

The Stolen River: Possession and Race Representation in Grenville's Colonial Narrative.

ODETTE KELADA
University of Melbourne

I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World- without the mandate for conquest. (Morrison 3)

Toni Morrison is writing here about mapping the white literary imagination in her work on the Africanist presence in American literature *Playing in the Dark* (1992). It is useful to draw on her work to examine Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005), given that this analogy of exploring 'New Worlds' is the basis for Grenville's narrative, which likewise tells a story of colonial encounters with Australia as a 'New World'. Grenville herself says:

I hoped to create an experience for a reader in which they could understand what that moment of our past was really like. The great power of fiction is that it's not an argument: it's a world. Inhabit it for a while and you are likely to come out a little changed. (Grenville, *Secret River- Secret History* 152-153)

In examining the white literary imaginary, Morrison's work draws attention to the constructions of race and representation in such 'worlds'. While the idea of a literary 'world' may conjure a vision of an intact and coherent sphere, a certain stable sensibility that one may enter into and find peopled with figures from the poetic realm, it may also be read as the locus of representations which are collected around a set of ideas and ideologies stemming from the 'real' world out of which these are invented and for which they function mimetically. Such a reading enables a richer and more complex approach, which engages and deepens the study of texts and their cultural implications. This essay therefore attempts to map representations of race in *The Secret River* to contribute to such discussions of literary texts as manifestations of cultural territories, which generate power relationships consistent with the places and times of their production.

As Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes in *Talkin' Up to the White Woman* (2000):

Representations are more than mere symbols. They are a means by which we come to know, embody and perform reality. Our different representations of reality arise 'out of differences in the position of knowing subjects in relation to the historicity of interconnected relationships of domination and contestation.' (xxii)¹

Grenville's texts are 'arguments' and 'worlds' whose representations of race and power relations offer important insights into the strategies and performance of whiteness in Australian contemporary literature, particularly in relation to the idea of the 'reconciliation' between white Australians and Indigenous peoples. The context of reconciliation, according to her writing memoir, *Searching for the Secret River* (2006), helped inspire *The Secret River* (2005).² The questions and analysis which arise in my reading of the novel do not suggest the writer is consciously reifying whiteness or virtue; rather, the intention is to look at possible effects of narratives which explore the colonial past and the legacies of coloniality. I refer to 'whiteness' as a 'location of experience,' as race critic and theorist, bell hooks, has described this term (hooks 18). Moreton-Robinson expands on how 'whiteness' operates in Australia:

Whiteness in its contemporary form in Australian society is culturally based. It controls institutions that are extensions of White Australian culture and is governed by the values, beliefs and assumptions of that culture. Whiteness confers both dominance and privilege; it is embedded in Australian institutions and in the social practices of everyday life. It is naturalised, unnamed, unmarked, and it is represented as the human condition that defines normality and inhabits it. (172)

The Secret River depicts in great detail the violence and ‘dark’ side of Australia’s history as perpetrated by white colonists. On the surface, it can read as a most unpalatable and confronting depiction of whiteness as implicated in the massacre of Aboriginal people. Sue Kossew notes in her essay, ‘Voicing the “Great Australian Silence”’ (2007), that Grenville has described her novel as articulating ‘a reassessment of what it means to be a white Australian’ and Kossew comments that ‘in so doing, she is situating her novel as a reworking of the narrative of settlement with a contemporary sensibility’ (Kossew 9). Kossew argues that Grenville

sees her novel as standing “outside that polarized conflict” of right and wrong by providing instead an empathetic and ‘imaginative understanding of those difficult events’ (Grenville in an interview with Ramona Koval). It is only by uncovering the painful scars of the past, the text suggests, by voicing the “Great Australian Silence”, that a process of reconciliation and shared belonging can begin. But even then, from her own positionality as a “white” Australian, it is hedged about by moral ambiguities. (Kossew 17)³

This essay will take up this question of moral ambiguities that the text engenders. It will refer also to the published account describing the inspiration and journey of writing *The Secret River* titled *Searching for the Secret River* (hereafter referred to as *Searching*). It is illuminating to have an author’s firsthand account and this provides rich textual commentary. This essay will engage with both texts to explore the dialogue between them. These works, which demonstrate Grenville’s willingness to delve into imagining Australia’s past, encourage productive enquiry into themes of positionality, writing and representation.

In *Searching*, Grenville articulates clearly her awareness of her own positioning and the desire to explore themes of belonging, history and memory. Identifying herself as a white Australian, Grenville describes how she is a descendent of colonisers and is understandably uncomfortable with the idea her ancestor may be a murderer, as she states ‘I wasn’t sure I wanted a murderer for a great-great-great grandfather’(7). Further discomfort about her ancestry is apparent in Grenville’s description of a conversation with Murri writer, Melissa Lucashenko, about her family history. In *Searching*, when Grenville describes her ancestor as ‘taking up’ land on the Hawkesbury, Melissa asks, ‘What do you mean ‘took up’? He took.’

Of course I’d always known that. But the lack of fit between a word and thing it stood for had never before come to me like a punch in the stomach.

Took up – suddenly it felt like a trick.

The trick itself was bad enough. The fact that I’d let myself be taken in by it was worse. Melissa and I had exchanged such small and harmless words. *Family. From. Took up.* But they were turning out to be grenades.(29)

Grenville describes the lack of fit between a word and the thing it stood for as coming to her ‘like a punch in the stomach’. This physically violent sensation followed by the observation that the words

exchanged between her and Melissa had turned out to be grenades (29) conveys that the past has powerful emotional currency.

In *Searching*, Grenville recounts traveling to England and researching her ancestry, specifically her convict ancestor Solomon Wiseman who was transported to Australia for theft. In reading accounts of the trial in England of Wiseman, Grenville describes the feelings that arise in hearing her forebear described negatively:

I found myself catching fire with indignation. ‘Notorious’? ‘Deeply read in the corruption of human nature’? How dare this pipsqueak say that! [...] my hackles rose again when the judge took the opportunity to have a bit of fun at Wiseman’s expense. (88-9)

When Grenville comes to writing the novel *The Secret River*, with the convict protagonist named William Thornhill, she makes it clear that the fictive character of Thornhill is not meant to read as an imaginative depiction of her ancestor, Solomon Wiseman. There still appears to be however an emotive investment in the narrative of *The Secret River* as a story of Australia’s past. The implications of this investment and the stakes involved are worth further enquiry in terms of narrative choices in reassessing belonging and identity for white Australians. A crucial part of the novel’s engagement with Australia’s violent history is the climax of a massacre scene of Indigenous peoples by white colonists. It is telling to examine how the murderous scene is enacted, the development of Thornhill’s character to this point, as well as representations of Indigeneity and whiteness. This essay argues that culpability is a more paradoxical notion than might at first appear in the text, at times appearing to be swept away by the tide of history and the inevitable destiny of colonial relations even as the characters re-enact the loading and firing of the gun.⁴

Grenville states on her website that the narrative of *The Secret River* ‘doesn’t judge any of the characters or their actions, only invites the reader to ask the question, “What might I have done in that situation?”’⁵ This essay will argue that the way the narrative engages with this question reveals it to be a loaded one to ask at this time when there are ongoing investments in nationhood and forging national identity. To aid in the composition of an empathetic and imaginative view, the protagonist of *The Secret River* is an everyman type who is not too good, not too evil. This is a formidable task for the story considering that this character will be involved in a massacre described in detail. This empathy-challenge leads to notes of dissonance throughout the novel and exemplifies the stakes that emerge in contemporary encounters with these ‘difficult events’ (Grenville cited in Kossew 17).

In *Searching*, Grenville illustrates awareness of the colonial framework impacting representations of Indigeneity by non-Indigenous writers and to counter this strategically, speaks of creating a ‘hollow’ in her book for the Aboriginal story (199).

Their inside story--their responses, their thoughts, their feelings--all that was for someone else to tell, someone who had the right to enter that world and the knowledge to do it properly. I might not be able to enter the Darug consciousness, but I could make it clear that there *was* one. To create a hollow in the book, a space of difference that would be more eloquent than any words I might invent to explain it. (198-9)

However the fraught nature of such a negotiation when telling a story of a massacre is evident with statements such as:

One of the things I'd learned in the course of my reading was that it was as useful to talk *about* 'the Aboriginal people' as it was to talk about 'the European people'. [my italics] (131)

and Grenville has to

...re-frame the scene. I had to put them [Aboriginal people] back in the picture. (97)

Despite the ambition to create eloquent spaces in the form of a hollow, the power to 'talk about' and 'put them back' is still a privilege of the narrative. Depending on the ways this is done, narratives around Indigenous – non-Indigenous relations continue to be contested ground given knowledges *about* Aboriginal people have long been created dominantly by non-Indigenous people and this is a continuing context of coloniality.

As research for telling a story of relations on the Frontier, Grenville describes in *Searching* how she travels to the Kimberley with the idea of encountering 'people of unmixed Aboriginal descent' (193). She states that:

I'd written scenes in which Thornhill deals with his Aboriginal neighbors, but I knew they weren't working. I'd never known anyone remotely like the Aboriginal characters I was describing, not even seen them from a distance. I was inventing them out of the only resources I had: stereotype, cliché and guesswork. (193)

In her memoir *Searching*, she repeatedly uses the term 'unreadable' to describe the faces and expressions of the people in the Kimberley. She states 'Nothing was disturbing or threatening about any of them, but there was a powerful sense of them as 'other'' (195-196). This sentence constructs disturbance and threat as pre-empted possibilities, which are then negated in this instance. The descriptions include:

Their skin was as black as the shadows. Their faces—I glanced quickly and turned away—folded in on themselves, unreadable. (194)

and 'Even in full sun the details of their faces somehow disappear' (194). The description of one man includes, 'The darkness of his face made it impossible to read his expression'(195). The one Elder woman who does speak at the Kununarra library is described as 'the essential human face, the essential human body' (197).

Moreton-Robinson states in her work on white feminism, citing Spelman and Bryant:

If there is limited or no intersubjectivity between women who are 'other' and white feminists, then knowledge of the 'other' is restricted to imagination and theory. In imagining someone there is never resistance from the image: '[...] for you never find anything in an image except what you put there. You don't investigate or interrogate an image to find out about it; there is nothing to learn from it because it only contains what you posit as being in it'. (148)

Limited engagement with 'the other' reduces the risk of disruption to and interrogation 'of one's own subject position' (148). While the descriptions above of encountering Indigenous peoples in *Searching* are problematic in my view as they read as explicitly 'othering', there is a sense throughout both the novel and *Searching*, that the texts evolve from attempts to interrogate subject

positioning. A tension emerges between investigating ‘stereotypes’ by having *real* encounters, yet at least in the writing of these encounters, the references to an essential human and unreadable faces evoke romantic, mythic imagery with essentialist connotations. This reflects I would argue, some of the tensions evident in reconciliation politics where open spaces for genuine enquiry are still battling with the embedded heritage of orientalist and colonial discourses. Narratives born in the reconciliatory moment(s) can exemplify key stakes intrinsic to contemporary perspectives on past violent formations of a nation – for instance, how is sameness and difference represented and navigated? What sense of nation emerges when colonisation creates such ongoing powerful legacies?

The presence of these dynamics in *The Secret River* can be read from the title and dedication pages onwards. Here a fundamental question is ‘who is this text for?’ Kossew notes that Grenville acknowledges the title comes from Prof. W.H. Stanner’s Boyer Lectures, *After The Dreaming* (1968), and refers to Stanner’s thesis on the silences about the violence in Australia’s history and the ensuing ‘secret river of blood’ (Kossew 8-9). Another possible reading I make is that to describe the river as ‘secret’ can imply a subtle reiteration of the notion of *terra nullius* as there appears to be no one there to know yet of the river’s existence. This description of the river therefore could suggest a coloniser’s perspective as it was only a secret until the white people ‘discovered’ it, not to the Indigenous inhabitants who would know the river and from whom it would soon be stolen.

The dedication reads: ‘This novel is dedicated to the Aboriginal people of Australia: past present and future.’ The title and the dedication thus make an interesting juxtaposition which stimulated my interest in the novel as a text emerging from a particular historic moment; a time where Australia’s past is more than ever publicly contested. The title enacts a non-Indigenous positioning, while the dedication is to Aboriginal people. Questions arise as to why a massacre-story would be told at this time through the eyes of a white perpetrator and dedicated in this manner? The politics of ‘reconciliation’ resonate through the title and dedication, setting the scene for reparation to play out in the text.

Grenville describes how *The Secret River* was initially inspired by an unspoken moment she shared with an Indigenous woman while walking across the bridge on a reconciliation march (*Searching* 12). As Kossew notes, the dedication could be a form of apology (Kossew 9). This would be in keeping with the emphasis on ‘saying sorry’ that was central to suggestions of how the process of reconciliation might happen. The dedication could indicate that writing violent histories and ‘voicing the silence’ is an act that may help the process of reconciliation. Speaking the horrors of the past enacts the logic of illumination, meaning that once these horrors are exposed, much like a wound, a process of recovery is possible--an act of taking responsibility and ‘owning up’ to this past; and of maturation as a nation. This may explain why, despite Grenville declaring that the writing of the violence was the most difficult she has ever done (*Searching* 162), the massacre at the climax of the book, and other acts of violence towards Indigenous people, are narrated in such detail. The degree of description is in keeping with the depth of detail akin to testimony or witnessing which can perform a literary catharsis or exorcism, a process of purification in order to release the toxicity of a violent history where issues of culpability and guilt persist (Collins 46).

Writing on reconciliation marches, Maryrose Casey draws on Sara Ahmed’s work on anti-racism. Ahmed uses Austin’s definition of performativity to make the point that declarative speech acts are not necessarily performative actions. Declaring that one is anti-racist does not make one anti-racist, so it is non-performative; it does not necessarily do what it is saying by the mere act of saying it:

The declarative mode, as a way of doing something, involves a fantasy of transcendence in which ‘what’ is transcended is the very thing ‘admitted to’ in the declaration: so, to put it simply, if we admit to being bad, then we show that we are good. (Ahmed cited in Casey 148)

Casey connects this with Australian reconciliation marches as ‘parallel performative actions’; they are performances which make a declaration of goodwill and support but they do not necessarily by themselves create change. Casey goes on to demonstrate that while the marches were powerful performances ‘that captured the imagination of many Australians’ (Casey 147), the ensuing political, media and personal responses to Indigenous calls for the symbolic marches to result in real positive changes for Indigenous people, indicate that the events were less about changing race relations than reaffirming the ‘goodness’ of white Australia. It is interesting that *The Secret River* was inspired by such a march, as literary texts, when dedicated to a group of people and with intentions such as ‘voicing the “great Australian silence”’ can operate in the declarative mode and likewise admit to being ‘bad’, having done bad things in the past, but this declaration is not by itself transcendent as Ahmed describes. While the novel, with its shortlisting for numerous prizes and the 2006 Commonwealth Writers Prize award, has evidently appealed powerfully to the imagination of many readers, the concern with ‘settler-colonial’ imaginings is how the narrative involved in the process of reassessing ‘what it means to be a white Australian’ (Kossew 9) shapes a progressive sense of nationhood. Ahmed argues that:

Shame ‘makes’ the nation in the witnessing of past injustices, a witnessing that involves feeling shame, as it exposes the failure of the nation to live up to its ideals. But this exposure is temporary, and becomes the ground for a narrative of national recovery. *By witnessing what is shameful about the past, the nation can ‘live up to’ the ideals that secure its identity or being in the present.* In other words, our shame shows that *we mean well.* The transference of bad feeling to the subject in this admission of shame is only temporary, as the ‘transference’ itself becomes evidence of the restoration of an identity of which we can be proud. National shame can be a mechanism for reconciliation as self-reconciliation, in which the ‘wrong’ that is committed provides the very grounds for claiming national identity. It is the declaration of shame that allows us to ‘assert our identity as a nation’. Recognition works to restore the nation or reconcile the nation to itself by ‘coming to terms’ with its own past in the expression of ‘bad feeling’. But in allowing us to feel bad, shame also allows the nation to feel better or even to feel good. (Ahmed para 23-4)

Hence shame can be converted to national pride. The elements in *The Secret River*, which might allow for such a potential conversion is the way the empathetic portrayal of the protagonist is constructed. By the end of the novel, Thornhill emerges as ultimately a good, though flawed, character, a man who is both bewildered and ashamed. I am not suggesting Thornhill is simplistically rendered. On the contrary, he is fairly complex. There are, though, scenes which to me still invoke the courageous and hardy frontier adventurer, defending his family against all odds. An example is the opening chapter ‘Strangers’ where Thornhill confronts an Aboriginal man with a spear outside his tent at night:

Be off, be off! [...] He had been stripped of everything already: he had only the dirt under his bare feet, his small grip on this unknown place. He had nothing but that, and those helpless sleeping humans in the hut behind him. He was not about to surrender them to any naked black man. (6)

This image of bravely protecting wife and child evokes pioneer imagery integral to Australian nation-making such as the battler and the anti-hero. When this is coupled with reiteration of Indigenous people represented through ‘colonial’ eyes the effect can be extremely troubling. These representations include references to Indigenous peoples as dogs: ⁶

It was true that they did not even know enough to cover their nakedness, but sat with their bare arses on the dirt like dogs. In all these ways they were nothing but savages. (229);

or ridiculous drunks (as with ‘Scabby Bill’ 90-2):

In the morning Scabby Bill could be found sleeping up against the back wall as if he owned it, collapsed into angles, one long skinny leg sticking out, his entire naked black body on full view except for the once-pink bonnet on his head [...] Men came from all the streets around, cheered to watch this black insect of a man capering before them, a person lower in the order of things even than they were. (90-2);

and imagery invoking the noble savage (as with ‘Whisker Harry’ 196-198):

Authority radiated from this naked old man like heat off a fire. (196);

and

Whisker Harry would stalk around on his skinny shanks, unhurried, deliberate. Or he might stand with one foot wedged in against the other knee, his spear upright beside him, watching the distance. When he came face to face with Thornhill he looked through him as if he were made of air. (199)

The countering argument to the idea that there are stereotypical representations in *The Secret River* is the point that the narration is communicating in an authentic manner the view through colonial eyes in the early days of ‘settlement’/invasion. Here narrative voice plays a crucial role. Grenville describes in *Searching* the process of selecting the voice for the narration. After initially attempting to write the narrative in first person, it apparently became clear this was not working for the ‘stately voice’ of the narration would not ‘belong to an illiterate Thames lighterman’ (163). Also the book needed to say things that Wiseman could not, it needed to be in third person: ‘Third person it had to be, then, but ‘third person subjective’ (164)—from Wiseman’s point of view, but only partly in his voice. This may make sense from a literary perspective, however, when third-person subjective narration is the mode for conveying such representations as exemplified above, I found the troubling effect amplified. There can be a greater sense of distance and an authoritative tone implicit in third-person narration even while in subjective mode. Indeed, the omniscient aspect of the narrative voice, the very feature that allows it to say things Wiseman could not, means that the argument of the text as representing ‘authentic’ colonial depictions of Indigeneity through Thornhill’s eyes, slips in and out; an unsettling effect given the disturbing depictions. There is an ambiguity between when the words are in Thornhill’s voice and the commanding contrast of the third person. I am not suggesting here that the narrator *should* be reliable but that the unreliability of colonial perspectives can be compromised by the effect of an authoritative sounding narration.

This essay will now examine characterisation and the contrast between Thornhill and that of Indigenous people in the novel. I argue that as Thornhill becomes humanised and at points such as the opening scene, potentially heroised, the representations of Indigenous bodies appear more one-

dimensional. The rendering of Thornhill as relatively a good average man is achieved in a series of textual manoeuvres. As described above, we are introduced to Thornhill as a man defending his wife and child from a 'naked black man' with a spear. Throughout the text, Thornhill is contrasted to a very good white man, Blackwood, and a very bad white man, Smasher, to show he is somewhere in the middle--a 'Joe blow' sort. He is repelled and shamed by the invitation of Smasher to rape the Aboriginal woman who is chained in Smasher's house (251-3). In the buildup to the massacre, when Thornhill comes upon an Aboriginal camp where everyone has been poisoned and witnesses a young boy dying, he tries to give him water. It is clear Thornhill was not involved in the poisoning (275-8). Although he feels justified in defending his crop with physical force against Indigenous women who he considers are stealing it, he lets go the one boy who is caught, rather than use him to lure more Aboriginal people to be harmed. The boy who is caught reminds him of the dying boy (282-3). At this stage, it is clear that Thornhill, while capable of acting violently when justified by a defensive logic of protecting *his* land, is also compassionate and has a conscience.

In contrast to Thornhill, Indigenous characters emerge as connected with an anthropomorphised landscape. Grenville, in *Searching for The Secret River*, recounts a moment of writerly revelation to explain her approach:

[...] I began to realize that the Aboriginal people were emerging in a way I hadn't planned: through descriptions of landscape. The rocks, the trees, the river--I realized I was describing them in human terms--the golden flesh of the rocks beneath their dark skin, the trees gesturing, the bush watchful and alive. Humanising the landscape could be a way of showing the link between indigenous people and their land because, in some way that I recognised without really understanding, the country was the people. (199)

This is an honestly expressed recognition, however the connection does not engage further with Indigenous epistemologies of relationships to land (accessible in numerous works such as those of W.H. Stanner, Paddy Roe and Deborah Bird Rose). Thus what ensues can read as Indigenous bodies appearing objectified and dehumanised in the descriptions of land/bodies. To conflate Aboriginal bodies and presence with landscape without 'understanding' is to risk textually harking back to legislation under which Indigenous peoples were categorised as flora and fauna. The following are some examples of descriptions that exemplify this Indigenous land/body conflation in *The Secret River*: 'the wind had exposed buttery rock, as if the landscape itself was a dark-skinned creature with golden flesh beneath' (101).

Similarly descriptions of Indigenous bodies incorporate elements of animals and land, such as:

His eyes were set so deeply into the skull that they were invisible each in its cave of bone. The rock of his face shaped itself around the big mouth, the imposing nose, the folds of his cheeks.(5)

and

They wandered about, naked as worms [...] They were like the snakes or spiders, not something that could be guarded against. (92-3)

Adam Gall's essay on this novel, 'Taking/Taking Up' (2008), describes *The Secret River* as significant for understanding the position and operation of the frontier in the contemporary 'settler-

colonial' culture of Australia. Gall cites Moreton-Robinson's argument that 'although the morphology of colonialism has changed, it persists in discursive and cultural practices' (Gall 24). *The Secret River*, he argues, may be read as a present-day form of frontier colonialism:

what is neglected [...] is the idea of the frontier as a continuous process that underwrites settler-colonial cultural texts and imposes real limits on the strategies these texts can mobilise. (Gall 99)

Gall draws his conclusion about limited strategies after interrogating Grenville's representational strategies in the text, including the descriptions of the Indigenous characters and the depiction of Indigenous bodies as connected with the landscape.

The conflation of landscape and land with Indigenous bodies becomes further problematised by Thornhill's drive for ownership of the land. This desire is consistently conceived in hypersexualised imagery of compulsive possession. In the boat 'Hope', Thornhill winds his way 'into the very body of the land'. (129) The text describes his journey in this way:

... the shadows lying purple in the clefts between the ridges, Thornhill saw it ahead: the high ridge, square like a sperm whale's head and the river below, which swung around the low point of land that was about to become his [...] in a frenzy of longing [...] feeling the strength in his own shoulders warm through his flesh, forcing himself against the river [...] Through a mouth gone stiff with passion, he hissed [...] the keel had settled deep into the mud [...] bursting out at last onto dry land [...] His own, by virtue of his foot standing on it [...] Mine. (131-3)

This piece of land he craves so lustfully becomes 'Thornhill's Point'. The implication I contend, of this Aboriginal body/land conflation is that, if Aboriginal people are the land and Thornhill is possessing the land in a sexualized manoeuvre, this constitutes a metaphorical rape. Even while Thornhill is ultimately characterized as an average man, and it is demonstrated in the narrative that he would never rape an Indigenous woman, this 'possessive' violation occurs on a subliminal (or not so subliminal) textual level. It is contextualised by reiterated declarations that he has never owned anything and so this 'aching' desire, which he would murder to fulfill, is normalised in a western conception of relationships to land via a possessive logic. After the massacre it is noted that now Thornhill's land is 'unmolested' by Indigenous people (313).

Grenville has suggested in personal communications that this section in the novel is in fact more evocative of a difficult birth with Thornhill moving against obstacles, impeded from progress by thick mud, butting blindly through bushes and bursting onto land newly hatched as described elsewhere in the novel.⁷ For me however, the language of a mouth stiff with passion, the reiterated desire to possess and the culmination of the literal erection inherent in the name 'Thornhill's Point' makes it hard to read as more explicitly a scene of birth. The interpretive dynamics, though, of being able to read the same passages as the birth of Thornhill and the start of a colony versus invasion and a rape of land are worth noting. The competing discourses of pioneer versus coloniser exemplify the tensions and stakes inherent in Frontier narratives.

As well as analysis of narrative voice and characterisation, it is necessary to explore the contextual framework for the climax of the novel, the massacre scene. For an understanding of this scene, it is worth noting a point in *Searching* where Grenville makes reference to the Holocaust. Grenville describes comparing the act of taking notes about atrocities perpetrated on Aboriginal people with looking at pictures 'of people in the Nazi death camps' in the Holocaust:

The poisoned, dirtied feeling came from the closeness of these events. They hadn't happened on the other side of the world. The Waterloo Creek and Myall Creek massacres occurred within a hundred kilometers of my mother's birthplace ...These [perpetrators] were my own people. (124-5)

The text continues to describe processing these emotions and trying to understand the Australian context:

And there was the logic of the situation, too, of newcomers moving into a place where other people were already living. One set of people wanted things another set already had. How could there *not* be trouble?

Reminding myself of that wasn't enough to make the sick feeling to go away.(125)

The strategy of situational logic adopted here appears to differentiate atrocities. What concerns me is the implication that there *could* be reasons for 'the sick feeling to go away' through being reminded of the logic of the situation. This resonates with what Gall terms 'the logic of escalation', and 'an impersonal, historic force that is "never a simple matter of right and wrong"' (Gall 101 citing Grenville, *Searching* 132). This is demonstrated in *Searching* by statements such as:

Settler violence ... does not emerge from evil so much as from 'a tragic, tragic inability to communicate across a gulf of culture.' (Collins 44 citing Koval interview with Grenville).

All of these people, black and white, had been faced with choices [...] They'd made their choices under the influence of all sorts of factors [...] (*Searching* 125)

The Wisemans and the Aboriginal people were left alone to get on with it, staring at each other up there on the Hawkesbury. It was just the two of them, working it out together [...] White meeting black, black meeting white and everyone trying to decide what to do. (*Searching* 181-2)

Such constructions and historic juxtapositions can act as rationalisations that equalise power positions, effectively eradicating their impact and bringing everything down to 'choice' while at the same time making it clear that choices were limited by the historical contexts undermining individual agency. Hence the effects and implications of the atrocities may be somewhat neutralized as they become more comprehensible and logical in these formulations. The events and actions appear removed from rather than informed by a sense of colonisation as a systemic, institutionalised and continuing practice; a 'well-oiled machine' (Atkinson) of imperialism by the time the British reached Australia after invading numerous regions and territories. Rather, to cast the issues in such terms as 'everyone trying to decide what to do' is to suggest that there are two parties, not unlike two people in a relationship who have had irreconcilable differences and failed communication. This results in mutual abuses, from which the two can recover if they reconcile or alternatively, as Fiona Nicoll suggests in her analysis of the language of reconciliation in Australia, if Indigenous people can 'reconcile' themselves to their fate (Nicoll 384). This is indicative of the reasoning behind the use of the term *reconciliation* which much of white Australia found palatable; the idea that, as opposed to the wrongs of imperialistic power and a dominant force oppressing another, such as occurred in Nazi Germany, in the Australian context two sides made questionable choices, failed to communicate and, hence, tragedy followed. Reconciliation language as a way of perceiving violent pasts can thus impact culpability and the evidence of genocide.

Where the narrative in *The Secret River* engages with the 'logic of the situation' (125), it appears strategically possible to create empathy for Thornhill. There is some contradiction here, though, with the narrative at times showing Thornhill as genuinely naïve and at other times, astute about the fact he is 'taking' rather than 'taking up' Indigenous land. Thornhill justifies his claim to land in statements such as: 'My place now--you [Aboriginal people] got all the rest' (144) and 'We'll stick to our victuals, mate, you stick to yours' (197). However, a paradox emerges as Thornhill also says: 'There will be no stopping us [...] Pretty soon there won't be nowhere left for you black buggers' (215). The reference to 'victuals' comes despite the character Blackwood informing Thornhill earlier that he has uprooted the yam daisies so the Indigenous population will go hungry (168). It is also clear that Thornhill has all the fertile land near the river (152). Likewise the acknowledgement that 'there will be no stopping us' is cut across by references to Thornhill's bewilderment and blindness. This ambiguity brings to mind the disjuncture behind the words 'taking up' and 'took', and, on a larger scale, could mirror the anxieties around colonial intention, knowledge and culpability in reconciliation debates.

When Thornhill is rather haplessly drawn into becoming a part of the party involved in the massacre of Aboriginal people, it is made clear by the narrative that he is driven to this action by his possessive love of the land and his fear of losing his wife who threatens to return to England. At this key moment Thornhill wonders, 'How had his life funneled down to this corner, in which he had so little choice?' (300). Thus at this crucial point, the protagonist perceives himself with diminished agency. Most compellingly, in the actual scene of the massacre, he proves he is a very bad shot, repeatedly missing, too slow, blacking out, unable to move or pull the trigger:

All over the clearing men fired and reloaded and swords rose and fell and came up all over blood in a din of screaming and roaring and the high panicked cries of children. After that first shot, things had moved too fast around Thornhill. He pointed his gun at blacks as they ran but the muzzle was always too late. He stood in the clearing, the thing up against his shoulder, watching [...] Then Thornhill felt a blow on his hand where it held the gun so that he dropped the thing [...] As Thornhill turned, a blow to the side of his head made everything go dark behind his eyes. He bent for the gun and was knocked over by another rock in the small of the back [...] Thornhill got the gun up to his shoulder but he was too slow again [...] 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 on the trigger, but nothing happened. (305-307)

While the white protagonist is present on site, he is not acting the part of brutal murderer. The climax is frozen, interrupted and obscured in keeping with Morrison's analysis of how literary texts representing white triumph tend towards suggestions of paralysis and incoherence. The paralysis, Morrison argues, appears almost always in conjunction with black or Africanist people who are dead (Morrison 32-3). In Grenville's climax, the white protagonist is indeed physically involved but things 'moved too fast', the muzzle was 'always too late', he literally drops the gun then is 'too slow'. Finally the gun is up but he cannot move. The attempt to understand past atrocities here, hinges on perceived limited agency and difficulty performing the bad acts. Thornhill, while a fairly hardy physical character to this point, capable of establishing his 'own' land 'Thornhill's point', appears plagued by a lack of competency or is it will? Does such a version of events ease the guilt of a white readership? Do paralysis and ineptitude make Thornhill's complicity with murder more bearable?

The one Aboriginal man Thornhill does kill, almost despite himself it seems, is the leader of the group, Whisker Harry.

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. It seemed the longest time that he stayed like that, as if by becoming a rock or a tree he could eject the thing that entered him. (307-8)

While Thornhill's ineptitude at massacre is well established, to take down the leader is ultimately an act of power in keeping with the hero/anti-hero mythology of conquest. He is subsequently in the final chapter represented as a 'king' and his wife as the 'queen' in their mansion. Despite this promotion to possessive sovereign power, he is nonetheless described as 'the picture of a man puzzled by what life could turn up' (322).

Through this construction of the massacre scene, if Thornhill is a proxy for exploring what one might do in this past situation, the white nation, while presented with shame, is not, I feel, ultimately threatened. In fact, if anything, the writing of such a text with its genuine goodwill and willingness to relive the nation's past atrocities, could read as a signifier of even more virtue; demonstrating an ability 'to grow up as a society', as Grenville states (Kossew 8). The protagonist, complicit in the murder of Indigenous families at their campsite, whose actions can be argued to constitute part of a larger picture of genocide and colonisation, was not proficient at the bloody deeds. He ends up appearing baffled in his final representation—'puzzled' yet a 'king'. Is this image of coloniser serving as an idealised national self-portrayal and a consumable version of a violent colonial history?

Morrison speaks in her work on the white imaginary, of the strategic use of 'Africanness' for white goals that are ultimately imaginative encounters to enable 'white writers to think about themselves,' (51) operating as a moral yardstick for ethical debate and the social contract. Morrison argues that black characters are often employed in the white imaginary for self-reflection. In this sense, texts which appear to be about slavery are often more self-reflexive as they are written by those in the dominant position and can be 'self-innocenting.'⁸ I found myself asking whether *The Secret River* also ultimately works as a self-reflexive contemplation of mythologised Indigeneity to shape white Australia's identity and assuage anxiety (Morrison 47). As cited in my analysis of the massacre scene, Toni Morrison notes that in American white literary texts a tendency occurs in the representations of white victory towards paralysis. She suggests that these are often conjoined with an image of impenetrable whiteness that ultimately triumphs:

Figurations of impenetrable whiteness ... surface ... whenever an Africanist presence is engaged. These closed white images are frequently found ... at the end of the narrative [In providing a] strong suggestion of paralysis and incoherence; of impasse ..., they appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent or under complete control. These images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness. (Morrison 33)

At the end of *The Secret River* there are indeed images of the white wall surrounding Thornhill's house, 'bright with its mortar and whitewash in the sunlight, so bright it was painful to the eyes. Foursquare, immovable, it was like a stately chord of music in this rumbled land' (330). At this

point of blinding and immovable whiteness, the Indigenous presence is literally a shadow (333). The narrator states that there is ‘no human ... a new emptiness’ (333). At this point in the narrative, *terra nullius* appears to be reasserted with the reference to emptiness and any suggestion of continuing Indigenous sovereignty is effectively whitewashed and reduced to a haunting ‘hollow’ (334). This word ‘hollow’ evokes the description in *Searching* of the space intended for the Aboriginal story in the novel:

To create a hollow in the book, a space of difference that would be more eloquent than any words I might invent to explain it. (199)

and it is also literally what the protagonist is left with in the text, a ‘hollow feeling’ (334). Thornhill’s only ‘measure of peace’ (334) turns out to be watching the landscape through his telescope, literally looking into the ‘dark’. Is he looking for redemption? Or can he genuinely be missing the Indigenous people he has regarded predominantly throughout the text as savages and whom he has helped to murder? On one hand the ending stretches credibility and exemplifies the limited strategies the ‘settler’/invader text can mobilise in its depictions of the ‘frontier’ (Gall 99). The image, though, of the haunted self portrayed here seeking peace from external dark shadows, resonates with Morrison’s notion of whiteness meditating on the shadow which is both its antidote and companion. These unsettled emotions exemplify contemporary ‘settler’ anxieties around processing guilt and looking towards ‘othered’ bodies to enact reconciliation.

The concern with the possibility of colonial narratives is, as Ahmed states, that the exposure of shame has been temporary and ‘becomes the ground for a narrative of national recovery’ (Ahmed para 23) – that shame has been a ‘passing phase’ and the utterance of it has not been enough to enact change, particularly when the utterance is loaded with white investments. It is worth noting from Casey’s research on reconciliation, calls for a Treaty were seen by some as ‘betrayals of the goodwill’ non-Indigenous Australians exhibited in the reconciliation marches. Some editorials and reports condemned the arrogance of ‘excessive Aboriginal stridency’ in the push for tangible political outcomes (Casey 145). Casey asks a question though about the potential of reconciliation marches as performances, which may also be applied to texts. Even if they do manifest and potentially support white virtue [and I would add white self-reflection], can this virtue [/reflexivity] function as a useable property that can be invested in ‘meaningful and tangible recognition of Indigenous sovereignty and rights?’ (Casey 148).

Good white anti-racist statements as evident with narratives such as *The Secret River* do not necessarily collude with ‘bad faith’ (Casey 148) and can be effective. However, I would argue that to ensure this is the case, it is important to engage with Morrison’s call to study the technical ways black characters may work to enforce and enhance the qualities of whiteness (Morrison 52-3). Encouraging ‘critical geographies’ (Morrison 52) may limit the violence, both physical and representational, which throughout Australia’s history, has frequently coincided with the desire to ‘do good’.⁹ Such critical practices potentially work towards producing conditions that *may* be performative, and could harness any commitment to change that exists in the desire to create past worlds. Tony Birch contends:

If this maintenance of repression is to be confronted, it will be through ideas and actions that do more than serve the sanctity of liberal historiography or support self-serving acts of symbolic empathy Non-Indigenous Australia needs to reassess its place within an Indigenous nation, including a willingness to accede to the principles of Indigenous sovereignty. (Birch 115)

In the end, the most generative aspect of imagined pasts may be the necessary reassessment and insights they encourage into the present. As Grenville states in *Searching*:

I'd have been hard pressed to say exactly what I thought reconciliation meant. It had something to do with what had gone on in Australia over the last 200 years: the violence, the taking-away of Aboriginal children from their parents, the fact that we descendants of Europeans lived on land that had once belonged to other people. Beyond that it was all uncertain: should we feel guilty, should we be talking compensation, what about treaties and land rights? (10-11)

ENDNOTES

¹ The quotation Moreton-Robinson cites is from Anna Yeatman, "Postmodernism and the Politics of Representation," *Olive Pink Society Bulletin* 3.2, 1991: 17.

² Grenville's account of this can be found in *Searching* 10-7.

³ Grenville's interview with Ramona Koval quoted in this extract is from ABC Radio National's "Books and Writing," Sunday 17 July 2005, available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/1414510.htm>.

⁴ The phrase 'tide of history' is not used in the novel--my reference here is to the judgment in *The Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v The State of Victoria & Ors* native title case (1998) by Justice Olney when he claimed that the foundation of native title had been 'washed away' by the tide of history. The reason I include it here is the sense of inevitability at times evoked for me, to the hostilities arising between the colonisers and Indigenous peoples.

⁵ Grenville website, see http://kategrenville.com/The_Secret_River.

⁶ Other examples include: 'At last he felt that there was nothing to be done but walk towards the [Indigenous] men, speaking as to a couple of wary dogs.' p.143; 'You might as well bloody bark mate' [Thornhill speaking to Indigenous men] p.144; 'He [Indigenous man] came up so close that Thornhill could smell his thick animal scent' p.147; 'He [Thornhill] made himself hail them [Indigenous men] in a jovial way, looking them right in the face, as if they were dogs that would bite if they caught the scent of fear' p.195; 'His [Indigenous boy caught] chest was going in and out as quick as a dog's' p.282.

⁷ Pers.comm. 9/12/2009.

⁸ The term 'self-innocenting narrative' comes from Phillip Morrissey citing Marilyn Lake: 'When reading *Dancing with Strangers*, I was reminded of Marilyn Lake's description of settler scholar Keith Windschuttle's *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* as a "self-innocenting narrative" (Lake 2003: 165).'

⁹ Jennifer Rutherford demonstrates this connection in *The Gauche Intruder: Freud, Lacan and the White Australian Fantasy*, 2000.

WORKS CITED

Ahmed, Sara. 'Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism' in *Borderlands e-journal*, 3.2 2004: <http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm>. Accessed 1 December 2010.

Atkinson, Wayne. 'Indigenous Land Justice in Australia: A Comparative Analysis' Unpublished Paper, 1999.

-
- Birch, Tony. 'The Invisible Fire' in *Sovereign Subjects* ed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Crows Nest, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 2007: 105-7.
- Casey, Maryrose. 'Referendums and Reconciliation Marches: What Bridges are We Crossing?' in *Parading Ourselves* ed. Maryrose Casey et al. Perth, W.A.: Network Books, 2006: 137-48.
- Collins, Eleanor . 'Poison in the Flour' in *Meanjin* 65.1, 2006: 38-47.
- Gall, Adam. 'Taking/Taking Up: Recognition and the Frontier in Grenville's Secret River' in *JASAL Special Issue: The Colonial Present*, 2008: 94-104.
- Grenville, Kate. 'Secret River- Secret History' in *The Sydney Papers*, Summer 2006: 149-53.
- *The Secret River*. Melbourne: Text, 2005.
- *Searching For The Secret River*. Melbourne: Text, 2006.
- . Official author website, <http://kategrenville.com/The_Secret_River>. Accessed 20 August 2010.
- hooks, bell. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996.
- Kosew, Sue. 'Voicing the 'Great Australian Silence': Kate Grenville's Narrative of Settlement in *The Secret River*'. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 42.2, 2007: 7-18.
- Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*. St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2000.
- Morrisey, Phillip. 'Dancing with Shadows: Erasing Aboriginal Self and Sovereignty' in *Sovereign Subjects* ed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Crows Nest, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 2007: 65-74.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1992.
- Nicoll, Fiona. 'Indigenous Sovereignty and the Violence of Perspective: A White Woman's Coming Out Story' in *Australian Feminist Studies*, 15.33 2000: 369-86.
- Rutherford, Jennifer. *The Gauche Intruder: Freud, Lacan and the White Australian Fantasy*. Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 2000.
- Wyndham, Susan. Interview with Kate Grenville, 'A Woman with a Past'. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9-10 July 2005.