

# Cannibalism and Colonialism: *Lilian's Story* and (White) Women's Belonging

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Lilian, he said, as if reminding me who I was. Lilian, you are an example of the degeneracy of the white races. I must have stood blinking in my surprise and Father hissed, so that the creeping cousin stared, You are sterile and degenerate, and as corrupt as a snake. ('A Friend Gone,' *Lilian's Story* 178–79)

## Introduction: The Postcolonial White Woman?

From *Joan Makes History* (1988) to *The Secret River* (2007), Kate Grenville has been concerned with bringing women's histories to light, in order to carve out discursive spaces for women who have existed largely in the interstices between public memory and official history. Women's relegation to the periphery of Australian national formation has been recognised in Australian feminist investigation since 1975 with the publication in that year of Anne Summers' *Damned Whores and God's Police* and Miriam Dixson's *The Real Matilda*. Broadly, they argue that men occupy such a privileged relation to Australian identity that masculinity is constructed not only as the representative quality of Australianness, but also as *the* pre-condition for nationality (Carter 384). In *Lilian's Story* (1985), Grenville offers a searing critique of Australian gender relations, challenging the marginal status accorded to women in dominant narratives of national formation. Charting Lilian's trajectory as she transforms from a daughter of the colonial gentility into a bag lady shrieking Shakespeare through the inner-city streets of Kings Cross, Grenville represents Lilian as a young woman made mad by the abuses she undergoes at the hands of her father. These abuses extend beyond routine beatings with sadistic overtones to a vicious rape, after which Albion has Lilian incarcerated in an asylum for ten years. Women's madness in *Lilian's Story* is explicitly framed by the madness of misogyny and male sexual cruelty, and by the paranoid fantasies of gender that sustain male delusion.

The novel's themes of madness, violent family dysfunction, and incestuous sexual violence offer a vivid critique of the family as the site where a skewed Australian identity is produced, displacing the pathology of a young woman constructed as mad onto the family as the site in which the 'pathology of the normal' and the 'normality of the pathological' is reproduced (Hodge and Mishra 217). Connecting the pathology of the family to the 'pathology' of the nation forged by the violence of white colonialism (Thomas 2), I propose that *Lilian's Story* is a novel about the madness of the colonial project, and of the discourses that sustain and justify it. As Anne McClintock argues, the family is a trope for the wider social context, and is therefore a site for the production of 'national' culture, reproducing wider social relations of inclusion and exclusion (*Imperial Leather* 45). The individual family is a symbol for the 'national family,' and in the imperial context, the projection of the trope of the 'natural' patriarchal family onto the nation's formative imperial hierarchy was instrumental in the project by which *difference* as a social category came to explain, and conceal, real social relations of race and gender.

By casting Lilian as a woman who is both eccentric and ex-centric, Grenville engages with the gender politics that situate women outside, or at best, as marginal to the nation. This feminist politics has been noted in critical readings of the novel as an illustration of women's symbolic homelessness in patriarchal cultures (Livett 119–134). Such readings emphasise Lilian's resistance to the 'pathologically deformed' codes of gender that structure Australian national identity (Hodge and Mishra 217; Gelder and Salzman 77–78). In one of the few postcolonial analyses, Bill Ashcroft suggests that Lilian's resistance to Albion's violence and control is a strategy of decolonisation (68, 71). Readings such as these consider the rape narrative as a metaphor for Australia becoming a nation by extricating itself from the colonial frame, inscribing the nation with a *postcolonial* status through its rupture with the imperial host. In part, these readings proceed because Grenville's decision to frame the relationship between Albion and Lilian in colonial terms was influenced by Anne Summers, who had demonstrated the parallels between women as a 'colonised sex' and Australia as a 'colonised nation' in *Damned Whores and God's Police* (Turcotte, 'Daughters of Albion' 31). Grenville uses the colonial relationship as:

a metaphor for many kinds of relationships, of which, of course, the parent-child one is the most obvious. The father in *Lilian's Story* is called Albion, naturally, because he is in that oppressive imperial/colonial relationship with his daughter. (Turcotte, 'Telling those untold stories' 293)

The father-daughter relationship is explicitly coded as imperial: Albion, the oldest known name for the British Isles, signifies Australia's history as the colonial outpost of British imperialism. This raises an important question: how does the trope of the colonised (white) female signify these *other* kinds of relationships for which colonisation acts as 'a metaphor'? This demands some critical decoding, but the politics of imperialism remains under-theorised in the critical reception to the novel. This paper interrogates readings of Lilian as a postcolonial figure to engage with the politics, and the ethics, of being Australian. By 'decentring the nation as an analytical category' (Vickery and Henderson 9), it provides a provocative re-reading of *Lilian's Story* that locates the production of Australian national identity within its history of violent colonialism.

### **Interventions: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading Practice**

The term 'postcolonial' is contested, and has given rise to vigorous critical debate about what exactly it stands for in the context of the 'settler' nation (McClintock, 'Angel' 84–98). The notion that Australia, in extricating itself from the imperial host to become an independent nation upon Federation in 1901, is somehow 'postcolonial' has been called into question. A range of feminist, postcolonial and anti-colonial critiques have inquired into the very legitimacy of the founding of the nation, to argue that colonisation continues in the contemporary legacies of colonialism and race relations that produce and structure Indigenous equality (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Key Concepts* 14–17; Carter 12).<sup>1</sup> Yet, the dominant narrative of Australia as a *postcolonial* nation remains stubbornly resistant to questioning, so that the 'post' in postcolonial comes to signify the period after nationalisation was achieved. A putatively 'Australian' literature is integral to the construction of a recognisably Australian 'national' identity. At this juncture, then, it is important to recognise that *some* literary texts that come to be interpreted as 'postcolonial writing' operate rather as texts of the 'Second World,' or 'white settler-colonial writing' (Slemon 102).<sup>2</sup> *Lilian's Story* has been situated as a postcolonial novel, but the question of how settler-colonial writing can be discursively constructed *as* postcolonial writing is underscored by questions about the politics of white

belonging in the settler-colonial context. Any sense of being distinctively Australian, or of having something distinctively Australian to say, is predicated on a peculiar and complicated sense of settler belonging. Terry Goldie, writing about the literature of settler Canada, argues that while the white settler is ‘alien’ in the colonial space, the Indigenous person is both always already alien—the Other—but yet ‘cannot be alien’ as a result of being Indigenous (174). Settler belonging is configured in terms of a radical disjunction that is at once ontological and epistemological: ‘So the Canadian must be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada?’ Goldie’s question resonates equally in Australia. For Goldie, the break in logic by which settler ‘belonging’ is constituted produces a particular kind of identity politics, in which white settlers seek recognition of their own claim to be ‘native’ or ‘indigenous’ too.<sup>3</sup> These deep-seated cultural imaginings both normalise and reinforce a cultural politics of white belonging.

It is this question that frames my reading of white belonging in *Lilian’s Story*, and its critical reception. Firstly, I note that the postcolonial constitutes ‘all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Empire* 2). As a postcolonial feminist, I aim to provide a critical practice that re-reads literary works—and their dominant critical interpretations—to ‘draw deliberate attention to the profound and inescapable effects of colonization,’ demonstrate contradictions in their ‘underlying assumptions,’ and reveal their ‘(often unwitting) colonialist ideologies and processes’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Key Concepts* 192). Such a reading practice is at once deconstructive and productive. Postcolonial strategies, like feminist strategies, are oppositional, as they operate as forms of ‘writing back’ to unsettle the normalising of colonial power. As Susan Sheridan contends in *Grafts*, this marks a shift in contemporary Australian feminisms, which seek to ‘redirect and expand feminist theory’ from the old binary of masculine/feminine towards the operation of discursive power in the production of Australian identity (4).

I argue that the colonial context that gave birth to ‘Australia’ relied on a construction of gender inflected by colonial paranoia about ‘race’ and female sexual purity, and that this paranoia was projected onto women as the site for racial anxiety.<sup>4</sup> This colonial paranoia imprints women with abjection (Kristeva 2, 4) through a cultural politics of gender that locates women outside, or at least on the fringes of, the nation. However, I suggest that *Lilian’s Story* reinscribes a politics of white belonging, in which the white fantasy of possession stands in for Indigenous dispossession. This reading engages with Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s understandings of ‘country’ as a ‘possessive logic of white patriarchal sovereignty,’ which circulates in the white Imaginary as a form of ‘national psychosis’ (in Elder, Ellis and Pratt 220). As the contribution of Indigenous feminisms makes clear, ongoing and systemic practices of white occupation normalised through the continual projection of this white fantasy continue to structure relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians as relations of colonialism. Such understandings therefore implicate non-Indigenous women in the relations of colonialism, despite their marginalised status within national culture (Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman* 180).

### **Colonial Paranoia: Women and the Nation**

The distinctively Australian texture of patriarchy has long ascribed ‘Otherness’ to women through the intersections between the power relations of gender and the history of colonialism.<sup>5</sup> The dominant discourses of gender that were mobilised in the construction of Australian gender relations have their roots not only in the *transplantation* of British imperial

values, but in the *translation and transcription* of these values to the colonial cultural context. The production of Australian identity takes place in a particular epoch, at the same time as the discursive production of gender and sexuality was forming in Western Europe, to ‘saturate’ women’s bodies with an apparently ungovernable sexuality. Michel Foucault argues that the female body was both pathologised and hystericised, establishing the link between women’s bodies and women’s madness (104.) The discipline of psychoanalysis was gaining intellectual currency alongside the discourse of scientific racism, which developed out of—if not strictly as a result of—Charles Darwin’s studies in Australia aboard the *Beagle* in the 1830s. The system of Australian gender relations that symbolically imprinted women as the locus of abjection suggests parallels between the psychoanalytic account of gendered subjectivity (elaborated in Lacanian and poststructuralist feminist theorising) and national formation processes. The psychoanalytic construction of women as the abjected outside (or repressed underside) of culture is noted by both Anne McClintock and Edward Said, who suggest that the social and cultural relations of abjection create categories of *outsiders*, such as women, the insane, convicts, the poor, or the colonised (McClintock, *Imperial Leather* 72; Said 207).<sup>6</sup>

This produced a colonial politics of gender that was also a cultural politics of ‘race’ and whiteness, as colonial paranoia about racial ‘contamination’ and ‘degeneracy’ took hold in the national Imaginary, producing a distinctly Australian symbolic in which the female body and its capacity for reproduction were rigorously controlled and policed in the effort to establish the white nation. Anne McClintock argues that colonial paranoia about ‘contagion’ and ‘degeneracy’ were located in the female body as ‘the central transmitter of racial and hence cultural contagion’ (*Imperial Leather* 46, 47). Through a signifying economy of abjection, then, the female body came to represent the fear of colonial ‘dirt,’ and the site of racial anxiety as the realm where white fears about racial purity circulate (Kristeva 4; McClintock, *Imperial Leather* 24; Grosz 205–26). As Jennifer Rutherford argues, women were targeted within this colonial Imaginary as Mothers of the White Nation or vessels of racial purity in need of protection by white men against the threat of racial degeneracy (13). Yet, as Kylie Thomas contends, this operated in such a way as to situate sexual violence against white women outside the ‘larger history of colonialism,’ because, ‘white men, as the protectors of white women, could not simultaneously be defined as a sexual threat towards them’ (6). Moreover, sexual desire in the imperial context was highly regulated, as this not only safeguarded the social order and promoted morality, but also defended racial purity. Foucault argues that this was in part because the bourgeoisie operated within a political economy and a semiotics of ‘blood,’ in which bloodlines, castes, orders, and lines of descent were integral to the production of the social order and to the species itself (123). Women of course had a privileged relation to the semiotics of blood, as it was their leaky bodies, their flows of blood that linked them to this political economy of furthering the (racially pure) species. Thus, sexuality became a means for ensuring that the ‘race’ did not become the site of degeneracy, and women’s sexuality was increasingly patrolled and policed. Indeed, ‘family planning’ was introduced in Australia principally as a form of ‘racial hygiene’ by which the survival of the racially pure species could be ensured (Summers 556; Carter 390). Within this signifying economy, female sexuality acts as the *imprimatur* for the regulation of racial hygiene. This has led to a particular temporal and social construction of gender informed as much by racial anxieties about a White Australia as about a patriarchal order.

Throughout the novel, these colonial discourses of gender are visible in the ways that Albion justifies his control of Lilian, conflating discourses of racial and sexual purity. Several times in the text, he associates Lilian’s wildness with fears of racial contagion. The first occurs in the section entitled ‘Running Wild’:

My feet have always been broad. *Nigger's feet*, Father said suddenly one day, seeing them up on a chair, and looked shocked. Later he felt it necessary to apologise. *It just slipped out, Lilian. We are all human.* His smile looked tortured. (137)

Albion tells Lilian that she is 'an example of the degeneracy of the white races' (178), linking fears of racial degeneracy to female sexuality. The language of racism and the language of misogyny collide in Lilian's body as the site for an exported culture that, it was feared, might degenerate in the colonial wilds. As Robert J.C. Young puts it, the exportation of a British culture to a colonial elsewhere was never

a simple process of the production of a new mimesis . . . A culture never repeats itself perfectly away from home. Any exported culture will in some way run amok, go phut or threaten to turn into mumbo-jumbo as it dissolves in the heterogeneity of the elsewhere. (174)

Because Otherness is a cultural product of this elsewhere, women were symbolically inscribed in this politics of degeneration, as they were doubly imprinted with both feminine and colonial disorder. As Gillian Whitlock notes, the construction of the female subject 'as a site of differences' in Australian women's writing demonstrates the 'complex cultural context' in which gender relations are structured ('Graftworks' 242). By representing Lilian as eccentric, and explaining the reasons for this eccentricity through the grotesque narrative of Albion's sexual abuse, Grenville situates Lilian as the female Other to patriarchy.

### **Cannibalism and Colonialism: The Grotesque Body**

In several passages in *Lilian's Story*, Grenville intervenes in the production of the Australian mythos, challenging the gendered production of national identity and the exclusion of women from the nation-building project. By according Lilian a place in the streets, the asylum and the bush, locations that exist outside, or at the limits of, colonial patriarchal law, Grenville shows how discourses of nationalism and Federation worked to exclude women. These zones are abject to the nation, and extrinsic to colonial space and time, suggesting the exclusion of women from the production of national identity. *Lilian's Story* records what happens to a woman who rejects these gender discourses, who makes herself fat to make her body bear the signs of her monstrous experience of patriarchal control and sexual violence. For critics such as Ruth Barcan, therefore, Lilian's obese body is a textual body that signifies the postcolonial condition (93–117). The desire for women to conform to a colonial ideal of gentility and frailty hinges upon the control of appetite and the body, so that middle and upper-class colonial women were required to embody the docile female bodies that corresponded to the prevailing currency of ideas about femininity in the masculinist scientific imagination. In refusing the docile body, Lilian, unruly and obese, approaches the female grotesque celebrated in feminist theorising as a figure of postcolonial rebellion. Within this tradition, images of fat women appear as 'apt expressions of colonial or post-colonial opposition to imperialism' (Jones 20). Dorothy Jones argues that 'images of large bodied women and devouring women' act as 'powerfully transgressive' protests against the 'confining limits imposed on female behaviour and desire in a male dominated culture' (20). In 'Female Grotesques,' Mary Russo argues that the grotesque body refuses a 'cultural politics for women' that produces 'radical negation, silence, withdrawal, and invisibility' (319). It is certainly possible to locate Lilian within this tradition, as her 'excessive size' and

garrulousness' operate as signifiers of the female grotesque (Rowe 36). Rather than being disordered, the grotesque woman is reconfigured as disorderly.

However, there are some problems with reading the grotesque as a language of the body that contests national codes of gender. As Kathleen Rowe points out, women are always already marked by their relationship to the (grotesque) body, and this privileged location is fraught with misogyny (33–34). The grotesque body is signified as excessively 'sexual' through a metonymic chain that aligns the female mouth with the vagina (36–37). It is this that brings Lilian into conflict with Albion, who routinely fantasises that she is 'running wild,' and having sex with the boys she meets at University (*LS* 117). Through the discourse of colonial paranoia, Albion distorts Lilian's hunger for life, for intellectual activity, for experience, to an uncontrollable and voracious female sexuality. More problematically, Rowe points out that the tradition also locates grotesque women as 'pig-women,' correlated with 'dirt,' making her 'especially vulnerable to pollution taboos because by definition she transgresses boundaries and steps out of her proper place,' residing 'neither where she belongs nor in any other legitimate position' (41, 42–43). Thus, the unruly woman is culturally imprinted with abjection. Russo further warns that theories of the female grotesque are essentially conservative and linked to the 'political history of domination,' because the grotesque woman's 'inversion' and undermining of existing social frames not only reinforce the social order, but are invariably 'set right' (320–21) through acts of repression. Albion violently represses Lilian through rape, and then has her committed to an insane asylum. These acts 'reset' Lilian's disorderliness and re-establish the colonial order of patriarchy. After she is raped, Lilian escapes to the bush in 'A Flat Ochre Town' (130–32), where she is arrested for parading naked through the streets of Tamworth, and brought back to Sydney where she can be 'managed' and brought under her father's control. It is only by reading *Dark Places* (351) that this is made clear, and it is this behaviour, and her nightly walks on the headland, that precipitate Albion's decision to have her committed to an asylum.

Despite these problems, Lilian's obesity and rejection of paternal control have been mobilised in the sorts of readings that decode resistance as evidence of a postcolonial strategy. Resistance is a feature of the postcolonial literary imagination, as Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra identify in *Dark Side of the Dream*. It can be read in oppositional strategies such as counter-discourses, which operate as 'anti-languages' signifying postcolonial 'opposition' (204). What is perhaps most persuasive in this notion of anti-language, at least for a feminist critical interrogation of madness, is that it offers a compelling strategy to read Lilian's 'mad' speech as a language of resistance to violent patriarchal subjugation. Mad speech, therefore, can be reframed as a language of contradiction that speaks back to and against the regimes of gendered oppression that characterise colonial patriarchy. Lilian's refusal to conform to disfiguring codes of gender both contests dominant narratives of national identity that privilege white masculinity, and critiques the Australian cultural formation of colonial patriarchy.

However, this raises the question of how a white feminist counter-discourse, challenging gendered constructions of Australian identity, can be framed so readily as postcolonial: it is not postcolonial in quite the same way that anti-colonial cultural or political critiques offered by Indigenous feminists are. The very readings of contradiction celebrated in postcolonial literary theorising turn on a particular 'critical manoeuvre' (Slemon 106) which opens up new contradictions, about what, properly, the postcolonial can be said to constitute. These are at once conceptual and political, encompassing not only what knowledge informs a postcolonial and/or feminist critical practice, but also how a particular cultural location, say, of whiteness,

of privilege, influences the sorts of readings that might eventuate, or be readily accepted by the critical community. The critical gaze, and the cultural location from whence that gaze emanates, remain wholly or partially un-interrogated in the colonial/settler context. These problems, which are problems of reading and interpretation, underpin the debates about how, or whether, hegemonic colonial discourse is decoded or subverted in the 'postcolonial' literatures of white settler nations. Slemon proposes that the 'white literatures' of former colonies are 'complicit in colonialism's territorial appropriation of land, and voice, and agency, and this has been their inescapable condition' even when those texts offer 'the most strident and most spectacular figures of post-colonial resistance' (106). While readings of Lilian as a postcolonial figure of resistance to colonial order remain seductive, it is important to recognise, as Gillian Whitlock notes, that 'women at different moments in [Australian] history have been both oppressed and oppressive, submissive and subversive, victim and agent, allies and enemies both of men and one another' ('Graftworks' 242). White women occupy a schizoid subject position in the colonial context, as we may be oppressed by gender relations of power, but are nevertheless implicated in the power relations of 'race' underpinning the colonial enterprise (Whitlock, 'Australian Literature' 152; Sheridan 166).

I propose therefore that a new reading is possible of Lilian's deliberate strategy to make herself fat. What if we were to read Lilian's obese body as a *leitmotif* for the devouring nature of the colonial enterprise? This requires that we read colonialism as a form of cannibalism, in which the colonial presence incorporates, engulfs, and swallows up what was here before, to re-code and rename it: to write over it. Reading practices that position colonialism as a form of cannibalism are a feature of the interdisciplinary field of Cannibal Studies, which not only critiques the production of the 'cannibal' as an imperial fantasy,<sup>7</sup> but also engages in the 'self-reflexive analysis of imperialism as itself a form of cannibalism' (Hulme 35). The control of lands during the imperial project from which Australia would be born demonstrates the colonial hunger for, and the consumption of, land, while Indigenous people were incorporated into the imperial regime through de-territorialisation and (forced) labour enshrined by the laws of an imperial body politic. Making use of these understandings of colonialism as a form of cannibalism, I contest readings of Lilian's obese body as the symbol of a *postcolonial* condition, arguing instead that it signifies a colonial subjectivity. To demonstrate this, I offer a close reading of a passage entitled 'Running Wild' (137–38), in which Lilian escapes the family home that functions as the seat of colonial and patriarchal order to walk the headland at night. This passage reveals the novel's engagement with, and perhaps unwitting replication of, the dominant 'colonialist ideologies' that structure white Australian notions of belonging.

### **Schizoid Nation: Women and White Belonging**

Grenville's feminist politics are clearly visible in 'Running Wild,' where the title works as an emblem of Lilian's resistance to patriarchal control. On her nightly walks on the headland, where the track becomes 'less and less certain,' Lilian becomes 'more and more comfortable' (137). The bush is textually constructed as exterior to Australian patriarchy, signified by the detritus of mattresses, old bicycle wheels, and broken bottles on the track that mark it as un-inscribed by colonial order. These waste products work to code women as the abjected 'dirt' of patriarchy. In consigning Lilian to a space that figures as a dumping-ground for mad woman, Grenville engages in a feminist politics of place. The waste-ground recurs in women's writing, acting as a metaphor for the erasure of women's contributions from narratives of national identity. Composed of layers of discarded objects, the waste-ground recalls the palimpsest, those manuscripts written over earlier texts whose layers of meaning are partially or wholly erased (Baldick 158). In this way, the waste-ground suggests a

storehouse for women's stories and memories. Furthermore, by inscribing Lilian as 'more and more comfortable,' Grenville disrupts a dominant narrative of the bush, which figured in the Australian symbolic as a dangerous and feminised space signifying the boundaries of the white nation. As Kay Schaffer argues in *Women and the Bush*, the bush figures as Woman, as an un-inscribed space to conquer, to order, and to possess, and as a penetrable site in which the colonial project would be born. Yet, while the bush was symbolically feminine, it was also 'no place for a woman,' as the site of a terrifying unknown (102). By connecting Lilian to national identity through the trope of the bush, Grenville provides a feminist reclamation of gendered space.

Although 'Running Wild' demonstrates Grenville's engagement with and subversion of a *patriarchal* politics of place, a colonial politics of place is reiterated here. The track also figures as a dumping-ground for white Australian objects, or a set of white middens, which signify 'progress' (137). Lilian needs these objects 'to steer [her] through' (137), because without these markers of white civilisation, the space would be un-inscribed and terrifying.<sup>8</sup> This coding of the Australian bush as terrifying has a long history, notably in the production of the Australian Gothic in white settler literature. From Barbara Baynton's *Bush Studies* (1902) onwards, Gothic modes of articulating the colonial experience have used the unique qualities of Australian landscapes as motifs for Australian mindscapes. With its upside-down seasons, its black swans, its platypus, Australian space circulated in a colonial Imaginary riven with fears about the strangeness and dangers posed by arriving in unknown locales, far from the civilised world of 'home'. In the absence of the sinister castles and dungeons characteristic of the European Gothic mode, fear and unease were transposed to the empty wilds of the Australian bush, which, as the frontier for colonial expansion, was full of terrifying unknowns and dangers. As Gerry Turcotte notes, Australia had figured in cultural imaginings long before the imperial project began as a 'grotesque space ... peopled by monsters,' 'Gothic par excellence,' revealing 'the dark subconscious of Britain,' which both represented and peopled it as the 'dungeon of the world' ('Australian Gothic' 10). Through the discourse of imperialism, and its inception as a penal colony, Australia was always already configured in Gothic terms.

*Lilian's Story*, with its themes of madness, sexual violence, and female entrapment, is a classic example of the Australian Gothic. The harbourside suburbs of Sydney where the novel is set act as an urban Gothic motif for the Australian *establishment*, illustrating the classed, gendered, and racialised social architecture of a nationalising culture forged in colonialism. This Gothic architecture frames the colonial modality. The Gothic articulates a sense of terror that finds its psychological corollary in Freud's notion of the Uncanny, in which the subject experiences feelings of dread, intense anxiety, and mental conflict which can provoke hallucinations and escalate into psychosis.<sup>9</sup> As Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs note, the Uncanny is predicated on 'being in place, and being "out of place" simultaneously' (23). Feelings of estrangement and de-familiarisation characterise the Uncanny (*Unheimlich*), as what is home-like (*Heimlich*) or familiar comes to figure as something strange, producing a profound sense of unease. The bush as site for a new 'home' resonated in the colonial Imaginary as the site of a growing anxiety, and 'anxiety was the "affect" central' for the 'white man in turn-of-the-century Australia' (Lake, 'On being a white man' 110).

Australia was characterised as a wilderness empty of the signs or symbols that would allow the land to be 'read,' a 'blank page' upon which new colonial meanings could be written (Carter 138; Ryan 9–11). However, Aboriginal people inhabited these 'empty' spaces, and their presence had to be excised to make this imaginary emptiness literal. A series of imperial



‘wars’ and regional ‘skirmishes’ broke out as the frontier advanced to swallow up all traces of Aboriginal occupation (Reynolds 7, 4). By this twisted logic, the bush was both conveniently empty, and yet paradoxically, dangerously populated. As Jennifer Rutherford notes, this colonial mythologising of the bush enacts a fantasy of ‘the primal mother, the monstrous, devouring being that is ever-present, threatening to devour the explorer, the drover, the child’ (197). In the colonial Imaginary, then, the bush has teeth, hovering at the edges of the white Australian psyche as the hallucinatory figure of the *vagina dentata*. The logic of the colonial project justifies the institution of the Law of the Father to ‘tame’ this primal being. And what is the Law of the Father in Australia if not colonialism?

The colonial enterprise is established through the orders of the King and the colonial bureaucracies in both nations to officiate the colony’s progress (Reynolds 3–31).<sup>10</sup> Men, as the official enactors of the law, are both the patriarchal architects and inheritors of the colonial project, whose work to bring first the colonies, and then the nation into being, constitutes a ‘male birthing ritual,’ configuring nationhood as a form of national paternity (McClintock, *Imperial Leather* 29). The notion of paternity, and patrimonial certainty, is important in the cultural context of the colony becoming the nation-state. As the Law of the Father is established in colonial settings, patrimonial strategies are used to rename and reinscribe colonial space, through a metonymic signifying chain that (re)creates the space in the name of England. The anxiously male presence that was established through this signifying economy was an attempt to establish paternity in the name of the King, and to attribute a set of British associations to the land. Imperial naming is also a claiming, by which the colonial architects sought to establish the legitimacy of the colonising structures they *erected*. Thus the Law of the Father, the law of colonialism, takes place through a figurative circulation of the phallus of Lacanian theorising as the emblem of that Law. The problem, then, with reading Grenville’s construction of Lilian as ‘more and more comfortable’ in the bush as a challenge to a patriarchal politics of place is that it situates colonialism as a wholly masculine enterprise. It ignores the question of how white women are implicated in the establishment of the colonial edifice. How, and indeed whether, Grenville challenges this white colonial politics of place is open to interrogation.

Lilian’s growing sense of comfort takes place as she fantasises that there ‘had never been anyone but myself here on this road between scrub’ (137). Lilian is textually constructed here as colonising figure. She not only walks the space, but seeks to claim it as a colonial representative, occupying the ‘empty’ space of the colonial fantasy as the prop of a founding fiction: *terra nullius*. Reading further, it becomes clear that Lilian’s ‘comfort’ in the space is encoded in metaphors that harness coloniality to a fantasy of being (or at least, becoming) Indigenous. The track to the beach is signified as Aboriginal space, unfolding ‘like a dry snakeskin,’ to wander ‘more and more like a tune someone was making up from moment to moment’ (137–38), recalling both the Rainbow Serpent and the Songlines of the Aboriginal Dreamings. Ross Gibson, discussing the use of the Australian landscape in Australian film in ‘Camera Natura,’ contends that the Australian bush ‘has been transmuted into an element of myth, into a sign of supra-social Australian-ness’ (214), operating as a trope for a distinctly white Australian identity. He notes that such landscapes operate as ‘gravitational’ poles for the white colonial imagination, which harnesses Australian identity as a form of ‘self-definition’ to a ‘more “native” vision,’ ‘waiting for the land of Dreamtime to stamp itself on the[settler] culture’ (215, 220). In ‘Running Wild,’ the imagery of an *unpopulated* landscape that is nevertheless deeply coded as Aboriginal speaks to this sense of the land as forming the uniquely Australian character, but it is a *white* Australian national identity that is evoked. Grenville also recodes Aboriginal ways of knowing and being as white Australian fantasies of

‘belonging’: ‘Then I could sigh and lie back, feeling cool sand in my hair, and watch for the stars swinging low over me, until finally I was released from my flesh into dreams’ (138). With its metaphors of restfulness and escape from flesh, this constitutes the bush space as mystical and spiritual by invoking the Aboriginal Dreamings. Gibson’s point that the land has been mythologised within the settler imagination as a form of white Australian Dreaming is pertinent here. By yoking Aboriginal ways of being and knowing to Lilian’s experience of place, Grenville reframes sacred space in ways that *unsettle* and *dislocate* Aboriginal people from the land. This imperial recoding is amplified when Lilian expresses a desire to be ‘slim and black’ (138). This scene is structured around the very questions that most trouble white belonging: to paraphrase Terry Goldie, how can the Australian be alien within Australia, when white belonging is upheld by and enshrined in white law? And how can the white settler resolve that radical disjuncture which turns on the inescapable feeling that one is both ‘alien’ and yet ‘not-alien’? This scene re-inscribes the bush as a signifier of white Australian possession. In this way, the obese Lilian can be read as a metaphor for the devouring nature of the colonial enterprise. It is only the signifiers of white ‘progress’ as detritus that recuperate the scene from a totalising fantasy of white possession.

*Lilian’s Story* reveals a white feminist politics of place that overlooks the ambivalent relationship that white women occupy in the colonial context. It is white women’s place in the nation, their settlement or displacement, their belonging to or alienation from it, that are encoded in *Lilian’s Story*, so that women as ‘schizoid’ settler/invasor subjects escape the colonial frame. It is possible to argue that Grenville’s later historical fiction attempts to interrupt this, particularly in *The Secret River* (2005) and *Sarah Thornhill* (2012). Grenville’s realisation that women are deeply implicated in race relations as the scene for the fantasy of white ‘settlement’ is documented in *Searching for the Secret River*, where Indigenous academic and novelist Melissa Lucashenko challenges Grenville to rethink the ‘unquestionable’ family history ‘formula’ that she uses to explain that her convict ancestor ‘took up’ land on the Hawkesbury. Lucashenko’s response—‘What do you mean “took up”? . . . ‘He took’—forces Grenville to recognise the discursive ‘trick’ underlying the common set of euphemisms that naturalise white colonialism in Australia (*Searching for the Secret River*, 28, 29). Yet, as I finish reading *Sarah Thornhill*, I find myself still troubled by Grenville’s work. If history is to be understood as a selective process of remembering and forgetting, then David Carter points out that the memory of colonial violence was not just forgotten over time, but had to be ‘actively “disremembered” or repressed’ (70). For me, *Lilian’s Story*’s politics of white belonging operate as strategies by which colonial memory is suppressed and radically dismembered. In offering this reading, I invite critical debate and responses to my argument that *Lilian’s Story* replicates those colonialist ideologies that the settler-colonial literature considers to be ‘postcolonial.’

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Anti-colonialism is a distinctly Indigenous mode of critical theory (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Key Concepts*, 14–17). Broadly, postcolonialism refers to ‘the effects of colonisation on cultures and societies’ (186), and therefore encompasses vigorous debates about the contemporary legacies of colonialism and race relations pertinent to the Australian context.

<sup>2</sup> Although the term ‘Second World’ no longer has currency, the distinction between writing from Empire, and the literature of the so-called ‘Fourth World’ demonstrates the difference in political and critical practices that the term ‘postcolonial writing’ seeks to capture.

<sup>3</sup> Goldie notes the long campaign by the *Bulletin* to have white Australians recognised as ‘native’. It argued that the ‘true’ Australian was ‘as much a full-blown, white British subject as the Britisher himself’ in Carter 60. A

further example of this tendency towards the ‘indigenisation’ of the white settler was the establishment of the Australian Natives Association in 1871, restricting membership to white Australian born men.

<sup>4</sup> There is not the space here to offer a theoretical elaboration of the workings of colonial paranoia. For useful discussions of this, see Hodge and Mishra 217–234, and McClintock, *Imperial Leather* 24.

<sup>5</sup> Feminist publications such as Marilyn Lake’s *Getting Equal* (1999) and Kay Schaffer’s *Women and the Bush* (1988) have documented the ways that women have been symbolically excluded from the nation, to argue that national identity was produced by a masculinist cultural politics of gender.

<sup>6</sup> The psychoanalytic construction of women as the abjected outside of Western culture is noted by Edward Said, who argues in *Orientalism* that discourses of race and biological determinism constructed the Orient as ‘backward, degenerate, uncivilized and retarded’ in a signifying economy that connected it to the abjected elements of Western society, identified in parentheses as ‘delinquents, the insane, women, the poor’ (207). The parentheses in Said’s text demonstrate the extent to which Western discourses of ‘femininity’ symbolically locate women as outside the nation in the signifying economy of exclusion and abjection.

<sup>7</sup> Cannibal Studies includes a range of approaches from New Historicism to postcolonial critique in Literary Studies. Works such as Gananath Obeyesekere’s ‘British Cannibals’ and William Arens’ *The Man-Eating Myth* are representative of this trend. Katherine Biber applies the metaphor of cannibalism to the colonial project in Australia: see ‘Cannibals and Colonialism’ 629.

<sup>8</sup> This tradition is noted by Alison Ravenscroft in her critique of the Australian Uncanny (81–88), which not only recodes Australian *space* as imperial *place*, but reframes the sacred as a terrifying, unknowable and un-inscribed emptiness in the white Imaginary.

<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud’s 1991 essay *The Uncanny* refers to the psychological experience of defamiliarisation and estrangement produced in altered states, which Freud links to the fantasy of castration.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Reynolds discusses the role of these colonial institutions in *Frontier* (1987), arguing that ‘common law arrived with the First Fleet; the Aborigines became instant subjects of the King, amenable to, and in theory protected by, that law,’ (4). The instrumentalities that established the imperial project were located both in Britain and within the colonies, and included such judicial bodies and offices as the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the various Governorships installed in the colonies, and the Commissioner of Crown Lands, all of whom were charged with issuing legal orders and carrying out the King’s decree, and all of whom were established by 1789.

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