

# Taking/Taking Up: Recognition and the Frontier in Grenville's *The Secret River*

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Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River* (2005) is among the most recent fictional accounts of early contact history in Australia. The novel tells the story of William Thornhill, a convict whose life is based upon that of Grenville's own ancestor, Solomon Wiseman. Like Wiseman, Thornhill is transported to New South Wales, and once freed, settles on the Hawkesbury River outside Sydney. Short-listed for several Australian and international literary prizes, and awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2006, the novel was followed by an exegetical volume, *Searching for the Secret River* (2006), "a writing memoir" detailing the process of researching and writing the novel.<sup>1</sup> Together the novel and memoir are understood as significant contemporary cultural texts, reflecting and elaborating elements of the surrounding white Australian settler culture that forms the context of their production. This article proceeds from the position put forward by Aileen Moreton-Robinson that "[a]lthough the morphology of colonialism has changed, it persists in discursive and cultural practices" (Moreton-Robinson 24). This discursive and cultural continuity will here lead to a characterisation of Grenville's texts (and Inga Clendinnen's, as discussed below) as settler-colonial cultural texts, and therefore as significant for understanding the position and operation of the frontier in the contemporary settler-colonial culture of Australia. The central questions here are about how and in what form the frontier persists in contemporary Australian cultural texts such as Grenville's.

The problem that concerns Grenville in the novel and memoir is well summarised by her exchange with author Melissa Lucashenko. According to Grenville, Lucashenko asked where her family was from. Grenville reports her own response:

So I sat gawping at Melissa, who was waiting for me to work out a response to the simplest question in the world. By way of answer, I told her a bit of the Wiseman story. 'My great-great-great grandfather

was born in London . . .’ I began. I got to the bit about ‘he was freed and took up land on the Hawkesbury’.

‘What do you mean “took up”?’ she said. ‘He took’. (Grenville, *Searching For The Secret River* 28)

Through this distinction—offered as a plain statement by Lucashenko—Grenville’s inherited ideas about her ancestor are teased apart, and the possibility of interest and inquiry emerges. As Grenville describes it:

*Took up*: you took up something that was lying around. You took up something that was on offer. You took up hobbies and sports.

*Took* had many more possibilities. You took something because it was there like a coin on the ground. You took offence or flight or a bath. Or you took something away from someone else. (28–9)

These quotations, as well as the rest of the passage in the memoir that follows Lucashenko’s question, of which they form a part, can be read as a distinction through which the contemporary liberal settler subject is defined and redefined in settler-colonial cultural texts. The apparent shift rehearsed here can be understood with reference to the concept of the frontier: it is the move from one side of the frontier, to the “other side” that is repeated in the passage. It signals the emergence of a form of recognition.

This emergence of a space of recognition within settler cultural texts has, in the last several decades, been consistently framed by the discipline of history. One response to Grenville’s text has been that of historian Inga Clendinnen, whose criticisms are themselves indicative of the importance of these kinds of settler-colonial cultural texts as symptomatic examples of a wider settler-colonial problem of the frontier. As I will discuss, both Grenville and Clendinnen represent settler positions that can be productively reread via the use of a rearticulated frontier concept.

As Grenville has explained in *Searching for the Secret River*, at several times during its early production she thought of it as history, and of her approach to research as historiographical, as opposed to imaginative. In following this trajectory, Grenville initially accepts the dominant cultural framework for interrogating the distinction taking/taking up. However, she concludes with the idea of doing a kind of empathetic history: “[. . .] I didn’t have to approach the past in a forensic frame of mind. I could *experience* the past—as if it were happening here and now” (47). During a radio interview, Grenville was asked for her position on the so-called ‘history wars’. She suggested that “a novelist can stand up on a step-ladder and look down at this, outside the fray, and say there is another way to understand it” (quoted in Clendinnen, “The History Question” 19).

There is another, parallel, way in which Grenville describes the project as a kind of history. She depicts her work as a direct communication of the story within the place itself, Wiseman's Ferry, on the outskirts of Sydney. As Grenville writes:

The place was speaking. It was language I didn't know, but even so I was starting to understand [. . .]. Before it could be a book this was a story. That story was somehow part of all this—these trees, these rocks full of language that was lost. I didn't own that story. It had to be allowed to speak for itself. My job was to get out of its way. (Grenville, *Searching* 171)

Grenville represents the novelist as trying to produce an empathetic history of settlement, but also trying to step back and allow the story of the place to appear.<sup>2</sup> Grenville aligns this unmediated expression of place with her understanding of how Aboriginal people are figured in the text, perhaps with overtones of Romanticism, but certainly in a way that reflects the colonial alignment of Aborigines with Nature. As she writes:

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

The idea of “recognising without understanding” functions here as an inflection of the emergence of a space of recognition, as suggested above. This suggests some possible problems with Grenville's project, because it is not just that Grenville does not understand or represent Aboriginal relations to land. Rather, she ontologically aligns them, in a way that suggests that she is simply “recognising” them, a passive conduit for that alignment to appear—but that also has the effect of producing a kind of “knowing” settler belonging. This is the response that Grenville makes to the distinction taking/taking up. The question of how this relates to the content of the novel is still an open one, and will be addressed in the final part of the essay.

Grenville demonstrates a conception of the cultural politics of speaking for those Aboriginal people who appear in the novel. Once again there is a sense that this approach is about recognition, without knowledge. As she discusses in the memoir:

Back in Sydney, I made some decisions. I would get rid of all the Aboriginal dialogue. It might be historically accurate to have the

Aboriginal characters speaking broken English, but it made them less sympathetic, more caricatured.

Their inside story—their responses, their thoughts, their feelings—all that was for someone else to tell, someone who had the right to enter that world and the knowledge to do it properly.

I might not be able to enter Darug consciousness, but I could make it clear that there *was* one. To create a hollow in the book, a space of difference that would be more eloquent than any words I might invent to explain it. To let the reader know that a story was there to be told, but not to try to tell it. (198–199)

This suggests an implicit and un-theorised understanding that *something* is preventing Grenville from speaking unproblematically from Aboriginal perspectives. On the other hand, given her earlier reference to an unmediated “story of the place”, what does it mean for Aboriginal people to emerge “through the description of the landscape”? I would argue that this problem can be answered by accentuating the continuity of the frontier, by offering some kind of recognition of its durability in shaping these issues, rather than recognising Aboriginal stories by rhetorically ceding space. Such a point can be illustrated in relation to Clendinnen’s response to Grenville’s novel.

A significant part of Clendinnen’s 2006 *Quarterly Essay* is devoted to a historiographic critique of *The Secret River*. Clendinnen’s basic argument is that, contrary to Grenville’s statements at various times, *The Secret River* is not history, and the reasons for this are largely methodological or epistemological. The tone of the critique suggests that it is an assertion of disciplinary boundaries, and of the clear and demonstrable distinction between history and fiction. It is an example of the ways in which historians have rhetorically dominated discussion of the frontier in Australia since at least the 1970s.

This aspect of Clendinnen’s critique of Grenville emerges from her longstanding commitment to a project of renewing Australian historical thought. This project was first outlined in her Boyer Lectures, given in 1999, and can be seen as informing her *Dancing With Strangers* (2003), a history of the early years of European settlement at Port Jackson that has some parallels with Grenville’s novel.<sup>3</sup> As Clendinnen suggested in her final Boyer lecture:

We need history: not Black Armband history and not triumphalist white-out history either, but good history, true stories of the making of this present land, none of them simple, some of them painful, all of them part of our own individual histories. (Clendinnen, “True Stories”, 102–3)

Clendinnen suggests that history can be plural—elsewhere she suggests a “cornucopia of true stories” (101)—and complex, and that in this way it can address the ethical and political needs of the present, especially the needs of a national “we”. But Clendinnen does not address the continuing ethical and political *effects* of the past on the present, or the effects of the present on the historian.

The critique also emerges from her broader examination of the distinction between history and fiction, which in the *Quarterly Essay* is posed through the image of the “ravine”. Clendinnen’s understanding of this distinction is put most eloquently in certain passages from her own memoir, *Tiger’s Eye* (1999) where she gives a sense of the disciplinary constraints of “good” history:

With history I am bound like Gulliver by a thousand gossamers: epistemologically to the deceitful, accidental record, morally to the dead men and women I have chosen to re-present, and to the living men and women I want to read my words and to trust them. (Clendinnen, *Tiger’s Eye* 244)

In contrast, she writes of fiction:

Fiction invents a world free from moral demands and from moral consequences, while imposing paradoxical restrictions of its own. We may invent experiences and put our own chosen shapes upon them, but the experiences must always be believable, which is something history does not require [. . .]. Fiction pretends that humans are simpler, more stable, more predictable than they are [. . .]. Fiction also affords the pleasure of the effortless penetration of fellow humans who are in the real world chronically enigmatic [. . .]. With fiction I turn into vapour, float through bone, look out through other eyes. (245)

If Grenville’s novel answers this account of fiction it is in its constitution as a project in response to the distinction taking/taking up, and its self-imposed limits, suggesting that the author of fiction is indeed bound by “moral” (and ethical, and political) demands present in the context from which their work emerges. Clendinnen argues that Grenville’s decision not to write Aboriginal dialogue and perspectives “reveals a contemporary delicacy of mind” (Clendinnen, “History Question” 19) and contrasts this position with Grenville’s explicit willingness to enter the consciousness of early nineteenth-century Britons. Clendinnen then argues that, by so confidently “empathising with assorted Britishers from 200 years ago” (19), Grenville has overstepped the historically correct boundaries of interpretation. For Clendinnen, then, the past is “another country”, in the sense that she flattens the differences between British and Aboriginal agents so that both are epistemologically remote in approximately the same way for the contemporary historian. It is

precisely the frontier relation under consideration here that implies that such a flattening, a neutralisation, is inadequate, and it is by attending to this limit that Grenville does attempt to address the ethical and political in ways that Clendinnen does not.

Following anthropologist Patrick Wolfe, who examines the changing morphology of settler-colonialism in Australia, it can be argued that this problem is evident to Grenville precisely because of the proximity between those settlers' practices and our own. Wolfe outlines a history of race relations in Australia as the progressive enactments of settler articulation to land, and of changes that are strategic, but not fundamental, in how settlers approach Aboriginal possession. This suggests that the frontier is a continuous process, underwriting settler cultural texts, and that posing this conception of the frontier helps to make Grenville's ethical and political problematic explicit.

Grenville's response to this problematic is a broadly Romantic one: even when it is framed by the idea of "standing above" the history wars, it is about producing an empathetic "story of a place" that offers recognition without rational knowledge. This is itself an assertion of textual neutrality, an authorial strategy that attempts to give representational space without determining that space in advance, and contrasts with Clendinnen's epistemological equivalences. In both cases, what is neglected—to greater or lesser extent—is the idea of the frontier as a continuous process that underwrites settler-colonial cultural texts and imposes real limits on the strategies those texts can mobilise. The frontier, for both of these writers, is a *fait accompli*, but they are actually enacting that accomplishment within their texts in different ways. For Grenville, the route towards such a settlement is more complex than for Clendinnen, whose disciplinary concerns obscure the importance of the frontier by making broad epistemological distinctions between fiction and history. In part, at least, the frontier *is* a kind of contemporary limit in how Grenville conceives her work. But the text of the novel itself suggests a different tendency, and ultimately a closer relationship between their two positions.

Grenville depicts Aboriginal claims to possession on equivalent terms to settler claims. This can also be read as a kind of neutrality towards both "sides" of the frontier. Grenville uses "yam daisies"—an indigenous food crop of the Hawkesbury River banks—as a metonym for Aboriginal possession in the novel. Upon the arrival of the settlers, the yam daisies are removed as weeds, and replaced by Thornhill's family with corn. In turn, this corn is harvested by local Aboriginal people (Grenville, *The Secret River* 279), leading to a violent confrontation as Thornhill and his family try to prevent the harvest, and following this, beholden to a kind of logic of escalation,

the burning of the remains of the crop. This is a turning point in the novel, where Thornhill becomes unsettled in his own possession:

He had thought himself secure at last on his hundred acres, with his boat and his servants. Had begun to take for granted his tin of tea, his strongbox filling with coins. What a blind hope that had been. His corn was gone, not just the cobs themselves, but the promissory note for a future. (286)

After this, the novel depicts the spearing of another settler, Sagitty, followed by the climactic sequence, in which the settlers attack the camp of Tom Blackwood, another settler who is friendly with the Aborigines (299), and murder several of his Aboriginal companions. As Grenville suggests in her writing memoir:

The story of the yam daisies made sense of conflict all over the country. It was the story of settlement in miniature. One event came after another, no one understood what the other side was thinking, and at the end there was bad trouble. It was never a simple matter of right and wrong. (Grenville, *Searching* 132)

This kind of equivalence is somewhat problematic, and mirrors the assertion of epistemological equivalence in Clendinnen's criticism. "Misunderstanding" does the work of resettling Lucashenko's distinction: taking/taking up.

From this perspective, the important distinctions in the novel are actually those between settlers, and it is through these relations that Grenville's response becomes explicit. On the one hand, there is the "good settler"—Tom Blackwood—whose stated philosophy is "Give a little, take a little, that's the only way" (Grenville, *The Secret River* 107). Blackwood lives with Aboriginal people, but he describes it as his land, and he is the one who suggests that Thornhill settle on the point. On the other, there is the rapacious character of Smasher, who lives on Broken Bay, and who is responsible for the rape and murder of numerous Aboriginal people throughout the book. Thornhill occupies a middle position, and is anxious to avoid becoming like Smasher, but ultimately becomes involved in the climactic massacre.

Following the massacre, the novel explicitly portrays the outcome for Thornhill as a simultaneous gain and loss. The pacification of the area leads to Thornhill's confirmation of his possession of the land, and to increasing wealth into his old age. It is also a loss, firstly of one of his sons, already partly acculturated to the local Aboriginal group, who goes to live with the 'good' settler, Tom Blackwood. Beyond this, there is a loss of confidence in possession, a kind of dissonance produced within Thornhill's later years. All of this suggests that Grenville has succeeded in unsettling the settler reader,

in producing an account that does rearticulate the frontier in the present. But it could also be read as a moral negotiation between good and bad forms of colonisation, in which the bad prevails through misunderstanding, and the logic of escalation. As Lyn McCredden has suggested:

The emptiness which Thornhill sees each evening in the land, and the fullness he has pursued in possessing and cultivating his own little piece of earth, are represented as being both of his own making and the products of historical forces. (McCredden 23)

It is significant that these historical forces emerge as a given (rather than as a 'taking'). The moral economy that is constructed in the book leads to empathy with both Blackwood and Thornhill, and to the repudiation of Smasher, but whether they conduct their activities in brutal or civil ways, they perpetuate the settler-colonial articulation directly to the land at the expense of indigenous possession. Thus what Tim Rowse has referred to as the "counterfactual" of "Australia uncolonised, Aborigines never dispossessed" (Rowse 256) is never allowed to appear, and its critical implications remain untested here.

As Eleanor Collins argues, an emphasis on loss can be seen to undermine progressive assumptions, and that this might be a disunifying, rather than a unifying engagement with national myth (47). I would suggest that, rather than being disunifying, the novel's critical success indicates that its function is to interpellate the "good" settler and confirm and solidify that position in the consciousness of the reader. Part of being the good settler in this liberal imaginary is the rehearsal of an unflinching examination, and re-evaluation of aspects of the national past. It involves the rehearsal of such an account of the frontier, and it is necessarily framed in this case by a logic of escalation such as that exemplified in Grenville, an impersonal, historical force that is "never a simple matter of right and wrong" (Grenville, *Searching* 132). Here, Thornhill's failure (contrasted with Blackwood's apparent success), his complicity with Smasher, can be corrected by a white reader who has come to understand, and is able to recognise this loss as such. The settler has reached the point of self-reflection, of self-examination from a transcendent position in relation to the frontier, signalling, in effect, its closure or overcoming. The "good" settler can see enough to know that both sides had it wrong, that they misunderstood, but that now a space for the other can be created within the settler cultural text, in parallel with what Grenville understands as "a hollow in the book" (198).

But providing a space of recognition is not necessarily progressive. Nor should "progress" necessarily be a value in itself in relation to the frontier, which is



itself a figure of progress. It could be reread via Patrick Wolfe's conception of the continuity of a settler articulation to land (93), or using Elizabeth Povinelli's concept of "the cunning of recognition" (17), as a strategy that facilitates continuity, that shores up and unifies at another level, in this case by introducing much the same kind of position that Clendinnen's "neutral" epistemology does—a judicial position, apparently above the action of the frontier that it evaluates and describes.

Alongside this moral economy, exemplified in the three settler positions, another important feature of the novel is its clear articulation of Thornhill's amorous relationship to the land. This is a revealing feature of the book, especially when compared to Grenville's own strategies of belonging. This is the passage where he first encounters the piece of land that he will be taking/taking up:

A chaos opened up inside him, a confusion of wanting. No one had ever spoken to him of how a man might fall in love with a piece of ground. No one had ever spoken of how there could be this teasing sparkle and dance of light among the trees, this calm clean space that invited feet to enter it.

He let himself imagine it: standing on the crest of that slope, looking down over his own place. Thornhill's Point. It was a piercing hunger in his guts: to own it. To say *mine*, in a way he had never been able to say *mine* of anything at all. He had not known until this minute that it was something he wanted so much. (Grenville, *The Secret River* 106)

When we couple this "confusion of wanting" that guides all of Thornhill's subsequent actions with the restorative gestures of recognition that Grenville herself tries to articulate, there is an interesting restorative transformation imagined between the two points. This is the transformation of the possessive drive of the settler, a drive that leads to loss as well as to great wealth, into the settler as the one who has learnt to recognise that loss, and who has repositioned themselves as a neutral conduit, as a novelist (or reader) who can simultaneously write (or read) settler consciousness and make space for Aboriginal consciousness. I would argue that such an image of transformation can be contested by suggesting that, through occupying such an empathetic position, Grenville is producing, at best, an account of regrettable excess, a humanitarian critique of colonialism. The distinction taking/taking up is negotiated by the creation of the cognisant settler. This can be contrasted with another way of reading the situation, from the perspective of the frontier, a position which suggests that the transformation of the "good settler" is underwritten by a sublimated version of the same possessive logic.

Since first drafting this essay, the sense of urgency attendant on questions of white possession has increased. While it may appear that the cultural politics implied in literary and historical texts are remote from immediate political questions, announcements made in June 2007 suggest otherwise. The collision of humanitarian concern with a logic that articulates directly to the land emerged as a significant issue. Thus, the intervention of the federal government in the Northern Territory is hinged not only to an authoritarian approach in addressing a humanitarian crisis, but also to the suspension of land rights.<sup>4</sup> Here that which is ‘underwritten’ in a text like Grenville’s—that is, the links between possessive logic and humanitarianism—becomes explicitly rearticulated in policy in confronting and problematic ways. In the declared “state of emergency” the alignment of the “good settler” and the violent frontiersman becomes more obvious, and the link between dispossession and settler activity, even that which is ostensibly humanitarian, is confirmed.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The novel was initially submitted as the thesis component of a Doctor of Creative Arts degree. Thus, the memoir began as the exegesis component of that degree. While this raises some interesting questions about the alignment of literary fiction with academic contexts, the cultural politics of these texts remain the focus of this article, irrespective of the particular institutional and material conditions of their production.
- <sup>2</sup> “My job was to get out of its way”: this way of understanding the practice of creative writing has recently been described by novelist Sue Woolfe, drawing on neuroscientific theories of creativity, as “loose construing” (see Woolfe, 2007). While outside the scope of this article, it could be argued that such a practice, when applied to Grenville’s problematic, may draw “ready to hand” rather than “creative” responses from the author’s cultural context.
- <sup>3</sup> A detailed comparison of the two may yield interesting tensions and parallels, but is beyond the scope of the present essay.
- <sup>4</sup> For a collection of critical responses to this intervention, see Altman and Hinkson, 2007. It remains to be seen at the time of publication what changes will be made with respect to this initiative by the federal Labor government of Kevin Rudd.

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