

# Narrating Historical Massacre: Alex Miller's *Landscape of Farewell*

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Alex Miller's *Landscape of Farewell* (2007) is one of many novels published in the first decade of the twenty-first century that attempts to deal with the unresolved question of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, which I refer to as 'fictions of reconciliation.'<sup>2</sup> Like all such novels, Miller's *Landscape of Farewell* takes significant risks both ethically and aesthetically in responding to the demands of reconciliation and, as such, is to be welcomed in the Australian literary landscape. This strikingly multidimensional novel has been widely praised, and shortlisted for numerous awards.<sup>3</sup> It can be (and has been) read in numerous ways: as a novel about 'man's inhumanity to man'; the writing of history and fiction; the legacies of the past; love of country; guilt in the face of the sins of the father; aging and the value of friendship.<sup>4</sup> In the introduction to his edited collection, *The Novels of Alex Miller* (2012), Robert Dixon offers a subtle caution against reductive or inattentive readings, particularly of novels such as Miller's that take politically charged issues as their subject matter. It would be doing Miller a 'grave injustice' Dixon suggests, if readers were simply to read Miller's novels as if they were 'about' a particular issue. For Dixon, Miller's work foregrounds, without attempting to resolve, difficult ethical contradictions. Given that this novel is, to some extent, about reckoning with difference, my reading seeks to disrupt orthodox readings of the novel and is, I hope, worth the risk of reduction.

In this article, I approach the novel through the troubling lens of massacre. For me, reading *Landscape of Farewell*, and particularly its central massacre scene, was a deeply unsettling experience, which became the impetus for writing this article. This article explores the troubling implications of the novel's sustained analogy between the generational effects for Indigenous Australian perpetrators of a massacre and the children of Nazis. It questions the novel's capacity to contribute to reconciliation, in spite of drawing upon many of reconciliation's key tropes. Drawing on the insights of comparative Holocaust studies, this article unpacks the novel's representation of massacre and genocide, and the subtle comparison between Indigenous belonging to country and Nazi attachment to national space. Finally, through the work of Dominick LaCapra, it scrutinises the obfuscatory representation of the perpetrator, and the novel's seeming projection of a form of perpetrator guilt onto the Indigenous subject.

*Landscape of Farewell* both emerges out of and responds to the difficult process of reconciliation. The word 'sorry,' apologies, regret and requests for forgiveness recur in the novel, and the narrative explicitly elaborates on key tropes of reconciliation discourse, such as 'sharing stories' and 'walking together' (Clark 1994). The context into which the novel was published is worth bearing in mind. Historians and novelists were still bruised by the History Wars and denial of the extent of frontier violence, and massacres in particular (see McIntyre and Clark 2003; Manne 2001). The novel was also published in the wake of the fraught public debate about whether or not the systematic removal of Aboriginal children from their families constituted genocide (HREOC 1997). A key feature of these debates was the question of whether what was done to Australia's Indigenous peoples, both during colonial settlement in the nineteenth century and as part of a program of assimilation in the twentieth, should be

classified as genocide (see Curthoys and Docker 2001). This question has led to difficult deliberations about the appropriateness of comparisons between Australian history and the Holocaust, and *Landscape of Farewell* is an important incursion into this debate.<sup>5</sup>

*Landscape of Farewell* follows the journey of a German professor, Max Otto, the first person narrator, who is grieving the recent death of his wife, Winifred. But Max is also in the midst of another form of mourning, which he is unable to clearly articulate, related to his father's possible implication in Nazi war crimes, and from the beginning of the novel it is difficult to ascertain to what we can attribute Max's melancholy. At the novel's opening, he is about to give his valedictory lecture before killing himself. The lecture is titled 'The Persistence of the Phenomenon of Massacre in Human Society from the Earliest Times to the Present' (13), and it begins with a quotation from Homer:

Agamemnon, the commander-in-chief of the Greek expedition against Troy, cautions his younger brother, Menelaus, against sparing the life of a high-born Trojan. *We are not going to leave a single one of them alive*, Agamemnon says to his brother, *down to the babies in their mother's wombs—not even they must live. The whole people must be wiped out of existence, and none be left to think of them and shed a tear . . .* (13)

A twentieth-century historian, Max has not been able either to let go of or work through an enduring interest in massacre:

The subject of massacre . . . had obsessed me for a time in my youth, but I found myself unable to make headway with it owing to my emotional inhibitions, not least of which was a paralysing sense of guilt-by-association with the crimes of my father's generation, and after several false starts I had abandoned the subject and fallen silent. (14)

At the end of the lecture, a young Aboriginal academic named Vita McLelland publically upbraids Max, yelling: 'How can this man presume to speak of massacre . . . and not speak of my people?' (15).

After the paper, Max apologises to Vita for his oversight and ignorance and they go for a drink together. Over the course of the evening Vita persuades Max that he should come to Australia, deliver a paper at a conference she is organising, and spend some time with her Uncle Dougald in the Central Highlands of Queensland. Dougald, it seems, is in some form of self-exile from his traditional country, related perhaps to the fact that his great-grandfather, a 'warrior' called Gnapun, led a massacre of white settlers. This fictional massacre in the novel was inspired by an historical Aboriginal massacre of white settlers, the largest known massacre of settlers by Aboriginal people, at the Cullin-la-Ringo Station in the Central Highlands of Queensland in 1861.

After Max spends some weeks at Dougald's home, Dougald asks him to write the story of the massacre. Apparently Dougald, who is clearly literate (he spends much of his time writing reports on a computer), can *tell* the story of the massacre, but, for some reason, cannot write it down. In this sense, and it is possibly the central conceit of the novel, for the story to be told and written down, Max and Dougald need each other, and their friendship is thus mutually beneficial. After Dougald tells the story of the massacre to Max, Max duly writes it down and

the resulting written narrative is inserted as a chapter of the novel, titled, simply, 'Massacre'; the reader never hears Dougald's oral version, even in written form.

In this chapter, Miller has not tried to follow the historical story of the Cullin-la-Ringo massacre, about which little is known in any case. Having said that, Max, as narrator, makes substantial truth claims for his version. For reasons that are not altogether clear but seem to be related to the massacre led by his great-grandfather, Gnapun had lived the rest of his life in exile. By finally having the story of his great-grandfather's massacre written down for posterity, Dougald is able to return to his country. He and Max go on a dangerous and difficult journey to his great-grandfather's cave. Dougald dies soon after but Max, who has lived in the shadow of his much-loved father's possible involvement in Nazi war crimes, is himself finally, as a result of writing the story of the massacre, able to come to terms with and face writing about 'the darkness of my family's silence' (317). The finished novel, which we find out at the end is a gift for Vita, is thus the resulting narrative of Max's healing journey from being depressed and suicidal to having a renewed capacity to face the truth of his family's past. This narrative journey is interspersed with flashbacks to Max's youth and particularly the time during the war when he had been sent to stay on his uncle's farm in the country.

Overwhelmingly, the novel has been read as telling a larger story about inhumanity, and Dixon's edited collection is the touchstone here. As Dixon writes in his introduction to the collection:

At the dark inner core of both *Journey to the Stone Country* and *Landscape of Farewell* is the persistence of violence in human history, especially the frontier violence of colonial Australia: in the first novel, a massacre of Aboriginal men, women and children by the first generation of white settlers in Central Queensland, and in the second, a massacre of white settlers by Aboriginal people. (18)

For philosopher Raimond Gaita, writing in Dixon's collection, the novel is 'about the love of country, about the murderous impulses that appear to be part of human nature' (218).

The novel certainly invites such a reading of universal inhumanity and guilt. As Max muses to himself early in the novel:

We may not ourselves have participated directly in massacring our fellow humans—and surely no sane person will hold the children responsible for the murders committed by their fathers—but our troubling sense that we are guilty-by-association with their crimes is surely justified by our knowledge that we are ourselves members of the same murdering species as they. (24)

And later, in the context of a childhood memory, he thinks, 'Guilt . . . was not the experience of the heartless perpetrator of a crime, but was a complex and pervasive condition of the human soul . . .' (89).

Dixon argues:

*Landscape of Farewell* brings together the Holocaust and the settler invasion of Australia in ways that challenge us to think about the persistence or, as Hannah

Arendt would have it, the *banality* of evil throughout human history; and yet, as Raimond Gaita points out, without simply equating them or attempting to ‘weigh the gravity of one against the other.’ (24)

I have no theoretical or philosophical objection to bringing together the Holocaust and the settler invasion of Australia to shed light on either event, or human failings more generally but, as Dixon suggests, this requires ‘great moral tact.’ In a sense, this article seeks to explore whether or not Miller has been adequately morally tactful in bringing these two historical events—that is, the Holocaust (which should more properly be referred to as genocidal) and the comparatively rare (compared, that is, to settler massacres of Indigenous people) massacre of settlers by Indigenous Australians.<sup>6</sup> In an interview with Ramona Koval, Miller said he was not unique in trying to bring together ‘Australia’s anxiety about its Aboriginal identity and the anxiety of contemporary Germans about what happened in the Second World War and their inability to deal with it’ (Koval 2007). Indeed, Miller is not alone in this comparison, so the question becomes, *how* does the novel bring together the Holocaust and the settler invasion of Australia?

There is an emerging body of work that explores the relevance of Holocaust studies to the Australian context, particularly since the *Bringing Them Home* report argued that the systemic removal of children from their families constituted genocide. As Ann Curthoys and John Docker argue:

Some of the debate was about matters of historical interpretation—the nature and extent of Aboriginal child removal, and of killing on the frontiers of settlement—and much of it has been about whether ‘genocide’ is an appropriate or a misleading term for characterising some or all of these events. Many felt that ‘genocide’ properly referred only to the Holocaust, that is the killing of millions of Jews by Nazi Germany, and that any comparison with the Holocaust was insensitive to the latter’s uniquely terrible nature as well as wildly exaggerating the negative aspects of Australia’s history of colonisation, dispossession, institutionalisation, and cultural imposition. (2)

Although some prefer to retain a sense of German (or even Australian) exceptionalism, scholars have generally welcomed the opportunity to think about the ways that new insights into the Australian context might emerge out of locating it within wider international historiographies and debates.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, from its earliest theorising by Lemkin in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, genocide has been understood as related to both race and colonialism through a two-fold process of dispossession and imposition, making research into the possible relationship of genocide to settler-colonialism in modern world history indispensable for Australia. As Tony Barta has suggested, even if the systematic removal of children does not constitute genocide, ‘comparison with what was happening in Germany brings out the genocidal undertone. Eugenics and colonialism were the links between Germany and Australia and the links went a long way back’ (55).

### **German and Indigenous Belonging**

While comparative Holocaust studies are useful here, and I share Neil Levi and Barta’s suspicion of either Australian or Holocaust exceptionalism, Miller’s novel makes a radical departure from this tradition. After all, the analogy between, to use Miller’s phrase, ‘Australia’s anxiety about its Aboriginal identity and the anxiety of contemporary Germans

about what happened in the Second World War,' is usually taken to refer to white Australian anxieties about atrocities committed against Indigenous people and German anxieties about the Nazi treatment of the Jews. *Landscape of Farewell* overturns this assumption. In Miller's novel, the Aboriginal and German descendants are analogised. From early on, the novel sets up a parallel between Max and Dougald's respective plights. Both are widowed, grieving, and ageing. Or, as Vita says to Max, 'you two guys understand each other. You're both in the same boat. You both lost your wives' (95). After hearing that Dougald's father was a violent alcoholic, their similarity is cemented in Max's mind; he thinks, 'our inability to memorialise the deeds of our father was an affliction he and I possessed in common' (191). There is a slippage here, though, because they are also both struggling to come to terms with being the descendants of perpetrators of crimes against humanity—crimes they have both been unable to confront and represent adequately. In other words, it is not just the violent deeds of his father that Dougald is unable to memorialise, but also, by implication, his great-grandfather.

The novel extends the analogy between Aboriginal and German descendants by inviting a comparison between an Indigenous sense of belonging to country and the fascistic attachment to national space that drove Nazi ideology. For example, soon after Max arrives at Dougald's home, Dougald goes away for a few days, and Max starts to wonder if he 'could counterfeit Dougald's existence here':

But of course I knew I could not counterfeit with assurance his deep attachment to this place. His attachment to his *country*, as Vita spoke of it, employing the word as if she spoke not of a nation to which he belonged, nor of a love of country, but as if she touched upon an ancestral knowing grappled into the roots of his being so deeply that even he knew its influence only as an uncanny intuition—as if his country required something from him, a sacrifice, perhaps, or a homage of some kind, but not something he could name or on which he could place his hand and say, *Here it is*. Did his country make a call on him and on his capacities which he as felt as an anchoring to this place? Was it a bond, indeed a bondage, that went beyond mere familiarity and a knowledge of things? (102)

As Max steps into an old shed that he presumes to be Dougald's childhood home, he is pondering these thoughts, and does so 'with the same feeling of guilty trespass I had known as a boy whenever I nosed about my uncle's house while he was away working in the fields' (104). That night he dreams of his uncle's farm—a dream he 'knew at once, was associated with Dougald's old cottage' (108). He wakes and begins to write a childhood recollection in his journal. He recalls being woken by his uncle in the middle of the night and dragged outside: 'There he grasped the collar of my coat and made me squat beside him in the headland furrow—was it his intention to bury me there, a living sacrifice to the fierce god of his soil?' (110). His uncle then took a handful of earth:

'This is our soil,' he said—as if he said, this is your soul. 'We must care for it as we care for our lives.' Even as a boy, at this first *initiation*, [he later refers to it as a *wild initiation* 114] I knew he spoke of something *sacred* to him, an indissoluble aspect of his innermost sense of who he was; that source from whence he had his *origins*. 'It is the soil of our fathers,' he said. . . . 'We are this soil.' . . . He might have been imparting to me the core of a *mystical knowing*. (111–12) (Emphasis added)

Initiation, the sacred, the authority of origins, mystical knowing: this passage has a series of terms that signify Indigenous Australia and widespread perceptions of Indigenous relationships to country.

Brigid Rooney, in her reading of the novel, suggests that the parallels between Indigenous Australian and German perpetrators ‘are audacious and risky, for Miller blends incommensurable historical acts of genocide’ (212), but concludes that the metanarrative of story as gift, legacy and cross-cultural exchange overwhelms such concerns. Rob Dixon’s reading also shares this uneasiness, wondering if in the focus on this ‘historically atypical example there is a risk of misrepresenting Aboriginal people as perpetrators rather than victims of frontier violence’ (2014, 152). However, through a careful unpacking of the novel’s many intertextual allusions as well as its liturgical dimension, he concludes that the novel is about much more than it appears to be, and that how the novel is to be read is unresolved.

Bill Ashcroft’s compelling reading of the novel draws upon Ernst Bloch’s notion of *Heimat* in order to perform a utopian reading of the novel as displacing national history with cultural memory, where memory is a source of what he calls ‘anticipatory possibility.’<sup>8</sup> Ashcroft is aware that Bloch’s use of the term *Heimat*, when the Nazis were deploying the term to identify the German nation as an Aryan homeland, is ‘dense with historical controversy and cultural baggage’ (22). But, Ashcroft argues, Bloch makes a distinction between the political soil of the nation and the utopian aura of the *Heimat*, a distinction which Ashcroft believes is beautifully captured in Alex Miller’s *Landscape of Farewell*. He sees that, for Max’s uncle, the soil is connected to race and nation and is ‘an object of intense identification, but it is an identification *quite distinct* from that provided by Aboriginal country. This is a sense of the land as sacred that Aboriginal people may superficially be seen to share with Europeans such as Max’s Uncle’ (22–23; emphasis added). Ashcroft asserts that there is a ‘very clear distinction’ between the two, based on the idea that the European identification—the homestead, the ancestral ties, the relationship with the homestead, is finite: ‘it all ended. Everything. Nothing of him, nothing of his house or ideas, not a thing of it remains’ (263). This ending contrasts with Dougald’s Old People, who had ‘not become extinct but defied our belief in history and had survived. The Old People, indeed, suggested to me another way altogether of looking at reality and the passage of time than my own familiar historical sense of things, in which change and the fragmentation of epochs and experience is the only certainty’ (271). The distinction in the novel, however, is much less clear than Ashcroft’s reading asserts. When Max is driving towards Dougald’s country, he is thinking of his uncle, and driving through the wartime countryside of Germany:

It was a landscape of mourning, and that is how I think of it still, the country of the past to which my soul belongs. My Uncle’s features were set that day in the mask he often wore of forever reaching into himself for something final, some elusive thing that he could never quite lay his hand to, hoping and longing for a sudden illuminating sign that would confirm his need to be at one with his earth. Not the land, not quite the *country* the way Dougald spoke of it, but the deep, black, arable earth that his father had fed and enriched and *his* father before him. (261)

What Ashcroft twice refers to as a clear distinction is, in Max’s understanding of the distinction, not clear at all—the most to which he attests is that they are ‘not quite’ the same, and contra Ashcroft, I think it is worthwhile unpacking some of the implications of an

analogy between fascistic attachment to national space and Indigenous belonging to country, an analogy which can only have meaning in the Australian context if the perpetrators are Indigenous. The novel, moreover, takes the analogy even further. Max, struggling to come to terms with his past, thinks to himself: 'How we are to speak of defeat is less obvious to us than how we might boast of our heroism and our glorious victories' (140). The novel thus asks how the vanquished and their descendants can find heroes, and even honour, in a shameful and defeated past. Indeed, the novel suggests that the violence of Dougald's father stemmed not from the perpetration of a massacre by Dougald's grandfather but instead from the loss and defeat he had suffered at the hands of white settlers. As Dougald remarks: 'I believe it was the loss of the old ways, and of the respect we once enjoyed, that enraged him, though I don't think he ever understood it himself' (182). As Max says, 'Defeat is a great silencer' (140), and the novel explores the conditions under which both Max and Dougald were able to find their voices, and tell their stories. Max finds resolution to his own defeated silence, and the possibility of exploring the past, through telling Dougald's story.

### Sharing Stories

Sharing stories or histories was a key goal of Australia's national reconciliation process, and the novel offers a model of collaborative story-telling. Dougald tells his story and Max writes it down. In this way the novel can be read as engaging with the demands of the reconciliation process. Miller is also clearly drawing upon the idea of the gift, and Max repeatedly refers to Dougald's story as a gift. As Max thinks: 'Told the story to me? Well no, he placed the story in my care' (192). Max repays the gift through writing: 'it took me ten long nights of arduous labour' (192).

For both Rooney and Ashcroft, this shared story and its cross-cultural narration vindicates the novel. Although Ashcroft notes that Max's writing of Dougald's story could be read 'as an act of effrontery, an appropriation of cultural story,' he concludes: 'In the end the story is not only an account of cultural destruction but a parable of what literature can achieve in the process of reconciliation' (26): 'I choose Miller's to indicate the power of literature to enact a reconciliation of vision, showing that visions of *Heimat* may be shared, allowing writers and readers to see Australia in a new way' (24). For Rooney, similarly, the shared story serves to 'foreground the question, for settler Australians, of ethical living, and perhaps ethical modes of writing in circumstances of complicity' (205): 'It is only through the appropriation of Dougald's ancestral story, a conversion into story that implicates and exercises the self, that the other can begin to be approached' (214). 'If there is resolution,' Rooney argues, 'if there is a vision of settler belonging, it is located in receptivity' (214). It is worth bearing in mind, however, that when Ashcroft refers to the 'exchange between Aboriginal story and white writing that we find in this novel,' or when Rooney refers to Max's encounter with otherness through 'Dougald's ancestral story,' that *Landscape of Farewell* is not, in fact, a shared story; it is a fictional story *about* a shared story and what becomes increasingly clear is that these are all Max's stories.

Max's rendition of the massacre is a highly romanticised version of a historical event. In the story called 'Massacre,' but subtitled 'A true story by Dougald Gnapun,' Gnapun's actions are that of an epic hero, as opposed to, say, the leader of a resistance movement. The only historical dimension which Miller seems concerned to convey is that the massacre was undoubtedly well-planned.<sup>9</sup> In the lead up to the massacre in Miller's narrative, Gnapun effectively insinuates himself amongst the settlers. He says to his followers: 'You must make yourselves useful and act with friendliness and decorum at all times. When our entire war

party are assembled in the camp of the strangers and they have grown accustomed to our presence and are at ease with us, then we shall destroy them' (224). During the massacre, Gnapun speaks respectfully of the leader among the settlers, the man he will slay, and refers to him as his brother, revealing what he calls 'the bewildering mystery of their brotherhood.' And, after slaying him, Gnapun 'caresses' his hand and 'lingers' beside him (239). In spite of being a historian obsessed with massacre, Max does not seem to be even cursorily familiar with any key theories about the complex phenomenon of massacre, and particularly, the complete dehumanisation of victims that massacre entails (see Semelin).

Instead, in writing Dougald's story, Max arrives at a version of the massacre that he already knew. For, in Max's rewriting, Gnapun uses Homer's words with which Max opened his paper at the start of the novel:

*We are not going to leave a single one of them alive, down to the babies in their mother's wombs—not even they must live. The whole people must be wiped out of existence, and none be left to think of them and shed a tear . . .* (13)

This may all be playful intertextuality, a celebration of metanarrative possibilities, or even, as Dixon suggests, a place where fable and allegory are breaking through, or alternatively, as a narrative that 'operates as myth, parable and liturgy' (Dixon 2014, 148). But we are talking about a massacre here, and an historical one. It matters how these stories are told, and Dougald had insisted that the truth must be passed on: 'I'm the only one left who knows the truth of what happened. If it's not written down the truth of it will be lost when I die . . . No one else is left alive who knows the truth of it but me' (179). The truth-status of the story is reiterated and, in a sense legitimated, when Dougald responds to Max's written version of his story of the massacre, saying to Max, 'You could've been there, Max' (247), a line with particular personal resonance for Miller.<sup>10</sup>

In Gnapun's/Max's narrative, the massacre was the result of the settlers having, unknowingly, 'altered the sacred playgrounds of the Old People' (218), thus destroying their power. The 'Messengers,' (the name given to the group that Gnapun is leading) 'have been rendered capable of suffering from their past, an evil previously unknown to them, and a punishment no people has ever had imposed upon it before this day' (219). As a result, the Messengers will from now on 'be the victims of Time, this terrible thing that will be set free among them like a pestilence and will devour their souls' (238). As Dixon has noted, this passage has troubling resonances with the Fall in the Garden of Eden. For Rooney, 'the terms of this powerful passage may revive concerns that here again we see settler colonial inscription of timelessness to a premodern safely vanished Aboriginal culture . . . Yet *Landscape of Farewell* withstands scrutiny in these terms. By the time we reach the 'massacre' chapter we are positioned to apprehend multiple meanings' (212). Certainly *Landscape of Farewell* does lend itself to multiple meanings, but Rooney's concerns about locating Indigenous people in a prelapsarian state of unity, quite different from the modern present in which they found themselves, are not so easily dismissed.

Not only does the passage suggest that the injuries of colonisation were purely psycho-spiritual, it ignores what we do know about both the causes and effects of the Cullin-la-Ringo massacre. There is some conjecture about what led to the actual historical incident—and disturbing sacred sites is certainly one of them—but there is also evidence to suggest that the massacre was in retaliation for earlier attacks, the kidnapping of an Aboriginal boy and the mistreatment of Aboriginal women (Carment 1980). There is also evidence to suggest that



settlers on the frontier used the Cullin-la-Ringo massacre to justify the wholesale slaughter of Indigenous Australians on Queensland's colonial frontier for years to come (Carment 5; see also Reid; and Loos). While the novel may perhaps be read as an attempt to recuperate a story of Indigenous warriors defending their land from invasion, such 'cultural memory,' as Ashcroft might call it, is undermined by the novel's sustained analogy of Indigenous Australians to the defeated (and dishonoured) Nazis.

### Victims and Perpetrators

One effect of this analogy is that the novel projects a kind of perpetrator guilt onto the Indigenous subject. In so doing, it suppresses a key productive benefit of a comparison between the settlement of Australia and the Holocaust. Neil Levi's discussion of scholarship that takes seriously a comparison between Australian colonial settlement and the Holocaust argues that 'with a few notable exceptions, those who do pursue and take seriously the comparison fail to address the most troubling and material implication that the charge of genocide and the comparison of Australian and German history entails: the question of the perpetrator' (130). In other words, while the novel explores perpetrator guilt and perpetrator trauma, its tight analogy of German and Indigenous perpetrators leaves little room to explore settler Australian perpetrator guilt and how settler Australians might come to terms with the violence upon which the Australian nation is founded. Dirk Moses draws on the work of Cathy Caruth to pursue the concept of 'perpetrator trauma' in his analysis of comparisons between Australia and Germany to understand the 'ideological heat' in such debates. Perpetrator trauma is latent or delayed and experienced subsequently by a perpetrator-collective as public memory enters the consciousness of the population. According to Moses, 'perpetrator trauma continues to haunt the perpetrator-collective until it becomes narratable into a new legitimating story and constitutes part of its self-understanding' (93). *Landscape of Farewell*, however, does not offer such a story. Settler Australians do not need to recognise themselves as either perpetrators or beneficiaries of colonial violence, nor do they need to consider questions of recompense or redress because perpetrator trauma is displaced so effectively onto Dougald.

In a wide-ranging essay on historical trauma, Dominick LaCapra insists on the importance of distinguishing between a generalised absence 'conceived as something constitutive of existence' which may lead to structural trauma, and specific historical losses and their concomitant historical trauma. He also explores the dangers of converting loss into absence, and the modes through which such conversions happen. 'When absence and loss are conflated,' LaCapra suggests 'one encounters the dubious idea that everyone (including perpetrators or collaborators) is a victim, that all history is trauma, or that we all share a pathological public sphere or a "wound culture"' (712). Universalising readings of the novel provide some evidence of conflation. LaCapra's elaboration of the dynamics of such conflation provides a key to understanding the passage described above in which the 'Messengers' find themselves victims of Time, and helps to make sense of Gnapun's anachronistic quoting of Agamemnon at the time of the massacre. As LaCapra reminds us,

absence is the absence of an absolute that should not itself be absolutized and fetishized such that it becomes an object of fixation and absorbs, mystifies or downgrades the significance of particular historical losses. The conversion of absence into loss gives rise to both Christian and oedipal stories (the Fall and the primal crime)—stories that are very similar in structure and import (for example, in attempting to explain the origin of guilt. (702)

Like Moses, LaCapra also considers ‘the possibility of perpetrator trauma that must be acknowledged and in some sense worked through if perpetrators are to distance themselves from an earlier implication in deadly ideologies and practices’ (723). Moreover it is worth reflecting on the massacre scene in *Landscape of Farewell* via LaCapra’s insight that

the conflation of absence and loss would facilitate the appropriation of a particular trauma by those who did not experience them, typically in a movement of identity-formation that makes invidious and ideological use of traumatic series of events in foundational ways or as ‘symbolic capital.’ (712)

Although LaCapra insists that, ‘with respect to historical trauma and its representation, the distinction among victims, perpetrators and bystanders is crucial’ (723), *Landscape of Farewell*’s massacre narrative blurs the boundaries between victims and perpetrators, enabling Max to occupy every possible position in his story-telling, collapsing differences to the point of oblivion. In Max’s narrative of Dougald’s story, Gnapun is able, via ‘visionary seizures,’ to enter the consciousness of the settler he is going to kill prior to killing him. In so doing, he finds the settler’s wife is called Winifred, the same name as Max’s deceased wife. In order to write the story, moreover, Max as story-teller finds himself entering the consciousness of Gnapun, the warrior: ‘I began to live more deeply in the events . . . Until I was Gnapun the warrior and *he* was me’ (192). So not only is Max able to enter the consciousness of Gnapun, he is, through Gnapun’s capacity to enter the consciousness of his victim, able to occupy the position of, and identify with, the victim as well. The victim was an unusually good man in the Queensland context—he believed in ‘equal fellowship’ (211) between black and white; he did not feel, the reader is told, the ‘passing shadow of imperial arrogance in his soul’ (211). (In a sense, the settler functions as a sacrificial lamb, another clue that we are dealing with a fetishised story that downgrades the specificity of historical loss). As Max becomes more involved in the story, it is no longer Dougald’s ‘but became the deeds of an imaginary and heroic self—none other than that same brave good man whom I had longed to become when I was a boy’ (194–95). Max is finally able to identify with his own childhood self. There are disorienting levels of phantasmatic identification here, as Max’s perspective shifts, obfuscates and collapses the roles of victim, perpetrator and witnessing scribe, in what LaCapra might refer to as a ‘rashly generalized blurring or simple collapse of all distinctions, including that between perpetrator and victims’ (724).

Max’s reference to boyhood longing indicates that there is something deeply infantile in this epic fantasy of heroic omniscience. Surely this is not what Vita McClelland meant when she asked ‘How can you speak of massacre and not speak of my people?’—the challenge that instigates the novel. The journey of Max’s attempt to rise to Vita’s challenge offers nothing more than an idealised representation of a massacre that meets the needs of his own childish longings.

There is an extent to which Max comes to understand this himself. In spite of describing the writing of the narrative of the massacre as arduous, he also finds it ‘a nightly joy’ and a ‘euphoria,’ suggesting that, again, historical trauma has been replaced by structural trauma which is, LaCapra argues ‘often figured as deeply ambivalent—as both shattering or painful and the occasion for *jouissance*, ecstatic elation, or the sublime’ (724). It is only later that Max comes to the realisation: ‘So, you have identified yourself at last with the perpetrator of a massacre’ (215). For Rooney, Max’s

shocked recognition of what drives his transformation—his identification with perpetrator of a massacre that allows the recuperation of his own father—*deflects us from anxious fixation on the referential content of his story*, and directs us instead towards metanarrative questions, to the intersubjective uses to which story is put—as gift, therapy, legacy, as tentative and necessarily risky cross-cultural exchange. (213; my emphasis)

For me, however, the referential content of the story remains central. Indeed, one might well argue that the anxious fixation on the metanarrative and the celebrated sharing of stories that some readers have found so illuminating, enables us to avoid the full implications of the referential content of the story, and its confused entanglements between perpetrator and victim.

Writing down Dougald's story becomes a vehicle for Max finally to face his own past. As he says, 'the massacre of the strangers had been more than just a telling of a story. [I was] at liberty to invoke the childhood dilemmas inscribed in my own heart, inscribed there during my childhood, and which had haunted me ever since' (250). He was only at such liberty, however, after inventing, identifying, and rehabilitating the Indigenous perpetrator of a massacre in the settler Australian context. I can see how this works for Max—but what it might offer Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in reckoning with their pasts is another question altogether.

Dirk Moses has traced the emergence of a 'self-critical community' in Germany in which 'the open debate about the meaning of the past provides the orientation in the present and a guide for the future' (98). For Moses, such a community 'permits the problems highlighted by the perpetrator trauma to be addressed against an open horizon about meanings of the past' (108). He suggests that such a community is yet to emerge in the Australian context, and, I would argue, *Landscape of Farewell* and its reception demonstrates this. To approach the process of reckoning with and taking responsibility for past deeds of those we love (our fathers, our grandfathers) by identifying with and glorifying perpetrators, even if in the interests of telling a larger story about the human capacity for violence, does not offer an adequate model for even framing the past, let alone coming to terms with its meanings, and what should be done about it. Instead, perpetrator trauma is displaced onto Indigenous Australians and an honest appraisal of history is replaced by the self-deceptive and self-serving fantasy of an honourable massacre.

But even massacre as the lynchpin of comparison between the Australian and German contexts is problematic. After all, the Holocaust was not a massacre, or even a series of massacres, although, tellingly, one very positive reviewer of this novel refers to 'Hitler's massacres' (see Hamilton). It was genocide. Just as the reality of genocide in Germany is overlooked in Max's obsession with massacre, the genocidal nature of frontier violence in the nineteenth century is similarly elided in the novel, about which it remains curiously silent.<sup>11</sup> As Jacques Semelin has argued, 'the terms "massacre" and "genocide" must be clearly differentiated, at least because the latter is inscribed in international law. Massacre is never in any case synonymous with genocide, although genocide always consists of one or several massacres' (2001, 379). The novel's exploration of massacre evacuates the question of genocide, a question that remains pertinent in the Queensland context. It is not for nothing that both Henry Reynolds and Dirk Moses have argued that the term genocide is more appropriate to the Queensland colonial frontier than any other in the Australian context, including the later systematic removal of children. As Reynolds has argued, the 'story of

frontier conflict was punctuated with genocidal moments when settlers and police systematically pursued particular groups of Aborigines with the intention of destroying them. Such moments occurred in a variety of circumstances' (130).

While *Landscape of Farewell* may offer insight into the childish longings of the descendants of perpetrators in coming to terms with difficult and painful pasts (about which the novel may have more to tell settler Australians than Indigenous Australians), it has little to offer settler Australians seeking a model for how to mourn historical losses of which we are the beneficiaries. It contributes little to our understanding of massacre, genocide or even, I would argue, reconciliation. Indeed the key reconciliation the novel offers is Max's reconciliation with himself. But perhaps, unwittingly, the novel reveals why reconciliation, which seems so often to be about settler Australians exploiting Indigenous hospitality to come to peace with our own complicity, remains such difficult, risky and necessary work.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the members of the Changing Australia's identity research group in the School of Arts at Australian Catholic University for their thoughtful and encouraging feedback on earlier drafts of this article: Noah Riseman, Melissa Bellanta, Hannah Forsyth, Laura Rademaker and Cath Bishop.

<sup>2</sup> This term emerges out of a collaborative project I am undertaking with Robert Clarke. In addition to the works of Alex Miller, we are looking at novels including Andrew McGahan's *White Earth* (2004); Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005), *The Lieutenant* (2008) and *Sarah Thornhill* (2012); Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) and *The Swan Book* (2012); Gail Jones's *Sorry* (2007); Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (2010); and Rohan Wilson's *The Roving Party* (2011). These 'fictions of reconciliation' stand out from a broader tradition of works that revisit the colonial frontier by a specific set of characteristics. Many explicitly draw upon the revisionist national histories that emerged since the end of the 1970s, and this is reflected in their plots, characterisations, and settings. They are also distinguished by often graphic accounts of colonial violence. Moreover, they are marketed in ways that reference reconciliation as a social/political project through their use of evocative cover jacket art and images, and publishers' blurbs on the significance of the work for the nation's understanding of its past. See Clarke and Nolan, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> *Landscape of Farewell* won the Annual Foreign Novels Twenty-First Century Award, and was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the ALS Gold Medal and the NSW Premier's Literary Award.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the critical responses to the novel are quite inspired, including Ronald A. Sharp's essay on the novel's vision of friendship, Joseph Cummins' work on sound and silence in the novel, and Brigid Rooney's discussion of the novel's temporality.

<sup>5</sup> *Landscape of Farewell* is not the first novel by Miller that addresses the difficult topic of massacre. A massacre also features in Miller's 2002 novel *Journey to the Stone Country*, in which Panya, an elderly Aboriginal woman who witnessed the massacre of her own people as a child, angrily, even abjectly, narrates her own massacre story. For the purposes of this article, however, I will only discuss *Journey to the Stone Country* in passing because it has been the subject of much more scholarly attention, and is a very different type of novel. There is no doubt that reading and discussing what one might call Miller's massacre narratives together is a fruitful exercise. A number of analyses have read the novels together including those by Shirley Walker and Brigid Rooney. One unfortunate result of this double representation of massacre—one perpetrated by settlers against Indigenous Australians and the other in which Indigenous warriors were perpetrators—is the idea in some quarters that Miller has demonstrated admirable balance. Shirley Walker, in her essay in Dixon's collection for example, asserts that 'Miller is nothing if not even-handed' (159); a perspective reiterated, indeed quoted, by Dixon in the introduction (18).

<sup>6</sup> Recent research undertaken by Raymond Evans and Robert Orsted-Jensen suggest that the numbers of Indigenous people killed on the Queensland frontier could be upward of 65,000 and that nationally, the ratio of black deaths to white could be as many as one in forty-four. Paul Daley, 'Why the Number of Indigenous Deaths in the Frontier Wars Matters.' 15 July, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/15/why-the-number-of-indigenous-deaths-in-the-frontier-wars-matters>

<sup>7</sup> See, in particular, Tony Barta, Neil Levi and Dirk Moses for an in-depth elaboration of these debates and positions.

<sup>8</sup> Ashcroft reads *Landscape of Farewell*, along with three other novels, through the lens of what he refers to as the transnation, the ‘exorbitant proliferation of actual subject positions within the state’ (19) that are displaced by but may also challenge the unifying national histories or myths of the nation. Ashcroft draws on the work of Ernst Bloch to elaborate his vision of the function of literature being ‘anticipatory illumination,’ that is ‘possibilities for rearranging social and political relations to produce *Heimat*, Bloch’s word for the home that we have all sensed but have never experienced or known’ (21). Ashcroft’s project here is utopian, arguing that ‘the utopianism of the transnation is a vision of the future grounded in memories that exist outside the “memory”—some might say the institutionalised forgetting—of history.’ For Ashcroft, this sense of *Heimat* becomes ‘the promise in postcolonial writing that replaces the promise of nation’ (21), a promise that, although it lies in the future, transforms the present. ‘It may lie in the future but the promise of *Heimat* transforms the present. It does this through what Edouard Glissant calls a “prophetic vision of the past”, an access to cultural memory that defines the future outside of any prescription provided by national history’ (21–22). For Ashcroft, ‘Utopia is important because the cultural memory of the transnation is located in *Heimat*, which focuses the anticipatory consciousness that links past and future and transforms the present’ (22).

<sup>9</sup> In the novel’s acknowledgements, Miller writes: ‘When I first heard this story as a youth, it seemed to me that the attack on this large party of white settlers must have been extraordinarily well planned, and that there must have been an Aboriginal leader of great character and ruthless strategic intelligence behind the planning of it’ (321).

<sup>10</sup> Miller describes the importance of this line, and it is restated in Dixon’s introduction. (4–5). Miller’s friend, Max Blatt told him the story of his escape from anti-Semitic attack in Poland: ‘He told me the simple bones of the story in a few sentences. I did not sleep that night but wrote the story in detail and in the morning I gave it to him to read . . . When he finished reading it, he said with feeling, “You could have been there”, and embraced me.’ (Waxing 25; also cited in Dixon 5). As Dixon suggests, the trope of sharing stories is a significant one for Miller that recurs throughout his fiction, and is a trope particularly suited to the reconciliation genre.

<sup>11</sup> The novel does make one oblique reference to the Holocaust in the scene where Gnapun first witnesses the destruction of sacred sites that instigates the massacre in the novel. As Brigid Rooney notes, ‘In recognising that “To sing, after this, would be blasphemy,” Gnapun seems to ventriloquise Adorno’s famous words that there is “no poetry after Auschwitz”’ (212–13).

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