natural world.

## Chapter Four

### “Dancing the Old Enlightenment”:

#### *Gould’s Book of Fish, the body and the postmodern sublime.*

Reviewers and critics of Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* have tended to be preoccupied with its postmodern form: its continually ironic distancing; the blatant untrustworthiness of its narrator; the confusingly interwoven anti-realist narratives and its dizzying *mise-en-abyme* structure; and its dense pastiche of Francois Rabelais, Miguel de Cervantes, Herman Melville and James Joyce among others (Clark “Madman”; Craven; McFarlane). While they have usually and adroitly discussed the novel in terms of its relationship to the canon and in the light of postmodern theory, they often seem to miss something at the heart of the novel, namely Flanagan’s liberal or progressive politics. While anti-realist, abstract experiments in postmodernism are sometimes associated with an often self-indulgent, late-capitalist nihilism, Flanagan’s sojourn in Australia’s colonial past is arguably informed by the same left-liberal politics that have motivated his political activism. Throughout his career, Flanagan has campaigned on and written about a number of issues of national importance. In the past five years this has included an article published in the British broadsheet *The Guardian* on June 26, 2007, in response to the then Coalition government’s paternalist treatment of Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory (“This Draconian Outrage Has Shaken Australia Awake”), and a lengthy critique of the Gunns’ wood-chipping debate and Government corruption in Tasmania that was published in the national Australian political magazine, *The Monthly* (“Out of Control”), and also in pamphlet form for distribution throughout the site of the contestation in the Tamar Valley. His novel, *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006), written in the genre of a spy thriller and marketed towards a popular readership, was received as an ambitious attempt to intervene in the effects of “The War on Terror”. It is an indictment of the encroachments on civil liberties by official



agencies, which exposes the allegedly sinister and corrupt allegiances between Western governments and their intelligence organisations, commercial media and even organised crime. The question then arises: why would an author who seems so publicly committed to social justice and activism choose a densely reflexive, ironic mode of expression in his representation of the Australian colonial past, particularly when postmodern philosophical and theoretical developments are so often perceived as being removed from the *realpolitik*?<sup>82</sup>

It would seem that Flanagan's decision to represent Australian colonial history in postmodern mode was made in order to reject the dominance of notions of causation and progress in representations of the national past, a dominance encoded in linear historical narratives. Flanagan's insistent linking of the early nineteenth century to the twentieth century and to the present is not so much an indication of historical causality — the notion that our colonial past has directly determined our national present — but the expression of a belief that the same universal ideals and positivistic methods of the Enlightenment commandeered to the service of the will-to-power were, and continue to be, the basis of systems of inequality and exploitation. This occurs in different places and national states in different ways, despite the understandings that emerged from the crisis of modernity. Through his body of work Flanagan continues to suggest that in Australia there is a particularly powerfully link between the brutalities of the nation's "founding" years and the political and social machinations of the present. While Flanagan, however, rejects what he sees as the oppressive effects of the Enlightenment, or more specifically the Enlightenment project, he retains a sense of liberal engagement as a key principle in combating present injustices and inequalities. It is important to clarify here that the Enlightenment project is not synonymous with the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment project can be defined as the effect of universal and universalising ideals, instrumental reason, and positivistic methods when

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<sup>82</sup> For a detailed argument about the politically ineffective and "removed" nature of the postmodern critical theory see Bronner's *Reclaiming the Enlightenment*.

combined with the material conditions of existence and the individual and national will to power, all of which work to defeat the potentially emancipatory aspects of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century modern ideals and social programs.

Here, I investigate the symbiotic relationship between aspects of Enlightenment liberalism and postmodern form. “Dancing the Old Enlightenment” in *Gould’s Book of Fish* is, firstly, a combination of the seriousness of resisting oppression and abuse of power in the name of personal freedom, and the right to feel the love, pleasure, joy and pain of human existence. It is, secondly, immersed in the paradox of articulating the resistance to potentially brutal manifestations of power through formal *play* or, perhaps, the “dance” of language, art and life. Like Ovid’s mock-epic *Metamorphoses*, *Gould’s Book of Fish* is an exercise in serious absurdities. In an unusual narrative device, twentieth-century conman and thief, Sid Hamnett, transforms in the second section of the novel simultaneously into a weedy sea dragon and eighteenth-century convict-artist-forger William Buelow Gould. Flanagan’s Gould, like the figure of the medieval fool, is unashamedly material and constantly indulges in physical pleasures. He subverts as he stumbles through each event, thrust powerfully along by forces beyond his control and all the while exposing the irrational workings of so-called civilised systems of the cerebrally-aligned “Age of Reason” through his own anarchic behaviour.

As I have argued in previous chapters, traditional linear, realist representations of history, whether historical or fictional, encode powerful Enlightenment concepts such as positivism and the notion that a stable, tangible past is retrievable through scientific method, the belief that the events of history cumulatively constitute “progress” and that humankind moves organically towards a greater civilisation, emancipation and enlightenment. If Flanagan wants to challenge these Enlightenment notions that still dominate political and bureaucratic systems and the national collective consciousness generally, a postmodern anti-

realist form is best suited to this purpose. In terms of the politics of its form, *Gould's Book of Fish* can be read as a self-conscious subversion of the classic historical novel, which itself emerged out of the Enlightenment narrative of history which was reliant on empiricist epistemology to determine the "truth" of the past. As Georg Lukacs explains in his influential analysis of the realist, classical historical novel, the Enlightenment conceptualisation of history is inextricably linked to the idea of progress: events occur in linear order, conflicts occur but, through their resolution, humankind learns and improves (*The Historical Novel*). In *Gould's Book of Fish* the eponymous book works metaphorically to represent the colonial past in a postmodern mode which undermines the Enlightenment belief in history-as-progress. Gould's book begins as a set of detailed and scientifically accurate paintings, but he soon transgresses the boundaries of this form, transforming it into a subjective and artistic interpretation of experience. Within the narrative, the material form of the book is fragmented and changing: for Gould, the written text is different every time the book is opened and the pictures shift like the surface of the sea. Like Gould's book, the colonial past and history in general is something that shifts, often according to the motivations of the story teller or reader, unable to be pinned down in any singular sense.

It should also be noted that "the past" of Flanagan's novel, despite its postmodern indeterminacy, does not represent an advocacy of extreme historical relativism. The representation of the colonial past and of frontier contact in the novel is clearly indebted to the work of revisionist scholars such as W. E. H. Stanner and Henry Reynolds: that the Australian frontier was a place of extreme violence and devastation is an idea at the core of Flanagan's novel. The difference between the version of the past represented in *Gould's Book of Fish* and more formally conventional revisionist histories is the representation of history through narrative and language. The postmodern form of the novel challenges the belief that the events of the past can be uncovered in an exact or scientific sense, whereas in more

conventional narrative forms Enlightenment assumptions still tend to work through the politics of its narrative structure.<sup>83</sup>

The strategy that I explore in my analysis of *Gould's Book of Fish* is the postmodern experimental narrativisation of a colonial past as it is applied to a political critique of the national present. More specifically, interpreting the novel through Jean-Francois Lyotard's discussion of the postmodern sublime<sup>84</sup> and a theory of bodily experience, I argue that Flanagan employs a postmodern aesthetic as a type of immanent critique in which the postmodern dialectic can be read as an extension of Enlightenment thinking. In the novel the past is shifting and, at least in a positivistic sense, ultimately irretrievable. This signals the notion of history as the postmodern sublime — a space of irretrievable loss and unfulfilled desire at the margins of history. This complex and abstract approach is grounded in the real though constant reference to bodily experience. While history and the colonial past shift and change in the novel, representations of bodily experience anchor Flanagan's novel in the recognition that real lives, individual and collective suffering, have often motivated postmodern and poststructuralist critiques. Underlying the theorising and abstraction of postmodernism is the desire for people's lives, often those from marginal groups, to materially improve.

The idea of postmodernist theory as both a critique and extension of modern or Enlightenment thinking — the immanent critique — is at the centre of the politics of *Gould's Book of Fish*. As Lyotard explains, the postmodern exists in a foetal state within the modern.

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<sup>83</sup> Flanagan seems to suggest that the best way of dealing with this founding narrative of terrible displacement and loss is through this type of postmodern artistic representation, a process reflected in a number of other postmodern texts that deal with the losses from modernity and colonisation such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Salman Rushie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) or Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999).

<sup>84</sup> Lyotard developed his theory of the postmodern sublime in major works and articles written during the 1980s and 1990s: these texts include *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), "Complexity and the Sublime" (1989), *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1991) and *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1994).

To avoid the hierarchising will-to power of modernity requires thinking beyond, around and between, in representation (*Lessons* 74). Similarly, postmodern events — what Lyotard terms *limit events* — erupt out of the modern, occurring when the events cannot be explained by the discursive laws of their time (*Lessons* 25). Therefore, postmodern representations or postmodern events are not necessarily diametrically opposed to the modern, but emerge out of it. This type of critique can be conceptualized as a type of extension of Enlightenment critical modes of analysis, even though the subject of the analysis turns back on the Enlightenment itself. By challenging the ideals and effects of the Enlightenment project, many postmodern texts work to further the emancipatory aims of the Enlightenment, even though they may not subscribe in the same way to the universal. In this way, in dealing with the Australian colonial past, Flanagan's engagement with postmodernism strengthens his liberal, emancipatory aims: the identities of Flanagan the liberal social activist and Flanagan the postmodernist are not as disparate as they might initially seem.

The very frequent critical focus on various Enlightenment tropes in the colonial setting of *Gould's Book of Fish* suggests the degree to which Flanagan perceives that particular modes of Enlightenment thinking — those that express the will-to-power and the scientific method — negatively affected European Australian culture from the beginning of colonisation. Symbols of the Enlightenment appear within the narrative to ironically signal its limitations. One example is the bottle in the shape of the bust of the great rationalist Voltaire, found on the Sarah Island colony. The bottle is highly prized by the Commandant for its associations with the European civilization which he attempts, insanely, to replicate on the island. At the same time, the potent French brandy found in the bottle becomes a means for convicts like Gould — who steals it and consumes it — to escape the terrible daily realities of life in the wilderness under an insane Commandant. At one point Gould finds himself in the surprising situation of having to sexually pleasure a visiting German clergyman's wife.

Unable to achieve an erection, he secretly substitutes the bottle at the last minute, bringing the woman to climax and thus avoiding punishment for poor performance and gaining the substantial reward of a six month supply of tobacco. Enlightenment symbols, like this Voltaire-shaped bottle show the foothold that the Enlightenment project gained in this short time. However, instead of civic pride, liberty, justice, and order, there is individual ambition, materialism, greed, escapism, and despair. While events like the “brandy” episodes are represented in a humorous and hyperbolic way, Flanagan’s exploration of the effects of the Enlightenment project in this context is consistent with more traditional historical studies that support the idea of the Enlightenment project working in an accelerated form in colonial Australia.

If colonialism was ideologically bolstered by various scientific and social projects of the Enlightenment, it follows that colonies were founded as a type of Enlightenment laboratory. In *The Enlightenment in Australia*, John Gascoigne gives a detailed explanation of why this was particularly the case in colonial Australia and highlights the importance of Enlightenment ideas and systems in the formation of an early Australian ideology, politics and material conditions of existence. According to Gascoigne, it was easier to put Enlightenment policies (including those concerning criminality and class structure) into practice in the penal colonies as there were no existing (European) traditions or structures established in Australia: British Enlightenment thinkers such as the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham, famous for the promulgation of “the greatest good for the greatest number,” were particularly influential (Gascoigne 10-12). Some Enlightenment initiatives, especially humanitarianism, were important in protecting the rights of both the convict and Aboriginal population. However, the difficulty of policing activities on the frontier because of the geographical and material conditions of the colony resulted in what could be interpreted as the *limit events* of the early colony or frontier, such as the decimation of local Aboriginal

groups or the brutal, exploitative conditions and corruption of convict settlements. Taking these factors of early settlement into account, it seems likely that the effects of the Enlightenment project were felt earlier in the Australian situation, especially on the frontier, than they were in Europe, where the Enlightenment project is most often associated with the events of the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>85</sup> In a number of episodes in the book the Commandant tries to implement plans for the “progress” of Sarah Island including a railway (absurd on an island in the middle of Tasmanian Wilderness) and impressive civic buildings, a process which devastates those unfortunate enough to be pressed into labour and, also, quickly decimates natural resources. It is as if all of the megalomaniacal-driven incidents of Europe, from early modern times onward, are represented on this tiny island. Thus the Commandant is “His Bulkiness, the Napoleon of Sarah Island, the Doge of the Great South Seas” (113). When the convicts first approach the island they see:

The bold streets running along and across the island’s natural contours,  
the extensive landfill and unfinished wharves & shoreside streets of  
looming stone warehouses that would shame Liverpool — collectively a  
prophecy of nation that might be summoned into existence simply by the  
night-time will of its leader. (112-13)

If Gould’s version of events carries all of the signs of the Enlightenment, most particularly its capacity for capitalist expansion, the force that drives the change is irrational, libidinal will-to-power — “night-time will” (113) — rather than any honest concern for the progress and collective emancipation of humankind. The corruption of Europe is clearly already here. The syphilitic Commandant even eventually wears a mask of gold to hide the deterioration on the

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<sup>85</sup> One of the first postmodern theoretical response to the Enlightenment project, Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, bases its key arguments about the “failure” of aspects of the Enlightenment and the triumph of the Enlightenment project on the existence of the extreme, violent events of the early twentieth century, particularly those that occurred in Europe.

skin of his face in the fashion of the famously calculating and brutal Northern Italian Cesare Borgia. Therefore, in responding to the accelerated modern foundations of the Australian settlement, Flanagan is both shaping his critique to the peculiarities and specificities of the Australian case and commenting on the far-reaching effects of an Enlightenment project that continues to shape national culture in the present.

One of the ways in which Flanagan's novel critiques the Enlightenment Project is through contesting the primacy of reason by insisting on the realities of bodily experience. "Dancing the old Enlightenment" is a phrase used by the protagonist, William Gould, as a euphemism for engaging vigorously in sexual acts. In its continued emphasis on the body and on physical experience, the novel rejects the Enlightenment concept of reason as the basis of historical progress by insisting on other forms of knowledge; it grounds this postmodern mode, with a tendency towards play and abstraction, firmly in the real. The novel makes extensive use of bawdy imagery and explores the extremes of physical experience to expose the limitations of the metaphysical and universal ideals of the Enlightenment. The importance of the body as a source of knowledge is attested to by recent trauma theory, which argues that the body works as stable referent — a category by which the material basis of experience acts as an anchor for the "truth" of human existence (Douglass 12). Through representing the realities of physical deprivation on Sarah Island and by making visible the remnants of traumatised bodies (including tagged and classified Aboriginal bones and the preserved, tattooed skin of executed convicts), there is a recognition of the reality of certain events — such as genocide — that occurred on the Tasmanian frontier. While the "truth" about the numbers of the dead, and the motivations and exact manner of death, can never be known in a scientific way, a recognition of the incontestable reality of violence against the body and of the ensuing psychic trauma of such violence grounds Flanagan's critique. Although *Gould's Book of Fish* engages to a degree with Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, its



representation of the colonial past, as evidenced in the records room scene, requires engaging with a much darker aesthetic in order to give expression to the loss and unfulfilled longing that an honest search for history entails.

Enlightenment concepts of history are also critiqued in the novel by its aesthetic of the postmodern sublime, which it uses for political purposes. This aesthetic is formally enacted through *Gould's Book of Fish* to foreground the ways in which Enlightenment empiricist epistemology, its ideals of truth, liberty and equality, have been commandeered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for unintended and unethical purposes, and to offer an alternative, postmodern concept of history, in which uncertainty, unknowability and unrepresentability can be seen as liberating and progressive political ideals. Lyotard's concept of the postmodern sublime draws heavily on the Kantian notion of the sublime. The idea at the centre of the Kantian sublime, according to Lyotard, is unknowability — the combination of pleasure and pain when the imagination can conceive of an idea, but not the presentation of it (*The Postmodern Condition* 78). This is the major difference to the more widely recognised British concept of the sublime as explained by Edmund Burke and associated with the British Romantic poets, in which confronting the sublime involves conflicting feelings of wonder, awe and terror — a response often inspired by nature. Lyotard's postmodern sublime takes Kant's "unpresentability" and applies it to what he perceives as a traumatized postmodern consciousness. Instead of awe and terror, the most powerful feelings are those of loss and the need for certainty. The three areas to which the postmodern sublime has been applied are: literary theory, which includes Lyotard's theory of the postmodern sublime; historiography, which includes Hayden White's theory of the historical sublime; and the postmodern historical novel. These theses align to expose the limitations of the rationalist and positivistic scaffolding of Enlightenment history by critiquing its realist narrativisation. White argues that the utopian potential of history can only

be reached through an engagement with history as the sublime, in all its horror, ecstasy and ultimate unknowability. Flanagan's novel is an example of those postmodern historical novels where an aesthetic of the postmodern sublime challenges the Enlightenment linear construction of history — some other notable examples of this genre include J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* and Thomas Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon*. As with Lyotard, White, and many postmodern historical novels, the foundations of history are not dislodged for the sake of an abstract intellectual exercise but to unsettle national and hegemonic systems of power that rely heavily on the past as a unified entity to bolster limiting and oppressive political and legal systems.

The connection between the postmodern historical novel and the postmodern sublime has been explored in Amy Elias's *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*. Elias investigates the genre of the metahistoriographical romance (her term for the postmodern historical novel) and its important political role, and she discusses the importance of the postmodern historical sublime in her examination of the action of history in the European and colonial past. Elias explains, for example, that in the search for history, the gaze is directed outward from the centre or the self to the borders of history where less is known or has been recorded (see fig. 1). In conventional history the borders are identified, information is uncovered through positivistic methods and history is eventually perceived in its totality. With postmodern metahistorical narratives, by contrast, when one nears the edges of history one realises that the borders are fluid and can neither be reached nor expressed. One encounters the sublime and, in turn, is directed back towards the centre in an attempt to understand the limitations contained in the narrativisation and linguistic expression of history, then back out to the margins again to discover the history of the Other and so on. History, once affected by the postmodern sublime, particularly in the postcolonial metahistorical romance, moves in a type of pendulum motion where ultimate meaning is endlessly deferred

and notions of margin and centre are in a state of constant reversal. The pendulum motion replaces the straight line of progress and attempts to dislodge the political hierarchies that it supports.

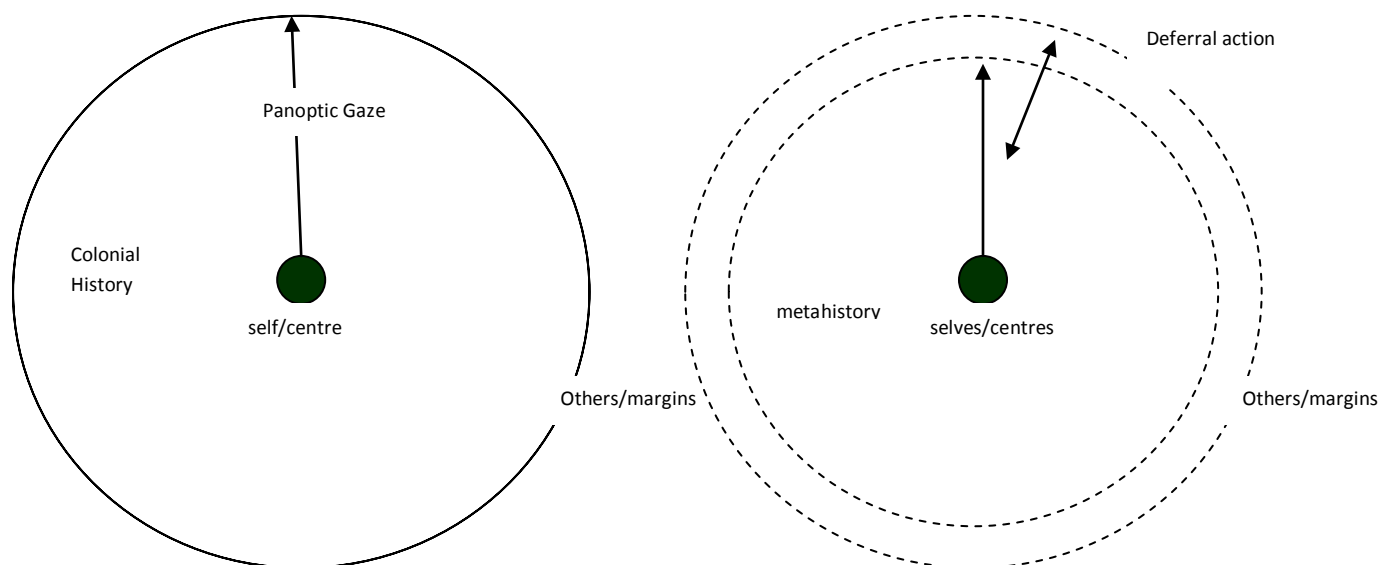


Fig 1: The Operation of History in Colonial and Metahistorical Narratives (Elias 201).

Elias's model of the movement of history in representations of the colonial past in the postmodern historical novel — pendular as opposed to linear — while useful, is Eurocentric and therefore limited, if not inadequate, for an understanding of Australian settler experience. In the early Australian settler colonies the various positions of metropolitan centre, settler, criminal/convict, and Indigenous Other complicate the straight back-and-forward pendular motion of Elias's model that relies on the binary of self and Other. What I want to suggest through a discussion of *Gould's Book of Fish* is that in the Australian settler condition there is more action and interaction at the borders of history — near the edges of the sublime — than is suggested by this idea of the pendulum motion of history because of the existence of different groups of Others. Most Australians in very early colonial Australian history

occupied the position of criminal, class or racial Other, and there was often conflict and competition between these groups. The “centre” is the space of representatives of European authority both in the settler metropolises and on the frontiers. I would argue that in the Australian settler context, as represented in *Gould's Book of Fish*, the action of this history moves back and forward while remaining at the edges of history and it does not always fully swing back to the centre.

Of all the episodes in the novel, the “records room” section of Gould’s narrative makes the most direct reference to Enlightenment systems and scientific methods as applied to history — “the barbarity and horror of the settlement written as order and progress” (318). In the later part of Gould’s narrative he discovers, explores and reads through the Sarah Island records room. He escapes from the prison, taking many of the ledgers, registers and books with him in an attempt to find a famous bushranger, Matt Brady, so that they can start a revolution. The records room consists of meticulously maintained records of the crimes and punishments of the inmates, lists of figures that calculate the economic details of the colony, letters written to and received from the Governor in Hobart, a written history of the penal colony, a library of histories and publications resulting from scientific cataloguing projects, and physical “specimens” (jars of preserved, tattooed skin) of punishments carried out. Awaiting execution, Gould discovers a possible escape route through the roof of his cell that leads to the records room. He reads through the texts, discovering much fabrication in these official, supposedly objective, documents. The failure of the records to accurately document events reveals more generally, the limitations of official records and conventional historical publications in representing the past in any full sense; it demonstrates the necessity of approaching the past through the historical sublime. In Gould’s own search for the past (the recent past in his case) all he finds are lies and inadequacies. This turns the search back to interrogate the method which, although scientific, is anything but disinterested and objective:

it clearly serves specific political interests. The physical and ideological location of Gould's enterprise, on the frontier — the outer reaches of “the civilised” — doubly complicates the search. In the metropolitan centres there are laws and systems in place to limit or hinder blatant abuses and lies like the ones that exist in the records room about the penal colony.<sup>86</sup> On the frontier, in the realm of the Other, no such limitations exist, making the frontier a shifting, shady area in the search for history. In this records room scene Gould discovers a sense of history as the postmodern sublime: history cannot be understood in a positivistic sense and can only be approached through an imaginative or artistic space. Further, as a type of unconscious countermove to the work of convict record keeper extraordinaire, Jorgen Jorgenson, Gould continues to express the realities of his own lived experience of Sarah Island through the paintings and musings of his “book of fish” to which he adds the record room story.

The body (as stable referent) works in this scene both to spatialise history and to signal the Enlightenment underpinnings of colonial Australia and twentieth-century Europe. Through the images of jars of tattooed skin, Flanagan uses the motif of the body to link the Sarah Island context to the Nazis' final solution, the holocaust, drawing attention to the similarities that exist between the Australian frontier and iconic limit events of the 1940s. The striking image of the flayed tattooed skin refers specifically to the events in the death camps of the 1940s. The skin (as well as the shrunken head of a Jew) were used as evidence of Nazi atrocities in the Nuremburg trials and were considered at the time proof of the degeneration of the German perpetrators into barbarism (Douglas 42). This powerful parallel

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<sup>86</sup> Gascoigne expands on this in his study by suggesting that efforts were made to limit the brutalities of the frontier and of penal colonies. While it was the humanitarian developments of the Enlightenment that inspired these efforts, they had a limited effect on the outskirts. Gascoigne cites the example of the Myall Creek Massacre. While white men were hanged for the murders, it seems that they were genuinely unaware of the degree of wrongdoing involved in the mass killing of Aborigines. This suggests that these types of attacks often occurred on the frontier and that there was little sense of judicial or moral consequence attached.

— linking this event to the early penal settlements and the Australian frontier — is also made to foreground the idea that the Enlightenment project underpinned both genocidal initiatives, suggesting that this type of event, which did not occur in Europe until the twentieth century, occurred much earlier in Australia where, as already noted, certain aspects of the Enlightenment took effect in an accelerated way. The recurrent use of these types of historical parallel indicates the spatialisation of history: events which repeat themselves at different junctures in history and at different locations.<sup>87</sup> The action of spatialised history is similar to the movement toward the postmodern sublime, where the movement of history works through repetition and deferral. In the “records room” scene of the novel the clear parallel is made between the racial genocide, enforced labour and brutal executions and murders of early colonial Australia, which were then repeated on a larger scale in the twentieth century, making the notion of history as a narrative of progress towards a state of enlightenment and emancipation seem ludicrous and ethically inadequate..

In the records room Gould has horrific, ghostly visions of skulls: a skull of the respected leader of a local Aboriginal tribe, Towtereh; the skulls of tortured and executed convicts; and the skulls of children. They stare and accuse. This space outside of rational, even conscious, experience is that of the postmodern sublime: a realm of unfulfilled desire and of terrible loss. This gruesome motif of the skull evokes not only those killed on the Australian frontier, but other limit events and genocides of modernity.<sup>88</sup> What Gould has read and seen — the half-truths, deceptions and lies of history combined with the real suffering of horror represented through the body — now demands a specific response, that of bearing witness. “Witnessing” has been described as a nagging presence (Douglass 48): it repeats and

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<sup>87</sup> While the idea of the spatialisation of history has been developed by a number of postmodernist theories, the notion of history working as a type of repetition, conceptualised as a horizontal plane, rather than a progression, conceptualised as a vertical plane, was first explained by Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

<sup>88</sup> The images of skulls seem to work as a reference to the genocide of the Cambodian killing fields, where a mass of human skulls have become an iconic image associated with the event.

echoes. This is similar to the notion of haunting that is used as a metaphor in the novel. Gould feels as if:

those awful flayed skulls were advancing and receding — with their awful red bone sticking through as if they had been gnawed by dogs — as if they wished me to make the past right. Something that was totally beyond my powers [...] Those fearsome shades would not leave and were begging of me what was impossible. (325)

Some time after this vision Gould does attempt “the impossible,” and tries to “make the past right” by attempting to take the records to the bushranger and reputed revolutionary Matt Brady so that they can together challenge the “official” history. He attempts to stand witness, to tell his story, to have justice served and history re-told for the benefit of the survivors and the dead. In trauma and witness theory, it is claimed that telling one’s own story of deprivation or terror offers the possibility of healing or *working through* (Douglass 44). In this section of the novel, Flanagan attempts to deal with a problem at the heart of the individual and collective relationship to the Australian colonial and frontier past: what happens with enduring trauma when there are no witnesses left? Flanagan seems to suggest that, in the absence of effective acts of witnessing, there is no ethical way to achieve closure and that the repeating memory of a violent colonial past is inescapable.

If the remote locations of the colonial frontier are sites where the effects of the Enlightenment project are accelerated, including the eruption of violent limit events, the frontier is a time and place that should be interrogated in order to provide insights into the national present — in particular, ideologies surrounding race. At the centre of the relationships between individuals and groups in *Gould’s Book of Fish* is the notion of complicity: the way that material conditions and brutal, corrupt state-imposed systems of discipline undermine any allegiances, enforcing individualism, self-interest and isolation as a condition of existence. The records room episode abounds in various types of complicity

amongst the various abject groups of Sarah Island. Representatives of these groups include: the old Danish record keeper, Jorgen Jorgensen, once a revolutionary back in his home country, but who now betrays his fellow convicts by misrepresenting the degree of their suffering in the official ledger, registers and histories of the island; the Aboriginal tracker, Tracker Marks, who leads the redcoats to bushrangers and escaped convicts; the convicts who decapitate and preserve the heads of Aborigines who were murdered or who had died of imported diseases; and Gould himself, who admits that he has remained alive only because of his ability to sell information about other convicts. Throughout the novel, Flanagan represents colonial, frontier Australia as a brutal place where the colonial system involves everyone in oppression of others. This is a place where “convicts flogged convicts, pissed on blackfellas & spied on each other, that blackfellas sold black women for dogs & speared escaping convicts, that white slavers killed and raped black women, and black women killed the children that resulted” (443). What happens here is not the proud nation-building of official histories. These complicities are not recorded or even uttered, are not preserved in narrative like those well-worn pioneering stories of national myth. This is the repressed or silenced history that we can never know holistically, that we can only approach. The interactions of these groups of Others on the outskirts of civilization and at the edges of history further complicate the action towards the historical sublime. Instead of the straight back and forth pendulum of the Elias model, where the historical gaze is directed from the self to Other and back, in the Australian settler context the gaze moves outwards, there is more action at the edges of history. In this space on the margins, different types of Others (the convict class Other, and Aboriginal race Other to name just two) each act on behalf of the colonial centre in oppressing, exploiting or exterminating the Other and then in surrounding these events with lies or silence. This makes a positivistic history even harder to retrieve and, in turn, reinforces the need to engage with the past through an aesthetic of the postmodern sublime.



Flanagan's representation of the complicities of the national past is another expression of its Enlightenment foundations, where the principle of self-interest underlies the functioning of social and economic systems. The Sarah Island system, where self-interest has overridden any sense of liberalism, perhaps works as a portent for the outcomes of Enlightenment systems in the present time. Flanagan encourages an interesting comparison between the Australian colonial past and the present day. Whereas the complicities and moral compromises of colonial times were often required for survival, now, individually, and sometimes as a nation, Australians continue to identify with the position of Other — outsider, victim or underdog — but this is a status many Australians can no longer rightfully lay claim to. As Ann Curthoys has explained, and I investigated in the second chapter of this thesis, white middle-class Australia's continuing claims to victim status may work to deny the role played by just such Australians in the persistent oppression of Indigenous and racial Others ("Expulsion, Exodus and Exile" 2-3). In our contemporary "relaxed and comfortable nation" (Howard),<sup>89</sup> can white Australia really claim a meaningful connection to the disenfranchised Other, such as the convict, bushranger or pioneer of our national folklore? Gould's remarks at the end of the novel link the deeply ingrained complicity of the Enlightenment project of the past to the present. They also, paradoxically, work as a very liberal call for engagement and emancipatory social change:

we all make our accommodation with power, & the mass of us would sell our brother and sister for a bit of peace and quiet. We've been trained to live a life of moral cowardice while all of the time comforting ourselves that we are Nature's rebels. But, in

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<sup>89</sup> In the build up to the 1996 federal election John Howard said to Liz Jackson in an interview on the ABC's Four Corners programme "by the Year 2000 I would like to see an Australian nation that feels comfortable and relaxed about three things: I would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about their history; I would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the present and I'd also like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the future."

truth we've never got upset and excited about anything: we're like the sheep we shot the Aborigines to make way for, docile until slaughter. (442)

Gould's mission to drag a pallet of the doctored Sarah Island records miles through the wilderness in order to start a revolution with the bushranger Matt Brady inevitably fails. Moreover, it seems revolution is impossible in a place where power and exploitation wind so intricately through different social groups, creating enmity, and where self-interested individualism inhibits the formation of meaningful communities. The political force of *Gould's Book of Fish* lies in its potential as immanent critique: the Enlightenment systems of past and present are scrutinised and criticised in order to further liberal, emancipatory aims.

The motif of dancing is used at the end of the records room episode both to reinforce the limitations of rationalist, Enlightenment accounts of human experience and to express the emancipatory nature of physicality and bodily experience. Gould's journey with the colony's records comes to an end when he encounters an Aboriginal woman known to him as Twopenny Sal, the Commandant's maid and mistress and Gould's former lover. Gould's relationship with Sal while they were both on Sarah Island offered him rare moments of pleasure and a paradoxical physicalised transcendent connection through shared bodily experiences of drinking, smoking, and sex. In this late scene, Gould awakes one morning to find Sal throwing his records and books on the funeral pyre of Tracker Marks and joins Sal and her children in the dance of mourning. This is a dance of profound loss that connects firmly with the notion of the past perceived as postmodern sublime. In what is also an inversion of the twentieth-century Nazi book burnings, the destruction of all of these limited and false histories — Enlightenment histories — becomes an unburdening; an expression of freedom for both Sal (racial and gendered Other) and Gould (class Other). As Gould and Sal sing, cry, and dance, they, for this moment at least, perform a sublime ritual of grief and joy that purges them of the oppression of Enlightenment history and offers an expression of pre-

modern, individual subjectivity that, in itself, is a form of resistance to Enlightenment systems of categorisation and control:

with her and the children I danced so many things that lay so deep within my soul it felt like a purifying fire itself. It was joy and it was sadness and it was inexplicable [...] We were dancing something beyond words. (377)

As Gould's records and histories fuel the fire, he embraces the physical as the site of resistance and resilience. In giving up the records, ledgers, and histories Gould accepts that the notion of "saving" history is ultimately impossible as, even when every effort is made to construct a "true history," it will continue to shift and change. He relinquishes that "entire untrue literature [...] that had so long denied me my free voice & and the stories I needed to tell" (375). In the final scene of the records room episode, Gould's revelatory experience is something like that of the postmodern historical sublime; a realm of loss and unfulfilled desire exists at the edges, in the space of Other. This is only experienced though an aesthetic space which is outside reason and, perhaps, outside language.

It seems likely that part of Flanagan's motivation in *Gould's Book of Fish* for dismantling Enlightenment notions of a stable, unified history was the desire to construct a polemical response to the conservative side of the History Wars. It seems as if Flanagan is reasserting an idea that many prominent Australian scholars and public intellectuals have long accepted about the national history: that we know enough about the past, penal colonies and systems of colonialism the world over, to accept that Australia's founding decades and subsequent frontier conflicts were times of violence and institutionalised terror. Flanagan's novel suggests that to whitewash this by over-emphasising heroism and pioneering achievements is to make a past of lies. This is one of the reasons that his convict "heroes" are utterly unheroic: they are ridiculous and grotesque, although never quite as much as their ruling-class masters. Were we a realm of anti-heroes long before it became the modernist

protagonist of choice? By representing the past as knowable only through something like the postmodern sublime, Flanagan gives expression to a set of ideas that should be at the centre of Australian society and should, in particular, inform official dealings with Indigenous Australians. That is, while the past can never be known in a full, unified sense, it is nevertheless a past of loss and should be approached through an aesthetic space on the edges of Enlightenment thinking. The novel speaks to the complicities and complacencies of contemporary society in a very liberal call for social change, inspired by Enlightenment ideals such as equality and emancipation. Flanagan's politics echo that of historiographer Hayden White when he writes that we need an alternative, non-linear form of history: "that alone can goad human beings to make their lives different for themselves and their children, which is to say, to endow their lives with meaning for which they alone are fully responsible" (*Content* 72).

*Gould's Book of Fish* is an effective instance of storytelling that is necessarily self-referential, fragmented, anti-realist, ironic but grounded in "the real" through the body. In rejecting the traditional narrativisation of the past in two of its most accepted and traditional forms — Enlightenment linear history and the historical novel — Flanagan calls for a more suitable form of storytelling to represent the past: a self-conscious, postmodern mode that both delights in the act of telling and also gives expression to the loss and unfulfilled longing of modern existence.

Richard Flanagan continues to have a complex relationship with the Australian nation. He revels in Australia's distance from centres of power like Europe and America, and the parts of the nation's heritage that represent independence and anti-authoritarianism. In a recent lecture given at the 2011 Melbourne Writer's Festival, however, he writes of the various ills he perceives as having descended on Australia in the present including the dismal state of public debate, what he calls the "new conformity" at the heart of Australian life, and

the restriction of freedom. His explanation moves through disparate subjects with characteristic energy: he begins with a dry impersonation of the Labor Member of Parliament Craig Thompson, who was recently disgraced by allegations of using union funds to pay for prostitutes, as a bleak reminder of the sad state of Australian political life; he tells of small but significant acts of resistance by Australian prisoners of war in Burma; he rails against the government's treatment of David Hicks and Muhamed Haneef; he gives a damning judgment of a nation that would allow refugees to drown in an incident as avoidable as that on Ashmore Reef in April 2009 and not call for change. He makes a tribute to the writer Vasily Grossman and, in particular, the truths of his final novel *Everything Flows*. Grossman's novel, according to Flanagan "breaks its banks" moving from the social-realist mode of his earlier novels to a form that "contains multitudes...its moods moving from the near mystical...to epic and elegiac." Grossman, he says, "reduces history, thought, human nature to a dazzling and dizzying poetry" ("The Australian Disease" 80). For Flanagan, the teller of truths — the dissenter — is also necessarily a teller of tales, often tall tales, a tradition in which Australia once had a distinguished heritage but, like the values of truth and equality, is fading. Arresting the movement towards the end of freedoms is also an attempt to tell enriching, challenging, energising stories which are, like *Gould's Book of Fish*, a "clandestine rainbow of tales" (*Gould's Book of Fish* 18).

## Chapter Five

### Rodney Hall's *Captivity Captive* and narrating the gothic: Beneath modernity

It is fitting that the final chapter of this thesis deals with one of the very first novels to be published in the period. Rodney Hall's *Captivity Captive*, the first of his *Yandilli Trilogy*, was released during the bicentennial year and is a self-conscious re-visioning of Australia's heroic pastoralist legend — an early example of Collins' and Davis's "backtracking". Two decades or so later is an appropriate time for what is, perhaps, a double backtrack. In revisiting the bicentennial moment, with its conspicuous celebratory mode, we also revisit Hall's critical response in a tale of another significant national moment. The Gatton Murders were perceived at the time of Federation as evidence of the nation's lost innocence, because of both the heinous nature of the killings and the public's voracious appetite for the graphic reporting of detail.<sup>90</sup> Now, two decades after the politically and socially progressive period during which Hall's novels were published, the nation continues obsessively to revisit its past in a number of cultural spheres, but these are no longer unproblematically progressive times, particularly in terms of Indigenous rights. Clearly there are myriad complex global and national, social, historical and cultural reasons for the various types of race relations that have unfolded in Australia during that time, which it would be impossible fully to unravel in the space of a thesis. However, what the action of backtracking can do here is reveal the strong and enduring nature of the connection between the Australian literary community and the left-liberal reconciliation agenda, even as its limitations and failings are steadily and increasingly revealed.

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<sup>90</sup> One of the reasons that the police investigation was such a failure was the disturbance of the crime scene by locals who rushed to view it and also that too many details of the crime were known to the general public.

Despite the initial critical success of Hall's *Yandilli Trilogy* novels,<sup>91</sup> they have been largely neglected since. I would suggest that the particular and confronting gothic form of Hall's novels departs from the political and aesthetic tendency in many Australian historical novels that participate in the broadly liberal reconciliation discourse that was in its formative stages in the late 1980s-early 1990s. This is not to claim that Hall's novels are at odds politically with a progressive social agenda:<sup>92</sup> rather, it is to argue that the gothicism of Hall's novels explores a specifically Australian fatalism, even nihilism, that exists within past and present colonial modernity despite the existence of powerful triumphalist national narratives. Part of the unsettling nature of this fictional space is a political ambivalence that is not easily relatable to the optimistic discourse of national progress. To now reconsider the political merits of Hall's trilogy is to discover the frustration and anger of some white and Indigenous academics at the lack of "progress" in the reconciliation movement in the two decades since the novels were published: their sense that the movement amounted to little more than a White "feel-good" exercise which has failed to effect meaningful social change. While the particular gothicism of Hall's trilogy may have been shockingly alienating in the hope-filled years before and after Mabo, it is undeniably prescient of the rage and resentment felt now amongst those wishing to support justice for Indigenous and other non-white Australians as the government, under majority mandate, continues to implement regressive race policies.

Hall's *Yandilli Trilogy* was published between 1988 and 1993. It is set in the fictional district of Yandilli, on the coast of Southern Queensland and traces three subtly interwoven tales of colonisation. *Captivity Captive* (1988) is set in 1898 where a hardworking Irish Catholic farming family become involved in a gruesome murder. A remaining family member, now in his eighties, recalls the details of the days leading up to the Boxing Day killings. He recalls his youth and the obsessive patterns of affection and desire in their large,

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<sup>91</sup> Hall's *The Grisly Wife* won the Miles Franklin Literary Award.

<sup>92</sup> Hall is well-known as a longstanding activist for Indigenous causes.

but isolated family. *The Second Bridegroom* (1991) depicts the experiences of a man transported for forgery in the 1830s. Assigned to a master and headed for an isolated pastoral settlement he absconds and spends many months with an Indigenous tribe, treated as one both feared and holy. When conflict arises between the tribe and the men of the steadily growing settlement, the nameless and profoundly disorientated narrator ends up being locked in an outbuilding, writing feverishly of his desire for the now-widowed mistress of the settlement, a development which suggests the intimate relationship between the violence of colonisation and sexual union. *The Grisly Wife* (1994) is the darkly comic tale of Catherine Byrne, wife of a charismatic millennialist preacher and one of his many female disciples. In their bush mission the little community reels when Catherine becomes pregnant during their, by all accounts, chaste marriage. They subsequently prepare for the reign of the next Messiah. Significantly, Hall's novels convey "typical" settler experiences and activities: a convict transportation story of *The Second Bridegroom*, a missionary experience, and an outback farming family in *Captivity Captive*. They are also, however, stories of exceptionality, what might be called the "oddities" of history: a convict worshipped as a deity in an Indigenous tribe, a missionary group with each person missing a body part, and the family at the centre of one of Australia's most infamous and bizarre murder mysteries. These unusual tales demand the specific consideration of details and they spark a longing to explain the various neuroses or perversions, a longing made stronger by the sense that there cannot be an explanation, or at least, not one that is satisfying.

Vijay Mishra notes in *The Gothic Sublime* that works such as Hall's, which present the profound psychic disturbance and sadistic violence at the very centre of modern existence, are a narrative demonstration of Walter Benjamin's iconic notion of blasting open the continuum of history — that these textual artefacts of barbarism are concomitantly texts of civilisation (2). Hall creates and adapts documents of "history" — the *Yandilli Trilogy* is



constructed to resemble the primary texts of a series of letters, a testimonial and a written witness account — and, in doing so, each novel attests to Benjamin's edict. Each tale is about a specifically modern situation, where characters are caught up in systems of imperialism and colonisation; but also about the failure of the Enlightenment, as pagan rituals return, repressed energies expand into violence, and individuals reveal their neuroses in various types of madness. During the period of the *Yandilli Trilogy's* publication, the Australian cultural community may have been prepared to debate the instances of violence in the formative years of the Australian nation, but was arguably less willing to engage with the brutal forces unavoidably present in the existence of the modern itself. Through his novels, Hall comes to an ethically confronting and philosophically bleak conclusion: not only that savage acts are evidenced in the chronicles of Australian history, but also that the symbiotic relationship between the barbaric and the civilised formed (and forms) the Australian political state just as powerfully as in other nations that are often, more famously, associated with atrocity and genocide.

The gothic mode of the novels is clearly apparent through the relationships between people and place. The recurring theme of troubled conjugal unions, signalled through the titles *The Grisly Wife* and *The Second Bridegroom*, represents the impassioned complexity of colonisers in the land they inhabit. The colonisers atavistically revert to superstitious and/or extreme religious belief to make meaning from lives of suffering. Most particularly, the narrator of *The Second Bridegroom* draws on ancient Celtic regeneration myth, the Goddess of Kirk Braddon, from his Isle of Man birthplace to fuel his complex fantasy of belonging, which also entails domination and sexual gratification. In the myth the goddess takes two husbands a year (one for summer and one for winter) and the new bridegroom must kill the first. The narrator of each tale conveys an unsettled interiority, ill-at-ease with themselves, others and the events that befall them. The narrator of *The Second Bridegroom*, for example,

writes his frenzied thoughts about his own role in ruling the new settlement as the new “bridegroom” — a desire culminating in his plan to take the widow for his own. His time spent with the Indigenous tribe, as he interprets it, brings him the mystical knowledge to assume his rightful place, ruling and repopulating the district as an expression of an ancient rite. A myth of primal, natural renewal is, to the narrator, the perfect expression of what the colony of New South Wales should be, an honest and natural fulfilment of humankind’s most primal desires. Sexual consummation is not just between individuals but between the newcomers and the place itself. The bloodshed of initial European-Indigenous contact in *Yandilli* is not the last violent death. As the legend suggests there is renewed violence with each generation. The isolated frontier space — the edge of the civilised — is a site that provokes intense experience, a concentration of emotion and relations, and often resulting in murder. The expansive natural spaces are continually interspersed with periods spent in dingy and airless interiors as the introduced culture builds living spaces that confine and repress. As displaced people, isolated and alienated by their experience they are only “at home”, when not “at home” in this liminal space between cultures, between worlds, constantly switching from extreme light and extreme dark. Angela Carter made the point that that which remains constant in the gothic is “the provoking of unease”(133). Anxiety or “unease” dominates life in *Yandilli*. In this space the Europeans try to realise their various fantasies of power and sovereignty, yet by the end of the final story the protagonists and their descendents are dead. Even the large Malone family of *Captivity Captive*, represented as grossly fecund in the previous generation, all die childless. The cycles of the goddess in this particular Australian manifestation have not brought continuity or stability. Sacrifice in the interests of renewal has become perverted by the schizoid character of a place stuck between nature and the modern, where production, competition and the will-to-power destroy any balance between humanity and the natural world, and all ends in barren entropy.

Since it is impossible to do justice to the originality and complexity of the three novels in the space that I have available here, I have chosen to focus on *Captivity Captive*, the most conspicuously gothic of Hall's novels, as best suited to an exploration of the psychic and spiritual turmoil evident in the relationship between the gothic, colonialism and modernity — telling themes to explore in the bicentenary year. The publication of the novel coincided historically with the publication of important revisionist histories and the very beginning of public debates of the History Wars. Unlike many of the other novels investigated in this thesis, it does not deal directly with the genocidal nature of colonisation, yet it has similar ideological underpinnings. *Captivity Captive*, the first to be written (1988) and the last in the chronological arrangement of the trilogy (set in the 1890s), is a grim tale based on the unsolved “real-life” Gatton murders, where three siblings are found dead and oddly arranged in a neighbour's field in what seems to be an unusually sadistic and ritualistic killing. The story begins in the 1950s, with Patrick attending the death bed of a dying neighbour, Barney Barnett, who has decided to confess to the infamous Cuttajo murders. Patrick sees with pleasure that the attendant police officer does not take the confession seriously, but the event spurs him to write a truthful account to be left in perpetuity after the deaths of the remaining siblings, thus preventing others from claiming the terrible “glory” of the crime for themselves.<sup>93</sup> The remaining Malone siblings, youths at the time of the killing, now in their eighties and nineties, exist in a state of tortured longevity as they “dare not die”, just as in their youth they dared not leave the farm called, strangely, “Paradise”, for fear of brutal punishment. In their old “skeleton” of a house Patrick's obsession with the past is reinforced by the ever-present ghosts of his parents, the father, Daniel Malone, who occupies their interior space on horseback in a Fuselian reflection of his brutish giantism in life, and his mother, Mary Malone, whose spectral presence is a dark, inescapable miasma. In a

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<sup>93</sup> We find out late in the narrative that Barney is actually responsible for one of the killings.

familiar gothic pattern, the wider contradictions and problems of modernity come to be concentrated in the domestic space of the family: the “pressure point” of the modern, built on “the faultline”, a “point of conjunction between alliance and sexuality” (Williams 95). The details of the murders, eventually explained by Patrick, reveal another traditional gothic preoccupation, that of incest (Botting and Wilson 12). Patrick and three siblings — Michael, Ellen, and Norah — on the Boxing Day in question engage in the sexual consummation of long held desires. Patrick has brought with him a loaded pistol with which he intends to kill Norah and himself after their passionate union. However, Norah seizes the gun and kills Michael in, as Patrick speculates afterwards, an act of envy over Michael choosing the younger sister, Ellen, instead of herself. The two girls are bound in ropes by Patrick so they can say they were set upon by an unknown attacker and that Michael died trying to protect them. As they stand bound together, two other witnesses emerge from the shadows. Eldest brother William comes forward and bludgeons Norah, now helpless, to death, while a neighbour, Barney Barnett, steps forward and murders Ellen, to whom he is also betrothed. The strands of desire are both due to their isolation, parental cruelty, and also something darkly inexplicable in the human condition, something that Patrick finds impossible to relate and refers to obtusely as “the mystery.”

This type of gothic narrative is particularly powerful in the context of a nation during its bicentenary year which is both surrounded by triumphalist sentiment and new knowledge about various “hidden” pasts to do with the continuous violence of colonisation, both state-sanctioned and otherwise. Such a celebration is a type of Enlightenment moment, full of the glamour of progress, the triumph of nationhood represented by, for example, the kind of overtly “sunny” historical re-enactments such as that of the “tall ships”, a flotilla that retraced the route of the First Fleet; a fraught symbol when one considers that the fleet largely consisted of convicts in appalling conditions who almost starved to death in the first year of

settlement, not to mention the resulting devastation to the Indigenous populations.<sup>94</sup> The novel articulates a critical response to the process of bicentennial hero remembering/remaking with types such as the pioneering pastoralist at the forefront of national affection. *Captivity Captive* subverts the triumphalism of such a history, but also questions the notion of history itself as a proud narrative of progress in its gothic investigation of those lives and events that are most often invisible within naive manifestations of the triumph of modernity in categories such as “the nation.” These perceptions are revealed as false when that which lies “hidden” or “below” may, at times, become visible. Gibson describes the phenomenon thus:

staked out in the past of a place, in a time just the other side of your immediate consciousness. Just outside the glare of your headlights. (2)

It is a response that is

especially compelling within colonial societies...culture(s) unconvinced of [their] sovereignty in the landscape. (14)

If one imagines that within the headlight beams is the safe, known experience, then that what lies just outside is something that one only glimpses and is made aware of but prefers not to investigate. Gothic texts can bring such events, such histories, into view.

Hall’s novels have an interesting relationship to the history of the gothic genre. In the popular gothic genre, as it emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in the writing of, for instance, Horace Walpole, Anne Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis or, in the United States, Washington Irving, the thrills and horrors of these tales are located “outside” in “spooky” French or Italian castles, heroes and heroines escape from terrible fates orchestrated and enacted by mad, lascivious monks, mysterious step-parents or guardians, or headless horsemen. Later gothic texts have a greater focus on the horror “within” and the horror

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<sup>94</sup> For more information about the complexity and controversy of bicentennial celebrations see Julie Marcus’s article “Bicentennial Follies.”

migrates to occupy the “inner” world more completely, even though canonical novels like *Frankenstein* or *Wuthering Heights* retain the isolated unease of traditional gothic settings — whether in Frankenstein’s laboratory in Ingolstadt, a ship stuck in ice or a rustic mansion on a wild moor. Both of these novels are exemplars of the horrors within the self. Frankenstein and Cathy see in a more overtly disorderly, uncontrollable Other that which resides as much within as without. Frankenstein’s “doppelganger” is the physically hideous creature of his own making who represents a particular type of Enlightenment fear. This fear is that the “advancement” of science will only reinforce that which humanity thought it may escape in this new age; the darkness, confusion and uncertainty of the human condition, starkly illuminated by new discoveries and knowledge. The narrative reveals the startling revelation that new knowledge may only ever reveal the fundamental truths of human selfishness, ambition and will-to-power. Similarly, when Cathy declares “I am Heathcliff”, she faces the sublimated nature of vital of parts herself and, also, the way that all of the light delicacy of her civilised life with husband Linton divides her from love and authenticity, embodied by this dark gypsy-child grown cruel and powerful in manhood (Sedgwick 121). *Captivity* *Captive* also reveals one of the powerful paradoxes of the gothic. Superstition, barbarism and savagery are represented in the ideological structures of the modern as things of the past; but they are simultaneously the stuff of the future, the Enlightenment project brought to fruition in Europe of the twentieth century; the structures of progress and civilisation hitched to barbarism on a grand scale. Thus the “marauding clan” of the Malones, the “primitive” Irish of the remote frontier, enact an event of such violence that it is at once atavistic and proto-modern. As Tzvetan Todorov puts it in his seminal discussion of horror, the gothic is the “backwardness announced in the form of things to come” (cited in Gelder 20), a particularly pertinent description when we consider that the bloody events of the novel occur on the eve of the twentieth century.

Australia has an especial relationship to the gothic, just as it has a unique relationship to the categories of the Enlightenment and the modern (Gascoigne; D. Carter)<sup>95</sup>. The early legal and social structures of the nation reflect a number of aspects of progressive Enlightenment thinking, although the historical conditions of settlement often made for a lived reality different from that envisaged by lawmakers and humanitarians. The nation may have been founded at a time of increasing engagement with the principles of democracy and powerful discourses of human rights, but the often conflicting principles of capitalism and imperial expansion made nineteenth-century Australia a dynamic mix of the paradoxes of modernity that endure in different forms until the present day. As Ian McLean puts it in his book *White Aborigines*, “modernity and colonialism are impossible to disentangle” (cited in McCann *Marcus Clarke’s Bohemia* 24). As gothic novels emerged in Europe as part of the anxiety surrounding ontological, social and political change, the appeal of the gothic in the Australian colonies from the early years of occupation was inevitable, because similar concerns were present, even amplified, by the anxieties of settlement. As critics such as Gerry Turcotte and Andrew McCann have argued, the gothic in an Australian context thrives in an environment of fear, isolation and alienation, tapping into what David Carter calls the specific “weirdness of our modernity”(9). Like the gothic in Europe, the Australian gothic, firstly, engages with that which reaches outside its Enlightenment cultural and intellectual frame and, secondly, it must also deal with the increased incongruity between the European experience and cultural backgrounds of these newcomers and the harsh materiality of existence in a place that seemed so wholly different.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> John Gascoigne has investigated Australia’s historical background and the intimacy of its connection to the Enlightenment in *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia* (2002). David Carter explores the Australian nation’s particular relationship with the modern in “Modernity and Belatedness in Australian Cultural Discourse,” in *Southerly*, 1994-95.

<sup>96</sup> See Gerry Turcotte’s entry “Australian Gothic” in *The Handbook of Gothic Literature*. For a more lengthy and complex explanation of this process see Turcotte’s *Peripheral Fear*.

*The Yandilli Trilogy*, especially *Captivity Captive*, are apt texts to demonstrate the ethical potential of the gothic historical novel in conveying the opacity of the Other, separated from the self by the space of history. The text invites a comparison to realism, where the development of character is more linear — as in Patrick’s attempt to write a narrative in a way that the police or other representatives of authority would accept as evidence, but as he attempts the explanation of cause/effect/blame he finds the task impossible. In the novel human actions defy complete explanation in any positivistic or legalistic sense. The ethical and political potential of the gothic form can be understood by applying a psychoanalytic model of subjectivity and a more historically and culturally contextualised approach to literary text. This discussion takes the two key twentieth-century theorists, Jean Laplanche and Georges Bataille, and their investigations of the often hidden or secret Other that is present in the self, to explicate the various experiences of alienation and violence in Hall’s novel. The narrative complexity of *Captive Captivity* can be used to demonstrate the way that these theories become more powerfully politicised once located in particular times or places. Therefore, these theories are related to both the colonial context in which the novel is set and the late-twentieth-century context in which it was written and published.

### **I. Laplanche’s ethical “alien”: Psychoanalytic theory and the materiality of the Australian colonial frontier.**

In considering the novel’s political implications, it is important to be aware of how its gothic frame sets in motion a confrontation with different types of narrative violence. From the first person narrative perspective of Patrick Malone, this is a tale of transgression and overreaching within the context of a patriarchal family, in which the emerging space of colonial Australia is rendered as existing in a vexed state of modernity. Patrick’s narration



conveys his attempt to explain and order the events before and during the murders of his three siblings, while simultaneously accepting the very impossibility of explanation. Here, there exists the implicit realisation that the act of telling the tale — this type of tale — in linear, realist form is inevitably an act of philosophically reductive containment and ethical violence. For Patrick, whose subjectivity is dramatically laid bare through the first person perspective of the novel, the process of narrative demonstrates the enigma (what he calls, using his Catholic frame of reference, *the mystery*) of both the self and Other (and relations with Others), and the very impossibility of knowing the drives and motivations of those Others, even siblings with similar experiences and the same genetic make-up. This model of subjectivity, in which the self is anguishingly isolated and simultaneously drawn to the Other, can be understood in terms of the Laplanchian model of selfhood explicated by Elisabeth Bronfen and David Punter in their essay “Gothic: Violence, Trauma and the Ethical”. They argue that a Laplanchian theory of subjectivity explicates the presence of that which is “alien” in the self, placed there by that which is enigmatic and alien in the Other (7). Further, this psychological model has important ethical and political implications for the non-realist narratives which represent it. As with Laplanchian psychoanalysis, in non-realist narrative entrenched notions of the borders of the self must become disorientated and unfixed, opening a space of therapeutic and ethical possibility. Although Hall’s novel works, to some extent, metonymically to expose unsettling realities within the categories of the nation and the modern, the very specific experience of the narrator and the inwardness of his subjective interpretations and self-analysis, unsettles the action of the universal and directs attention inwards towards the separateness and alienation of experience.

Another important political implication of the Laplanchian model of selfhood, as argued by Punter and Bronfen, lies in its potential to release not only therapeutic practice but also literature and criticism, from the repressive function of the search for origin. They

explain that the repression of that which is enigmatic and irreducible in human experience, such as that which is irrational, libidinous and instinctual, is an ethically violent act (14). Punter and Bronfen provide a useful explanation of this repressive action by referring to Laplanche's citation of Freud's comment about archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, whose entire knowledge of history, both of the individual subject and knowledge generally, according to Freud, is used "to one end; the patient identification of the ground of the coordinates to unearth Troy; this may also work for the different "patient" — the one on the couch — for the excavations of the psychoanalyst" (qtd in Bronfen and Punter 16). For Punter and Bronfen, it is the work of the gothic to reveal that there is *no precise point* at which to dig, as such, to uncover Troy or to unearth the past in a way that reveals, in reverse order, a clear line of causality in human existence. Accordingly, there is no specific singular, perhaps traumatic, experience which has made the subject unknown and enigmatic to themselves. Bronfen and Punter extend and vary Freud's archaeological metaphor to explain the use of the gothic in different types of "digging", where the strategies of gothic are likened to the actions and presence of a mole, burrowing here and there, known by superficial evidence of its underground presence, with its activities destabilising the superstructure on the surface (16-18). The gothic reveals that there is no "Troy," only a series of possible narratives about Troy "incapable of exhausting itself in the singleness of story" (20). This metaphor is fitting for the use to which it is put in this chapter: it is impossible to divorce the narration of singular and collective histories from that which has been designated "gothic," and that realist form applied to enigmatic and traumatic experience involves an inevitable ethical violence in its denial of the Other. *Captivity Captive* shares an intimate connection with Bronfen and Punter's thesis through its self-conscious use of the gothic form combined with the interiority of first person narration to explore the enigmatic self, and thus challenges

critics and readers to question the belief in the possibility, indeed the desirability, of recuperating origin.

The strength of Punter's and Bronfen's argument lies in its recognition of the inseparability of the seemingly opposed modes of the modern and the gothic. The gothic emerged at the same time as Enlightenment modernity and as an inevitable response to that which was not explained by it, that which seeps or bursts out of social and ideological forms of containment. In the paradoxes of its form, the expression of that which is "in excess" — the unconscious, irrational, violent, animalistic, libidinous — through literary modes of narrative that are of the Enlightenment, the gothic can be seen as acutely modern in its ability to exist on both the inside and outside of regulating social and ideological systems. Occupying a marked liminal space, the gothic can operate to represent veiled entities like the unconscious, often working as "medium," making the interior life exterior in a shadowed labyrinthine movement. Anne Williams writes in her seminal work *Art of Darkness: The Poetics of Gothic* that the (eighteenth-century) gothic is prescient of psychoanalysis in its profound engagement with the miseries of the modern world (8). She goes as far as to say that:

[s]imilarities between the Freudian model of the psyche and the conventions of gothic fiction are best understood as parallel expressions of an Enlightenment frame of mind... "Enlightenment" articulates the necessity for darkness and to celebrate the known implies mysteries. (148)

These ideas have vital implications for Hall's novel. In broad generic terms *Captivity Captive* can be categorised as crime narrative, even while constantly undermining its rationalist, empiricist underpinnings. While Patrick's explanation of the Boxing Day deaths of three siblings eventually reveals the identities of the "murderers" and the energized tangle of

family relations in the preceding years, the web of cause and blame is never fully unravelled, the crime itself defying explanation.

In his attempt to narrativise events — to write the “history” of the murders of his brother and two sisters — Patrick struggles with inconsistencies in his own interpretation of events and, in analysing the complex reactions of others, the most beloved of them long dead, is fitfully aware of the impossibility of the task. In an investigation of one of Jean Laplanche’s central assertions in his “Essays on Otherness” — that realist form enacts violence against the individual psyche — Punter and Bronfen call for a literary criticism that expands its ethical and political potential through being unrecuperative (8). Malone’s narrative, therefore, can never be the straightforward explanation he initially attempts but is marked by inconsistencies, uncertainties and the shifting nature of subjectivity and memory:

I am beyond that age when a man’s mind occasionally tumbles headlong down shafts of memory, glimpsing some small moment among humble objects and feeling his heart contract with grief for the life he once led: I have now reached the point where this is my normal condition. Now and then the reverse happens and I am swept level with the present, dumped in my shell somewhere I’d rather not be, longing only to sink back to a region offering room for hope, time for seeing every last thing as completely as human eyes can. (532)

This description of the devastating obsessive recollection recognises the philosophical difficulties in attempting a historically objective account. Patrick sees how obsessive recollection is now central to his consciousness and he remains in the bittersweet space of exquisite memories of the intensity of a life he has lost. Objectivity in this emotionally charged space of the past is impossible. Yet, to his way of thinking, his very closeness to events as participant, his unashamed interestedness, provides insight and authority.

“[S]eeing as completely as human eyes can” means to Patrick both a constant and unending

examination, thus the constant circular psychic movement between past and present and an acknowledgement of the limits of human perception. Using Laplanche's terms, the narration enacts the "retention" or "preservation of alterity." "[S]inner" though he knows he is, Malone's narrative maintains ethical circumspection in its obsessive but honest spiral of recollection. He neither denies his own culpability (he himself had intended a murder-suicide that he never carried out), nor makes wholesale accusations of anyone else. The implication here is that "origin and the ontological reliance on a realist line of causality" (Bronfen and Punter 8) is necessarily eschewed to face the complexities of ethical obligation in a history such as this, and in history generally.

In Patrick's narration, inexplicable events ("the mystery") can only be understood by a confrontation with a type of sublimity that borders on the mystical, and which can only be known and felt by the full embrace of the notion of enigma. Bronfen and Punter explain that in the gothic the unconscious, never openly accessible to the subject, is forced into a type of alienating violence by the attempt to narrativise in realist terms, resulting in unsettling effects such as a type of uncanny reduplication of a feeling or perception that cannot be effectively communicated or explained. Indeed, in the operation of the modern, a "gothic" response is inevitable, its alienating effects caught in the action of an endlessly fragmenting self (8). The realist form, in this discussion of the unconscious, attempts to contain an unassimilable foreign body (10). Similarly, Patrick is never able to integrate fully the various reasons and drives that seem to have motivated his participation in events. This conclusion relies on the recognition that the unconscious is "Other," not more self than self, or "Hyde to Jekyll"; rather, it is something exponentially alien, itself formed by the "Other" or alien, in another and so on, a gestalt of unconscious drives, responses and contextual pressures. In the novel, this is expressed in the unusual effect of a narrator aware of the limits of narrative, and the operation of the unseen through narrative, even as he is compelled to tell a "truthful" tale. He

has, therefore, no other way to explain events other than by referring to them as “the mystery”, a quality that is as much a part of being a Malone in “Paradise” as the brutal violence to the body and mind they receive from their parents, the father having beaten the eldest William to the point that he can never function to his full mental capacity again. Like some of the other siblings, he feels there is some kind of primal and enveloping mysticism — a divine access to the infinite — surrounding them that suggests that somehow the Boxing Day events were inevitable. The “mystery”, in their Catholic frame of reference, is what is left at the end of the process of explanation. Malone explains early in the narrative:

Let me tell you there’s something in us that we don’t put a name to. We feel it right enough but don’t exactly know what it is. Norahh claimed to know that this was God, waiting for us to be worthy of him who is already in us, hoping to shine out from what we do. Many’s the time we talked it over. But I couldn’t be brought to see life that way. If I could, I would have taken up the offer to become a priest... With me, it has become a sensation of greatness; not a greatness belonging to God but a power in my own body waiting for a chance to show. (*The Yandilli Trilogy* 509)

His tangled attempt to explain the “mystery” of those realms of experience outside modern frames of reference — an enigma or “untranslatable residue” (Bronfen and Punter 13) — often has recourse to the sensuously evocative symbolic lexicon of Catholicism. As it is represented here, the mystery has something to do with physicality, the nascent energy amassed during their long confinement on a property which they are forbidden to leave. It seems that what Patrick calls the “greatness” — of emotion, physical, violent and sexual extremes, something which seems to give their lives purpose and resonance as they make their “mark” on their time and place — comes about because of the extent of the confinement, yet there is no certainty in this interpretation, only a type of mystical apprehension and, as Patrick admits, this is his own

interpretation. As the events move on to their violent conclusion Patrick has to admit he can never fully understand the motivations and responses of the others. Likewise, that which exists in “Paradise” is impossible to put into words in that “it was too intense, too complex, too intelligent for anyone to talk their way out of once they got into it” (*The Yandilli Trilogy* 551). This force — what Punter and Bronfen refer to as “the alien put there by an alien” (10) — is the force of unconscious influence, itself susceptible to outside influence, that is always too difficult to trace back to origin, like a crackling radio not quite tuned to a station, and in the specific situation of the Malones, connects them by a shared and palpable sense of energy just out of intellectual reach that is intimately connected to the extent of their eventual transgression.

Psychoanalytic models are at their most useful when combined with a materialist consideration of specific historical circumstance. While the Laplanchean model of subjectivity, applied to the gothic form, is both useful and illuminating, it also has limitations, particularly when applied to the Australian colonial frontier. While the Punter/Bronfen analysis is historically aware in as much as it sees intrinsic human responses reshaped by the structures of the modern, it is not flexible enough to take into account specific and diverse human experiences: the modern is considered as, more or less, a unified, even heterogeneous entity. The situation of *Captivity Captive* shows the extent to which different types of traumas can be intimately and reflexively connected. Dominic La Capra explains how vital it is to treat “structural” and “historical”, carefully and differently (“Trauma, Absence, Loss” 700). He explains that structural trauma, like that addressed in Laplanche’s model, is intrinsic, like the “loss of innocence” archetype of Freudian analysis of the primal scene. In this scene — when a child witnesses his parents engaged in the act of sexual intercourse or other like experiences — they receive a confusing view of certain puzzling and frightening realities. The state of confusion is made greater by social taboos that forbid the discussion or

acknowledgment of such an event. While these alienating experiences are, therefore, part of Western modern subjectivity, what is the result when the effects of structural trauma are combined with historical experience of trauma? La Capra explains that historical trauma — individual or collective experiences where trauma (possibly avoidable) has been imposed by an outside force — requires a different type of theoretical and political approach. This type of trauma is not wholly inevitable, even though it is caught up in powerful controlling political structures, and requires perpetrators. What might arguably be attributed to historical trauma in the specific situation of *Captivity Captive* includes the inter-generational, inherited trauma of an existence based on the most heinous forms of sovereign violence, such as the massacre of Indigenous tribes, and forced transportation. On a smaller, individual scale the novel investigates the specific violence and psychological abuse inflicted by a parent. While it is undeniable that motive and guilt should be recognised in their opacity and complexity in any ethical consideration of events, to attribute all human hardship to structural trauma removes important political considerations. A dangerous potential endpoint of analyses that are over-reliant on structural trauma, to the cost of other material aspects of existence, is that historical trauma is posited as inevitable. Thus, to add the consideration of historical trauma to the Punter/Bronfen model compounds the reflexive and circular uncanny effect of the gothic outlined in their argument. As the gothic communicates through the form of secret archaeological investigation that reveals the unstable foundations beneath the superstructure, the compounded effect of trauma (historical) on top of trauma (structural) exposes an edifice that is not only unstable but practically tottering: the gothic machinations below, somehow appropriately, revealing not only a cracked structure but something almost ghostly in its insubstantiality. This is not to suggest that the structures of power including those of law and its implementation are not powerful; rather, it is to argue that the ideological and social structures that support them are disturbingly insubstantial.



The Malone family, particularly the parents Daniel and Mary Malone, are compelling representations of the cumulative effects of structural and historical trauma. Their brutality is to do with the postlapsarian state of life in the ironically named “Paradise”, firstly, in its presence as a psychic space of anger and horror, locked in constant repetition of the shame and grief of the Fall and expulsion from Eden; secondly, the geographical/historical space of the Australian frontier, poised at the cusp (geographical and psychological) of the “civilized” and “savage” compounds their pain, the type of life that exists there always laying bare human brutalities not only in the realities of constant cycle of life and death of pastoralist life but also in the repetition of intimidation and violence necessarily to maintain the level of parental intimidation required to keep the children working the farm and ensuring their financial success, enabling them to buy up neighbouring properties where, in comparison, the farms flounder. The violence could also be unbidden, with Daniel succumbing to “attacks of rage” where “he’d strap you on a bed-end and flog you for no reason he could explain through the froth filling his mouth” (487). The culture of alienating masculine competitiveness spreads to the next generation. Patrick describes one incident in the hot summer days before the murders where a younger brother Jeremiah enters the room where all of the brothers sleep close together in their single stretchers. Jeremiah stands before Patrick naked, knowing him to be awake, to gloat in triumph over his own rapidly expanding muscular physique and large penis. It is an act of intimidation over Patrick who is known in the family for intellect rather than strength. It is a telling moment in a constantly changing hierarchy. In a life where physical and emotional pain colours every other emotion and response, the characters are represented as driven by a need for completeness yet any experience of sensorial and emotional resonance or pleasure can only ever be a reminder of that which is always and already lost. Patrick relates their constant backwards-directed yearning for a type of Freudian reunion with the mother in explicitly sexual terms, reflecting

on the “fierceness” and the fugitive completeness of a first-time sexual union that he himself felt with his sister Norah:

As we lay burning together I thought of my parents, fearing that they too had felt this divine fury for the first time, lost in each other just that once and never finding their way out of the labyrinth again (Father Gwilym had told me the story of Orpheus and Eurydice) — certainly past the need for talking as they trod through hell. Might it be that they looked back, though forbidden to live the same experience twice, and sank into an underworld of failure each time that they were within reach of rising to a new and savage moment? ... I recognised, in myself and my brothers and sisters, the mockery of their fumbled attempts to find freedom once more. (546-7)

In addition to the most obvious reference of “Paradise” as already fallen, turned to hellish underworld, the repetition of the Fall in every individual sphere of individual and collective life indicates Patrick’s and his siblings’ pre-emptive understanding of bitter disappointments to come. It is little wonder then that, for Patrick, life is not only inherently “fallen” but when some freedom seems gained it is lost more than ever in a cycle of compounding disappointment, as suggested by the allusion to Orpheus, who in retrieving his dead wife from the underworld made the mistake of looking backward at her before she emerged, breaking his vow to the Gods and causing the death of his wife, this time for ever. Redeeming satisfaction — sexual or existential — is an impossible task of retracing experience to a lost origin, a path through a “labyrinth” to a state of fulfilment that can never be re-found.

Structural trauma, the avoidable sense of grief and anger at the end of innocence, embedded in unconscious, often unspoken existence, is compounded in a physical/psychic/political/geographical space such as the “hell” of Paradise. In this context, the clearest path to “redemption” is seen to be through the acquisition and expression of power

which, even when achieved, will be unsatisfying. Jeremiah, most physically and temperamentally like Daniel, has some understanding of the nature and methods of his father's brutal rule. As he explains:

“Cruel is not the word for Pa...Pa has to be one step ahead”. He pointed to the open paddock in the moonlight. “That was filled with enemies. Trees, men, women, kangaroos. They have to be chopped down one by one to make room for us. The fences keep nothing out. They are just a sign that beyond this point any intruder has him to deal with” (515).

Daniel Malone embodies the connected roles of the father and the pastoralist, both of them intent on domination and mastery of the natural world and one's offspring respectively. The father/pastoralist's desire for absolute power is reinforced by the treatment of his children as sources of labour, and by his refusal to allow them to leave the property. The gothic tangle of trauma in *Paradise* is thus both structural and historical. The novel suggests, in a typically compounding and paradoxical action, that the conditions of history make structural trauma even more devastating.

The representation of colonial experience as a paradoxical state that exists both outside and inside modernity echoes the type of unresolved subjectivity — alien within and without — that is articulated by Laplanche. Profound losses are part of the human condition, experienced both within (structural trauma) and imposed from without (historical trauma). A novel like *Captivity Captive* demonstrates the need to look at the structural, wider, historical and specific traumas in peripheral, specific locations of the colonial to expose the way that “normal” human losses are compounded and exacerbated by what occurs at the cultural centre. The colony is thus the place where the extent of the cruelty, indeed, the savagery, of the modern, is most evident. As Gerry Turcotte recognises in his useful figure of “peripheral fear,” the space of the gothic exists on the perceived edges of the “Enlightened” or settled world, even as it taps into

the fears and drives at the centre of culture (69-70). Whether this is the mysterious southern European space of early gothic novels or an isolated Yorkshire moor, a Transylvanian castle, or the “heart of darkness” of the Congo, the gothic is about the zone in which “civilisation” encounters the perverse, the uncivilised, the savage.<sup>97</sup> As Williams notes, the gothic is a profoundly ambiguous form: it most often works as ideological champion or gatekeeper of Eurocentric, Enlightenment norms, at the same moment that it undermines them by exposing the unsettling similarities on either side of the conceptual or imagined line (33-45). The outskirts of empire signal traumatic experience that is at once of the modern, but also an indication of the specificity tied to history, circumstance and place. Just as Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* knows that “the horror” is present not only in the exotic Congo but also in humanity itself, it is this “other” space, *as well* as the particular historical juncture brought about by the colonial and commercial expansion into Africa that provides the impetus for this realisation. Thus the narrative ends with the journey reversed as Marlow heads into the dark heart of the modern metropolis. The specificity of time and place is thus a crucial part of the gothic, even as it works metonymically to express wider modern anxieties.

The attention in the gothic mode to the specificity of history gives the form further political force and flexibility. While giving necessary recognition to the breakdown of motive, causality and origin, it simultaneously heightens the fact that human trauma and its effects are intensified and redoubled by historical circumstance — both general (as in the cultural and social forces of modernity) and also the way that these currents work in specific situations, such as an isolated farm in Southern Queensland in the 1890s. Punter and Bronfen note at the conclusion of their argument that the “search for origin would offer the seeming opportunity of

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<sup>97</sup> Certain elements of this study intersect with what has been described as the postcolonial gothic, a category which has been intelligently investigated by David Punter and Tabish Khair. While there are important similarities with these texts, I would veer away from the term postcolonial gothic to describe the situation in this novel as the Australian case must be viewed in its specificity; particularly as it is a settler state rather than a state of occupation.

freedom from the ethical, but instead would be a response to the need to get closer to the anonymous sources of the message's incoherence" (20). So rather than a type of relativistic freedom from culpability or responsibility, Punter and Bronfen advocate the need for ethics through a greater consideration of the complexity of causality than is recognised in modern ideological and political systems, which are so fundamentally tied to realist narrative. While cause or blame is caught in a labyrinth of individual desires and social processes, the processes of reflection are both worthwhile and necessary, even while they remain contradictory and inconsistent. Rather than removing human existence from the ethical, the process asks for the complex and ongoing consideration of causality in its many paradoxes. Assignment of blame is then made, but always with an understanding of the alienation within modern systems that exists alongside a politicised recognition of degrees of guilt among individuals and parties; a process that provokes constant re-consideration, revision and self-questioning in the absence of certainty.

In its gothic expression in *Captivity Captive*, the domestic space of the family focuses the modern in a destructive magnification which, in its way, works as a grim prophecy of the potential destructiveness inherent in modernity, such as that of the twentieth century. The ultimate complexity of Malone's enduring remembrances is revealed in Part III of the novel, when he is able to admit to himself his own role in the murder of his beloved siblings. It is at once an admission of personal guilt and a revelation of the ultimate destructiveness of the modern; but it is also an acknowledgment of the significance of a set of specific circumstances around an event, the details of which are finally revealed. While not having killed anyone himself, his desires, both conscious and unconscious, were important in shaping the actions of Christmas and Boxing Day and the eventual expression of incestuous desire. In connection with the events, Malone explains his privileged position as the clever child; given unprecedented access to education, he is the most "(E)nlightened" of the siblings. He recollects

and understands his own will-to-power surging during those days before the murders, and attempts to connect his motivations with his particular position as the “intellect” of the family. In his cleverness and capacity for insight, manipulation and organisation (as powerful as brute strength in the operation of colonisation), he tries to reverse the distribution of power in Paradise. On Christmas Eve, he learns of the exploits of St Patrick, after whom he was named, from his teacher, Father Gwilym, and in a rush of identification, announces to his family: “before Saint Patrick died, all Ireland was his.” Saint Patrick’s power to “colonise” Ireland with his faith becomes an expression of Patrick’s eroticised will-to-dominate. His desire to possess his beloved sister Norah is evident in a scene which takes place on Christmas Day, the day before the murders, when he sees in a shared look between Norah and brother Michael both their fear of him and their wish to escape what they now understand as his intentions towards Norah.<sup>98</sup> Patrick accepts a degree of culpability in the murders and sees, belatedly, in his plotting (he planned the secret assignation between the four on Boxing Day) and actions an echo of his father’s will-to-power. Just as the confinement imposed by Daniel causes an event at the limits of transgression, Patrick’s orchestrated attempt to fulfil his desires in the secret place outside his father’s jurisdiction brings about its own destructive backlash.<sup>99</sup> It is as if Daniel himself, in the life he perpetuates and creates for his children, sets in play the process of doom that eventually destroys his “kingdom” through Patrick, both the most civilised of the children and Daniel’s true savage inheritor.

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<sup>98</sup> This is unresolved within the text. While it seems through Patrick’s narration that Norah (at least to an extent) willingly participates in the sexual consummation of their passion the next day, there is confusion as to her own motives and feelings. Patrick later recognises that she loved and wanted Michael more. The movement of the narrative suggests that she may have consented to sex with Patrick, whom she also loved and desired, as Michael was more enamoured with the younger Ellen. After Patrick produces a pistol she takes it and kills Michael. She claims to William that Patrick has raped her, before her death at William’s hands, although there is some suggestion that this is to escape the “punishment” for transgression that William doles out.

The novel's final chapters also make a more obvious critique of Enlightenment modernity as the tale briefly "broadens" geographically when Patrick briefly describes his experiences as a soldier in the Great War. While his war-time service remains a pale reflection of the type of devastation he has seen take place on a smaller scale, he acknowledges a clear connection between them. In contemplating Vienna at the end of the war, he sees the loss of "the grand imperial powers" of Europe, symbolised by "their palaces in their capital cities, their galleries and boulevards, [which] for all their glitter and aristocratic scepticism were a spent force" (617). He sees the loss of community and connection, as men and nations "turned on each other, cousin against cousin, clan against clan" (618). His comparison between the events of an outback Australian farm, occupied by Irish settlers for only three generations, and the centre of the European world, shows these gothic spaces as bleakly prophetic of the large-scale devastation of the twentieth century, the literal crumbling of great modern structures and the loss of life on an unimaginable scale. Significantly, the Gallipoli campaign, now widely regarded as the foundation myth of the Australian nation, is described not in terms of heroism but as brutally chaotic. Patrick reflects on the similarity of personal and historical atrocities thus:

When you look back on it, you say to yourself: How did it happen? such madness? such murder? the lies so senseless, so impossible to unravel, the blame so hard to assign to pardonable causes?

Is it any surprise that in the years when these atrocities were brewing a nation like ours thrilled to the news of a mystery at Cuttajo? No wonder people cared more for this murder and felt it reached their souls more than any case of kindness could, any case of heroism? The horror spoke with a million tongues. (618)

In considering the connection between personal and historical atrocities, the novel also considers the ethics of causality and culpability. In characteristic gothic fashion, the narration

equivocates between the difficulty of assigning cause and the need to apportion blame, but it nevertheless makes clear the need for complex consideration and judgement. Patrick's endless thinking, endless questioning, is represented as the only ethical and truthful endpoint, and in a manner which meets the challenge of Bronfen's and Punter's question: "What remains to be said about the excavation of trauma, about the inevitability of forcing the message into coherence, forcing it to speak in a recognizable fashion? What would we...have to become, what new sense would we have to grow, in order to hear the message clearly — and if we ever did, how would we distinguish it from psychotic thought broadcasting?" (22). The endless questioning, the unsettlement of this process, demonstrates their point that the gothic is well-qualified to produce ethical history, and that we must accept that a degree of "expressionist distortion" is unavoidable.

As well as foregrounding the impossibility of arriving at the "truth" of history, Patrick's agitated ruminations rehearse some of the key puzzles of late modernity, posing the questions implied by Bronfen's and Punter's notion of the enigma. How does one salvage meaning and purpose in the knowledge of such destruction and humanity's sadistic, even monstrous, capabilities? How does one assign culpability in a web of violence that is so socially, structurally ingrained? How can there be any philosophical endpoint other than nihilism? Nevertheless, and crucially, in the knowledge of the base negativity of the human condition, Malone still sees that degrees of culpability exist separately and, for this reason, atrocities must be responded to in individual terms. He writes that, after the war, Australian soldiers like himself had little understanding of how they had been "used", that governments were "old boys' clubs" and that, because of this the soldiers "escaped a full share of the blame". While the attribution of cause or blame is represented, from a philosophical standpoint, as intractably difficult when one considers the web of factors in subject



formation, this endpoint of the narrative implies that undertaking the task is ethically imperative.

## II. Historicising Bataille: politicising *thanos*

Patrick and his siblings are driven inexorably to transgress not only to overcome their isolation but also to achieve exhilaration — a desire and an experience which can be understood in terms of what the contemporary philosophers Foucault and Lyotard have called a *limit event*. In the captivity of their settler-colonial lives, the resonance of the pleasure/pain/elation/guilt of incest and murder is represented as an understandable reaction to the nihilism of their existence. In this sense, their motivation can be explained in terms of the model of subjectivity proposed by Georges Bataille, in which the only response to a life embedded in meaninglessness — a void of perpetual negation — is the consuming expiration of those acts which flaunt taboos by participating in forbidden encounters with sex and death. The political dimension of this psychological model of the self is explicated by Giorgio Agamben, in a partial extension of Bataille’s notion of “base matter” or “base materialism” — human negativity or base urges that thwart aspirations to social or individual completion (*Inner Experience*). Agamben argues that that which falls outside the enlightened and rational — “bare life” — is the object of sovereign violence on which the nation state is based. The resulting indistinction between inside and outside — will-to-violence and the law — can result in these acts of civilised violence, such as that perpetrated, in its most advanced form, by the fascist state. Hall’s engagement with these often unexamined aspects of modernity, in all of their grotesque violence, contributes to the unusual energy of *The Yandilli Trilogy*. Within the world of *Captivity Captive*, in particular, in which forms of communication and “communion” are represented as seemingly impossible and a broader political engagement with the world as futile, it would be easy to conclude that all that can be salvaged from

existence is the pleasure/pain of transgression. However, in laying bare both the foundations and edifice of the modern, the instability and hypocrisy of these political, ideological and philosophical systems are exposed and evoke a political response that entails re-engaging the modern but, this time, in the full knowledge of its failings.

The personal/social investigation at the centre of the gothicism of *Captivity Captive* represents the Other not as an opacity, a totality outside the self, but as a series of unsolvable mysteries within *and* without. It recognises that blame or guilt (concepts philosophically linked to that of causality) can never be easily assigned; that the constant rethinking and revising of them must be part of an ethical relationship with the Other. It acknowledges the inter-related ethical imperatives of guilt, culpability and responsibility, but in a more complex, ultimately irresolvable way than is assumed in modern Enlightenment political and ideological frames. Patrick's account/history entails thinking about the specific social and contextual specificities of his own (and others') emergence, which itself entails a kind of social critique as part of this deliberation on the wider mystery. While his belief in the existence of a deeply embedded enigma may seem to offer a form of escape from ethics, his struggle to understand its incoherence, the founding trauma and the related realisation of failure, can be read as the starting point of ethical process. The absence of a coherent centre to the search simultaneously marks the puzzling uncertain space on the border of the "known" self and the need to engage rigorously with the specificity of circumstance: one's own and that of others. Nor is this movement away from the self shown as seamless or easy. Rather, like Foucault's well-known characterisation of transgression itself — the lightning in the night, the flash that momentarily opens up the darkness ("Preface to Transgression" 27) — it throws into dramatic relief the intensities of confinement and overreaching, like the conceptualisation of self and Other, in the same way as a brief moment of intense light makes the darkness of night appear all the more dense and black.

When *Captivity Captive*'s driving narrative force is an uneven loop of "captivity" and transgression (where "captivity" is somehow briefly and paradoxically "captive"<sup>100</sup>) and the violent consequences of the conditions of modernity, it is useful to draw on the investigation of the concept of *thanos* by Georges Bataille, who was writing while Europe was transforming in response to the rise of fascism, the definitive crisis of the modern. As *Captivity Captive* belongs to a genre that exposes the limits of realism,<sup>101</sup> it is useful in this study to step away from late-modern psychoanalysis, and consider the implications of the (related) twentieth-century discourse of transgression — a key element in the novel's deployment of the gothic. Bataille explores the modern as a chaotic state where transcendence and totality — that which he perceives as giving life meaning — only exist in death, although a fragment of this type of blissful/painful surrender can be experienced in extreme physical states such as torture or orgasm; hence the thanatic obsession with the inseparability of copulation and annihilation. Likewise, the novel focuses on Patrick's preoccupation as both a young and old man with what seems a necessary and inevitable flight through perversity and transgression in order to achieve something like meaning. The work of Michel Foucault, whose attention to Bataille brought the latter a far greater degree of intellectual consideration, represents Bataille's oeuvre as an exit from philosophy ("Preface to Transgression" 32), working outside the confining progressions of dialectical thought and breaking open a vital discourse about transgression. In this way Bataille pre-empts the late twentieth-century developments of poststructuralism and returns us again to a consideration of the architecture of the modern; the action of transgression making visible the artificial nature and ontological confinements of the social and ontological structure.<sup>102</sup> Bearing notable similarities to Laplanche's figure of endless and chaotic tunnels of the unconscious

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<sup>100</sup> The phrase "captivity captive" appears in Ephesians 4 and Psalm 68.

<sup>101</sup> The work of Georges Bataille is often associated with surrealism.

<sup>102</sup> An extended explanation of Bataille's significance is offered in Denis Hollier's vital contribution to Bataille studies, *Against Architecture*.

which, in turn, destabilises the architectural frame, Bataille's desire for a reformulation of civilisation demands the recognition of the dark space of the "labyrinth underneath the pyramid or tomb", a complex place that existed anterior to the modern, shaped in pre-history (Hollier, qtd. in Botting and Wilson 11). This groundbreaking excursion into that which is most forbidden in the already veiled discourse of sexuality is, like the gothic itself, a type of cultural faultline, what Foucault calls a "fissure" in the modern, where the taboo — activities designated secret and unutterable — open the possibility of ultimate difference and a "language stripped of dialectics" (32). Like the downwards destabilising pull of a vast below-ground void, Rodney Hall's vision of this infamously thanatic episode of Australian history excavates the invisible aspects of human relations so deeply embedded in modernity, making important connections between the discourse of transgression beginning in the late 1920s and, then, back further to the founding times of the Australian nation state, Enlightenment society *par excellence*. The process of excavation in the novel attempts to divest art and philosophy of any unifying pretensions and opens a cultural space for explorations that are both painfully self-aware and cognisant of the limits of what can and cannot be known: a vital step towards ethics.

The frontier farm setting of Paradise in *Captivity Captive* bears important similarities to the subterranean "worlds" of these theorists, although Hall's figurative space is very different. The ancient "old world" spaces — Bataille's labyrinths or the type of sinister underground prisons, dungeons, secret tunnels of traditional seventeenth century gothic, which Vijay Mishra sees epitomised in Piranesi's dungeons — are replaced by the vast, bare "antipodean" spaces of a crudely wrought settler homestead and the surrounding acres, divested of trees and natural growth. In the characteristic pleasure/pain space of the gothic, the father's realm cannot keep "the natural"/the unconscious wholly at bay: it is without and within, giving rise to strange reversals like the ethereal beauty of flies on a corpse, "no longer

black but luminous in the tilting light” (525). After locating much of the narrative in a settled space characterised by the most terrible of domestic cruelties, Patrick describes Paradise as an essential part of the perfection of his childhood memories where, despite his father’s attempts to brutally control the acres on which the house stood,

[o]ur childhood was filled with happiness, with flights of swans and hailstorms as night when the clouds were lit like giant flowers overhead, heavy with honey and rooted to the soil by lightning. (490)

The use of figurative language to describe the clouds recalls Foucault’s figure of the lightning in the night (“Preface to Transgression” 28), whereby the violence of the bolt of lightning brings momentary but profound illumination to the void and connects the outside to the inside, the sky to the earth. Similarly, the Malones’ childhood “up to the murders” is shaped by cruelties but also by the most emotionally and sensorially expansive moments of pleasure and beauty, as the sky in its vast totality comes to earth in an action that prefigures, in reverse, the Malones’ eventual contesting of all limits. The Malones’ farm can be discussed as an expression of Bataille’s concept of “base matter”, sometimes called “base materialism”, that which exists in the human psyche and which interrupts notions of human completion. It is in effect a kind of creative negativity that works as material resistance to the imposition of control and exists in a space anterior to symbolic and binary divisions. The conclusion that Patrick spirals repeatedly toward is a potent expression of this amorphous concept that entails the most profound “unknowingness” and which, as Botting and Wilson have usefully put it, exists beneath “the threshold of knowledges that aspire groundlessly ever upward to bring them back down to earth...” (11).

The realm of experience of base matter is, again, given conceptual and linguistic shape through the sadomasochistic aesthetic connected to the Malones’ Irish Catholicism. While this particular “Catholic” aesthetic is not limited in its expression to the particular

geographical/cultural/historical space of Yandilli, it is the cornerstone for the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gothic novel. Its intersection with the literal and psychic marginalisation and isolation of an Australian frontier space takes on a peculiar potency that attests to the inside-outness of the modern/civilised and primeval/savage. Patrick tells of his education in this Catholic discourse through the ministrations of the priest Father Gwilym: he is fully aware of the priest's lust for him, particularly during preparations for and the performance of the Communion Mass. This desire, as Patrick also realises, is intensified for Gwilym due to Patrick's outsider status as a Malone, the member of a family infamous for violence and power-mongering even before the murders. When Patrick, as altar boy, hands Gwilym the cincture when donning robes, he can see the priest "always found [this moment] fresh" as he straps it tight. Accordingly, the transcendent intent behind the act of communion, particularly the act of the Eucharist as creating a union with God through ingesting the body of Christ, reverses the ascendant movement through the full-fleshed and libidinous pleasures of earthly appetites given form through energised, sensuous ritual. Similarly, the feast at Christmas is a celebration of appetite in an inwardly-directed expression of consumption. The Malone family feasting on roast pork is repeatedly likened to the pig they are consuming, as "the floor squirmed with lascivious snufflings and nips ... the respectable silence of beasts devouring a beast above the board floated as thick as oil on the pandemonium of what was being stifled below" (550). Here the ritual of the Eucharist is reshaped into the form of a cannibalistic feast in an expression of base matter; the transcendent movement of the sacrament beyond the complications and desires of the flesh inevitably returns to its earthly, fleshly form, signalling the inseparability of body/spirit of the Christian schemata, a condition paradoxically present in its own structures of faith and worship. Even the potent symbolism of ascent in the Crucifixion is inverted in the act of ritualistically "sacrificing" the pig for Christmas; the slaughter of the animal uses an Irish method that stipulates the use of the

Kilkenny frame. This method ensures that the pig bleeds slowly to death over hours while bound upside down to the wood scaffold, rather than being “bled” after the act of killing, as if the long period of suffering improves its taste. Patrick’s narration thus rejects the profound Cartesian dualism of the Enlightenment and the ascendant and unproblematic movement of modern dialectical philosophical and social structures: the base matter of libido, appetite, the will to strain against containment and towards anarchy, confirm his belief in the impossibility of progress.

It is not surprising that Hall, representing the Australian frontier at the end of the nineteenth century as a proto- or ultra-modern space, confronts similar paradoxes of the modern to Bataille. In seeing the expression of the unconscious and the base in constant tension with modern subjectivity, both writers co-opt a religious mode of expression that predates the modern. Behaviours and perceptions that are deemed unnatural permeate their cultural boundaries; what is inside is outside, pre-modern is proto-modern, civilised is savage. This is most evident in an important episode on Christmas Day afternoon (the day before the murders), in which Patrick, Norah, Michael and Ellen venture into the unexplored terrain of Black’s Creek. They walk upstream towards the source in a journey that becomes increasingly sexualised and frenzied, and is represented in the constant symbolism of the natural world such as the water “spouting through fissures, flurrying among clustered stones or twisted to coils as diagrams of human muscle” (637). As Patrick observes the landscape he perceives signs of the savage, and eventually, in a bizarre climax, he and his siblings stumble onto an open space and a bloodied rocky altar. He believes that they have stumbled onto a scene of human sacrifice, framing the “unnatural acts” of the next day as profoundly natural, located as they are in the most unsettled or wild spaces. The Conradian trek into the “heart of darkness,” the perceived savagery of the “blacks” of Black’s Creek, foregrounds the narcissism of Patrick’s narrative perspective. He writes:

Some powerful urgency drove us, or rather drew us, until we shed all sense of effort and, instead of pushing on higher seemed to be standing still while the land itself slid towards us complete with timbers and thickets, the creek foaming at twice its speed, birds gathering close in deafening excitement over our intrusion. The foliage fluttered with eyes and fingers, a flicker of white feathers, a dash of ochre paint, whole trees gliding by and ridges of veined rock gliding too. A columned ravine opened ahead, swinging wide and already painfully bright; its rugged line of cliffs etched harsh repetitions of pulsing light in the eye. Behind our head leaves dangled sharp as knives, honed blades chiming faintly and multitudinously. (637)

The gothicism of the moment is evident in the ambiguity of this Dantesque description of the pleasure/pain layered depths of “hell” at the end of the journey. Is this a stumbled-upon act of violence, or the return of Patrick’s own recurring desires? While there is little Indigenous presence in the novel, the notion that Patrick could project expressions of his own “base matter” onto the local Indigenous people communicates an important politics, particularly as the oppositions of civilised/savage, natural/unnatural not only dissolve but assume inverted shapes.<sup>103</sup> While it appears to Patrick that the shapes of the natural world lead to this moment of transgression, the details of the narrative suggest that he has also brought his own version of savagery with him, and sees the natural world through its lens. The minutiae of the forest, the leaves like knives, anticipate the eventual site of the sacrificial altar that seems to await them. However, the scene is less one of recognised Indigenous practice and more the imaginings of savage sacrifice from European romance. Significantly, no Indigenous person is clearly seen at this site. Patrick’s eventual position over the altar-like flat rock, Ellen in his

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<sup>103</sup> Patrick notices, for instance, that the “blacks” pause in their journey by the farm stop to notice the slaughter of the pig, and speculates (in hindsight) that it must seem to them to be a puzzlingly, imaginatively cruel way to kill a pig.



arms, signifies his desire for ecstatic expiration and profound mastery. The modern and civilised take on an “inside-outness”: Patrick’s presence not only directs the response of his siblings but, in his narration, the shape of the natural world itself. In this way, the civilised — Patrick — corrupts the “natural” realm of the savage. This representation has its own political ethical implications, where modernity embeds narcissism and the will-to-power, and which is reflected in Patrick’s encompassing gaze.<sup>104</sup> His subjectivity is exposed in a way that reveals the complexities of his motives and responses: the tangle of base compulsions, repressed through both religion and social forces, resurface in a way that shows the intensification of the base once it has passed through the modern, a grotesque depiction of a dialectical progress where the Other is drawn in to the service of the self.<sup>105</sup>

The final chapters of the novel, which deal with the intricacies of the night of the murders, further refuse certain causality, but at the same time reveal the source of Patrick’s extraordinary and fierce insights. When reflecting on his thoughts earlier on the day of the crime, Patrick writes:

Up until the moment I reached the forbidden border, I could find strength to endure the part life I had come to accommodate comfortably enough. Yet from

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<sup>104</sup> The Indigenous group that are, perhaps, present at this scene remain, in their acts and motives, an enigma, at least to the reader. The novel implies that, whatever their perception of events, they are nowhere near as “savage” as the Malones.

<sup>105</sup> This Dantesque *mise-en-abyme*-like hell also conveys the Malone’s profound suitability as colonisers. The absorption of ideas and cultures as the ever-changing nature of Irish culture, both at home and abroad, has not led to enlightenment but rather to brutally efficient and sado-masochistic killers. Patrick, to heighten the troubling nature of these conclusions, is able to detect the utter futility of any action they may take to control their lives. One might speculate in response to Patrick’s conclusions about the extent of the depravity, that it is his considered awareness of the extent of the perversions of Paradise, as well as his own part in them, that are the true horror of the place, just as Conrad’s Kurtz writhes in the knowledge of the extent of human depravity both of the Congo and of, as Marlowe later concedes, London, the centre of so-called civilisation. It is little wonder that death for Patrick, as is formulated by Bataille, is the most redemptive course of action, the erotically charged annihilation a symbol of all that can be redeemed from their lives.

the moment I turned my gaze outward, nothing would satisfy but total ruin. (648-49)

In this climactic scene Patrick knows he wants to consummate his life-long desire for Norah and to end their lives, but is unaware, until that moment, of his ultimate purpose. After this consummation, Norah runs with the pistol and shoots brother Michael at point blank range and the tangle of murders follows at a frenzied pace. These moments determine the remainder of Patrick's life, driving his obsessive attempt to explain the "facts" of the events — their sequence, and the identities of the killers, in the knowledge that he can never be certain of the feelings and motives of the others, even when they appear to mirror his own. While the observable, exterior world of action is intelligible, the interior world remains unknown and ultimately unknowable. What he does know, however, is that the cycle of captivity and desire has brought them all to this threshold, the fraternal/sororic love turned to a consuming sexual expiration, desire requited and unrequited in the uneven operation of lust; Patrick for Norah, Norah for Michael, Michael for Ellen. While for Bataille the experience of transgression takes one outside of the political, the way in which the limit event "delivers us over without ourselves" (Blanchot 48) has vital ethical implications in that one can never take for granted knowledge of the Other and must always proceed in recognition of the separateness of difference. In these concluding moments, then, the novel's reinforcement of the uncertainty of knowledge and motive complicates the issues of judgement and culpability, leaving Patrick and the reader open to the process of ethical re-visioning of the Other: even when Patrick knows as much as he does about the murders he can neither explain nor judge events but remains forever obsessed by both the attempt to explain events knowing that he never can and, also, the moment of brief fulfilment in orgasm and expiration.

The potential of gothic texts to form a type of ethical history relies on the psyche-altering recognition of that which lies outside conventional knowledge paradigms. Bataille

claims that ecstasy, even in its darkest forms, teaches us radical difference: pushed to the edges of the known — rationality, morality, utility — the limit event therefore takes us beyond quotidian experience which thrusts the individual into a state of transgression where, for a moment, one is beyond being aware of time — a state of impossible totality. In *Captivity Captive* the narration, caught within the excess of memories that both elate and torture, gains its greatest insight because of the defining movement outside of the self, through the limit event of group incest and murder to a lifetime of reflection and analysis when Patrick, seeing the failings of his previous ideas and firmly held beliefs, shapes a jagged, “misshapen” (Foucault “Preface to Transgression” 42) narrative. There is always the sense that, as with guilt and judgment, ethics is complex and caught up in a vortex of cause and effect, innocence and culpability, entities that are not as separate as they may seem to others who have lived “soft” and simple lives.<sup>106</sup> That realm of ethics is bound to the knowledge of the impossible Otherness beyond the limits of self, a recognition of all that one cannot know or express; indeed, of mystery.

The limits of knowing the essence of another (and the self) are figured by Bataille in the idea of the eye — particularly the eye turned upwards in ecstasy or pain — at once most vulnerable, and most impenetrable (one cannot make “contact” with that eye), the gaze itself turned inwards.<sup>107</sup> Similarly, in *Captivity Captive* Patrick notes that the eyes of the corpses see more, in their grotesque decomposing totality — their state of fully consummated transgression and escape — than the eyes of the living, “no longer flinching at what they opened on” (557). The open eye, with its own sexual implications, signifies ultimate

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<sup>106</sup> Patrick comments, “The sort of person the authorities put in a magistrate’s chair is he who imagines a plain man may copulate with someone tied up and helpless and asks what sort of hell that would be. The answer might be heaven, of course; as you will know if you have ever dared refuse to be woken from the enchantment of your free mind, from the sublime superiority of the of your solid body achieving flight ...”(626).

<sup>107</sup> Bataille explored this concept most famously in his controversial novel *The Story of the Eye*, first published in 1928.

receptivity, as Patrick notes in his only memory of intercourse “gazing in at irises as wide open as the body’s orifices to receive you,” yet this is also followed by opacity when the pupil rolls back in response to sexual climax. As with the ecstasy of orgasm, the corpse’s eyes are at once open and receptive, ultimately knowing and yet dead, beyond reach or communication — a paradox of transparency/opacity. Afterwards, when Patrick has consummated his desire for Norah, he knows that his longstanding fantasy to be the ultimate object of her desire — the unicorn to be lovingly stroked by the virgin in a medieval walled garden<sup>108</sup> — is precisely *his* fantasy, not hers. Norah’s desire, he comes to understand, was primarily for Michael, and Patrick reflects on the evidence of the extent of their intimacy. At this point he has proceeded to the systematic “disengagement” of the “I” at the limits of self:

...to the limit and to this opening where its being surges forth, but where it was already completely lost, overflowing — emptied of itself to the point where it becomes an absolute void, an opening which is communication. (Foucault “Preface to Transgression” 33)

Significantly, in the midst of the chaos of incest and killing, in the moments following his eldest brother’s killing of his most beloved sister, when he believed that the target of William’s heavy bludgeon would be himself,<sup>109</sup> Patrick experiences a “philosophical exhaustion” (659). At this point, he achieves the most profound understanding of the impossibility of knowing — knowing another and knowledge itself — the exhaustion utterly complete in a physical, psychic and intellectual sense. Like the symbol of the eye itself, he sees and is blind; he knows and intuits that he cannot know.

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<sup>108</sup> Patrick has harboured a fantasy about Norah since childhood where he imagines Norah, like a medieval virgin in a walled garden and himself as the unicorn she strokes, with his head in her lap.

<sup>109</sup> In the thick of the chaos Norah claims to William that Patrick has raped her, perhaps, to save herself as she must have realised that William has witnessed the incest (or perhaps her view was that she was coerced). William perhaps is angered by the lie itself or by the fact she participated in the incest in the first place, or for another unknown reason (perhaps even sexual jealousy of Norah? Patrick? Michael himself?)

While Bataille's work on transgression is implicitly critical of modern political structures that seem to sap meaning from human experience, its redirection of the expression of desire and meaning towards the consummation and annihilation of the limit event constitutes an ultimate retreat from the political and historical.<sup>110</sup> His model of subjectivity suggests fatalism as the only possible endpoint in a modern world assumed to be devoid of purpose and meaning, and only to be escaped by extreme pleasure/pain into a limitlessness and unknown totality. In a similar vein, Patrick reflects on how suffering is all that brings meaning to the experience of modernity: "The brutalities of life at Paradise... Whatever else, they were not tainted with the contemptible blandness, the utterly grey indifference and suffocating comfort now fallen like a blanket in this whole country" (671). On the other hand, when one considers the action of transgression and its relationships to ethics — to glimpse mysteries of self and other in the limits of ecstasy or pain and apply these insights to the challenge of quotidian existence — a purposeful, worthy life (of sorts) might be recovered.

The narrative "conclusion" to *Captivity Captive*, in which Patrick returns from the limit events and survives the chain of violence, represents him as entangled in a lifetime of interpretation and self-analysis. This conclusion grounds the tale in the materiality of history in a way that diverges from Bataille's formulation. For Bataille, emphasis remains on that which lies "outside", the constant pursuit of transgression and its consummation, even though he recognises that the urge to transgress (and transcend) is compounded by historical circumstance and the imposition of modern subjectivity. Denied the release of death, Patrick lives on to apply the knowledge he has acquired to other situations (although always, to him, a pale shadow of Cuttajo events), such as his experience of the Great War. In the last chapter of the novel Patrick reflects, on his return from the war, that it is William he must return to. Patrick now realises that William had more understanding and control over the events of

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<sup>110</sup> Maurice Blanchot, writing of Bataille's work, believes the limit experience to be an overwhelming contestation that traverses history (42).

Christmas 1898 than Patrick ever knew at the time; but it remains an ethical imperative to care for him as William advances into old age. He now sees William, the damaged eldest brother, as representative of the “new man,” the modern man who, in his covert, insidious controls perpetuates Enlightenment systems, including the mass slaughter of war. William’s plans and actions are characterised by emotional numbness, a state brought about by violence and, indeed, base matter, which in turn, he helps (perhaps unknowingly) to perpetuate.

Patrick’s understanding of his brother is conveyed in the novel’s final paragraph:

Willie was the one who mattered. He took that terrible blow from Pa, which I saw as my oil lamp flared in the wind of their passage, to teach the old man that he should never lose himself in violence again. Without Willie, the rest of us may not have walked straight either. I accepted his hand and understood this was why I chose to stay. This was the Ireland of my youthful captivity, which I, like Saint Patrick, must embrace again with the faith I had learned in France. I must at the same time love and defeat him. Pride gave me no choice. (689)

To reach the decision to return and remain with this damaged brother and acknowledge a debt, even in the face of murder, has required Patrick to connect deeply with the mystery and enigma of their family and the limit events of Boxing Day, 1898 (and of 1914-18): the recognition of opacity and unknowingness necessarily precedes an ethical existence. The inclusion of the concept of pride in the final moments seems unexpected in the light of Patrick’s previous thoughts, but if one considers pride as a belief in the worth of the self, Patrick, through his return, salvages a degree of meaning and merit, even in the knowledge of what has passed; a notion with metonymic significance for late modern times. In another complexly circular action, the novel recuperates a central Enlightenment tenet through reimagining subjectivity and the dominant paradigms of self and other: ethical and

responsible action is found after passing through the basest, most alienating and transforming regions of human life.

Bataille's idea of base matter, like a consideration of the unconscious, is important to the study of gothic in that ways of being that exist outside of rational, dialectical Enlightenment systems are at its core. These transgressive modes underlie its ambivalence as well as its political and ethical potential, even within its undeniable political ambiguity. The gothic, when plunged markedly into an exploration of those often unconscious drives — sexual desire, will-to-power, release and expiration — without redemptive narrative closure, makes more of the genre's disruptive potential, of which *Captivity Captive* is a potent example. Commenting more specifically on the gothic in an Australian context, Andrew McCann claims that the gothic simultaneously enables a myth of origin that is potentially purged of its sovereign violence, where traces of Indigenous presence are naturalised as part of an eternally eerie and haunted landscape but, also, where the nation's scandalous foundation in violence tends to resurface (*Marcus Clarke's Bohemia* 186). *Captivity Captive* pre-empts McCann's implied challenge (2004) to the gothic in an Australian context through its immersion in the most forbidden, invisible forms of violence — the family violence spurred on by the condition of settler capitalism on the edges of the "civilised" world. This type of violence is, arguably, even more invisible than the types of race violence that have been the subject of many recent historical novels set in colonial times. While this focus does not negate the undeniable occurrence of interracial violence (knowledge of these past conflicts/massacres is referred to within the narrative a number of times), the structure and form of *Captivity Captive* expose the deeply enmeshed operations of violence at the centre of modern Western culture's most powerful and cherished institution, the family. Rather than the domestic being a haven from interactions in the public sphere, it expresses and perpetuates its most hostile machinations. Bataille's vision of limits and transgression,

outside of the modern dialectic and logocentrism, are essential to the expansion of the self that can accommodate the opacity of the Other (and, often, the opacity of the self): Hall's narrative brings the political ramifications of such insights into greater focus, in a self-conscious engagement with form.

The gothic novel contains important ethical possibilities as an historical document. Accepting the inevitability of certain "expressionist distortions" (Bronfen and Punter) and the fallibility of knowledge generally, it opens up new possibilities for reimagining human interactions and experience based on the analysis of the self and social structures through the essential process of alienation, whether of the traumatic overreaching of the limit event or unresolved subterranean surging of the Laplanchean unconscious. The gothic form can work to explore and uncover both structural trauma deeply integrated and compounded by the conditions of modernity, and the outward moving action of Bataille's transgression, again, a natural and likely response to the modern. What is particularly important about this kind of self-conscious historical narrative is the acknowledgement of these important responses to the modern in a way that acknowledges its various limitations and violence without removing the subject from the ethical and political. A novel such as *Captivity Captive* could be interpreted as the most deeply *gothic* of gothic texts in the way it deals so resoundingly and critically with the impossible paradoxes of the modern while being itself so intrinsically *of* the modern, embodying the simultaneous presence of "outside/inside" realms, pre-modern/modern, and the impossibility of motive and causality/the need for ethics and responsibility. The gothic form itself so aptly expresses the recognition of limits (of conventional historical knowledge, social norms, Western philosophical traditions) via a journey through both limits and excess. While a writer like Bataille savours (perhaps indulgently) the various erotic explorations of death, Hall enters the terrain energetically but with an implicit recognition that death is not always ecstatic and may also be experienced as horror and wasteful, irredeemable loss. For



instance, Patrick had witnessed the death of his brother Daniel in the trenches in France (a detail he starkly narrates in the final passages): there is nothing triumphant or transcendent about anonymous degrading death in trench warfare.<sup>111</sup> Hall's late-modern perception appears to be formed in response to the wreckage of genocides and the destruction of modern events, and his work thus reflects on the profound need for genuine ethical engagement in the wake of twentieth-century atrocities. The gothic is so useful here because of its formal engagement with the non-transcendent (as opposed to influential Romantic notions of individual and artistic transcendence)<sup>112</sup> in that there can be no escape from the historical materiality of existence. No ecstasy of transgression, can distract from the need for a restructuring, re-visioning of the modern in a way that will avoid the repetition of atrocities.

In *Homo Sacer* Giorgio Agamben investigates a political concept he calls the zone of irreducible distinction where the modern sovereign state relies heavily on the operation of various systems to incorporate "bare life" into political order, and the administration of the state, in such a way that inside and outside of condoned behaviours cease to make sense. Writing six decades later than Bataille, Agamben's *Homo Sacer* integrates a late-modern sensibility of loss which is both a response to the extremes of modern violence, and an expression of sadness connected to the end of philosophical certainties and political ideals, and characteristic late-twentieth century pessimism about humankind in general. The critic Andrew McCann has discussed Agamben's zone of irreducible indistinction and the gothic in Australia in a sophisticated study of the work of Marcus Clarke. McCann argues convincingly that, while Clarke's novel *His Natural Life* relies on the humanistic notion of

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<sup>111</sup> In terms of style, Hall's narrative is far less sexually detailed than the confronting representations Bataille is renowned for. This is not to suggest that Bataille's forays into *thanos* were wholly self-indulgent, masturbatory exercises. I make this point to suggest that Hall's different representations and emphasis give the novel a different type of grounding in materiality.

<sup>112</sup> Both Mishra (17) and Williams (2) define the gothic against the Romantic as notably non-transcendent in its aesthetic and philosophical mode.

intrinsic empathy, the historical setting (convict settlement in the 1820s) of the 1874 novel often dramatises the slippage between forms of atavistic violence and the Victorian prison system, the lawmakers/enforcers and convicts mutually entrenched in the will-to-violence (*Marcus Clarke's Bohemia* 192). *Captivity Captive*, devised as a self-conscious continuation of the more radical vein of Australian literary gothic tradition, demonstrates the centrality of the gothic form to a heritage of critical literature. This unsettling form of the gothic is particularly vital in an Australian settler context with its especial relationship to the modern. If we think of the traditional purpose of history, tied up with Enlightenment values of education and knowledge, a novel such as *Captivity Captive*, exposes the fundamental lies of modernity, including the mantra of progress to which history itself is often in service. McCann draws the apposite conclusion that “visions of the order of colonial life have a habit of falling apart under the very thing that colonialism elides — its own scandalous foundation in violence” (*Marcus Clarke's Bohemia* 186). Hall’s choice of the event of the Cuttajo murders, re-narrated through a fictional version of one of the key players into recognisable gothic form is potent as a “history” because of its various inversions of dominant triumphalist narratives of progress .

In a speech given a little over a decade after the publication of *Captivity Captive*, titled “Being Shaped by the Stories that We Choose from our History”, Rodney Hall states his views about the importance of interrogating our national past with the energy and directness of the longstanding activist he is. In a style very different from the poetics and complexity of his novels, he spoke of the need for honest and authentic consideration of the past in relatively simple terms, mentioning the need for “truth” and “honesty”, and as a participant in the History Wars that were raging intensely at the time, one hundred years after Australian Federation. As with Mark McKenna’s condemnation of “comfort history” — where volatile historical information is made palatable through the gentler cultural mediums

— Hall censured the cultural tendency to be “shaped by [the stories] that we’re comfortable with” and called for an engagement with the aspects of Australian history that cause discomfort and even pain. In the light of this speech it is no surprise that Hall had previously ventured into the disturbances of the gothic to achieve this aim. He says, in conclusion:

The search to uncover Truth ... This is no less than a search for the story at the heart of experience, at the heart of our knowledge and our happiness. The story of our loves and disappointments, our grief and our happiness. It governs whom we trust, how we behave and what we do with our lives.

In all aspects of living we seek the story of who we are, what we are and how we became like this, simply because we need to know. (“Being Shaped by the Stories”)

It is as if, for Hall, after the pain and horror of the past hundred years, all that remains, put simply, is the need for self-reflection and painful evaluation on individual and national levels. The consideration of the past, even in the knowledge of the ultimate impossibility of the task, is an ethical imperative to “fulfill our obligations” and act in whatever way possible within one’s own place and time. One of the opening images of *Captivity Captive* is a very young Patrick, eight-or-so years old, witnessing a photograph, called *Caught Unawares*, being taken on their land. The scene had been staged by a commercial photographer with a group of “natives” posed with spears as if to strike a pioneer, vulnerable and alone, burdened with wagon and chattels. As with Walter Benjamin’s notion of the *trace*, the young Patrick makes observations about the way that fragments of a lived reality may puncture the deceptive fixity of the image. The historical trace bursts the “realism” of its photographic frame as young Patrick instantly sees the fraudulence of the image, the clothes too clean, the horses too fresh, a realisation somehow on its way to exposing the romanticised and reassuring nature of the triumphalist “comfort” history of Australia and the reality of a state founded on sovereign

violence, as well as a system that continues to profit (as did the Cuttajo photographer who sold the picture to Irish immigrants to send to their relatives back home) from a web of untruths. The object of the photograph is itself a potent symbol of modernity and history, a material object that seems to speak truth through the medium of its structure and form, and through which a particular way of seeing and being is internalised through subtle interactions between the subject and modern knowledge systems. Gothic texts such as *Captivity Captive*, like Benjamin's trace, disturb this process and, puncturing the frame of realism, call for a critique of the subject (self) and the modern. In the end such texts call for a simple, honest lived response to one's context, even in the face of extremity.

## Coda

1988-2011

What are the Black Mirror stories[...]?

They are myself, unrecognisable. They are myself, writing disaster. I looked into a mirror and darkness looked back.

Gail Jones *Black Mirror*<sup>i</sup>

### I. Refusing to be Silent

The satirical commentary program, “Yes We Canberra”, by The Chaser, an ABC comedy group, was produced to accompany the 2010 Australian election campaign and included a segment titled “Life at the Top”. This segment featured what appeared to be an Indigenous version of a panel discussion where four Indigenous elders sat cross-legged on the earth in a Northern territory outback setting to discuss election issues. The juxtaposition of this Indigenous context, movingly dignified in its simplicity, with the issues of the campaign — broadband, low-level political debate, funding for mediocre Australian films — made the to-and-froing of election debate seem trivial and startlingly self-centered. The Chaser, with (perhaps unusual) sensitivity, drew the viewer’s attention not only to the overwhelming disparity of economic and social privilege in this country, but also the almost complete absence of any discussion of Indigenous issues during the 2010 election campaign — a troubling invisibility that quickly begs comparison with the 2007 Labor victory and former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s apology to Indigenous Australians that occurred soon after. In the last segment of “Life at the Top” to screen before the election, one of the elders posed a question concerning Labor’s track-record on Indigenous affairs to produce the following exchange:

Elder 1: What have they done?

Elder 2: They said ‘sorry’ to us once.

Elder 1: When was that?

Elder 2: Three years ago

Elder 1: And what about since then?

Elder 3: Lots of things. Every week they remind us that they said “sorry” three years ago.

Not only does this section of “Yes We Canberra” satirise the uninspiring platform of the Labor party as the election unfolded, it also reflects political and cultural tendencies that have become increasingly troubling in the Australian political sphere more generally in the last two decades, the time at which this thesis begins its investigations. There has been, firstly, a type of inertia in terms responding to vitally important Indigenous issues to do with basic human rights and equality and, secondly, a lack of meaningful, high quality political debate about past and present abuses and racial injustice.

While the early 1990s saw the Mabo and Wik land rights decisions and the mid-nineties the release of the groundbreaking *Bringing them Home Report*, the years that followed have brought little of what might be termed “progress” in terms of racial equality. The twelve years of the Howard government (1996-2007) must be mentioned within this context as it is from this period that the most virulent expressions of racism and social conservatism emerged. This was partly to do with the conservative policies of the coalition and partly to do with an increasingly volatile global political climate. Considerable damage was done to the intellectual and cultural life of Australia during this time.<sup>113</sup> After the wave of optimism following Rudd’s election and the apology to Indigenous Australians, there has been a disappointing lack of practical action. The only significant act Julia Gillard seems to

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<sup>113</sup> Tanya Dalziell’s insightful article “An Ethics of Mourning: Gail Jones’s *Black Mirror*” has influenced the writing of this conclusion.

have initiated during her own period of leadership has been an inquiry into holding a referendum about whether or not to change the National Constitution to be more respectful to and inclusive of Indigenous Australians. However, as Marcia Langton (head of the committee) has commented, such an action is unlikely ever to bring about actual change. That referendums hardly ever result in affirmative decision was something that Gillard knew when recommending this particular course of (non)action. Langton implies that the commission merely pays lip service to a left liberal concern for Indigenous rights without ever actually coming to a point of change that will be more contentious. It may be inaccurate to equate the Labor leadership's disappointing reluctance to keep Indigenous issues on the public agenda with Howard's refusal to acknowledge the type of past injustice brought out by (among other investigations) the *Bringing Them Home Report*, yet statements like Rudd's speech at the launch of Thomas Keneally's *Australians: Origins to Eureka (Rudd)* encourage us to see similarities between the conservatism of the two major parties in a way that would have been unthinkable two decades ago.<sup>114</sup> Rudd's speech in which he calls for an end to the History Wars gives some indication of a degree of historical and political denial that is, arguably, prescient of the conservatism and instrumentalism of many Labor politicians that the Australian public has witnessed in the past five years.

After Rudd's 2008 Apology to Indigenous peoples one could be forgiven for thinking he considered himself aligned with the views expressed by the former Prime Minister Keating in his landmark speech at Redfern Park. Rudd's speech represents Keating and his allies in the History Wars as being at the extreme and fanatical end of a polarised debate and, in doing this, parts company with an important cultural movement comprising distinguished intellectuals, politicians and activists who have dedicated their careers to increasing knowledge of national history and attempting to bring about justice and reparation to

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<sup>114</sup> This has been discussed in previous publications by Robert Manne in "Comment: the History Wars" and myself in "Refusing to be Silent".

Indigenous Australians. By positioning himself at the moderate centre in terms of views on the national past, squarely and simplistically between the denialists and the revisionists (whom Howard famously termed the “Black Armband Brigade”), Rudd implied that “true” or “good” history is fixed and apolitical — a notion which is at best naïve and at worst a totalitarian weapon.<sup>115</sup> So when Kevin Rudd, in his speech, called to end the History Wars a number of troubling implications follow, such as: history being a political and societal irrelevance; historical revision having no clear connection to social justice; and that lively and impassioned public debate is not a necessary aspect of Australian society as a just and functioning democracy (Rudd).<sup>116</sup> Statements made about history often work as political touchstones and Rudd’s key points in this speech were illuminating in terms of his own understandings of history. He represents the History Wars as being out of the sphere of concern of normal Australians, calling them “arid and intellectual”. His call for what is effectively “silence” on important social and intellectual issues is accompanied by disinterest on the related issues of Indigenous rights; it seems that a lack of interest in the details and

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<sup>115</sup> Dominick LaCapra has titled one of his most recent books *History In Transit* in order to emphasise the need for society to respond to the changing nature of history and the various ways of perceiving the past it investigates but, also, for the discipline of history itself to accept the demands of its inherent involvement with politics.

<sup>116</sup> The Chaser’s satiric reporting of Australian political debate suggests that election debates consist of petty squabbling over relatively unimportant issues to the detriment of social justice and human rights. The accuracy of this statement is reflected in Rudd’s call for an end to the debates of the History Wars. On one hand this action suggest that not only are politicians victims of the increasingly poll driven, presidential-style campaigns where policy is communicated through sound bites and catch phrases, but they themselves are often willing participants in emptying public discourse of that which is politically important and intellectually challenging. Federal politics, therefore, becomes a sequence of meaningless power grabs between two parties that are fundamentally politically aligned. In effect, this type of comment attempts to quell a debate that needed to happen, and needs to continue to happen. In the twenty-four hour buzz of political discourse and an incessant news cycle there is perhaps less room than ever for meaning debate about issues to do with the ethical obligations of the Nation, an issue at the heart of the History Wars. Direct calls for the end of the debates, like Rudd’s, attempt to silence informed and politicised debates in a similar way to the “white noise” of the discourse of party politics in, it seems, the belief that an informed, passive electorate is the best electorate or, at least, the most suited to this new brand of Australian politics.



specificity of national history is connected to a lack of action on the effects still disadvantaging Indigenous people in the present. One could, therefore, conclude that the powerful alliance between silence and cultural denial continues to be a deeply ingrained part of Australian culture despite all the publically visible historical revisions of the 1980s and the History Wars. Arguably, the persistence of denial at the current time is even more troubling than before the appearance of revisionist histories. The evidence of the nature and extent of the nation's crimes and culpability in the years since colonisation continues to grow and, therefore, any neglect of the seriousness and relevance of these issues becomes even more fraught and ethically compromised than before.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that many Australians are fascinated by history that is politicised and controversial: neither are these debates “arid and intellectual”, as Rudd puts it, but concerning the stuff of actual lives and the pain of real, lived experience. Despite a continuing culture of silence and denial there are significant numbers of people who still wish to engage with the problems and challenges of Australian history. In a time of falling standards in high-profile political debate it falls to other groups of public intellectuals to offer meaningful discussion on matters of the nation's ethical and human rights and keep Indigenous stories and histories alive in the national consciousness. Such texts include the widely acclaimed feature film *Samson and Delilah* and Rachel Perkins' 2008 documentary series *The First Australians*. The relative popularity of these texts demonstrates that an audience exists for the type of Indigenous stories that are generally considered as the “unofficial” or non-triumphalist part of Australia's history. SBS's Australian version of *Who do You Think You Are?* follows prominent Australians as they track different genealogical paths, including stories of immigration and colonisation. Similarly, ABC's recent program *Whose Been Sleeping in my House?* traces events in a building's history and the history of its families, community, and region. The effects of the past on the subjects of these programs is

often palpable as they show intense emotion in the process of finding out about the suffering of an ancestor or as they grapple with actions of a distant family member, or a previous owner, that they find troubling. What is most remarkable about these texts is that convey the strength of connection between the past and present and how, at the fundamental level of subjectivity, there is often a recognition that we consist — genetically, socially and ideologically — of that which has gone before us. A denial of the energy of these debates is also a denial of the existing cultural sentiment that accompanies the success of these types of popular histories.

In an August 2009 episode of the ABC's high-rating panel show *Q and A*, broadcast from the Melbourne Writers' festival, the audience-generated discussion focused largely on history and the national, colonial past. The conversation between writers Richard Flanagan, Tara June Winch, Kamila Shamsie and politicians, Labor's Lindsay Tanner and Liberal Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott (then Shadow Minister for Families and Community Services), made for compelling viewing as they attempted the articulate responses to these types of questions. One *Q and A* audience member asked: "Do we struggle to talk about our identity in any depth because we risk feeling further implicated in the brutality of our colonial past?" The question conveys not only the regret that troubles fair-minded non-Indigenous Australians, but also the difficulties involved in discussing these issues: that historical revelation and unfolding interpretations are hard to assimilate mentally and emotionally and even harder to form a response towards. In a moderate and articulate answer to this particular question the former (now retired) Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner stated that "the biggest weapon you can use on these things (a history of violence) is silence". In another forum, the Indigenous writer Alexis Wright stated that she inherited all of the words *unsaid* in Indigenous families to (perhaps unsuccessfully) stop further pain and keep peace, "Words that have buried 1000 crimes and 1000 hurts." Clearly, as individuals and as a culture there is

an ethical and political imperative to break the silence if we are to be a nation that values honesty and justice.

Significant numbers of Australians who still wish to discover or negotiate a way of “being at home” here, even if it involves the recognition that negotiating your relationship to history and the past should never end. Being ethically “home here”, paradoxically, is to deny the kind of entitlement, assuredness or comfort that we associated with a “home”. This process of existing in Australia ethically is inseparable from engaging with history: the most troubling events from the past; but also the enigmas of history and the understandings that what one can never know or has never experienced should be part of a collective sense of what has been lost.

In this social climate it is little wonder that the Australian historical novel has undergone such a surge in popularity, as any glance at lists of publications, review pages or literary awards will demonstrate.<sup>117</sup> Like a number of these popular history television programs, historical novels contain the potential to encourage an imaginative engagement with the past, to inform about past events, and to cultivate an explanation about the continuities between past and present — they explore various ways of breaking the silence. The historical novel, as has traditionally been the case, represents a nexus between the national past and the individual subject. Novels such as the ones explored in this thesis are a fitting place for the processes of exploration and questioning to take place. The reader sees staged in front of them the problems of ethics and conscience that relate to the role of the individual within the society they inhabit, that run parallel to the complex and ambivalent feelings some Australians have about their nation and their own ethical responsibilities. Neither are these various fictional representations of the Australian past and their connected

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<sup>117</sup> In 2011, for example, Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance*, a story of initial contact and colonisation on the South West Coast, won the Miles Franklin Literary Award, while Rohan Wilson’s *The Roving Party*, about the Tasmanian genocide received the Australian-Vogel Prize.

political explorations “one-off” contributions; all of the authors discussed in this thesis have gone on to write more than one historical novel. They, in different ways and through different novelistic forms, have continued to investigate important national and political questions. When so little is promising about the mainstream political responses to the troubling and violent aspects of our national past, at least these questions are being asked in some cultural spheres including the literary sphere. The historical novels are one group of cultural texts that attempt to speak through the various atrophying, infantile cultural silences of a society reluctant to face or to attempt to atone for its wrongs.

#### **IV. To the future: mirrors and mourning**

The novelist and critic Gail Jones has described Australia as a nation that “refuses to mourn” (“Sorry-in-the-sky” 160). If we see mourning through Eric Santner’s useful formulation, to mourn in an individual or collective sense is to attempt to coexist with various irresolvable forms of otherness including the assimilable differences that exist in culture, in junctures of history, in relationships and ultimately in death. It also involves accepting the inevitable pain involved in the process of grieving for what is past. One may not embark on this process with a view to overcoming grief, which might result in denial or forgetting. Ethical mourning entails learning to live with the enduring sense of what has occurred and what has been lost. Many Australian historical novels of the past twenty years attempt to initiate or articulate an ethical response to the most troubling events of Australian history, a process which could be interpreted as an act of mourning. Rather than “airing” the secrets of the past with a view to “moving on,” the most ethically effective novels attempt to produce effects which endure, continuing to trouble and unsettle responses to the atrocities of history. Santner discusses the necessity of grieving as the recovery of the “stranded objects” of history; “stranded” in that they are the terrible, unspeakable, sometimes culturally prohibited subjects of discourse where their presence incurs complex responses of shame, anger, loss, regret, confusion. Thus,

looking ahead to a changed, more ethical national future involves an enduring connection with the past.

This process of self-analysis and exploration is sometimes figured at various important moments in Australian art as the figure of the self looking in a mirror. Mourning requires a confrontation of with the self — whether individually, or in terms of culture/nation — including the shaping effects of context, place, family, and history. It can be usefully figured as the self looking into a mirror, yet, no matter how much we look into it, the processes of mourning and self-critique should never finish. We must continue to change in response to experience and environment, and as undiscovered parts of ourselves emerge they, in turn, must be examined and require response. This is never easy. In *Benang*, for instance, as Harley tries to discover his identity he stands before a full-length mirror, one leg bent in what Scott describes as the stereotyped Indigenous pose of a water bird. In the recognition that mirrors do not unproblematically reflect reality and can also deceive, Uncle Jack tells him to throw the mirror away and that Noongar people see them as a “mamari” — a “little devil man” that may deceive or confuse. Then, as Harley poses with pieces of his Grandfather’s collection of Indigenous “artifacts” it becomes apparent that there is no easy way to assume an Noongar identity when he has been raised outside of the culture; Scott suggests that authentic Noongar identity is not just a matter of posing with a spear in front of a mirror. This image has more to do with desire than reality. Harley then finds other ways of finding an altered selfhood. Similarly, non-Indigenous Australians have no easy, unproblematic way of “belonging” but must recognise that cultivating a meaningful relationship to history and place is a long and difficult process in which the self undergoes a series of changes, the outcome of which one can never know in advance (Butler *Precarious Life*).

In terms of the cultural “backtracking” of historical novels, a similar process is going on in stories about colonial conquest and massacre that ostensibly encourage the perception of Australian history and the nation itself as it really is. Yet, just as an image in a mirror can never reflect the complexity of reality, the novels themselves show a fragment of experience/existence that is inevitably reliant on what appears in the frame, what can easily be seen, what is hidden, what we choose to see or are more inclined to focus on, and what we are inclined to avoid. For these reasons, as I hope this thesis has demonstrated, some novels have had varied degrees of success in initiating a process of ethical critique, self-reflection, or encouraging cultural mourning.

The image below is one of Arthur Boyd’s paintings from his “Half-caste Bride” series. It is well-known that the series was inspired by a journey to Alice Springs and the distressing scenes of Indigenous suffering and disadvantage that he saw there. The paintings are explorations of the strange and uneasy conjunction of cultures. In the series the Indigenous “groom” often physically dominates the picture with his intense stare directed outside of the frame to meet the gaze of the viewer. The half-caste bride’s race status is often indicated by dark limbs of an otherwise bright white figure; perhaps indicating the impossibility of “integration”. The white face of the bride is wide-eyed, naïve and seemingly enmeshed in fantasy. She seems to ignore the presence of the ominous black crows and the cowed, despairing black figure that are often pictured alongside the couple, preferring the illusion of total union symbolised by the obvious symbols of a Western Christian wedding such as flowers or her white veil. In this particular image, one of the most interesting aspects of the two figures is that the groom looks up to meet the gaze of his bride while the bride looks down to her own reflection in the pool beneath. She nourishes the pool with a stream of white water from her own jug. In this figure Boyd represents the inwardness of Australian whiteness, sometimes imagining itself in an intimate union with Indigenous people and the

physical space that both groups inhabit, yet, as the bride looks down to the water all she seems to see is her own reflection. Like Narcissus, she is entranced and unable to see past herself to that which exists alongside her within the frame of the reflection. Her rapture is a response to herself rather than any ecstasy of union.



Fig 2: Arthur Boyd. *Reflected Bride II*. 1958. Private Collection.

The most ethical way of recognising oneself is an act of “un”-recognition. One must be open to see the self anew in the full vision of one’s own social and historical context, and in the fullness of our complexities and complicities. We must have recourse to a fuller understanding of the situations with which we are faced, and learn to take in fuller accounts and wider, deeper histories.

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