

# PITCHING ETHICAL RESONANCE: ANDREW McGAHAN'S *THE WHITE EARTH*

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*The song is gone; the dance  
is secret with the dancers in the earth,  
the ritual useless, and the tribal story  
lost in an alien tale.*

Judith Wright, *Bora Ring*

## I

In 2005 Andrew McGahan's fourth published novel *The White Earth* won the prestigious Australian Miles Franklin Award, a prize inaugurated in the 1950s through the estate of the writer Stella Franklin. In giving McGahan the prize the Franklin judges noted that the author 'subjects postcolonial Australia to a searing analysis.' As they go on to say in the short paragraph published on the award's website, McGahan 'draws on the full resources of the novel as an imaginative form to explore some of the most urgent social and political issues haunting Australians today.' They mention the two main characters—nine-year old William and his patron, his great uncle John McIvor. Throughout the novel the boy carries a festering, almost numbing wound in his ear. 'William's disease,' the judges observe, 'is literally the burden of the past' (2005).

This last reference to history invites us to consider to what extent and in what terms *The White Earth* can be regarded as a historical novel, a genre the narrative in some ways lends itself to. Accordingly we can note how the narrative's resourceful, broad temporal reach stretches to the establishment of a large merino sheep farm in the northern parts of the Darling Downs in Queensland, in the mid-nineteenth century. We can also note the preoccupation with a landed gentry: the property was developed by Edward White, whose lineage derives from a 'pastoral dynasty' in England. Described as 'impoverished aristocrats,' the Whites had come to Australia in the 1820s (23). They are further described as 'squatters,' who took 'possession of the land in 1860,' built a rural mansion and set-up what came to be known as the 'Kuran Station,' whose expansive plains lie wedged between a mountain range and a river, a 'kingdom of their own.' The temporal sweep is thus matched by a geographical arc, cartographically registered by a partly imaginary map preceding the novel's Prologue.

And yet while this patronage alludes to a familial lineage and historical trajectory, it is overtaken by a pastoral imaginary entangled with a specific political momentum against which much of the action of the novel takes place: the Federal Labor government of Paul Keating and native title parliamentary debates in 1993, whose legislative deliberation comes to a head in the Epilogue. In Australia these debates came in the wake of the *Mabo* decision of Australia's High Court in 1992 to grant indigenous subjects in Australia the right to apply for native title land claims, thus annulling the all-encompassing sovereignty of *terra nullius*, which stipulated that upon colonial settlement the land had been vacant of any productive or

meaningful occupation. This was followed by the High Court's *Wik* decision in 1996, which determined that pastoral leases do not necessarily extinguish native title claims.

In McGahan's novel these references are paralleled by allusions to Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party that emerged on the Australian political scene in 1997, contesting the federal elections the year after. Hanson's constituency in Queensland, the north-eastern state, was largely rural, made up mostly of farmers and pastoralists. In *The White Earth* the party is masterminded by McIvor, whose 'Charter' ends with the demand for 'One Flag,' 'One People,' and of course 'One Nation' (133). In this vein McIvor heads the inner circle of what he calls 'The Australian Independence League,' organizing an inaugurating rally of 'concerned citizens' to formally adopt the charter and develop a plan of action. More radical than Hanson, the paternalist McIvor envisages a popular crusade that would gain momentum as a secessionist movement, rather than work through legislative and electoral institutions of the state. 'We threw Whitlam out and Fraser came in,' McIvor tells William, referring to former Australian Prime Ministers,

but nothing changed. No one gave a damn about you unless you were waving a placard. You had to be a migrant, or black, or homosexual. But God help you if you were a normal Australian, let alone a farmer like me. We used to be the backbone of this country. But not to those people. To them, we were the biggest problem. We were fascists. We were destroying the environment. We had to be controlled. Fraser went and Hawke came in, and things just kept getting worse. That's when I gave up voting. Why bother? Parties, politicians—they're all exactly the same.

These words are sputtered through the haze of a fire—fiery words matched by McIvor's fiery silhouette: 'The flames leapt up, so that William saw his uncle as a dark shape before the fire, surrounded by ruin and rubbish, the rage rising in his voice with the flames' (138).

The novel indeed begins and ends in flames, with many other instances, semblances and metaphoric allusions of fire strewn throughout the story. In the Prologue William stands dumbstruck on the back verandah of his family's farm house, looking out at what is initially described as 'the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion.' This turns out to be a fire ignited by an electrical fault on the harvester operated by William's father, as he drives through the midst of a very dry wheat field. Shell-shocked and not quite seeing through the hazy smoke and not quite comprehending what was happening, or perhaps all too well seeing what was happening, William stood rooted to the spot.

After his father's death William's mother has to give up their property, and mother and son are taken in by McIvor, who now owns and occupies the dilapidated 'House' (always capitalized in the novel) the Whites had built on the Kuran Plains. The situation is rather tense, as the mother has certain expectations that in time William would inherit the House, providing them with security. Short tempered and often stricken with headaches, addicted to medication, she carries her own demons. With William she is more harsh than caring, sometimes slapping him around when his inability to understand the situation annoys her. William's unconscious desire for her death through conflagration discloses itself by way of

his incapacity to understand and respond to her motivations. As he tries not to let the image of his burning father dwell in his thoughts, he can't help turning his burning thoughts to her: 'William's mother, meanwhile, had not received the grace of an early death and a martyrdom to fire, but his feelings about her had always been complex. She was harder to love than her husband—physically harder too, a thin woman of angles and bones...' (7). The festering wound in his right ear was caused by a severe slap she had given him when she learned that he had witnessed the fire catching his father and looked on without raising an alarm. No doubt still shocked by the event, he is further traumatized by the on-going, relational incidence of her callousness—a sonorous pitch, we could say, in which his capacity to engage and respond to the situation is rendered abject and passive.

The many figurative and literal registers of fire in *The White Earth* animate the dissonant, polyphonic tenor of haunting and historical exigency woven into McGahan's novel, the narrative attuned to the present as a smouldering site of antagonism between political and imaginative sensibilities. This antagonism to some extent informs Gelder and Salzman's description of *The White Earth* as 'a rural apocalypse novel,' who go on to remark that it 'folds its Gothic visions and fantasies into a position of settlement that makes its connection to contemporary Australian political realities crystal clear' (24). Observing the characterisation of McIvor's own, somewhat delirious claims to a 'sacred' connection to the land, these critics suggest a form of 'white mimicry,' further describing his outlook as a symptom of 'white panic.' Together, white mimicry and white panic become symptoms of both a political sensibility and a register of Gothic association: 'The Gothic,' they write, 'returns to the novel as it moves closer to the exact moment of the Mabo decision in December 1993.' McGahan's 'post-*Mabo* novel,' Salzman and Gelder assert, recalls Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic classic *The Fall of the House of Usher*, considering the final conflagration in which both McIvor and his stately mansion are reduced to smouldering ashes.

The polyphonic or 'contrapuntal' (according to Edward Said's critical initiation and application of the term) reverberations across and between imaginative and political associations of earth are significant for McGahan's novel. It can be addressed by briefly considering A. McCann's short and provocative essay 'The Literature of Extinction,' where he notes a contradiction between what he calls 'progressive political identifications' and 'residual if not regressive aesthetic forms' (54). McCann traces a literary practice that works not merely to figuratively incorporate earth into aestheticized and imaginary modes of romantic and pastoral vision, but also, in doing so, to inscribe a presumptive sense of loss and mourning of indigenous Australians. This elegiac lament echoes 'an intensely affective, Romantic mode of writing fixated on landscape' (51), in the service of an aesthetic sensibility that produces an imaginary sense of indigenous absence, an imperious evolutionary presumption of the dying out of indigenous subjects. For McCann it is the aesthetic scope and elegiac tenor of this assumption—or to mention the compelling term he quotes from Patrick Brantlinger, 'proleptic elegy' (Brantlinger 4)—that imbues indigeneity with a lament for the passing, the dying-out of indigenous subjects. By aestheticizing landscapes—thereby constituting an epistemological inventory by which earth is naturalized *as* landscape—poetic mourning substitutes a romantic semblance of nature for the social materiality of history, 'similar to the poetic rehearsal of doomed-race theories in the nineteenth century' (McCann 52). In other words, poetically charged descriptions of fauna and flora, of wilderness and natural environment, work to render a sense of landscape somehow untainted by the signifiable force of material and imaginative practices.

In this vein we can recall how Raymond Williams had in the early 1970s pondered over the way in which ‘neo-pastoral’ verse idealised the rural environment, rendering its social materiality reducible to figurative associations, so that, as he says, ‘living tensions are excised, until there is nothing countervailing, and selected images stand as themselves: not in a living but an enameled world’ (18). For his part, McCann turns to politically aware and progressive writers, focusing on Judith Wright’s poem “At Cooloolah” (Wright 83).<sup>1</sup> He reads the poem as an exercise in subsuming the social materiality of history to a ‘natural schema,’ irrespective of Wright’s progressive thematic and poetic concerns. Despite what we can call the poem’s critical postcolonial register, McCann insists that its elegiac tenor ‘mourns the passing of an Aboriginal presence...and imagines that colonizer and colonized are both part of a vast natural schema into which colonial conflict is subsumed’ (53).

In some respects McCann’s argument lends itself to a view of the ambivalences of postcolonial critique, towards foregrounding how a progressive critical practice is constrained by having to situate its terms of reference through residual forms entangled with practices and discourses of colonial subjugation. In an important respect this irredeemable ambivalence is situated where postcolonial critique foregrounds its historicizing and semiotic limitations, so that the ‘post’ in postcolonial is just as symptomatic of lingering trajectories and inventories as it is both a marker of decolonizing historical discontinuities and a critical reflection on the tension between symptomatic and historical registers. Arguably, Wright’s poetry captures and foregrounds this ambivalence, especially her poem “Bora Ring,” which McCann could well have mentioned to qualify his rather summary conclusions. To reflect briefly on the poem, if indeed ‘The song is gone; the dance / is secret with the dancers in the earth / the ritual useless,’ this is because ‘the tribal story’ is ‘lost in an alien tale.’ Which is to say that here Wright strives to foreground how an ‘alien’ poetic *pattern* works to produce the very tenor, the conventional associations, of that loss and absence. And far from evoking a ‘natural schema’ (McCann), ‘the apple-gums / posture and mime a past corroboree / murmur a broken chant’ (Wright 2-3). Accordingly, I would argue against the view of another critic, whose reading of “Bora Ring” suggests that ‘identification between the Aborigine and his environment [is] so complete and powerful that nature itself has absorbed the lost Aboriginal culture’ (Walker, quoted in King-Smith 124).<sup>2</sup>

I am, then, suggesting that McGahan strives to foreground this ambivalence. For just as the historical sweep is overtaken by, or rendered significant through, dissonant impulses in the present, we could say that the historical index entwined in the novel relates not only to ‘the burden of the past,’ (as the Franklin judges say) but encompasses the burden of a present in and for which the novel was composed. Or rather, to the tension resonating across and between past and present. In this temporalising respect it is useful to evoke Gérard Genette’s concept of ‘anachrony,’ which he relates as ‘one of the traditional resources of literary narration’ (1980 36). The concept has been particularly useful for studies in narratology, in respect to accompanying notions of analepsis and prolepsis, flashbacks and flash-forwards. It points to the constitutive split or gap between narrative and story, so that, for example, a two-hour film could tell a story that occurs over a temporal expanse of twenty years. In other words, narrative works to organize temporal continuities and discontinuities in which a story can be composed and told. But this gap, I want to emphasise, implicates a range of historical contingencies, concerning predominating cultural patterns and social modalities circulating through distributions of material and imaginary resources.

For my purposes I want to note how what we can call anachronic contraction works to stabilize the present as a vantage point to manage temporal continuity, or for that matter, discontinuity. In doing so it is employed towards closing the gap or relieving (transcending) the tension between narrative and story, present and past. As I said this gap or tension enfolds a range of social material practices, cultural production and discursive articulations, as well as modalities of reading and viewing—all negotiating the patterns in which narrative and story, present and past, are brought into proximity. We could say, to give Ken Gelder's notion of 'proximate reading' a temporal twist, that a variable relation of 'remoteness and closeness' (11) implicates modalities of inhabiting and making sense of both place and time. But my point is that in this expanded and more phenomenological sense of proximity, anachrony encompasses an ethos embodying critical and creative practices engaging the very capacity of narration to situate history as past, which can potentially acknowledge alternative articulations of relationships between present and past. It is in such terms that I want to track the pitch of ethical resonance in *The White Earth*.

## II

Concerning this, we can observe a barely disclosed, though insistently repetitive thematic trajectory in McGahan's novel that works to foreground anachronic contraction—from the novel's temporally restless opening chapters (the incessant backward and forward movements through and in time) to its final pages that tend to avoid an assembly of identification and empathetic closure. This has to do with the way in which the novel evokes a relational pitch of ethical resonance. In an important respect this pitch resides not so much in the possessive register of William's throbbing ear, not in *his* disease, not in terms of his numbing wound. It rather resides in how a *White* appropriation of wounding is situated as a pattern of exchange with those in whose midst William moves. In an essay on *The White Earth* Marc Delrez refers to this sense of wounding as identification, implicating what he calls 'trauma envy' accruing 'moral capital' (2011). Extending his argument we can note the White family's sense of having been 'impoverished,' socially and culturally injured. Or more centrally for the novel, McIvor's own sense of wounding that McGahan skilfully sets in relation to the White family's proprietorial rights over the Kuran Plains—rights, ownership and propriety secured through legal sanctions and imaginary attachments overlapping with the unacknowledged massacre of the indigenous Kuran people. We can also observe McIvor's affective sensibility of being wounded by political culture, his sense of being betrayed by 'parties' and 'politicians.'<sup>3</sup>

As my title indicates, then, I want to consider how ethical resonance in *The White Earth*, while not directly thematised in the novel, is nevertheless embedded in its narrative, and as a conceptual assemblage lends itself to a consideration of the relationship between the narrative and political sensibilities. This has some bearing on how McGahan's novel can be read to articulate the question of ethical resonance as an intergenerational dynamic—here concentrated in the damaged ear that William struggles to own—to suggest that succeeding generations maintain a sense of tension between past and present; to particular perspectives, imaginary and political sensibilities encompassing their variable narratives. The damaged ear implicates a pitch in which voice resounds across waves of speaking and listening, whereby sounds and their significance have always to be supplemented if they are to cohere as reciprocal patterns of inhabiting and exchanging self- and other-understanding. Addressing

the ethical implications of response as a 'sequel,' Mladen Dolar writes that 'voice does not command or prohibit, but it nevertheless necessitates a continuation, it compels a sequel' (99).

In an essay on *The White Earth* Russell West-Pavlov suggests that the figure of the diseased and throbbing ear 'has its own narrative history which can be read as a corporeal allegory of the history of white settlement in Australia' (101). I want to add that in the novel this disease works to situate the reverberating force of ethical resonance in respect to a historical and social implication not so much of the question of responsibility—which along with duty is a key term in the production of ethical sensibility—but rather in terms of affective and discursive registers of responsiveness. Beyond its formulation as either an Aristotelian teleology in which one's actions are progressively aimed at achieving a mode, or perhaps mean, of happiness; or else a Kantian deontology in which one's actions accord with an ethical demand regardless of outcomes, a more relational approach to the question of ethical responsibility necessarily views respons/ibility as an ability or capacity to respond—as the graphic contours and phonetic tenor of the word suggests. Accordingly, a capacity to respond is located neither subjectively (a property that one can own and exercise at will) nor objectively (according to a rule of conduct), but is variably structured, inhabited and engaged in and through relations of social exchange—relations encompassing practices of subjugation and resistance, though also in terms of material and imaginative resources that distribute modes of accessing public care and recognition. This has some bearing on how we can think of William's voice in terms of a social field or pitch, where the extension and retention, or else enunciation or withdrawal of voice is subjugated and enabled through social, personal and political sensibilities that have a relational, dissonant rhythm.

The contours and sonority of this pitch are manifold: pitching (throwing) voice as social extension; the sonorous, audible tenor of voice entwined with listening; and social fields in which this pitch sustains relational capacities to be responsive, to give and receive. This pitch, to be sure, cannot be assumed to constitute a level playing field—so that the articulation and reception of voice has first to negotiate the circulation of power and desire as relational dynamics. Together, this manifold rhythm of voice implicates an ethical register locating the social pitch of the throbbing ear William is constrained to own in terms of guilt and shame (his disease), an ethical register preoccupied with and directed toward a consideration of responsiveness of non-Aboriginal Australian subjects, though not excluding how resistant practices by indigenous subjects have some bearing on this ethical problematic. Moreover, this ethical exigency in McGahan's novel concerns a relationship between haunting and history in respect to the present as a range of diverse temporalities, and the present as a potential 'gift' (Hage), a reciprocating commitment that, in the first instance, rather than assume an equivalence of power between interlocutors, first addresses the material, imaginative, and indeed temporal circumstances of enunciation. This has some bearing on how the distribution of material, imaginative and legal resources are involved in the production of capacities to give and receive, to inhabit and articulate responsiveness, to further engage responsiveness as a social modality of political culture.

### III

With McGahan, the pitch of responsiveness remains stunted, concentrated in William's throbbing ear, the 'wretched quagmire' of 'his thoughts,' not only in his relationships to his mother and great uncle, but also through his conversations with McIvor's estranged daughter Ruth, a lawyer and champion of indigenous rights. As William reflects, after a bout with

Ruth: 'But some of the words that came out of his mouth had sounded horrible, and the way she had looked at him...His ear throbbed and the sun hurt his eyes'. Before him, drifting through his conflicting thoughts, the landscape billows as a smoldering expanse of mist, its signifiable and imaginary force receding through and into the temporal fog of history:

He lifted his gaze and stared out over the plains. Everywhere he looked there was haze and smoke, vague shifting shapes that could have been anything. Towns that became farms that became empty grassland set on fire. Nothing was solid, not the land, and even less so its history. He had been told so many stories—but which ones was he to believe? He had seen none of these events with his own eyes, walked none of the world with his own feet. (285-6)

As both landscape and history dissolve into a vaporous awareness of their symbolic force, 'empty grassland' comes to be foregrounded as a curious term, replete with historical contingency, as its tenor shifts between descriptive and imaginary associations. The epistemic, figurative and graphic tenor of 'empty grassland' gathers the earth as a form of possession, in the sense of what Mary Pratt calls a 'convention of representation'—whereby through the seeming transparency of a descriptive mode of address what is seen is very often assumed to be all there is to see (139-155). Concerning Australia, Simon Ryan notes how 'firing' practices 'prepared the country for white inhabitation,' the land physically expropriated and imaginatively possessed by the 'instrumentalist gaze' of the early explorers who knew about the practice (160).

For McIvor it is not enough to own the property, the sprawling Kuran Plains and dilapidated House he desires, but to possess it in a more fundamental manner: '...as he turned upon the spot, drinking in every sight and sound of the landscape, he knew that this was the instant in which he took possession. Not legally, not financially, but essentially' (146). His capacity to see and hear digests the landscape as an embodiment of his very being, a fantasy of what Lacan, developing Freud's *Wunscherfüllung*, would call imaginary fulfillment, of a prediscursive sense of attachment to an ideal-ego. In another register, Paul Carter's marvelous notion of 'a travelling epistemology' encompasses what can be called a performatively secured proximity of language and landscape, so that 'empirical' or descriptive modes of address could only make sense by being supplemented 'rhetorically,' through performative associations: 'possession of the country...depended, to some extent, on civilizing the landscape, bringing it into orderly being. More fundamentally still, the landscape had to be taught to speak' (58). McIvor's delirious quest for fulfillment is managed by denying this performative refrain, and in a temporal sense denying the constitutive anachronistic gap between narrative and story.

In a certain sense the desire for fulfillment is in and for itself the fulfillment of desire, implicating circulations of cultural, sexual, social and political sensibilities. So that to speak of desire is to speak of a pursuit for fulfillment, of a certain affective mode of orientation in the midst of which an absence or emptiness is projected as a quest for filling-in. And yet this exchange of oneself through an imaginary and physical absence—of something missing that both inhibits and confirms a sense of being whole without any remainder, independent of any response or sequel—refers not to a prediscursive or ontogenetic attribute of lack (as Lacan's

earlier work implies), but rather to a social modality and ethos in which desire works to constitute a sense of self and social viability.

The scene in which McIvor comes to embody his delirium is replete with an unspeakable, affective resonance of shame and guilt, exchanged through the pitch of an assumed propriety informing the possession of earth, in the midst of his father's presence. His father, Daniel McIvor, had been in a police force charged with keeping the natives in check, and had later worked for the Whites for over thirty years, running the sheep station for them. Upon the death of Edward White in 1929, his granddaughter Elizabeth decided to sell the property, cutting Daniel out, cutting John McIvor out from what he came to desire as his inheritance. 'You were only ever an employee, Mr McIvor,' she tells the father, accompanied by the son, dismissing them both: 'And for the first time in the interview her gaze flickered over John as he sat by stupidly, and he saw that her contempt embraced him as well. *Your son was only ever an employee. I think you might have forgotten that*' (55, McGahan's emphasis). Seeing what he came to regard as his inheritance evaporate into thin air, John McIvor is stunned with shame, for both himself and his father: 'In the last moments he could only stare at Elizabeth, and out of his shame there flamed a terrible admiration for her.' This unacknowledged flaming shame will come to dominate how McIvor exchanges his sense of self with others, how he comes to pass on his delirium to William. The inheritance is passed on from father to son to nephew, referenced when William finds Daniel McIvor's dusty police cap in an old suitcase, and goes around wearing it—the younger generation inheriting the desire and political sensibility of the older generation.

Through his delirium McIvor orients his desire as a possessive relationship to the plot of earth expropriated by the Whites, a relationship in which the very significance and symbolic weight of the landscape emerges through the imaginary and material terms of his desire for fulfillment. And yet his possessive desire implicates a history of dispossession: the site he chooses to hold the rally is steeped in a history of indigenous gatherings and ritual practices, marked by a ceremonial circle of stones, or Bora rings. In fact McIvor confides to William that he has chosen the site precisely because of its ceremonial significance, as a sort of 'protest' against a view that 'the blacks have some magical connection that whites can never have.' Through his inflamed desire for fulfillment he acknowledges the site as sacred, but only to re-inscribe its ethos as the very site of his own imaginary and emotional relationship to the landscape. 'We can have connections with the land too,' McIvor tells William, 'our own kind of magic. The land talks to me. It doesn't care what color I am, all that matters is that I am here. And I understand what it says, just as well as anyone before me, black or white. I found this ring, didn't I? So I deserve respect too' (181).

McIvor's desire, we could say, is immersed in a modality of what Nietzsche in his study of morals called 'ressentiment.' As Nietzsche has it, 'the man of *ressentiment*' has a 'soul' that 'squints; his spirit loves hiding places, secret paths and back doors, everything covert entices him as *his* world, *his* security, *his* refreshment; he understands how to keep silent, how not to forget, how to wait, how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble' (38, original emphasis). McIvor's possessiveness implicates certain symbolic mandates in which historical finitude is betrayed to a semblance of the primordial, whereby the disclosure of indigenous remains—the present as a trace of the force of remainder—is swiftly given over to an abrupt closure, as 'the indigenous,' 'the aboriginal,' is inscribed into the vision, the epistemic fervor, of a specific cultural heritage, a specific pastoral vision. And yet his desire for a primordial or



essential modality of filling-in revolves around the skeletal remains of ‘the Kuran people,’ buried deep within a water hole that he is keen to keep secret, associated as they are with a massacre his father had perpetrated, as well as historical traces that may well be used for claims to native title.

In *The White Earth* McGahan situates this essentialising fervor as a tension between disclosure and closure, alluding to a narrative of reconciliation that the momentum of his narrative is keen to critically address, steeped as it is in a present *haunted* (to again refer to the Franklin judges) by its non-contemporaneity with itself, to borrow from Dipesh Chakrabarty (109). In this respect Gelder and Jacobs make a perceptive observation: ‘We often imagine a (future) condition of “reconciliation,” and indeed, a great deal has been invested in the packaging of this image as a means of selling it to the nation—but the “uncanny” can remind us of just how irreconcilable this image is with itself’ (24). Indeed, in an essay on *The White Earth*, Martina Horakova notes its resistance to reconciliation as a redemptive narrative desired by a predominating refrain of political culture in Australia.

As an uncanny or irreconcilable image, then, McGahan’s ‘empty grassland’ works to foreground how the power to possess the earth through the epistemic force (Moreton-Robinson), or constitutive anachronic fracture, of narration predominantly rests with non-indigenous subjects, whether through the voice of McIvor or his adversary and advocate of native title, Ruth. McGahan qualifies this ‘emptiness,’ this ‘enameling’ (Williams), by alluding to the indigenous material practice of strategically burning the land to regenerate its growth and productivity, suggesting that it was precisely this practice that subsequently rendered the physicality of the landscape amenable to a vision and epistemic tenor of ‘plains,’ attracting the keen interest of settlers looking for convenient places to graze their sheep.

With McGahan ‘emptiness’ is split between, on the one hand, an epistemic register in which its imaginary or signifiable force is prediscursively sown (all there is to see), and on the other hand a critical view of the historical finitude of this epistemic register itself. The compelling work of Elizabeth Povinelli reminds us how this historical finitude implicates what she calls ‘the time of enunciation,’ often vacated and passed-over (in all the senses of this term) in the interests of recuperating the fetish of a national narrative, reproduced by those whose interests are well served by this vacating of ‘the real time of enunciation’ (55). So that to assert that ‘the origin of native title lies in traditional law’ (Povinelli paraphrasing one of the High Court judges of the Mabo claim) conveniently forgets that this ‘origin’ is enunciated in and through the pitch of the present’s denial of its presentist fervor, denies the power and privilege of enunciation, for(e)gets a hegemonic capacity to performatively recuperate ‘origin’ in the name of the nation:

As the nation stretches out its hands to an ancient aboriginal law in order to embrace its own ideal body, indigenous subjects are called on to perform a complex set of semiotic maneuvers in exchange for the good feelings of the nation and the reparative legislation of the state. Indigenous subjects must transport to the present ancient prenatal meanings and practices in whatever language and moral frameworks prevail at the time of enunciation...(55)

It is in this sense, I want to suggest, that the momentum and ethos of McGahan's novel can be regarded, precisely, as 'haunting Australians today' (Franklin judges), or more vigorously a tension in which 'Australians' inscribes an uncanny semblance of finitude, of a 'today' replete with various hues, hesitations and stammers, whereby 'Australians' cannot be stabilized beyond the tremors of its prediscursive impossibility. In *The White Earth* history is on fire, its smoldering remains visible as traces of white smoke hovering over the landscape, seeking a responsive addressee, just as the skeletal remains of 'the Kuran people' lie buried beneath a water hole, also seeking an addressee whose capacity to respond can be adequate to the extent that the pitch of this response first considers how the present is both epistemologically and ethically managed as an anachronic contraction secured through the fervor of a structured narrative.

#### IV

In respect to the desire for a structured narrative, the resonance of its ethical pitch can be approached through reference to speeches by the former Prime Minister John Howard. 'Too often,' he says in his 2006 Australia Day Address (2006), 'history has fallen victim in an ever more crowded curriculum to subjects deemed more "relevant" to today. Too often, it is taught without any sense of structured narrative, replaced by a fragmented stew of "themes" and "issues".' Howard, here, is calling for a 'root and branch renewal of the teaching of Australian history in our schools.' His concerns are shaped by the so called 'history wars' (Moses) in which he positioned himself against what he liked to refer to as 'the black armband view of history,' which tended to be too critical, much less celebratory than that he prefers. This less celebratory view, he claims, 'has succumbed to a postmodern culture of relativism where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated.' While the teaching of history in schools 'should include indigenous history as part of the whole national inheritance,' its mandate should be charged with coaching 'the great and enduring heritage of Western civilization'; almost the exact words now trumpeted by the current Federal Education Minister, Christopher Pyne (Hurst; Neville).

Manifestly, for Howard, there does not seem to be any conflict or dissonance between 'indigenous history' and this glorious 'enduring heritage.' One of his tropes is 'evolution,' which relates to his notion of 'structured narrative,' over and against 'fragmentation.' A primary concern of Howard here is the youth, who may well become 'disinherited' if history becomes relativised, contaminated by 'issues' and 'themes.' 'In the end,' Howard insists, 'young people are at risk of being disinherited from their community if that community lacks the courage and confidence to teach its history.' Thus, the question of history—or present and future generations' capacity to respond to a past becoming present, present becoming past—has more to do with an instructive pedagogy, rather than modalities of ethical exchange.

A point I want to foreground, then, has to do with Howard's unregenerate refusal to look beyond 'themes' and 'issues' to an ethical modality—what Ghassan Hage refers to as 'care,' 'participatory belonging' and 'the presence of the other as gift' (100, 151)—in which themes and issues are embedded. This relates to the former Prime Minister's notorious refusal in 1997, at a conference on national reconciliation, to articulate and submit an apology for violence and expropriation perpetrated against indigenous subjects; more pressingly at the time the 'stolen generations'—forcible, bureaucratically managed removal of children from their families, with the intent to progressively racially streamline the population. 'I do not

believe as a matter of principle that one generation can accept responsibility for the acts of earlier generations,' Howard is quoted as saying to a group of students he had a session with at Harvard University in 2008 (Davies), referring to the apology articulated by the Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in February 2008.

For Howard, as well as Pyne, a 'structured narrative' would incorporate 'indigenous history' as part and parcel of the forward march of 'western civilization.' But according to the anachronistic tension woven into McGahan's narrative, it becomes possible to suggest (to borrow further from Said) overlapping narratives having significance and ethical sonority in terms of their contrapuntal entanglements, if only such diverse narratives could be given the gift of voice. Accordingly, we could speak more about contrapuntal narratives, rather than 'a structured narrative;' more about pitching response than responsibility.

The evocation of generational response can be related to William's exasperated reflection I quoted above, that 'He had been told so many stories—but which ones was he to believe? He had seen none of these events with his own eyes, walked none of the world with his own feet.' Immediately following these all too solitary thoughts, he moves into 'the safety of the House' (286), and finds his mother listening intently to a verbal stoush upstairs between McIvor and Ruth, between the guardian of primordial identification and the supporter of indigenous rights. Facing his mother, William decides that he cannot bear 'to be near her,' her proximity amounting to the relational pitch in which he experiences his voice as a site of abjection, undermining his capacity for responsiveness. Feeling nauseas, he retreats to his room and curls up in his bed. Between his mother and McIvor, William has almost no opportunity to extend his voice and render his thoughts a mode of ethical responsiveness.

The pedagogical stricture of a structured narrative underestimates an ethical register implicated in the gist of its symbolic and practical signification, devaluing how the present may be situated as a site for an extension or pitch of voice. For Howard, it seems, history is to be firmly situated in the past, untainted by the ways in which subjects develop, enjoy, suffer capacities (circulation of material, imaginative and legal resources) to address and voice the past, or else ethically situated so that dissonant voices bearing witness to a past becoming present be acknowledged as speaking *in* the present. As Howard's views come to inform the present Federal Government's decisions on policy, the question of responsiveness is to be strictly, pedagogically directed towards 'the' past—a symbolic mandate that works to relieve, recuperate, and vacate a sense of how the present addresses the past, renders past present. The restricted ethos assumed under the sign of a structured narrative underestimates how history remains 'relevant to today,' precisely in terms of considering how to symbolically initiate, practically structure, imaginatively and materially support ways by which present and succeeding generations, as well as present and succeeding subjects straddling varying transnational and Australian inventories, can maintain an ethical sense and practice of responsiveness for both past and present.

The theme of undigested remains is a pivotal aspect of McGahan's novel—remains of a past whose revenant significance depends on how they are to be heard and accounted for, admitted to the scope of ethical concern. This relates more pressingly to the remains of the Kuran people and their survivors. How are both remains and survivors to enter fields of listening, voiced through an ethical concern for their public acknowledgement, by a political culture

that approaches history as a site of care and nurture, approaches the value of life and death through modalities of what Judith Butler in her recent work calls 'grievability' and 'precarity' (2006)? For Butler precarity as a condition of the value of life is closely linked to a capacity to socially exchange and witness grief, closely linked to the way in which political cultures sustain and nurture a conception of life as potentially grievable. She poses this in respect to 'the differential distribution of grievability across populations' (2009 27). Accordingly we can ask to what extent has the 'heritage of western civilization,' its 'structured narrative,' worked to render some lives and deaths worthy of precarity, while rendering others unworthy, beyond the scope of grievability?

The momentum of McGahan's novel carries the burden of this ethical register, not by answering these questions, but rather by creatively suggesting their urgency, in terms of how they may be posed and situated in and as a pitch of responsiveness. In part this urgency has to do with how 'a structured narrative,' 'western civilization,' 'Judaic-Christian values' (Pyne), work as symbolic mandates or moralising strictures, situating the future anterior as a predetermined set of rules and sanctions, a blueprint for moral conduct, as when William transgresses the bounds of prescribed movement in the House, and is found out by his mother:

She was furious, yelling at him shrilly. What on earth did he think he was doing? His uncle had set strict rules, William's job was to obey them, not to steal keys and open locked doors. Didn't he understand what was at stake? Didn't he understand what his uncle might do? Did she have to explain everything to him again? (159).

In response William escapes to his room, 'curled up on his bed, waiting for the inevitable summons' he anticipates from his uncle. The significance of William's transgression, his straying from the strictures of his mother's and uncle's 'structured narratives,' their respective desires for fulfillment, is entangled with how he is constrained to anticipate a response, the very terrain in which the symbolic mandate of 'the inevitable summons' will predetermine his guilt before he has a chance to be heard, to situate his voice as self-extension in the world, rather than remain 'curled up on his bed.'

The Kafkaesque-like summons (physically played out in the Kafkaesque-like House, with its many passageways, entries and exits) embodies an exchange of subjectifying impulses of resentment, guilt and shame, having to be carried by William as a festering incapacity to enter the terrain of ethical responsiveness as a modality of voice in the present, not that which can be definitively placed in the past. As Gabriele Schwab, addressing another context, says, in disavowing 'negative affects' of 'guilt and shame...the parental generation deposit[s] them into the unconscious or even conscious processes of subject formation in the next generation' (105). Another critic notes the relational, transmissible, contours of shame as a social modality of what I have been calling fulfillment, a modality of subject formation oriented around a striving to inhabit and fill-in the sensibility of a gap: 'shame appears when the obligation to inhabit a subject position coexists with the void, the lack, of subjectivity itself' (Bewes, 23). As a recuperative mode of a structured, nationalizing and civilizing narrative, this 'obligation' entails *responsible* notions of fulfillment, whereby shame circulates in the name of a standardised we or they, 'displac[ing] arguments over power, hegemony, and social contradiction' (Povinelli, 183).

But if shame works to recuperate the gap lying between present and past, it can also work to expose the contrapuntal dissonance of the present itself. In this respect Ghassan Hage has provided one of the most sustained considerations of what he calls ‘polluting memories,’ developing this from the philosopher Raimond Gaita. This to some extent hinges on a more materialist notion of guilt and shame as ‘circulating particles,’ potentially informing modalities of public acknowledgement and nurture. How, Hage asks, ‘does one become polluted if one is not the originator of the polluting act?’ His answer, in part, concerns how ‘care’ is distributed and accessed as affective exchanges having some bearing on how national belonging transpires as ‘participatory belonging,’ in terms of ‘caring for the memory of the other’ (96). In other words, that the ‘we’ not be equated with the symbolic mandate of conscience, but always emerge through contrapuntal tenors in which capacities for responsiveness be materially and imaginatively enabled.

## V

In *The White Earth* both the Kuran people and nine year old William come to be disinherited, disowned and divested—not from history, but through an incapacity to situate the ethical resonance of history in the present, ponder over the present’s non-contemporaneity or non-identity with itself. They are disinherited from a capacity to exchange history through an ethical practice that would not conflate responsiveness with guilt—a conflation partly informing Howard’s unregenerate refusal to enter into and exchange a symbolic currency of apology, due also to his fear of having his political sensibility shamed, or else rendering shame a modality of political sensibility. Where structured narratives are mostly about didactic closure, ethical responsiveness works toward dis-closure, or at least a form of closure that has travelled through disclosure—first of all foregrounding and dis-closing how the real time and place of enunciation assumes and is enabled by certain material and epistemological privileges, institutionally located and managed.

This ethical concern arises in respect to a consideration of how the very temporality of the present—critically concentrated in the epistemic fervor of ‘empty grasslands’—is occupied and distributed in ways that the question of responsiveness, of inheritance and disinheritance, can be approached without pedagogically *ear-bashing* the youth, without the disciplinary constraints of a structured narrative that forecloses the possibility of a social practice in the midst of which voice arising from the past, or else arising through unanticipated ways of addressing the past, can be situated as voice in and of the present. It thus may well be ethically compelling to say that it is more a matter of the past haunted by the present, rather than the other way round—a past that is to gain value and significance through the contrapuntal patterns and ethical tremors by which it is variably engaged and passed-on, not definitively structured and passed-by. Perhaps William could then become neither ‘mine’ nor ‘yours’ (357), not a possessive mode of inheritance.

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<sup>1</sup> See John Kinsella's introduction to this volume for an alternative reading of the poem, which was first published in 1955.

<sup>2</sup> But for the undeniable materialist implications of Wright's work, which she manages to put into tension to poetic 'enameling' (Williams), see for example her essay "Wilderness, Waste and History" (1991, 17-25).

<sup>3</sup> 'White panic' can be extended to note how in Australia there emerged a sense of people losing their backyards to native title claims, a sense of being potentially 'wounded.'