

“one should never go back”: history writing and historical justice in Thea Astley’s *A Kindness Cup*

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This essay offers some reflections on the proximity of Thea Astley’s masterful novel of the Queensland frontier, *A Kindness Cup*, and a major shift in Australian history writing that occurred in the 1970s and 80s with the emergence of Aboriginal history. Several critics have argued that Astley’s novel reflects the political and intellectual spirit of this moment, epitomised in the work of figures like W.E.H. Stanner, Henry Reynolds and C.D. Rowley (Sheridan, 12-13; Lever 130-1). The novel gives us an unflinching account of the violence of the Queensland frontier and dramatizes practices of national remembering and forgetting. Without disputing this claim, I want to do something slightly different. I will suggest that Astley’s novel is also a reflection on the *writing of history* that offers a critique of some of the political and affective investments that we may place in the work of recovering the past. In this, Astley’s novel does something quite different from the historical work of her contemporaries, asking a series of questions about the relationship between remembering and redressing violence: Why do we want to recover and remember a violent past?; What do we hope this process will achieve?; What blind spots inhabit the faith we place in the exposé?; And how can we be so sure of the difference between retelling violence and replaying or re-enacting violence?

We can link the emergence of this new tradition of history writing to W.E.H. Stanner’s Boyer lectures for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, delivered in 1968, in which Stanner coined the phrase ‘The Great Australian Silence.’ The lectures are often credited with ushering in a radical history writing in Australia intent upon breaking the silence on Aboriginal dispossession and frontier war (Attwood 19). ‘The Great Australian Silence’ was born out of persistent practices of disremembering that had allowed settler Australians to ignore the story of Aboriginal dispossession and the contemporary situation of Aboriginal Australians. Stanner argued that there was a structural repression at the heart of Australia’s understanding of its past and that this could not be explained by ‘absent mindedness’ but was instead, ‘a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape’ (24).

Stanner’s call for a new kind of Australian history writing was answered over the next twenty years: C.D. Rowley’s *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* (1970), Henry Reynolds’s *The Other Side of the Frontier* (1981), and Lyndal Ryan’s *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* (1981) were some of the earliest and most significant historical studies to engage with the Indigenous experience of the frontier. Stanner’s lectures addressed both Australian history and Australian historical memory, notably why the Australian past had come to be remembered or forgotten in certain ways. The tradition of scholarship that Stanner ushered in was therefore highly self-conscious about the way that history writing, although it might be about the past, ultimately addresses the present and so is ‘inescapably political’ (1), to quote Reynolds in *The Other Side of the Frontier*.

Critics including Susan Sheridan and Susan Lever have argued that *A Kindness Cup* should be situated in relation to this new tradition of Australian history writing (Sheridan 12-13; Lever

130-1). The novel is set in Queensland in the 19th Century and takes its impetus from a selection of historical events and documents. It recounts the massacre of an Aboriginal tribe, a horrific act of sadism against a white man who tries to warn the tribe about it, and the town's concerted forgetting of these acts of violence. And it tells the story of a misguided but well-intentioned school teacher, Dorahy, who wants the truth of the town's violent foundations revealed and remembered. Like Stanner's lectures and much of the work that followed them, Astley's novel demonstrates the complicity between foundational nationalist mythologies (such as, for example, the idea of the pioneering spirit) and the disremembering of Aboriginal dispossession. In this sense, while *A Kindness Cup* is a novel about what happened on the frontier, it is also a novel about historical memory, about how this violence has been disremembered and the ongoing affects of that disremembering. As Sheridan states, Astley 'dramatizes white society's capacity to suppress knowledge of its crimes against Aboriginal people' and 'poses questions which derive from cultural contexts shared with the historians who were her contemporaries' (12).

What has been less well noted, however, is how profoundly different Astley's novel is from the work of these contemporaneous historians. At the crux of this difference is its deep ambivalence, even pessimism, about the political and affective use of historical recovery. Following Bain Attwood, we can argue that much of the historical work that emerged in this period was either explicitly or implicitly driven by the optimistic belief that looking honestly at the Australian past, and particularly its violence and injustice, could be the basis of democratic change in race relations in Australian society (Attwood 37-40). By contrast, Astley's novel is primarily about the damage done by one well-meaning individual's attempt to bring the history of frontier violence to light. At the novel's conclusion, the exposure of historical atrocities at a town meeting leads to an outburst of mob violence that is structurally very similar to the violence that has been exposed. As critics have commented, Astley's work is often characterized by irony, moral ambiguity and a lack of ideological closure (Dale 1999; Adelaide 1997; Sheridan, 2008). The conclusion to *A Kindness Cup*, in which the efforts of the conscientious objector are shockingly thwarted, is a striking example of Astley's use of situational irony and her refusal to give readers an easy moral response to the violent Australian past.

I will argue here that when we situate *A Kindness Cup* in its intellectual and historical context we can read it as re-inflecting some of the underlying investments that will come to structure an emerging tradition of critical history writing in Australia. What the novel makes problematic in this tradition is not its politics: like most of the work in Aboriginal history emerging at this time, Astley's novel is left-wing, anti-racist, and committed to rethinking the national story. Rather, the novel critiques certain investments that we may have in projects of historical recovery and what I will call the politics of exposure. This can be understood as a politics that works from the assumption that violence, inequality, and injustice are mostly the result of ignorance and that therefore better knowledge will help prevent them. Stated in more concrete terms, the novel's bleak conclusion can be read to problematize a kind of politicized historical scholarship that works from the guiding assumption that knowing what happened on the frontier will help us prevent a replay of racial violence in Australia.

What remains unthinkable in this familiar political and intellectual mode is the idea that a fully cognisant subject might be no better equipped to prevent violence or, perhaps more shockingly, that the subject was always already cognisant, that we have always already known about this violence. The novel, I suggest, asks what fantasies and blind spots lie behind our uncritical investment in the politics of the exposé. I also argue that Astley presents the disturbing

possibility that this politics may be inhabited by a desire for historical closure that carries within it the sprig of violence. Written in 1975 on the cusp of this new tradition of history writing, Astley's novel assists us to think through some of the investments that we may make in practices of historical recovery and their limitations.

I turn now to some of the key ideas that structure a small selection of the historical work that emerged in this period. My aim is to clarify what I am calling 'the politics of exposure' and to demonstrate how it structures this work.

In his memoir *Why Weren't We Told*, Henry Reynolds looks back at his career as a radical historian. Describing the democratic sentiment that drove his historical work he writes,

Much critical, revisionist history springs from the idea that Australia should do better and is capable of doing so. It is written in hope and expectation of reform, crafted in the confidence that carefully marshalled, clearly expressed argument can persuade significant numbers of Australians to change their mind and redirect their sympathies. Beyond that confidence in individuals is a firm belief in the capacity of Australian democracy to respond to new ideas which in time can reshape policies and recast institutions, laws and customs. (245)

There are two main assumptions at play in this statement. Firstly, that present injustices have their basis in historical injustices. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, that the rational exposure of the origins of these injustices will shift public sympathies and initiate democratic reform. For an example of the kind of work that Reynolds is referring to here we can look at C.D. Rowley's masterful 1970 publication, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*. Rowley was a historian, social scientist and public administrator in charge of a large scale, publicly funded studies of Aboriginal people in contemporary Australian society. In this major text, Rowley argued that better historical knowledge was the key to understanding the situation of contemporary Aboriginal people and he suggested that this historical knowledge would shift public opinion. He stated:

no adequate assessment of the Aboriginal predicament can be made so long as the historical dimension is lacking; it is the absence of information on background which has made it easy for intelligent persons in each successive generation to accept the stereotype of an incompetent group. (9)

Reading these quotes side by side we can see that both Rowley and his successor, Reynolds work with the belief that the perpetuation of historical injustices, what Rowley refers to as 'the stereotype of an incompetent group,' is the result of broad historical ignorance. And they also suggest, optimistically, that better historical knowledge will lead to an expansion of empathy in the Australian people.

As well as linking history writing with reform (both reform in the realm of policy and in the broader public realm in the sense of reforming the attitude of the settler) some histories produced at this time also contain the more abstract hope that critical historical recovery work might perform a work of restorative justice. The following quote is from Richard Broome's *Aboriginal Australians*, from 1982:

The Aborigines have been denigrated and oppressed, while the Europeans have generally assumed the dehumanizing role of the oppressors, and have had a false

sense of their own superiority. All Australians must see history for what it was, and is, before any mature Australian outlook can develop. Also natural justice for Aborigines can only be achieved and the colonial relationship of dominance and subordination between black and white be ended, when Australians are honest about their past. (6)

The justice to which Broome refers here, what he calls ‘natural justice,’ is achieved by seeing the past clearly and honestly. And to the historian falls the job of enabling this form of justice by revealing the past, without filter and ‘for what it was,’ and thus allowing the settler to acknowledge their own implication in that past.

It is not my intention here to undermine or critique the optimistic, democratic investments of this tradition, but as noted earlier to show that *A Kindness Cup* carries none of this optimism. The novel is based upon historical recovery work not entirely removed from that undertaken by contemporaneous historians: it takes its impetus from real historical events and documents and it is unflinching in its reconstruction of frontier violence and cruelty. However, it refuses to see this work in and of itself as democratising, or to call this recovery work a form of justice. In *A Kindness Cup* the exposure of violence itself operates as a form of violence.

In the novel’s acknowledgement, Astley calls *A Kindness Cup* a ‘cautionary fable.’ The fable as a form works by presenting the reader with a bad example: a central figure that the reader is led to quickly identify with only to be shown that this identification was misguided and then to reverse it. In the tortoise and the hare, for example, we first identify with the hare and with his arrogant belief that he can nap and beat the tortoise. By the end of the story we realize both the hare and our identification with this character were misguided. As Thomas Keenan argues, in the fable we identify in order to dis-identify (45-7).

In *A Kindness Cup*, readers are led to form this kind of encouraged, but ultimately misguided identification with Dorahy, a school teacher who wants to uncover and expose the massacre of an Aboriginal tribe and a horrific act of sadism against Charles Lunt, a white man in the community who objected and tried to give the tribe warning. Moreover, readers are both structurally and morally aligned with Dorahy for most of the novel. However, like in the traditional fable, the use of situational irony at the novel’s conclusion works to reveal both the mistake of Dorahy’s investments in this project of exposure and our own mistaken investment in Dorahy.

Halfway through the novel Charles Lunt is accosted by a punitive party in his home where he is caring for a sick Aboriginal man. The sick man is shot dead and Lunt lashed to his body before the party move on to a massacre of the Aboriginal man’s tribe. The quote that follows presents perhaps the central image of the novel, the figure of white conscience lashed face to face with the Aboriginal dead:

Sweetman ushered a Judas “Sorry, old man” and the rest of them seized him then. One of them went outside and brought in some saddle ropes and although Lunt fought them back a rifle butt knocked the sense out of him and they lashed him strongly with a lot of unnecessary rope to the dead man and then both of them to the bed. Face to face. Lunt lay with his lips shoved into flesh already cold. (47)

The novel begins however not with the massacre or its lead up but rather with Dorahy’s return to the town twenty years later for ‘Back to the Taws,’ a celebration of the early years of

pioneering and commemoration of the town's 'founders.' The subject of the novel then is not only the massacre itself but also the question of how it will be remembered. Dorahy's aim in returning to the town is to uncover the massacre and to bring the truth of the town's foundation to light in a 'hope for delayed justice.' (60) Dorahy claims to want justice for Lunt, the white man who was sadistically abused, and for the Indigenous people who died in the massacre. 'It's not just you' he says to Charles Lunt, 'It's the old man as well. It's Kowaha. It's her husband. It's Kowaha's child.' (56) Dorahy, we might argue, sees himself as in some sense beholden to the dead and the abused and as carrying a kind of ethical responsibility, what the novel will describe as a responsibility of 'conscience,' to speak on their behalf. The question of justice then, for Dorahy, is explicitly linked to the possibility of historical recovery and the act of speaking this history. Justice will be achieved through the recovery and exposure of historical violence and speaking of this violence in the name of the dead.

Dorahy's obsession with exposing the town's violent past is contrasted with its celebration of the past, a celebration that ignores or perhaps more precisely is indifferent to the massacre. This forgetting is serviced by remembering of a different kind: the memorialization of the bravery of the early history of settlement, stories of 'self sacrifice' (91), 'old friends' (89), 'recollections and memories' (129), the 'marriage of place and person' (90). By coupling the story of a massacre with the story of a town's commemorative celebration Astley comments on the way that nationalist myths both require and enable the erasure of frontier violence. Slanted remembrance and tradition, Astley shows us, are perhaps key to the ways the past can be misrepresented, and indeed denied.

We might argue then that although this is a novel about frontier massacres, the central conflict it recounts is not really between settlers and Indigenous people. Rather it is between two different kinds of settler intent on very different versions of the national past: one that is committed to proud and affirming stories and one that is committed to exposing truth and violence. For Dorahy, the act of remembering in this context takes on a degree of moral significance: it becomes for Dorahy a way to refuse complicity with a group of people who he believes want to forget the violent actions that characterised that past. Thus the following exchange with a town's member:

'You shouldn't have come back here in the spirit of criticism. That's all over now.
So long ago no one remembers.'
'I remember'
'You won't forget you mean.' (50)

While Astley stages this conflict in the nineteenth century, it is presented, both thematically and structurally as an allegory for a conflict in and for the present: the question of how this past will be remembered, while it is Dorahy's question, is most importantly a question for the reader. In this sense the novel dramatises the conflict that was laid out in Stanner's lectures about remembering and forgetting the history of the frontier. This is also the conflict that would re-surface in the History Wars of the 1990s. And we might note that like in *A Kindness Cup* in these debates one side, the left, claimed a moral responsibility for the work of remembering. There is in this sense something very prescient about Dorahy's conflict.

For most of the novel readers identify with Dorahy, both structurally and thematically. We identify with Dorahy because he seems to be taking a moral stance against the crimes of the frontier. And we also identify with Dorahy because we are structurally aligned with his position in relation to these crimes. Like the reader, Dorahy is neither victim nor perpetrator but rather

witness to this violence. Dorahy does not participate in these crimes but he sees them, as Astley makes sure we do as readers. Dorahy in this sense embodies the same moral questions that the novel presents to the reader: how do we remember a violent past? What is the responsibility of the witness in relation to this past? And how much responsibility does one bear for crimes committed in one's name? The punitive party, we find out, sees itself as acting on behalf of the whole community, as protecting 'those things we cherish ... The food from our children's mouths' (38). It is perhaps not too much of a stretch to say that for Astley, the settler reader is also part of the community in whose name the punitive party acts, as the party sees itself as laying the foundations for future generations.

For Dorahy the desire to link the work of remembering violence with justice is not merely whimsical. Rather it responds to and tries to repair the blatant failure of the justice system on the frontier. A significant portion of the novel recounts a botched trial that takes place after the massacre, and which serves as a cover up. Astley took much of the material for the court scenes from archival transcripts of the Select Committee on the Native Police Force from 1861. Her dramatization demonstrates that the law was unable to recognize frontier violence as a crime in large part because it could not acknowledge the complicity between pioneering or the settlement of the land and murder and dispossession. Indeed, the failure of justice takes place not so much because of the capacity for individuals to lie or deny responsibility, but because the language of legal procedure, the rules of evidence, and the limits of legal citizenship all contribute to a systematic erasure of the Aboriginal victim and an inability to see the dead Aboriginal body. For example, the massacre is not described as a massacre or even as a shooting but rather as a 'dispersal' (53), a term that Astley takes directly from the transcript. There is no possibility of hearing evidence directly from Aboriginal people because at the time they were not able to testify in court and besides the dead cannot testify. Perhaps the most blatant miscarriage of justice is that although the shooting is, at one point, admitted it cannot be recognised as murder. Thus, while Buckmaster, the ringleader, admits to shooting and claims to have seen six dead bodies the ruling finds that,

While there were certain irregularities in the proceedings of the day, the entire unhappy events were the result of wrongly placed enthusiasm, a perhaps too nice a sense of injustice and the understandable grievances of men who found the difficulty of living—and I mean pioneer living—aggravated to an unbearable pitch by the extra annoyance the blacks posed to their efforts. (126)

For Dorahy, 'going back,' going 'back to the Taws' and going back over this past is impelled, in his own words, by 'a hope for delayed justice' (60). History writing, for Dorahy, becomes a redemptive space; the act of recounting past crimes, even those in which he was not directly involved, speaks to the structural silencing of the plaintiff by the courts. Dorahy, for instance, considers writing a piece about Charles Lunt and in his name called 'Why I left town, by a victim' (103). Here he sees it as his job to speak for and in the name of the victim. In response to the objection that this may not be his story to tell, he retorts that the story is 'a part of local history' (103). Dorahy conceives of history writing as the task of speaking in the name of the victim where the institutions of justice have failed and where their structure precludes the victim's own voice.

We might speculate briefly as to why and how historical recovery comes to take on this role, both for Dorahy and, I would argue, for historians working around the time of this novel. In *The Juridical Unconscious* Shoshana Felman argues that in the wake of the holocaust the law has been called on not just to decide an individual's guilt or innocence but rather to 'respond,

in a larger manner, to the traumatic historical experience of the Holocaust and juridically confront the very trauma of race, of being a Jew in (Hitler's) Europe' (4). This, she suggests, is a form of 'put[ting] history on trial.' (11) The courtroom becomes the space in which this is acted out, particularly in the collective hearings on behalf of holocaust survivors where it is called on to hear the voices of history's persecuted. (12) In Australia there has never been a legal arena in which to hear the crimes of the frontier. My suggestion would be then that in the absence of this, history writing and fiction become the space in which the crime is recounted, trauma aired, and justice optimistically supposed to be re-established. History writing in this sense takes on something of the role of the court procedure.

So far I have demonstrated some of the ways that Dorahy makes the task of historical recovery a moral imperative and the logic by which this become a way of responding to the failure of the justice system to recognise frontier violence. I have also been suggesting that something of the logic of Dorahy's thinking is at play in the work of historians working at the time Astley wrote this novel. Dorahy can be read as a figure for the revisionist historian. I want now to turn to Astley's critique of Dorahy. For if this is a fable in which we are led to identify with Dorahy only in order to be shown the error of that identification, we now need to explore what, for Astley, is misguided about Dorahy's project.

In the final scene Dorahy and his friend and ally Snoggers Boyd attend a commemorative event in the town hall and in front of all the people of the town recount the massacre twenty years ago and the sadistic abuse of Charles Lunt. In response, a small group of men rise up and set upon the whistle blowers. They attack Charles Lunt and push him down the stairs and his fall seems to re-enact a woman's leap and fall from a cliff during the massacre. They drag Dorahy and Boyd outside and beat them up. Dorahy throughout the novel has seen this recounting of the massacre as a form of belated justice, but ultimately his project backfires, leading to a re-enactment of the violence it set out to uncover.

At the crux of Dorahy's error is a blind faith in the political and moral value of the exposé. Dorahy's obsession with telling the truth about the past is guided by the belief that where the justice system has failed to punish the culprits of the massacre his own exposé, twenty years later, will result in a retrospective exercise of justice. As he says, 'it's going to destroy ... Buckmaster, Sweetman. They'll be exposed for what they really are' (120). The fantasy at play here is that ongoing injustice, in this case the celebration of murderers by the town, is mainly the result of mystification and that once the truth about Buckmaster and Sweetman is exposed they will be dethroned.

Borrowing from Eve Sedgwick's work on paranoid reading we can observe that what remains unthinkable for Dorahy is that even if the truth is fully exposed this may not change things or that 'a fully initiated listener may remain indifferent or inimical or have no help to offer' (138). And yet this is precisely what Dorahy's own experience of the town might have suggested. In the trial, for instance, there is no obfuscation of the massacre but rather, more cynically, a refusal to prosecute the offenders. Snoggers Boyd observes that the townspeople were always aware of the massacre: 'the whole town knew at the time but no one was prepared to make outright challenges' (103).

The true extent of Dorahy's misunderstanding is revealed in the final moments when, as the 'hate pack' (135) leave Dorahy and Boyd groaning in the dust, the two abused men hear the sounds of the celebration continuing, the townspeople raising their voices in a rendition of Auld Land Syne, 'full throatedly ... roar[ing] chorus after chorus' (135). What is most shocking and

surprising in this conclusion is not that the whistle blowers are silenced but rather that once the men are removed from the hall the celebration continues. Thus, the scandal the novel foregrounds is not the exposé itself, at least not in its content. And neither is it that the whistle blowers are punished. Rather, what is revealed through Dorahy and Boyd's exposé (which perhaps was obvious all along) is the fact that everyone already knew but that they considered the information insignificant. Dorahy's big mistake was to believe that there was a subject who would be shocked by his historical exposé.

Returning to the idea that the novel can be read as a commentary on the figure of the historian we can compare this scene to the opening of Reynolds's *Why Weren't We Told*. The comparison is useful because the texts describe similar scenes: an educated man of conscience informing a public audience about the true history of the frontier. The difference is that where Astley gives us an audience that is both knowledgeable and indifferent to this history, Reynolds recalls an audience who is first ignorant, and then moved:

After political meetings, after public forums, lectures, book readings, interviews, it hasn't mattered where I spoke, what size the audience, what the occasion or the actual topic dealt with.

Why didn't we know? Why were we never told? (1)

He continues:

More to the point, they (the audience) felt that they should have known these things themselves and didn't. They wished they had known them before. They believed their education should have provided the knowledge, the information and hadn't done so. (2)

Leaving aside the question of genre—the fact that one text is a memoir and the other a novel—and leaving aside, also, the question of historical setting, the fact that Reynolds's describes his present while Astley's novel is set in the nineteenth century, we can compare the construction of the settler subject and the historian in these parallel scenes. For Reynolds, the settler subject is genuinely ignorant about colonial violence. This ignorance, it is implied, is not the fault of any individual who may be in his audience but is rather the fault of the ideologically driven limitations of the education system. The question, 'Why weren't we ever told?' is testament to the ignorance (and we might add innocence) across the country about the facts of Australian history, but perhaps more importantly to the fact that people have a genuine desire to know and to acknowledge that history. This is not a wilful ignorance the question seems to say. The historian, in this scenario, can speak out against the state's perpetuated silences, providing an ignorant, but we might add, innocent, settler population with knowledge about their history. In contrast to this, Astley's novel suggests that settler Australians have always known what happened on the frontier—they simply never cared too much about it. In this case it is Dorahy, the speaker, who is ignorant in that he has failed to realise that the violence he 'uncovers' is conspicuous rather than hidden.

This comparison allows us to ask: to what extent does the politics of the exposé rest upon the fantasy of an innocent subject? The scene in Reynolds's memoir, we might speculate, is the scene Dorahy fantasizes about, where an audience would be genuinely shocked and moved by the information disclosed and as a result the culprits exposed and expelled from the town. Yet both these scenarios depend on the idea that there is an innocent subject who did not and indeed could not know about the violence of the frontier and so is shocked into action by the revelation.

Dorahy, Astley suggests, is not just ineffective in his commitment to this fantasy about the redemptive work of historical recovery. By the end of the novel his exposure of violence has also initiated a repeat of that violence. As Lunt is set upon by the mob in the final moments of the novel he turns to Dorahy and mutters, 'Damn you.' (134) What is devastating about this is that Lunt suggests that the violence he is about to endure, a violence that seems to replay an earlier violence twenty years ago, has now, this second time, been initiated not by the people of the town but by Dorahy himself and by his obsession with historical exposure. The desire to reveal violence it seems, can manifest as or conjure further violence.

What is the nature of this violence for Astley? In this moment we realize that a flavour of violence has run through Dorahy's obsession with historical exposure all along—that he has found himself overtaken by affect that eerily recalls that which drove the punitive party. Dorahy is 'greedy' (83), 'frantic' (80), 'sick with fury' (99). The novel thus asks, to what extent does critique take its energy from that which it opposes? And what are the affective investments that drive the work of critique and exposure? Rita Felski has argued that forms and styles of criticism operate within particular affective registers (216), approaching their object through a certain matrix of feelings. Thus, for Felski, what Paul Ricoeur famously called the hermeneutics of suspicion, that is, a form of reading in which a critical detachment from the text is assumed in order to uncover its repressed or hidden meanings, is constituted by a particular and affect laden mode of relating to the text. For Felski, suspicious reading enables, 'guardedness rather than openness; aggression rather than submission; superiority rather than reverence; attentiveness rather than distraction; exposure rather than tact' (222).

Following Felski's discussion we might posit Dorahy as a suspicious reader. At 'Back to the Taws,' he wants to keep himself detached and guarded in relation to the rousing and sentimental language of the ceremony and he holds himself aloof by counting clichés (90). Dorahy's intellectual detachment is suspicious and critical in its orientation—indexing and analysing the ceremony's rhetoric rather than letting it affect him. But Astley shows us that suspicious critique is a highly invested and affect laden exercise. As the ceremony continues Dorahy finds himself shouting at the crowd, 'How many, eh, did you sacrifice?' (91). The scene shows us something of the potential atmospheres that inhabit the work of critique and warn us of an aggression that may override its intentions.

Another aspect of the violence that inhabits Dorahy's project is its reliance on an appropriation of Lunt's experience. For Dorahy, history writing and justice are aligned through the act of speaking in the name of the victim. However, the novel asks us to consider the difference between what it means to live with historical trauma and what it means to write history. As critics of trauma have argued, the traumatic experience is characterized by its resistance to narrative (Caruth; Felman). Lunt chooses not to speak of the incident and we might argue that in his desire to reveal what has happened Dorahy must, in some way, violate and misrepresent a crucial aspect of Lunt's experience: its unspeakability. A question the novel asks then is: How does one make space for the victim's trauma within the narrative closure of history writing when to write history is to erase something fundamentally true about that experience—its resistance to narrative?

Finally, Astley suggests Dorahy's need for a totalizing and we might say political solution to violence and the failure of justice through a public exposé overrides any small and individual acts of healing and responsibility that might take place. The key example of this is the individual work taken on by Lunt himself who, before the reunion, is living in another town

and has taken the now grown daughter of one of the victims into his employ as a cook and cleaner. While we might bring a critical eye to bear on the power dynamics within this relationship, within the logic of the text this is presented as a gesture of responsibility for what is perhaps the larger and more structural crime: the violent dispossession of the Indigenous population.

The basis of Lunt's ability to come to terms with the violence is an acknowledgment of his own complicity in the crime. He voices this position in response to Dorahy's demand for justice: 'It could so easily have been any of us who did it ... the luck of the draw' (56), Lunt reflects. The point here is not absolute moral relativism or to claim that there is no difference between doing it and not doing it. However, it does interrupt Dorahy's fierce desire to affix blame for the attack. Lunt's response in which he identifies with the criminal suggests that for the settler there may be no simple position of guilt or innocence in relation to frontier violence. As Fiona Probyn-Rapsey has argued an understanding of complicity can work to register the settler's structural (as opposed to individual) and trans-historical (as opposed to localized) implication in colonial power relationships and colonial violence (69).

To put it in more concrete terms, Lunt and Dorahy's very presence on the land and as members of the community render them in some sense complicit in crimes committed by the party and in the name of the town. As the leaders will state, 'We were interested only in what concerned the good of us all' (130). Lunt's small acts of acknowledging responsibility and attempting to heal, taken in relation to one of the Indigenous victims, can be read as emerging from a recognition of this complicity and the attempt to carve out a personal space that is not based on the violent politics of distinction that drive the punitive party and Dorahy's own attempt to insist upon an absolute separation between the guilty and the innocent settler. Lunt's small, moral, and incomplete response to the crime is presented by Astley as a way of continuing to live after violence. Dorahy's hope for a totalizing political solution, by contrast, must not only erase these smaller acts but is also swept up in an oppositional fury that ties it to the affects and logics it seeks to move past.

I have argued then that we can read Astley's novel as offering a caution against some of the moral and affective investments that we might make in historical scholarship. It also shows us something of the particular value of fiction for thinking about the past and in this it shifts the terms of some of the Australian debates about history and fiction that have raged over the last decade, particularly in relation to Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*. These debates disagreed over the relative value of history and literature as two different frameworks for accessing the past, with both sides seeking to claim the superior value of one form over the other. (Historians, and particularly Inga Clendinnen defended the value of careful historical scholarship against Grenville's claim that fiction and the imaginative identifications of the writer could allow the reader a closer relationship to the past than the fragments of the archive.) Rather than attempting to attack or defend the value of history writing or historical fiction, in this essay I have asked how fiction might offer a reflection on the practice of history writing itself—particularly history writing that takes up the violent and traumatic past. Of course, Astley's novel is part of the tradition it seems to critique: the novel depends on historical recovery work and it reconstructs frontier violence. The value of the creative work however is that it is able to do this work while also attending to its limits, thus insisting that we hold open the space between historical recovery and historical justice.

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