

Finding the Secret River:
Mapping a Composite Narrative of *The Secret River* and *Searching for*
the Secret River

By

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Abstract

This thesis conducts a close reading of Kate Grenville's two recent texts, the historical novel *The Secret River* and its companion "writing memoir" *Searching for the Secret River*. The first text rewrites an Australian colonial history while the second inscribes a personal, biographical history. I argue for a paired reading of the texts, which broadens the novel's historical concerns, encompassing *Searching for the Secret River*'s contemporary anxieties about place. This reading constructs a composite narrative which is a representation of postcolonial as well as colonial experience. It also enables a decentring of the persistent controversies regarding Grenville's claims for her novel's historical veracity.

The Secret River has featured notoriously in a contemporary Australian debate about the ethical responsibilities of novelists appropriating historical fact. However, a focus on this public and academic debate over disciplinary boundaries has dominated commercial and critical reception of *The Secret River*, obscuring other aspects of the novel. In establishing a composite reading, this thesis examines one such aspect: the narrative's preoccupation with the notion of belonging.

Chapter one maps the composite narrative across the two texts, differentiating, as well as emphasising the connections between, the journeys of each text's central character. The chapter dissects the characters' individual and common experiences of belonging, while tracing several recurrent themes – including the contested power of literacy and orality – through the composite narrative. The characters' relationships to land are considered as expressions of postcolonial anxiety, after Alan Lawson's discussions of settler narrative tropes.

In chapter two I explore the composite narrative's representations of belonging with a temporal rather than a geographical approach, identifying a nostalgia which is present both formally and thematically. The notion of a literary postcolonial belatedness underpins this argument, facilitating an examination of Grenville's relentless rehearsal of not only national but personal histories.

The final chapter broadens the scope of the thesis to include Grenville's earlier historical novel, *Joan Makes History*, as well as two contemporary fictionalisations of Australian history – Lindsay Simpson's *The Curer of Souls* and Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*. A discussion of the presence of a

historiographic self-consciousness in each of these texts contextualises the composite narrative's approach to harnessing historical fact.

The thesis concludes that the paired reading allows a more complex investigation of *The Secret River* than a reading of the novel alone.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis conducts a close reading of Kate Grenville's recent historical novel, *The Secret River*. Based on Grenville's own convict ancestry, *The Secret River* is the story of William Thornhill, who is transported to New South Wales in the early 1800s and subsequently claims a patch of land as an emancipist. Published in 2005, the novel has attracted considerable national and international literary attention. Amongst its distinctions, it has been longlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award; shortlisted for the Nita Kibble Literary Award, the Booker Prize, and the Miles Franklin Literary Award; and won the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction, and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. It has also invited a significant amount of criticism from audiences beyond literary circles, most notably from various Australian historians, who have chastised Grenville's appropriation and manipulation of historical "fact." Inga Clendinnen, for example, has described *The Secret River*'s creative historical interpretations as "opportunistic transpositions and elisions" which lend support to her accusations that "novelists have been doing their best to bump historians off the track" ("Who Owns the Past?" 16). John Hirst, like Clendinnen, finds that Grenville has fallen victim to what he describes as "the liberal fantasy" (84): a delusion about the possibility that during European colonisation of Australia, "the conquest could have been done nicely" (82). Clendinnen and Hirst firmly express the concerns of a group of historians who argue that liberal reimaginations of colonial history pose grave dangers to contemporary Australian society in promoting partial, inaccurate, and emotionally motivated historical narratives. The implied censure is that these fictional narratives might overwrite "factual" historical narratives in the minds of readers. As Mark McKenna contends, "[t]he rise of the novelist as historian, of fiction as history, has accompanied the decline of critical history in the public domain" ("Writing the Past" 100).

This fraught territory of fictionalising history breeds a conflict over disciplinary boundaries which, as Deborah Hope notes, "like the history wars ... continues to simmer just beneath the surface of our public discourse." Grenville herself has participated publicly in this debate about the role of the novelist, and particularly about the rights and responsibilities inherent in the task of the

historical novelist, making claims for fiction's power to create a "world" and not an "argument" ("Living the Past" 20).¹ The debate about blending historical fact with literary narrative raises questions of archival fallibility, historical slippage, reconstructive privilege, and the moralities of fiction. These questions are all critical in the current scholarly, political, and cultural climate, when the teaching of history in the education system is being challenged and revised; when literary explorations of the notions of identity and belonging are encompassing representations of race, landscape, and the past; and when "postcolonial experience" rests somewhere between pride, shame, and academic factotum.

However, there is more to *The Secret River* than the function it has satisfied in this debate over disciplinary boundaries. Undoubtedly the controversy has contributed to the novel's public profile, increasing commercial interest in the book and prolonging the critical attention span commonly afforded a new release. But the ubiquitous and persistent controversy is not the only analytical framework worth bringing to the novel. Kate Mitchell, for example, conducts a nuanced reading of *The Secret River* which contributes to an argument about the socio-cultural memory-work enacted by neo-Victorian fiction. Mitchell's discussion does not restrict its examination of Grenville's uses of history to the controversy surrounding the novel, and yet it still manages to acknowledge the impact of the ongoing debate. Other recent analyses of the text have included Adam Gall's perspective on the persistent representations of the cultural politics of colonial frontier experience in Australian literature, and Judith Barbour's fictocritical reading which, incorporating biblical passages and colonial documents, shifts the focus from Thornhill to his wife Sal. There are also many other productive ways to discuss this text which have yet to be fully exploited: not least, positioning it beside other texts in order to provide a perspective on the kinds of decisions Grenville has made in fictionalising history for *The Secret River*. These other texts

¹ Further examples of Grenville's public contributions to this debate include her reply to Clendinnen's *Quarterly Essay* ("The History Question: Response"); a paper presented at a conference at the National Library on Australian historical narrative ("The Novelist as Barbarian"); extensive commentary on her personal website, to which she refers readers of her *Quarterly Essay* response ("Home page"); an address to the Sydney Institute ("Secret River – Secret History"); and, notoriously, her 2005 interview with Ramona Koval for ABC Radio ("Interview with Ramona Koval"). Although the content of many of these oral and written texts overlaps significantly, this indicates the breadth of public commentary in which Grenville has engaged.

could include not only Grenville's own work, such as her previous historical novel *Joan Makes History* (1988), which indulges in a different kind of investigation of Australian settlement myths, but also other Australian novels of colonial history such as Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish* (2001). These texts can all be considered performances of historical "reenactment," employing Vanessa Agnew's broad use of the term, and need not be limited to novels but can also include other reenactments of Australian colonial history – even encompassing the liminal "texts" of cinematic or televised entertainment such as the serialised SBS "living history" experiment, *The Colony* (2005). This series, with its accompanying book documenting the production, is an interesting one to read beside *The Secret River* because both explore the European colonial settlement of the Hawkesbury River area in New South Wales, and both explore a penal experience as well as an experience of racial contact. Both claim rigorous historical research, yet are presented as heavily mediated artistic representations of this history, and both suffer similar problems as a result of trying to negotiate the sometimes incompatible demands of historical validity and entertainment. However, such reading frameworks can continue to privilege issues of historical accuracy over more sophisticated analyses of representation.

Another alternative, then, on which the first half of this thesis will focus, is a generic examination which manipulates the boundaries of the novel in order that it might paratextually encompass Grenville's companion text, *Searching for the Secret River* (2006). The inclusion of this second text will facilitate discussion of the main concerns of this project: representations of belonging, the impact of a literary postcolonial belatedness, and how these two issues contribute to the formulation of a historiographic self-consciousness in Grenville's two texts.

Understanding the public fascination with *The Secret River*

To suggest, as some reviewers have, that *The Secret River* is remarkable for its achievements in fictionalising Australian colonial history is far too simplistic. Juliette Hughes, for example, summarises the novel in an entirely uncritical manner, stating that Grenville's five years of research on "every possible angle of the book" contribute to a "powerful" story which "takes on the present as well as the past" and manages to sensitively address the problems of fictional

appropriation of a national history. Stella Clarke praises *The Secret River*'s ability to "do what historians cannot ... [it can] offer dialogic 'acts of remembrance,'" which she describes as "a gift" ("Taking History"). But it is not the first novel to enact a creative historical "remembrance," and not even Grenville's own first novel to do so. Nor, despite its problematic reception amongst historians, is it the most controversial novel to attempt such a thing. And certainly it is not the most artistically remarkable novel to do so, despite the swag of awards it collected within its first year of publication; in ignoring formal developments in the genre of historical fiction, it severely limits its own scope.

Perhaps, then, what has attracted such attention is the novel's approach to racial conflict in Australian history. The dedication of *The Secret River* appears to claim that the book might voice and illuminate a bipartisan understanding of a settler/Indigenous experience of frontier racial contact. However, it seems not only optimistic but generous to accept this claim, as Rachel Slater does, apparently convinced that Grenville has succeeded in writing the Aboriginal characters "back into ... history in a balanced and credible way." Slater does not justify this opinion with any analysis of the Aboriginal characters in the novel, but instead concentrates on Thornhill's European perspective. While Grenville dedicates her novel to "the Aboriginal people of Australia: past, present and future," her Aboriginal characters are not offered voices, and the narrative very much foregrounds contemporary white imaginings of settler-Indigene relations. The dedication is made more in a spirit of defence than in a spirit of offering. In fact, Grenville has been quoted proudly claiming the book as her "act of acknowledgement" and her "way of saying: this is how *I'm* sorry" (Maral).

Is it, then, the novel's place in the debate over the rights and responsibilities of novelists working with factual material which has held *The Secret River* under such a powerful public and critical lens? Indeed, some critics, including Jane Sullivan, have chosen to endorse the novel's position in this debate by appealing to the public and sometimes very personal conversation between Clendinnen and Grenville – a conversation which has been one of the central forums for *The Secret River*'s contribution to the conflict. But to propose that *The Secret River* uniquely furthers this debate is simply naive. The disciplinary dispute is not a new one, and historians, novelists, and critics alike have long

engaged in exploring the issues involved. The participants in this ongoing debate span centuries and continents as well as fields of expertise. For example, the Hungarian theorist Georg Lukács analysed the form of the historical novel in the 1930s. In *The Historical Novel*, he asserts that a historical novel must be concerned with documented evidence, and yet at the same time must be able to integrate elements of possibility and imagination. Lukács's diachronic treatise on the form also notes that the historical novel and its "different problems of form" are direct "artistic reflections" of the historical and social times which provide a context for them (17). Hayden White's expansive work on the issues of historical fiction since the 1930s has also made a prominent contribution to the field, problematising the differences between historical and fictional writing and mapping the liminal and hybrid spaces between the two. More recently such issues have been taken up by novelists like Margaret Atwood, who regularly analyses her own role in the process of translating historical research into fictional narrative. For example, in discussing the development of her historical novel *Alias Grace* (1996), Atwood interrogates her endeavours to weave possibility and imagination into narratives of historical events, detailing the challenges she faced in crossing disciplinary boundaries and the ethical and creative decisions she made in response ("In Search of *Alias Grace*"). Although simplistic, Sullivan's article is coherent in placing *The Secret River* within the broader debate around historical fiction, and providing a concise overview of Grenville's own contribution to the conversation, and of the range of responses this has generated. However, an exclusive focus on this particular aspect of the novel's reception does a disservice to the text in relegating its impact to its political function and ignoring its literary qualities.

Why, then, has *The Secret River* attracted such broad and impassioned responses both critically and commercially, as both literary work and socio-cultural phenomenon, and in both academic and popular forums? What qualities of this novel have prompted its presence on tertiary and university syllabi, in academic conference papers, on shortlists for literary awards, in the public debate about Australia's contemporary relationship with our colonial past, and in popular literary dialogues such as ABC television's *First Tuesday Book Club*? What has fuelled the popular and critical fascination with this novel – a fascination enjoyed

neither by Grenville's earlier fictional foray into Australian history, *Joan Makes History*, nor by other Australian authors' similar essays? A brief glance at the Australian Literature Resource (AustLit) database indicates that the volume of work which has already been written about *The Secret River* certainly outweighs that written about *Joan Makes History* or other thematically and chronologically comparable Australian novels.² Once we move beyond the novel's notoriety, what remains to commend its continued presence in a contemporary literary consciousness?

One way of responding to this question is to examine the novel in partnership with a second text, *Searching for the Secret River*. This text, described on its cover as a "writing memoir," documents Grenville's experiences in researching and writing *The Secret River*. Grenville invites us to share her journey from the decision to research her convict ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, through her frustrations and triumphs in libraries and archives in both London and Sydney, to her decision-making processes in turning Wiseman's story into the story of William Thornhill. In this text, Grenville capitalises on her experience as a creative writing teacher and, as with previous publications such as *The Writing Book* (1990), demonstrates her interest in self-reflection during the creative process. In what Delia Falconer describes as a work which "falls somewhere between an extended festival paper ... and in-depth discussion of the drafting process" ("Wiseman"), *Searching for the Secret River* includes sections of early versions of the novel, and analyses the subjective experience of creating the work. The publication of such "behind the scenes" material accompanying works of fiction is not uncommon, and other Australian examples include Beverley Farmer's *Body of Water* and Murray Bail's *Notebooks*. In Grenville's case, however, the work of authorial commentary has not only commercial, but academic motivations. Much of the material in *Searching for the Secret River* was submitted as Grenville's exegesis for her Doctorate of Creative Arts at the University of Technology, Sydney, in 2004. As such, it has the potential to enter into a very specific dialogue with the text which generated it. Here it differs from a work like Bail's, which enacts its commentary on the writer's work through a

² This commentary on *The Secret River* includes scholarly and critical writings, and covers a wide range of publications including national newspapers and academic journals.

retrospective collection of notes which are neither self-reflexive nor, necessarily, tied to specific published writings. *Searching for the Secret River* also differs from a work like Farmer's which integrates the commentary, as well as diarised memoir sections, with works of prose and poetry. Unlike Farmer's, Grenville's commentary is published independently and although it is intricately tied to *The Secret River*, it is also capable of standing as an autonomous narrative.

While it would be easy to dismiss *Searching for the Secret River* in a critical examination of *The Secret River* (after all, *Searching for the Secret River* was released after the novel and is discontinuous from the fictional narrative, when considered outside the doctoral context), it is far more productive to consider the indelible marks one text inscribes upon the other. This thesis argues that *The Secret River* can be read as one component of a narrative which takes place across two texts. This is not to negate other readings of the novel, nor to disregard any of the novel's fundamental characteristics such as its attempt to represent early racial contact, its contribution to the debate over fictionalising history, or even its prize-winning status. Rather, the pairing allows a new perspective and a much deeper exploration of the ideas and issues contained in both texts, which are less remarkable as independent texts than when considered as constitutive elements of a broader narrative.³

Reading a composite narrative

This thesis conducts a reading of *The Secret River* and *Searching for the Secret River* in which the two texts are structurally and fundamentally connected.

Through establishing the presence of a common narrative running across and between both texts, the thesis will argue the validity – indeed the necessity – of viewing both texts together as a single, composite narrative. The term *composite* is used here in the specific sense associated with physical substances: “a material made from two or more physically different constituents each of which largely

³ As postgraduate studies in creative writing become more prevalent and more formalised in an academic milieu, it seems likely that the publication of such paired texts will proliferate as writers seek to publish not only the works of fiction they create within universities, but the accompanying scholarly exegeses. As Julie Fletcher and Allan Mann note in their introduction to the issue of *Text* dedicated to exploring the exegesis, “the creative or practice based thesis is a reality.” Correspondingly, experiments with ways of readings these textual binaries, such as this thesis conducts, will become increasingly important.

retains its original structure and identity” (“Composite,” def. B2b). There are several extant frameworks within which to read a pair of texts, but none are able to capture precisely this essence of the composite. One example is Gérard Genette’s taxonomy of the various paratexts which contribute to a text. While this structural theory is illuminating, and provides a possible reading for Grenville’s paired narratives, it fails to account for the mutual dependence of *The Secret River* and *Searching for the Secret River*. To consider the latter as simply a public authorial epitext (a paratext not physically appended to the central text) for the former would be technically accurate, but would favour *The Secret River* as the primary text, with *Searching for the Secret River* subservient to it. This, too, is accurate, but explicates only the obvious relationship between the two texts, rather than tracing a deeper connection. Similarly, conceiving of *Searching for the Secret River* as a collection of public marginalia to *The Secret River* – a reading modelled after H. J. Jackson’s detailed work on marginalia – reveals an interesting relationship between the two texts, and is particularly enlightening about the chronological correspondence and its implications for a reading of belonging. However, this reading, too, privileges the novel as the primary text, relegating *Searching for the Secret River* to the role of augmentative material. This thesis seeks instead to read the two texts in a parallel relationship, and will extricate links between the texts, mapping the progression of various themes and ideas from one text to another, to expose the shape of the composite narrative, thus demonstrating the repercussions of ignoring one text while analysing the other.

The composite narrative’s central concern is one of belonging, and of the desire for belonging. This thesis examines this notion in depth, establishing a complex definition of belonging – as both linguistic and conceptual premise – and interrogating the composite narrative in order to understand how each text contributes a discrete, yet complementary and necessary, commentary on an Australian postcolonial search for belonging. At the same time, the divergences between the texts will also be accounted for, clarifying the difference between the composite narrative and the formal alternative of a single narrative encompassing both a fictional and a metafictional voice. The thesis makes careful note of the tension between the need for collegiality between these two texts, and the

simultaneous need for physical autonomy and integrity.

The purpose for positing, and then arguing for, the importance of this composite narrative is to find a new way of reading *The Secret River*, a way to move beyond the persistent, vigorous, and yet already-antediluvian debates about truth and fiction, about history and veracity, about permission and privilege. Clendinnen's *Quarterly Essay* asks "who owns the past?"; this thesis will ask "why own the past?"

It is important to clarify carefully the assumptions underlying the composite narrative model. While the thesis constructs *The Secret River* and *Searching for the Secret River* as elements of a single composite narrative, this is always with the understanding that the two are published as separate texts, regardless of their origins as constituent sections of a single doctoral thesis. At no point will this thesis argue that the constructed composite narrative is equivalent to the single narrative present within a serialised or multi-volume work. Nor does it intend to claim that the composite narrative is the result of authorial, editorial, or commercial intent. Instead, the argument is that, conceptually, a single narrative may be usefully read across and between the two autonomous texts. This narrative may be identified to the extent that even when reading a single text independently, as both texts allow and encourage, traces and "phantom limb"-style shadows of one text may be found in the other. This can result in a subtextual sense of discomfort and dissatisfaction which can be alleviated through a composite reading. The distinction between reading the texts as volumes of a single narrative and reading a notionally present single narrative is both complex and vital to this argument, so it bears further examination at this point.

Even acknowledging their originary coexistence as part of a single thesis, what this study suggests is not that *The Secret River* and *Searching for the Secret River* are separate volumes of a work which has been divided for publication; this, if it were true, would require no argument at all. Rather, the argument of the thesis is for the conscious and active pairing of these two texts, in order to expose a link which exists even more necessarily than that indicated by their publication context. The argument is a constructive and not a deconstructive one, and does not insist on a pre-existing single narrative, but rather conceptualises a new composite narrative.

The composite narrative is focalised through two characters: William Thornhill, the central character of *The Secret River*, and Kate Grenville herself, as the first-person subject of *Searching for the Secret River*. The Kate Grenville who appears in *Searching for the Secret River* is a heavily mediated, textualised, and narrativised version of the author. Because of this, and in order to conceptualise *Searching for the Secret River* as a parallel text to *The Secret River* – rather than a text in the independent genre of biography/memoir – the manifestation of Kate Grenville in *Searching for the Secret River* will be referred to as Kate. The Kate Grenville who is the author of both texts will, according to convention, be referred to either by full or last name. The nomenclature emphasises a reading of Kate as a consciously constructed character. Not only does this permit a distinct differentiation and distance between character and author, but it recognises the literary qualities of Kate, thus allowing a discussion which avoids engaging with any of the strangely personal criticism which has emerged during the aforementioned controversy surrounding *The Secret River*. Finally, this strategy balances the central characters of each text in the composite narrative, so that their journeys may be read in parallel, with each character as a fictional construction (though both heavily grounded in “fact”) serving the overall narrative.

Mapping the thesis

Chapter one introduces the notion of belonging, and discusses expressions of belonging in the composite narrative from the perspective of geographical connection. Kate’s and Thornhill’s journeys are positioned in terms of their search for a relationship with place: with home, with origins, and with landscape. These journeys are contrasted with each other to highlight two different experiences of a desire for belonging. They are also examined jointly, as a theme in the composite narrative, and the common impact of Kate’s and Thornhill’s differing experiences is discussed. This combined treatise on geographical longing is explored particularly with reference to various postcolonial tropes, and includes discussion of Alan Lawson’s “The Anxious Proximities of Settler (Post)colonial Relations” as well as Peter Read’s *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership*.

Chapter two describes the temporal experience of belonging, and concentrates on the search for a place in history, for a connection to the past, and

for an understanding of cultural, social, racial, and personal heritages. Again, the differences between Kate's and Thornhill's experiences are noted, and again the commonalities are identified in order to justify a reading of the two experiences as individual but cooperative threads of the composite narrative. The dangers of textual nostalgia are also expounded, as well as the difficulties of a postcolonial literary belatedness. The concept of nostalgia is investigated in depth, and is harnessed to discuss Grenville's iterations of personal and colonial histories in both the composite narrative and *Joan Makes History*.

Chapter three identifies the presence of a historiographic self-consciousness in the composite narrative and, in order to contextualise *The Secret River* and *Searching for the Secret River* within a cohort of contemporary Australian historical novels, compares this self-consciousness to that which is manifest in Grenville's own *Joan Makes History*, and also in Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* and Lindsay Simpson's *The Curer of Souls* (2006). The chapter conducts close readings of these three texts, exploring a range of possibilities for narrative awareness and textual acknowledgement of the historiographic challenges implicit in the form of historical fiction.

Finally, the conclusion introduces Grenville's most recent novel, *The Lieutenant* (2008), and surveys the early critical response to the text, noting that Grenville's continuing exploration of national settlement histories reinforces her reliance on traditional realist methodologies. This persistent textual examination of postcolonial notions of belonging is situated within a compulsive social and cultural dependence on national historical narratives.

CHAPTER ONE

“... to Own a Piece of the Earth”: On the Syntax of Belonging

Both of the central characters in the composite narrative are engaged in very specific relationships with place. From the earliest moments of *Searching for the Secret River*, Kate is on a journey to find “a particular spot on the planet” in order that she might be able to say “*this is where I’m from*” (*Searching* 28). Kate is not searching only for a place, but for a place to which she is somehow connected, in a historical, genealogical, and even constitutive sense. Thornhill is on a journey to find “a piece of ground” that he might own, and say “mine” of, “in a way he had never been able to say *mine* of anything at all” (*The Secret River* 106). While Kate’s overarching desire is to belong to the land, Thornhill’s desire is for the land to belong to him; he is enchanted by the notion that it is possible for a human “to own a piece of the earth” (134). These two variations in denotation of the word *belonging* constitute a binary which recurs regularly in the composite narrative, often with no clear division, so that it is the binary itself which becomes important, rather than one or other component of it. The desire to be a part of, and the desire to own, are so inextricably linked that they exist in a single word – belonging – and the intense longing for this belonging is present throughout both texts. Together, Kate’s and Thornhill’s experiences construct a representation of land as both object and subject of belonging.

This chapter investigates in detail the two applications of the word belonging, analysing both the convergences and the divergences of Kate’s and Thornhill’s experiences of belonging. In the course of this discussion, the two characters’ experiences are read as expressions of colonial and postcolonial anxiety, and conflicting representations of literacy and orality are explored in both texts as a way of identifying physical symptoms of this anxiety. In Grenville’s texts, the relationship between literacy and corporeality becomes not only an embodiment of a relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, but serves as a link between Thornhill’s relationships with land and his relationship with his wife. This chapter interrogates these relationships, balancing them with Kate’s experiences in *Searching for the Secret River*.

In reading Kate's journey in *Searching for the Secret River*, it is perhaps most useful to consider the word belonging as an abstract noun, derived using the present participle form of the verb. Here, the sense it carries is one of relationship: of membership amongst; of habitual, legitimate, even rightful, association with; of connection to; and of mutual loyalty towards someone, something, or somewhere. In *Searching for the Secret River*, the "something" and "somewhere" with which Kate builds a series of these relationships are, respectively, past and place. Past, here, includes family and colonial histories, as well as a lineage towards the present, while place encompasses a social, environmental, and personal connection to land, country, and home.

For Kate, belonging provides an individual with not only safety, comfort, and protection, but also purpose and meaning within a wider community. These perceived benefits of belonging can be traced through two aspects of Kate's journey in *Searching for the Secret River*: her genealogical and her geographical search. In both instances she yearns for belonging, with the hope that, once found, it will offer her an assurance of both her own safety and her own value.

Belonging, in this grammatical sense, is always accompanied by an implied (if not an actual) preposition: belonging *to*, belonging *with*. The presence of a preposition foregrounds that alliance between group and individual which is effected by the relationship inherent in a sense of belonging. For example, through stories, Kate works towards a sense of belonging within the span of her family history – the preposition *within*, here, indicates Kate's understanding of her location in a genealogical lineage. Discussing the comfort of the familiar family stories of Solomon Wiseman, Kate identifies this connection to her lineage. She likens the stories to an old, worn sideboard handed down in the Grenville family. Like the furniture, the words give Kate "a sense that [her] ship [is] anchored to the past by ropes of story" (17). For Kate, words and narrative are able to construct the threads which will connect her *to* her past, situating her *within* her family history, thus also connecting her *to* her present and *to* the land – all sites where she might find belonging.

When Kate's need for belonging is explored with reference to land rather than history, the preposition can become *on* or *in* – each alternative emphasising a human dependence on land as fulfilment of Maslow-esque needs at all levels,

from physical to psychological. Kate experiences this need for connection to land both in Australia, where she resides, and in London, to where she traces her family heritage. She had visited London in her youth, because “it was what you did ... Britain was what you knew” (29). Her adolescent sense of belonging to a colonial mother-country had been instilled as a part of the “cultural landscape” of her upbringing (29). Living in London on a working holiday visa, the young Kate went to great performative lengths to establish and confirm her proprietorial sense of belonging – she refused common tourist destinations, eschewed maps, and even managed to pick up “something of an English accent” (30). But on returning to London as an adult, she finds her easy assurances fractured, and instead is forced to acknowledge that “she [is] really a foreigner here, in England” (30). She realises that her sense of belonging is, as Rebe Taylor describes it, “learned” and not a “rightful ... gift from ancestors” (15). This realisation promotes her search for an identification with place in Australia, her colonial home, in order to fill the space left by the surrendering of her naive British loyalty. It seems that for her own satisfaction, Kate needs a sense of belonging with at least one place – whether this be the place she is now, or the place she thinks she has come from. Her narrative in *Searching for the Secret River* is, as the title intimates, one of a search: for her history, her present, and their relationship with each other.

The text opens conversationally:

In the puritan Australia of my childhood, you could only get a drink on a Sunday if you were a “bona fide traveller”. That meant you had to have travelled fifty miles or more. Around Sydney a ring of townships at exactly the fifty-mile mark filled with cheerful people every Sunday. One of them was a little place called Wiseman’s Ferry. (3)

Although informal and glib, this first paragraph of *Searching for the Secret River* is already relying on a dialect of desire, of quest. The use of the second person inducts us, as readers, into the role of an Australian traveller, inviting us to share Kate’s search. The anecdote, which introduces us to Grenville’s convict ancestor Solomon Wiseman, is not revisited in the text and is recounted here only as a rather flippant means of establishing of the notion of place. But it subtly induces a sympathy – if only subliminal and subtextual at this point – with the weary traveller in search of something. In this case, the object of the search takes the

simple material form of a drink, and the search is resolved within three sentences. But Kate's quest as a weary traveller is for something much more personal, philosophical, and intangible, and something for which she still seems to be searching (as are her readers) at the conclusion of the text.

Early in *Searching for the Secret River*, Kate happens to travel "by a stroke of extraordinary luck" across the sea to London, where Wiseman had "lived and died not as a story ... but an individual" (25). At this point, it is Wiseman for whom she is searching. Already, though, it is clear that Kate believes that if she can find him – that is, find records of his life and find his place in the world – then she will be closer to being able to find her own particular "spot on the planet" (28). By locating him genealogically, she will somehow be able to locate herself physically. Grenville does not yet explore overtly this link between historical and physical belonging. Instead, it is simply the evidence of Wiseman for which Kate searches. Until this point in her life, Kate has known her ancestor only as a character in her mother's oral histories, those stories her mother was so "proud of ... having" (4). But now, after an experience during the Reconciliation Walk in 2000, Kate discovers an urgency impelling her need to learn more about her great-great-great grandfather, and she thinks that perhaps she might turn this knowledge into "a non-fiction book of some kind" (14). To do this, she will need to find physical evidence, something more substantial than her mother's stories. And in the first instance, this physical evidence is going to be textual.

This fact introduces another recurring issue: that of the power of language, whether as text, documentation, narrative, or inscription. Throughout *Searching for the Secret River*, Kate exhibits an eager faith in the value and stability of the written word. This, perhaps, is to be expected, considering Kate's position as a writer, one who depends on the written word as not only a source of income, but as a personal passion; when she describes writing, she speaks of the "urge, craving" and "real excitement plus sense of doing something worth doing" (147). However, in embarking on her research, she appears reluctant to adopt the healthy cynicism necessary to recognise the volatility of the "facts" on which she is so dependent. From early in *Searching for the Secret River*, Kate spends countless hours in libraries searching for information about Wiseman. On the occasions when she does discover textual documentation, she rarely interrogates the

provenance, the accuracy, or the independence of the documents. Even more striking are her experiences with transcripts of Wiseman's court appearances at the Old Bailey; Kate is delirious with excitement at hearing her "great-great-great grandfather's voice, speaking directly across two centuries! The actual phrases he used! ... [his] words, [his] tone!" (23). Later, in referring to other historical novels – works of fiction – she admits that she can "guess the limitations of these sources" (202). She notes that dialogue was likely to have been tidied, refined, and generally textualised. Yet she never exhibits this same cynicism towards the accuracy of her own primary sources, such as the court transcripts. These, instead, are documents to be revered for their truth, for their ability to carry speech from the lips of a convict in the 1800s to the ears of a writer almost two hundred years later. Through these encounters, Kate demonstrates a solid belief in the capacity of text to communicate, unambiguously and without bias, between two individuals separated by any amount of distance, time, or experience.

In relying unconditionally on her sources in this way, Kate denies herself, and her research, the credibility afforded by proper interrogation of such sources. Marc Bloch describes such archival sources and textual evidence as "witnesses" and notes that historians are aware that these witnesses "can lie or be mistaken" (90). He also asserts that the only way to find value in such documents is to approach them with sufficient scepticism that their fallibility may be recognised. Bloch notes that "even those texts or archaeological documents which seem the clearest and the most accommodating will speak only when they are properly questioned" (64). Similarly, White criticises nineteenth-century historians for believing that "facts ... speak for themselves" and for ignoring their own role in giving voice to those facts ("Fictions" 218). Clendinnen asserts that "[i]t is self-deluding, evasive nonsense to say that 'the sources' must be left 'to speak for themselves'" ("Fellow Sufferers"). She, too, suggests that the sources, or facts, must be encouraged and guided to speak, through the questioning and contextualising work of the researcher. In withholding this proper questioning and instead accepting the Old Bailey transcripts as facts with the capacity to speak, Kate limits the interpretive possibilities for the documents.

Kate's faith in the truth of the text remains unshakeable even in the face of her early frustrations in the research process. In her first attempts to expand the

family story of Wiseman, she acknowledges “the difficulty of establishing even the simplest fact” (38), noting that the documents she has located tell only partial stories. Yet she does not recognise the possibility that these partial stories may be unreliable as well as incomplete. Instead she clings to the reassuring notion of text as trustworthy, insisting that “[t]he transcript of the trial was a fact” (38).

This persistent naivety in Kate’s approach to research, and to textuality, is frustrating, and Grenville can be criticised for failing to address her process thoroughly and for failing to recognise a vast scholarship extant in the area of fictionalising history. This criticism is particularly justified in the face of her public claims for the validity of the historical “truths” in *The Secret River*. An example of these earnest claims can be seen in Grenville’s 2006 address to the Sydney Institute, where she vigorously defended her text as an experience allowing readers to “understand what that moment of our past was really like” (“Secret River – Secret History” 152-53). Yet her cursory engagements with the “difficulty of establishing ... fact” in *Searching for the Secret River* seem to set themselves up as a vindication, admittedly a frail one, of her own debt to the historical archive. The authorial paratexts to *The Secret River*, then, demonstrate a degree of ambivalence in their respect for the authority of textual documents. This ambivalence becomes more intriguing when read beside *The Secret River*’s representations of these ideas, and of the related ideas of literacy and orality.

For William Thornhill in *The Secret River*, the power of storytelling is rarely questioned. In the prologue, Thornhill’s only comfort during the sea journey to the colony is found in “telling over the bends of his own Thames” (4). Already we understand that narrativising his experiences – particularly his connection to place – is, for Thornhill, a way of reassuring himself and asserting his right to exist in a given space. This can be observed in the scenes of his early life in London, too. For example, the first time he is caught stealing at the wharves, “William Thornhill ha[s] his story ready” and the words of the story feel, to the confident young fabricator, “no lie” (22-23). Once he meets Sal, who will eventually become his wife, they share this fondness for telling and re-telling their own lives, and their life together. This expands towards re-tellings of their futures as well as their past (38, 123). In fact, the power of narrative – especially in the story Sal constructs for him – is what gives Thornhill the confidence to

survive in Newgate prison after his conviction for theft, and to face the court (60-65). This notion of the redeeming power of a constructed narrative is persistent throughout *The Secret River*, recurring at all the novel's most significant moments. For example, on his way to participate in the massacre of Aborigines at Blackwood's camp, Thornhill reassures himself that after the event, in their defence, the group of settlers will "have their story ready" (301). He rehearses the constructed and false details, pulling about him a security blanket of narrative in order to banish the trepidation he feels at what he is about to do. A reliance on this comfort of false truths permeates the final section of the novel also, as we see how all of the Thornhills' narratives have begun to fail them; as Thornhill has earlier observed, there is "a kind of loneliness to telling a story too well" (198). To the very last, Thornhill fights to resist this loneliness which is manifest in his ultimate dissatisfaction at the novel's conclusion. He re-invents himself as "an old colonialist," a known euphemism for "*old lag*," and appropriates a cleaner convict history than his own: a "well-made story, every corner of its construction neatly finished" (321). Although this adopted identity is only a poorly palimpsestic re-writing, Thornhill still finds it consoling.

But while Thornhill finds oral narratives comforting, perhaps it is their malleability which reassures him, because he is not at ease with the more immutable narratives of the written word. This is exemplified when Sal teaches the young William to write (33-35). Thornhill only agrees to these lessons because of his love for Sal – personally, he thinks that "[m]arks on paper ... sap the power of the mind" (33). His lessons with Sal are uncomfortable, distressing, and difficult, and this foreshadows the later symbolism of the written word (as well as commenting on the Thornhills' relationship). When Thornhill's story to the court fails to gain him a reprieve, for example, and he is condemned to death, Sal decides that their faith in narrative should not be diminished; on the contrary, they must now harness the full potential of narrative, and turn to the written word. To do this, they need to enlist the help of one more advanced in the skills of the written word, a notorious fellow prisoner known as the "*creeping Jesus*" who, for a price, will write "begging letter[s]" (67). This "creeping cripple" (67) embodies Thornhill's conflicted belief in the power and the symbolic meaning of literacy. While the underground scribe and his words literally hold the power of salvation

for Thornhill, the physical representation of this power is the cripple himself: a man whose ability to write appears intimately connected to his own physical deformation. For Thornhill, then, the potential of the written word is enormous but equivocal, as its effects are both miraculous and perilous. This ambiguity is reinforced by Thornhill's colonial experience, when again he is forced to seek the assistance of one who possesses the skills of literacy, this time to write a petition for a full pardon. Here, the scribe is known as "a broken-down gentleman far gone in rum" with "a fine phrase and ... a good hand" who can be bribed to write letters if plied with alcohol, but the balance between sobriety and alcoholic confidence is a delicate one (113). Once again we see the mysterious power of literacy through Thornhill's eyes; while it might save one's life, the ability to write also has the power to physically destroy those who use it.

The composite narrative is able to navigate this ambivalent relationship with text and literacy. In her journey towards belonging, Kate struggles with a dependence on textual documentation and with a faith which is destined to blind her to the dangers of the written word, specifically the dangers inherent for a historical novelist in an unquestioning acceptance of the authority of text. In Thornhill's journey of belonging, these dangers are manifest in the physical condition of the characters who are able to write. Their physical weaknesses and the damaged physical bodies serve as a warning which speaks across the liminal space between text and paratext, a reminder that the written word is as dangerous as it is attractive.

In her search for belonging, through Wiseman and her "spot on the planet" (28), Kate faces not only the philosophical challenges of managing textual documents, but also the physical and emotional challenges of confronting issues of personal, familial, and cultural identity. These are matters with which she has apparently never engaged, and an early encounter in *Searching for the Secret River* highlights their importance. The encounter, with fellow Australian writer Melissa Lucashenko, is described by Kate as the first time she has "knowingly" had a "sit-down conversation with an Aboriginal person" (27). Interestingly, it takes a visit to London – away from the country that is home to them both – for the two to meet (other than fleetingly at literary festivals), let alone to discuss their experiences of Australianness. For Lucashenko, importantly, her

Australianness is strongly grounded in her identity as an Aboriginal woman, despite the fact that she also acknowledges her Ukrainian heritage. Grenville presents this meeting as a pivotal one in the genesis of *The Secret River*. Although Kate is already searching for Wiseman's story and for evidence of his life, the search has so far been an almost idle one, a journey of curiosity. Even the fact that she was able to follow him to London "by a stroke of extraordinary luck" implies that Kate has not, as yet, any serious plan behind this search, and that even though she has "hungered to find out who he was" she is not yet committed to any form of directed research into his life (25). But when, by another mere coincidence, she meets Lucashenko at a cafe in London, something shifts. Lucashenko asks Kate where her family is from: a question which, Kate reflects, should be "the simplest question in the world" (28). Perhaps the question is simple, but Kate finds the answer impossible.

At this moment, Kate discovers a gaping absence in her sense of self, in her sense of worth as an Australian, as she realises that she has "no answer" to the question (28). Instead she nurses an unexpectedly "savage envy" (28) for the ease she attributes to Lucashenko, and to the casual English diners around them, to be able to lay a hand on a piece of earth and say with absolute certainty, "*this is where I'm from*" (28). She longs for the "rightful" belonging Taylor describes (15), and which exists only as a mythical condition inscribed on others' existence. The savage, but naive, envy Kate discovers at this moment is sufficient to feed her entire narrative, and it is also what feeds her character William Thornhill. It is a motivating longing to find a mutual experience of belonging with a piece of earth, with a place somewhere on a map.

Grenville appears to employ the word "savage" as though it were unproblematic, and as though it expressed only the intensity of her jealousy and nothing more. It is, of course, a heavily loaded descriptor, simultaneously layered both with disturbing overtones of violence, and of colonial and postcolonial perceptions of indigeneity. At its most innocent, a careless use of the word might conjure notions of an assumed Indigenous alliance with nature and wildness.⁴ But

⁴ For a problematisation of the dichotomy between civilisation and the "noble savage" see Terry Goldie's *Fear and Temptation*. The chapter entitled "The Natural" provides a detailed overview of the history of, and issues surrounding, representations of the Indigenous "natural." Goldie engages in a discussion of the implications of the literary

even such a connotation has the effect of “undermin[ing] the complexity of the relationship of Aboriginal people to their land,” as Lynette Russell notes (29). In this instance, Grenville’s use of the word indicates Kate’s peculiar assumption that Lucashenko, through her Indigenous subjectivity, has access to a more natural and simple sense of belonging in postcolonial Australia than Kate herself does as a non-Indigenous Australian. In addition, the word – placed, as it is, beside the word “envy” – has the effect of revealing a sense of violence in Kate’s interaction with Lucashenko, and with an Indigenous relationship to land. Fiona Nicoll alludes to the impossibility of such a linguistic slip being innocuous, and acknowledges that in fact this envy is potentially quite damaging. She powerfully describes the “destructive effects of a collective white ambition not only to be at home in this place but also to determine the meaning and experience of ‘home’ for Indigenous Australians” (26). The word “destructive” here implies the dangers implicit in an envy like Kate’s, where such a “savage” longing for a connection to land can necessarily redefine and displace those who already maintain such a connection.

Read’s conversations in *Belonging* reveal a similar violent envy, as well as a tangling of two grammatical forms of the word “belonging”: the abstract noun form which applies to Kate’s journey, and the verbal noun form which is relevant in Thornhill’s journey. Read, as a non-Indigenous writer, attempts to explore how non-Indigenous Australians should manage their relationships with the land, and finds the terms “belonging” and “dispossession” problematic, perhaps even irresolvably so. While Read believes that non-Indigenous Australians may be able to “intellectually” theorise a relationship with the land, he also claims an overwhelming feeling that “*emotionally* the land is ours and our love for it seals the union” (16, emphasis added). Here, he echoes the intimate longing for the Australian land that William Thornhill experiences throughout *The Secret River*, invoking the concrete noun sense of the word “belonging,” which implies an ownership rather than membership.

Although sections of *Belonging* might speak to Grenville’s text in terms of informing a non-Indigenous reading of land and of relationships with place,

notion of the natural, and the chapter is supported densely with close readings.

Read's arguments are often naive and limited.⁵ Ken Gelder has observed this in a review of the text which concludes that Read fails to engage in an examination of the "contemporary postcolonial predicament," instead directing his attention to a somewhat misguided "poetics of 'deep belonging' to country." This interrogation of belonging to country yields a statement which could almost have come from Thornhill at the conclusion of his narrative: "I belong but I do not belong; I seek a solemn union with my country and my land but not through Aboriginality; I understand our history but it brings me no relief" (Read 21). Thornhill's awareness of his own situation is not this explicit, but the sentence could be read as a subtext to the dissatisfaction with which *The Secret River* concludes. This dissatisfaction can be associated with a failure to achieve a complete sense of belonging – a failure due partially to Thornhill's ambivalence about his complicity with the attempted local genocide of the Aborigines – and returns to the discussion of a violent envy towards those who appear to have the "natural" privilege of belonging.

The "savage envy" quickly becomes, for Kate in *Searching for the Secret River*, if not for Thornhill in *The Secret River*, a savage longing: a longing so desperate as to appear violent, and with the power to drive Kate's research and her eventual writing of *The Secret River*. This longing is intensified during Kate's meeting with Lucashenko when the latter questions a euphemistic expression Kate rehearses from her oral histories. Kate glibly uses the phrase "took up land," a Grenville family idiom which collocates with any mention of Wiseman settling land on the Hawkesbury (28). Lucashenko severs the phrase, leaving Kate with only the first word, and the less comfortable alternative that Wiseman in fact *took* the land. Kate, apparently, has never considered the component words in the phrase, nor their corresponding implications. This belated discovery facilitates for Kate a flood of possibilities for alternate readings of her family history. Astonishingly, Kate now wonders, for the first time, who or what Wiseman took

⁵ Read's book was released several years prior to an article by Anita Heiss which might have offered some guidance on the complexities of non-Indigenous writings about Indigenous concerns. Heiss does not attempt to provide definitive guidelines for non-Indigenous writers, but does present a broad survey of opinions and suggestions from Indigenous writers, as well as non-Indigenous writers' responses. Her article is commendable not for prescribing solutions, but for openly discussing the challenges faced by writers negotiating these potentially sensitive areas.

the land *from*. This new understanding that a piece of land might always already belong *to* someone is one that unsettles Kate, and will eventually unsettle Thornhill also. For the first – and not the last – time, the longing for belonging becomes threatened by the tangling issues of possession, rights, and even competition.⁶

Here we can begin to feel the complicating influence of postcolonial subjectivity on Kate's perceptions of land and belonging. As Lawson powerfully elucidates, "[e]mpty land can be settled, but occupied land can only be invaded" ("Postcolonial Theory" 25). For Kate, then, the process of finding a place of belonging must be one of either textually emptying the land in order to settle it with her genealogical history and belonging, or reaching an acceptance that part of Wiseman's "settlement" history is an invasion history. The disquieting moment when Lucashenko questions the phrase "took up" is the moment when Kate first recognises these two alternatives. The realisation that she must either erase an Indigenous history or acknowledge an invasion history, in order to fulfil her longing for belonging, is one which motivates the rest of the journey. Kate sets out to discover whether Wiseman "took up" or "took" land, and in doing so, she hopes to learn how her own relationship to that land might be dictated.

In Lawson's argument, the impossibility of settling on land without dispossessing Indigenous peoples is highly politicised, and is dissected particularly with reference to the dissolution of the *terra nullius* legal precedent in 1992 ("Postcolonial Theory" 25). At the same time, this notion of erasing existing inscriptions on place and space is analysed in the context of literary and textual representations, and Lawson raises the "endlessly problematic double inscription ... of authority and authenticity" (25). Lawson states that "the settler subject translat[es] his (but rarely her) desire for the Indigene and the land into a desire for Native authenticity ... the settler mimics, appropriates, and desires the

⁶ Kate's realisation recalls a post-Mabo re-conceptualisation of pre-colonial Australia. Although she does not discuss this subtextual allusion, Kate's new figuring of the familiar phrase "took up" is reminiscent of a postcolonial refiguring of the notion of "settlement" without the justifying *terra nullius* doctrine, and in both cases the new understanding is potentially fraught with the interferences of cultural insensitivity and a resentment based on a sense of settler anxiety and guilt. For further discussion of the conceptual and academic aftermath of overturning the *terra nullius* doctrine, see Haydie Gooder and Jane M. Jacobs; Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson; and Lawson ("Postcolonial Theory").

authority of the Indigene” (26). Lawson does not expand his comment on the gendered nature of longings for land in this context, but elsewhere embarks on a discussion of miscegenation as a trope of incorporation in settler narratives (“Anxious Proximities” 1220). This particular form of “desire for indigenized identity, spirituality, and the land” (1220) is problematic in the context of an abstracted female settler narrative like Kate’s.

Lawson’s argument on gender complicates an interpretation of Kate’s search for belonging because her desire cannot easily be read as one for an authentic and indigenised belonging, according to his discussion of these tropes. Nor does Terry Goldie’s *Fear and Temptation*, to which Lawson refers his reader, offer much guidance on how to read female desires for belonging to Australian land. Rather, Goldie suggests that “the basic *view* of the indigene as sexual figure is an extension of the masculinist reification of the Other,” hinting that it is the symbolic gendering of the Indigene which is worthy of attention in postcolonial writings, more than the nominal gender of the author of, or even characters in, the work (65). Goldie dedicates a chapter to the investigation of sexuality in textual relationships between “white” and Indigene. The chapter, however, refers largely to the direct representations of miscegenation, and is less concerned than Lawson’s argument with symbolism. There is one portrayal in *The Secret River* of a violent interracial sexual relationship, between Thornhill’s fellow settlers Sagitty and Smasher and an Indigenous woman to whom Sagitty refers euphemistically as “[b]lack velvet” (252). Thornhill’s reaction to this relationship is telling: “[f]or a terrible vivid instant, a scene lit by lightning, Thornhill imagined himself taking the woman” (252). After implicating himself hypothetically in this act of sexual colonisation, he is immediately “seized with a desperation to get away” (252) and he later feels himself tainted with “the evil of it” (253), attempting to “put the picture ... away in some part of his memory where he [does] not have to see it” (255). But this instance of the guilt of colonial complicity with a literal act of rape is secondary to Thornhill’s ongoing and symbolically sexualised relationship with the land, and to Kate’s parallel experience of a desire for land in *Searching for the Secret River*.

Although it does not carry the same sexual connotations as Thornhill’s relationship with land, Kate’s experience should not be read as simply an

uncomplicated individual and personal desire for belonging. As Helen Tiffin notes, women writers in colonial countries struggle with their “ambivalent positions within their own systems of colonialist oppression” and, further, this complicates their identification with, and understanding of, “their role as perpetrator-victims” (377). This struggle applies not just to colonial and postcolonial race relations but to relationships with land also, as land is implicitly referenced in any discussion of colonial settlement. Kate, an incarnation of Grenville, occupies the contested autobiographical space of both character and author in the composite narrative of *The Secret River* and *Searching for the Secret River*, negotiating her position as “perpetrator-victim” in this colonial and postcolonial narrative. Kay Schaffer explores these difficulties of defining the position of colonising women when she notes that “women writers reiterate masculine constructions in their representation of the feminine. One might say that the fiction by women writers supports, even as it seems to challenge, the codes of national identity” (107).

The complexities of analysing narratives as expressions of a female colonising position offer a caution against reading Grenville’s construction of Kate as a specifically “female” experience of postcolonial anxiety. Instead, Kate’s identity within the composite narrative is, like Thornhill’s, that of a settler-invader. As Schaffer states, “[b]oth men and women ... are implicated in the naming of the land as a feminine other” (111). Kate does not represent one component of a gender binary, but one of a binary of indigeneity. Her relationship with a colonised country, therefore, can be read with the same nuances of miscegenation as Thornhill’s might be. As Jane M. Jacobs acknowledges in her argument about relationships between feminism, environmentalism, and settler cultures, “the land ‘Australia’ [is] feminized in the name of colonization and exploitation” and the Indigenous inhabitants are often “conveniently consigned to that feminized nature” (176). Kate’s role is gendered male in this formulation, when settlement – as well as a postcolonial desire for belonging – is read as an act of miscegenation of both land and inhabitants.

The composite reading sanctions an elaboration on a gendered reading of Kate as a miscegenating settler, by providing a second narrative voice and experience. *The Secret River* contributes to *Searching for the Secret River* the

alternative perspective of William Thornhill's male voice. This is not to devalue a female voice, nor to suggest that Kate's narration cannot stimulate a sophisticated examination of the anxieties of postcolonial longings. Rather, it should be noted that Thornhill's "male" voice is enacted and filtered through the already-gendered voice of Grenville as female author. Thornhill and Kate, then, become divergent narrative devices through which Grenville is able to rehearse differing depictions of a gendered colonisation experience. Yet at the same time the coexistence of Thornhill's and Kate's voices lessens the importance of either the author or character's individual gender, emphasising instead a reading of the composite narrative as a gendered rewriting of the colonisation process. Not only does it present a concrete geographical longing for place, but Thornhill's experience lends strength to an exploration employing Lawson's complex analysis of (post)colonial settler anxieties. These anxieties are categorised into rich and almost archetypal tropes, such as incorporation ("Anxious Proximities" 1220) and asymptosis (1221), which can be read in *The Secret River* and *Searching for the Secret River* as the notion of belonging is addressed from multiple perspectives.

In *The Secret River*, Thornhill's journey tends to be associated with the verbal noun form of the word belonging. Here, the denotation of belonging becomes that of the invariable plural noun, belongings. While Thornhill's search is not, essentially, for the material possessions usually described by the word belongings, it is this sense and connotation of the word which is most appropriate in *The Secret River*. Here, the word carries the weight of ownership, value, and even covetousness, each of which enter into Thornhill's experience of a desire for belonging.

Thornhill's search holds little of Kate's concern for family heritage and lineage, although on occasion he and Sal do spend considerable hours reconstructing their past, with varying degrees of veracity. In stark contrast, Thornhill's obsession is with the present and with the future. Where Kate has a "hunger" for land to accommodate her past (24), Thornhill hungers for land to house his future. His desire to own land on the Hawkesbury has nothing at all to do with finding his place in his family and his history, and everything to do with creating a firm place for himself and for his family to come. He even gives his first child (Willie) his own name. This is a clear indication that he intends to

people the world with more Williams, and to ensure his own survival and the continued habitation of his own place in both space and history. His rehearsal of his own name is not, here, an appeal to the past, but rather a means to destabilise his history, reclaiming the past on his own terms and with an intention of securing the future. The origins for this craving can be traced to his childhood when, surrounded by other William Thornhills (cousins, uncles, even a deceased older brother), he aches for individuality and seeks it by subverting the curse of profusion. He vows to make the most of his multiplicity: “*William Thornhills will fill up the whole world,*” he rails (11).

The verbal noun form of belonging, like the abstract noun form, also carries connotations of membership although, as the *OED* indicates, the membership or relationship here differs subtly. When using the verb form, belonging commonly takes an adverb or preposition. In *Searching for the Secret River*, this construction serves to highlight the fact that Kate is seeking her place with relationship to others: both individuals and groups. But in *The Secret River*, Thornhill’s search is more for a personal sense of power which, although it does necessarily depend on his surroundings (over which he hopes to exert this power), is expressed with less reference to these external contexts. For Thornhill’s experience, then, it is more appropriate to consider the verbal noun form, which is less strict about taking an adverb or preposition, and therefore less focused on defining the role of the Other in this relationship.

Thornhill’s yearning for belonging, unlike Kate’s, is one which manifests itself early in his life. Where Kate embarks on her search as an adult, the young William Thornhill is already aware of a longing for land while he is still a child in the slums of London. The opening of *The Secret River* informs us firmly that poverty does not just mean squalor, disease, and hunger for William and the Thornhills. It also means that nothing has ever belonged to them. For William, not only is physical hunger “a fact of life” (11), but equally a desire for belonging (in both senses of the word) is ever-present, manifesting itself most fully at the moment when he falls in love with a piece of land on the Hawkesbury River many years later. From the very beginning of young William’s story, this desire for place is inextricably entangled with a desire for Sal Middleton, his childhood sweetheart and, later, wife. William longs, very early, not simply to experience

but to *belong* to a better life than his own; this is manifest in his fascination with the Middletons' home in the Borough.

Although Sal's family is only a little better off than William's, she enjoys the benefit of the full attention of her parents. William, at age ten, is already one of six Thornhill children (two more will follow), and inhabits a world "crowded with other William Thornhills," feeling himself "no more than a shadow" (11). Sal, conversely, is an only child, and "the only shadow in her life" is the graveyard filled with stillborn younger siblings (17). William is instantly enthralled by Sal, and feels connected to her. She calls him "Will," a nickname he loves: "[h]is name had been used by so many others that it was stale with handling, but Will was his alone" (19). Just to think of Sal makes William feel "warmed from the inside" (19). Clearly, his longing for Sal is integrated with the only other things for which he has longed in his short life – the comforts of food, and of warmth. Sal is able to fulfil these physical needs in him. Only a page after the young Sal's introduction, the depth of William's cravings, for both comfort and place, are exposed. More importantly, the depth of the relationship between these two desires becomes apparent:

It was easy to wish to belong in this house, number 31, Swan Lane. Even the name of the street was sweet. [William] could imagine how he would grow into himself in the warmth of such a home. It was not just the generous slab of bread, spread with good tasty dripping: it was the feeling of having a place. Swan Lane and the rooms within it were part of Sal's very being, he could see, in a way no place had ever been part of his. (17-18)

It is not only the certainty of victuals for which William envies Sal, but the deeper and more intangible privilege of "having a place." William believes that this sense of belonging would nourish him on an emotional and philosophical level so that he might somehow "grow into himself"; the desire for belonging is so primal and vital that it underlies his very sense of self, just as Kate's sense of belonging feeds her sense of self and her national identity. Somehow, having a place to which he might belong – a place which would, equally, belong to him – would allow William to achieve a complete expression of his individuality, and his identity.

Together, Sal and William frequent a "patch of waste ground at Rotherhithe" that they come to think of "as their own" (18), and his feelings of

peace and comfort in this place further reinforce his belief that belonging and place are closely linked with a deeply personal sense of fulfilment. Both the desire for Sal and the desire for land can be read as journeys towards intimacy: one physical, the other primarily symbolic. This alignment of the two desires justifies a gendered reading, after Lawson's arguments, of the experience of longing in the composite narrative. While Kate's desire may be read as primarily geographical, William's may be read as a confused sexual yearning, as his longings for Sal and for the land are never completely disentangled. His journey towards belonging (in both denotations) with Sal parallels his journey towards belonging (again, in both denotations) with land.

The first of these journeys, the marital relationship, begins very gently. In the prologue section, "Strangers," we first meet Sal as Thornhill's wife, "sleeping sweet and peaceful against him, her hand ... entwined in his" (3). "Sweet" is perhaps the word most frequently used in connection with Sal; from the beginning, even the name of the street where Sal lives is sweet (17). When she teaches William to write, he is preoccupied with her "sweet flowery fragrance" (34); when she reads to him, even in the gloom of a Borough graveyard, her voice is "especially sweet ... around the knots of words" (36). When they first reach Thornhill's Point, he observes "that sweet mouth of hers holding itself bravely" (137). Later, in their temporary tent, she falls asleep against him, "her weight sweet as a child's" (159). Later still, when she is in danger of dying of milk fever, Thornhill watches "[t]hat sweet worn face of hers" which is the "only soft thing in his life" (183). And finally, at the end of their story, even when she is tired and resigned to life in the colony, he still loves the way she "smile[s] at him from that sweet mouth" (324).

The beginnings of Thornhill's relationship with the land, too, are characterised by a gentle, innocent affection, although it quickly becomes more conflicted. When he first sees the land to which he will eventually lay claim, Thornhill sees it as a "sweet place" which is "just the shape of his own thumb" (106). His summation of the land as "sweet" explicitly indicates that he is experiencing an intimate longing for the land, much like the longing he encounters in his relationship with Sal. He also conceptualises the land in the shape of a body, again suggesting a physical intimacy, as well as the desire to

make this unfamiliar wilderness both familiar and tame. To further complicate this desire, the shape Thornhill is inscribing onto the land is not simply that of a human body part, but specifically a part of his *own* body. This hints at a complex hope for control as well as for familiarity and belonging. What Thornhill feels is “a chaos ... a confusion of wanting” (106), and suddenly his desire for the land is no longer gentle and innocent. Instead it has become a “piercing hunger ... to own [the land]” (106). Much like the physical hunger he experienced in his childhood, his longing here is physical, powerful, even painful. He is overwhelmed by, almost consumed by, this “wanting,” of which “[n]o one ha[s] ever spoken” to him before; he has never imagined “how a man might fall in love with a piece of ground” (106).

Lawson’s exploration of colonial anxiety supports a reading of this “confusion of wanting” as a colonising experience. Lawson reveals how settler tropes might examine the particular form of anxiety which he identifies as a tension between “desire and identification on the one hand and projection and othering ... on the other” (“Anxious Proximities” 1218). Thornhill’s confused longing for the land, and the way in which he reads this land – as both sweet and familiar, while at this point in the narrative far from attainable – can be seen as an expression of the anxiety Lawson discusses. While Thornhill demonstrates his desire for and identification with the land, reading it as both sweet and in the shape of his own body, at the same time there is an “othering” of the land which constitutes his confusion. While Lawson refers particularly to the “othering” as a “cultural boundary marking” (1218), with an implied reference to the human Indigene, the term can be extended in this case to Thornhill’s defamiliarisation of the land itself.

The othering of land in *The Secret River* takes place through two channels. The first is the silence that overtakes Thornhill after he first sees, and feels a desperate hunger for, the land. He immediately hides his desire, “turn[ing] away with no interest on his face” (106). When he returns from his excursion on the river, he describes for Sal the area surrounding the point, but when it comes to describing the land itself, he can only sketch it with a stick in the dirt, because the place is “a dream that might shrivel if put into words” (108). Despite, or perhaps because of, his intense longing for the land, Thornhill forces himself to keep this

land a “secret dream” (116). He continues to feel that the land is “too frail to be exposed to the air in anything as blunt as words ... hardly to be thought of, even in the privacy of his own mind” (106).

Thornhill’s confusion and discomfort become even more troubled at this point of unwillingness, or inability, to articulate his longing. Here, he enters into the fraught territory of literacy, textuality, narrative, and orality which is so ambivalent symbolically within the composite narrative. At this particular moment, the difficulty is deepened through the confusion of Indigenous orality and permission to speak. As Goldie suggests, “the split between literate and non-literate is often used as the defining point for an absolute division between white self and indigene Other” (*Fear* 107). Thornhill’s inability to speak of his longing, and yet his willingness to *inscribe* it by sketching the longed-for piece of land, indicates that his own relationship with narrative here is conflicted. While he is unable or unwilling to linguistically describe either his longing or the land (the site of his longing), he is able to approximate the process of writing, by inscribing a pictorial description of his longing onto the soil at his feet. Here, the land, also silenced and thus aligned with a non-literate Indigene, becomes a kind of *tabula rasa* for his non-linguistic inscription. It is not by coincidence that Thornhill etches a cartography of his desires literally onto the land where he currently belongs, inscribing his longing for one piece of land onto another piece of land, one within his reach. Nor is it a coincidence that when he eventually claims the land for himself, he again makes a physical “mark over the face of the land,” inscribing his authority over, and this time his perceived ownership of, the land (134).

In refiguring him as non-literate during his pivotal moments of connection with the land, Grenville not only returns Thornhill to his early years in London, prior to Sal’s teaching, when his life was awash with longings (for Sal, for a place to belong to, for food and physical comforts), reminding us that these desires are a constant driving force, but she also blurs Thornhill’s sense of identity. At this point, literacy, Goldie’s defining distinction between white self and Indigenous Other, is denied Thornhill, although he still commands the power of inscription. It should be noted that Thornhill is not merely non-literate here; he is also denied orality. This silencing bears an uncanny resemblance to the one Kate conducts

when she silences *The Secret River*'s Indigenous voices. She describes her decision, late in her drafting process, to “get rid of all the Aboriginal dialogue” (*Searching* 198). She decides that she does not have the right to “enter the Darug consciousness” and that, disturbingly, “a hollow in the book, a space of difference ... would be more eloquent than any words [she] might invent to explain it” (199).

Despite this decision, there is one significant scene in which Grenville has retained direct speech for one of the Indigenous characters: Long Jack, one of the few survivors of the massacre at Blackwood's camp. In the final pages of the novel, Thornhill, for the first time, hears Jack speaking English (*The Secret River* 329). The symbolism is blatant but fraught. When Thornhill tries to entice him up to the house for some “*good bloody tucker*,” Jack speaks only a few words, and they are words of anaemic resistance against European colonisation: “[*n*]o” and “[*t*]his me, he said. *My place*,” and finally, “*sit down hereabouts*” (329). The words' already feeble authority is undermined by the fact that in order to communicate at all, Jack is forced to speak to Thornhill – a synecdochic representative of the colonial enterprise – in the language of the colonisers. This image is complicated by a strange inversion of the novel's recurring imagery regarding literacy and physicality, and a conflation of this with notions of orality and land. Where literacy is elsewhere accompanied by physical disability and disfigurement, here Jack – who is physically and mentally scarred from a gunshot to the head during the attack at Blackwood's camp – becomes orally literate for the first time in the novel. The association between physical disempowerment and literary empowerment is refigured here as an association between physical damage and a conflicted oral empowerment. Until he was wounded, Jack's “literacy” was intact and he was able to communicate easily in his own language. But it is not until his physical disfigurement that his literacy is accessible both to Thornhill and to us as readers, so that physical damage becomes allied with the possibility of communication in a colonising language. This contradicts the earlier instances, such as the “creeping Jesus” in Newgate, who must sacrifice physical control in order to master the power of inscription. In Jack's case, his physical damage symbolically forces a sacrifice of his existing literacy.

Although the symbolism for Jack's character is associated with oral instead of written communication, it still contributes to the novel's assumptions regarding

the value of the literacy and the written word, because in attempting to communicate with Thornhill, Jack accompanies his words with a physical inscription on the soil in front of him. In his bonding of words to soil, Jack “smooth[s]” and “caress[es]” the land (329), perhaps in an unconscious attempt at soothing and at wiping away the inscriptions Thornhill made when he claimed the land for himself. Yet this, too, is a tangled representation of land, belonging, orality, inscription, and body. While Jack speaks in a tongue which is not his own, and while his body bears the scars of the colonisers, he is attempting to soothe the land to which he still belongs, and the impact on Thornhill is that he feels an angry “pang” of “emptiness” (329) which recalls Kate’s savage envy of Lucashenko’s sense of belonging. Finally, the image is complicated by the fact that as Jack smooths the land, it leaves “a patch like the scar on his head,” reminding us that the scarring physical inscriptions on both body and land are not simply made by settler on Indigene, but are records of conflicting struggles for belonging and ownership.

In contrast to this moment of confused relation between Indigene, land, and orality in *The Secret River*, when Kate identifies her decision to amputate the Indigenous dialogue from her novel, she finds that she has inadvertently aligned the Indigenous people with the land, and that her own textualisation has led her to believe “the country *was* the people” (199). This is an example of the problematic simplification of indigeneity which Russell identifies. For Kate, the simplification and silencing of both land and inhabitants is linked to her sense of incapacity when faced with appropriating the Indigene Other. For Thornhill, his silencing occurs when he is faced with the anxiety of othering the site of his longing. As Goldie suggests, “[o]rality becomes the land” (*Fear* 126) and here, for Thornhill, both orality and land are out of reach. The inability to speak of the land works simultaneously to draw the longing more intimately into Thornhill’s consciousness, and to create a barrier, a divide, an “othering”; the longing is inexpressible and therefore inaccessible, and the land is pushed further away from Thornhill. This illustrates the tension Lawson describes between a familiarising process of identification and longing, and an unsettling process of distancing and othering.

The second form of othering of land in *The Secret River* takes place through Thornhill's fear of the land, once they finally settle on Thornhill's Point. He fears the unfamiliar native flora and fauna – for example, the bird with a “cruel ... curved beak ... with a hook at the end that could tear flesh” (134). Even more significantly, he is not at ease with the land itself, where there is “nothing a man [can] recognise as human” (142), which induces a fear in the whole Thornhill family. Sal, particularly, is uncomfortable, and Thornhill again becomes distanced from the land, as he sees that “[t]hrough her eyes this place [is] merely the material from which the world was made, not the world itself” (136). On their first night on Thornhill's Point, once the sun sets, the land is full of “secretive noises,” and the fire they build against the cold night makes the Thornhills “helpless creatures,” reminding them that beyond the glow of the fire, the land is unknown and powerful (138). The trees, the sounds of the insects, and the darkness are all threatening in their unfamiliarity. As he goes to sleep, Thornhill clings to an empty mantra of reassurance, repeating to himself, “[m]y own,” and “[m]y place. Thornhill's place,” as though the words might have some performative effect, “[b]ut the wind in the leaves up on the ridge [is] saying something else entirely” (139).

There is a conflict here between Thornhill's longing and the problematic possibility of ever belonging to, or owning, this teasingly unattainable land. While he experiences an intense emotional connection to the land, he also recognises the incongruity of this, thereby creating for himself an experience of what Lawson describes as settler anxiety. Of the settler narrative tropes Lawson identifies, “asymptosis” comes nearest to describing Thornhill's experience here, as he inducts himself into a situation where, as a colonial settler, his longing for indigeneity can never be reached, but still it “must be approached, even appropriated” (“Anxious Proximities” 1221). Figuring the land in the shape of his own thumb represents this appropriation, as Thornhill attempts to make the unfamiliar land familiar. However, this symbolism is complicated by Thornhill's unreliability as a narrator. Thornhill maps the land onto the shape of his own body, “the only thing he ha[s] ever had power over” (119). But while he feels that his body is under his control, in fact throughout *The Secret River*, particularly in the early sections, we see how severely Thornhill's most basic personal and

physical liberties are assailed. The young William's control over his body is erratic at best; when rowing he is "master of himself" and wins races (34), but when he lets Sal teach him to write, it is she who becomes (for the first, but not the last, time) his "master," and he finds his own hands "maddening, pernicky, unnatural" (34) and his efforts "shameful" (35). This is also a reflection on the conflicted value of literacy within the composite narrative, and of the battle between the intellectual privileges of inscription and the command of the corporeal body. Later, he is incarcerated, "packed tight in stone cells" with the other prisoners, with the "soft hopeful part of him ... hardening over" (59). Soon after, he is condemned to die – the definitive loss of bodily control – and in his cell with "nothing ahead but death," he feels "stripped of everything" (66).

It is Sal who becomes responsible at this point for Thornhill's life. She "[takes] charge," devising a plan to save him from the gallows (60). Through the story she constructs for him to tell the court, it is Sal's intervention and literary acumen that literally save Thornhill's life, returning to him that illusory power over his own body in which he invests such value. With this intervention, Sal is ultimately responsible for their transportation to New South Wales. She is not only figuratively responsible, but legally also. On their arrival in the colony William Thornhill, convict, is assigned to Sal Thornhill, free settler, who will be his "master" while he serves out his term in the penal settlement. This is the second time that Sal becomes Thornhill's master, and it represents a subversion of a conventional power balance within a heterosexual relationship. Thornhill is not comfortable with the inversion of this binary when it first occurs, with Sal as his academic "master." While William clearly loves Sal and enjoys her desire to teach him skills beyond what might otherwise be available to him, his discomfort with the balance of power is tangible during this period, as his frustration nearly drives him to "[tip] the whole table over there and then" and flee "down to the river [Thames]," the place where he can be in control, and "any feat of strength or endurance would be within his grasp" (34).

Later, on the *Hawkesbury*, it is again a river which is the site of Thornhill's control. Indeed, it is the river which facilitates Thornhill's masculine entering of the land. When he finally travels to the place of his longing, transporting his family on the transparently symbolic ship the *Hope*, it is the river which enables

them to “wind their way into the very body of the land” (129). He navigates the *Hope*, in a highly sexualised “frenzy of longing ... forcing himself against the river” towards the banks of the land he has claimed (132), an action recalling the colonial gendering of settlement discussed by Jacobs. Interestingly, Goldie’s exploration of the idea of “the female indigene as emanation of the land” (*Fear* 73) does not extend to any examination of the inverse analogy which applies here, of the land as gendered – an analogy which, as Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra argue, is so familiar that it is sometimes “taken for granted” (164).

Thornhill’s arrival on the *Hope* completes an image of the land as a “calm clean space that invited feet to enter it,” which is introduced when he first sights the land (106). From this first glimpse of the land, he longs to “enter” it, to prove that the land belongs to him, in a disturbing but familiar mixed analogy of sexuality and colonialism; as Schaffer asserts, the Australian landscape is, “within a framework of imperial and colonial ideologies ... an object to be possessed, conquered and tamed” (23). Thornhill’s persistent longing for possession is one which can be expressed through both colonisation and penetration, and this is unsurprising when we recall that the young William appeared to confuse his longings for Sal and for place. It is Thornhill’s mastery of the water, then, which eventually allows him to exert some degree of ownership over the land although, as we have seen, this relationship is complicated by his othering of that land. But, despite the othering, there is a strong sense that Thornhill reasserts his power in a gender binary by becoming master of the river and, by extension, master of the land, when he is not able to become master of Sal, or even of himself.

While Thornhill is not always impotent in his relationship with Sal, the power balance in the Thornhill marriage certainly tips subtly (and sometimes not-so-subtly) at many junctures of their relationship. Sal’s softness and sweetness, of which Thornhill is so enamoured, never equate with a lack of power. On the contrary, she is “frail as a bubble, but stone-hard too” (290). Throughout their relationship, Thornhill is dependent on her for many strengths. Aside from her critical intervention to save Thornhill’s life back in London, there are many examples of Sal acting as the dominant partner in the marriage. Even before the colony, when both of her parents died in London, Sal “accepted the coming of the bailiff’s men better than [Thornhill] did” (45). Then, in their early days in Sydney,

she attempts, even under foreign conditions, to fulfil a traditional wifely role, taking short walks with Thornhill, “leaning on his arm like a lady” (89). But her performance of this role is certainly not for herself, rather it is “only to please him” (89). Moreover, the way she leans on him is as a lady “with her squire” (89), thus refusing to relinquish the symbolic power she has been assigned as Thornhill’s “master.” This power is not only symbolic; in the colony, although Sal is the one desperate to return home, it is she who in many cases acts as their catalyst for survival. It is Sal, for example, who is “canny at the inn-keeping game” (85), helping them earn money towards “their freedom” in the colony (86). It is Sal who devises the plan of buying the *Hope* so Thornhill can work the packet trade along the Hawkesbury to earn them more money (116), and Sal who solves simple practical challenges such as how to keep snakes out of the Thornhills’ hut (161).

Despite this deliberate attempt to overturn a traditional gender binary, however, *The Secret River* fails to realise the full narrative and theoretical potential of these reversals, instead leaving the moments as isolated incidents within the text, often even relegating them to the category of comic relief, as when Thornhill is formally assigned to Sal on their arrival into Sydney. With a “sardonic look” towards Sal, the man in charge of the newly landed convicts says to her: “[h]e might be the husband but you are the master now ... [h]elp yourself dearie, do what you fancy with him” (77). While this invitation to Sal might appear to disempower and emasculate Thornhill, because it is offered in a spirit of jest it carries little power, and nor is it pursued later in the text with any gravity.

Perhaps the only significant implication of Sal’s sporadic spells as Thornhill’s “master” is the fact that by devising and carrying out the plan to save Thornhill’s life, when he is in the cells in Newgate, Sal performs a symbolic consummation of their relationship which is much stronger than that provided by any emotional, physical, or sexual intimacy in their marriage. Their wedding night is alluded to only in the most matter-of-fact, efficient fashion, as are many other significant life events for Thornhill, from the death of his parents to the births of his children. The physical consummation of their marriage is described, with a circumspect and somewhat Victorian delicacy, as something which “hardly even seemed as decided as an action” (37). This strange passivity characterises much of

their relationship, a relationship which is, nonetheless, enduring. The recurring image of intimacy for Thornhill and Sal is one of gentle, parallel physical contact, such as when they sit “side by side ... wedged up close together” as children in the empty waste ground at Rotherhithe (18). This familiar contact between them is present at each important turning point in their relationship and in the narrative, such as on their first night in Sydney when Sal sits beside William near the fire, “her thigh stretched out alongside his” (81). Despite its passivity, this contact serves as a constant reminder of Thornhill’s longing for belonging which here is manifest in a human rather than a geographical relationship. At the end of their journey, when Thornhill has finally built a house on his land, and is living the gentlemanly life he dreamed of, he sits watching the land around him, and he and Sal return to the even, platonic habits of their first contact as she sits beside him and he observes the feeling of “her leg, warm, solid, a comfort against his” (331). However, this circularity holds a sense of disappointment rather than satisfied closure, and Thornhill observes a subtle “space of silence between husband and wife,” interrupting their habitual physical closeness (325). The text concludes with the same sense of sad “bafflement” that Thornhill sees in a commissioned portrait of himself; the novel, as much as the portrait, is “the sum of all the things that ha[ve] ever happened to him” (322), but the sum is as passive as the consummation of the Thornhill marriage. It is barely a destination, more a coincidence. It is an unfulfilling conclusion.

Again, Lawson’s theorising of the settler anxiety may provide a context in which to read this experience. Lawson suggests that

[t]he settler must stand just in front of, in the place of, but never in the body of, the indigene. The need, then, is to *displace* rather than *replace* the other because the other must remain to signify the boundary of the self, to confirm the subjectivity of the settler. (“Anxious Proximities” 1221)

This is a salient issue in examining the sense of bafflement and the lack of fulfilment which saturate both Thornhill and the reader at the conclusion of *The Secret River*. We leave Thornhill on his veranda “with a hollow feeling,” watching through a telescope, as he does every day, the cliffs beyond Thornhill’s Point, “scanning the trees and the silent rocks” (334). What Thornhill searches for is evidence of “them” – any surviving Aborigines who might be living somewhere

beyond his land (333). He sometimes thinks he sees one, but each time, he is forced to acknowledge that it is “no human, just another tree, the size and posture of a man,” and “[e]ach time, it [is] a new emptiness” (333).

Thornhill cannot understand why he feels unsatisfied. He has at last fulfilled the longing which has propelled him throughout the narrative. He is finally *Mr Thornhill*, a gentleman (if only an emancipist) with a villa and wealth enough to “make the world whatever way he want[s]” (316). The house is large and well-equipped – ostentatious, even – and he commissions a gentlemanly portrait to hang in the parlour (320-21). He can afford velvet and armchairs and shawls for Sal, and the servants they had dreamed of when lying together in a tent in Sydney. They still speak reverently of returning to that fiction of a place they call “Home” (316-17), which Grenville regularly accentuates with a capital letter. But it *is* a fiction, and William and Sal both know that Thornhill’s Point is where they will end their days. After Thornhill’s frenzy of longing to settle himself on the land, after he has fought to stay there, after he has finally obscured the memory of “some other, hardly recognisable William Thornhill” who once stole turnips from the farms near the Thames (315), there is the sense that he is quite discontented. Life as a fully pardoned landowner is “not quite what Thornhill had pictured” (315). The portrait in the parlour is actually his second; the first was a humiliating mockery, depicting him holding a book upside down (320). The second, equally, is a disappointment, reminding him that wealth and status cannot hide origins. This disappointment, interestingly, was foreshadowed on the very day that Thornhill gained his absolute pardon, as he gazed on the Governor’s portrait and wondered, in yet another expression of the longing for an authentic belonging, whether he himself could ever “appear as substantial as this gentleman, or did a man have to be born to it?”(114).

Thornhill has participated in an organised massacre, to which the emancipists resort in order to protect “their” land. Although he has never been comfortable with his neighbour Smasher’s ways of dealing with the “black savage[s]” (158), when it comes to his final decision about whether to join Smasher’s crusade to “[g]et rid of the blacks” (298), he expresses only minimal hesitation before choosing “his place” over the lives of the “blacks” who live nearby (299). This local genocide is seen as the ultimate solution and Thornhill

knows that Sal will not stay on Thornhill's Point until it happens, although he is careful to lie to her about the details when it *does* happen. In this way, a collapse of a gender binary into a colonisation binary is enacted, recalling Schaffer's discussions of the role of the woman writer in a colonial literary landscape. Although it is Thornhill who makes the decision and physically takes part in the massacre, he displaces some of the responsibility for his actions by assuring himself that it is what Sal silently desires. Neither gender can be absolved of the colonial act of symbolic miscegenation. While this act allows Thornhill to settle once and for all on his land, it also casts a shadow over his sense of belonging, as he attempts to resist a deep postcolonial guilt.

The massacre closes the narrative-proper of *The Secret River*, and all that remains is for the epilogue section ("Thornhill's Place") to describe how the Thornhills' lives will stretch onwards into their future. Having obliterated the Indigenous inhabitants of Thornhill's Point and the surrounds, it is also necessary to obliterate their memory. In a gesture groaning with symbolism, Thornhill attempts this by building his own house on top of the rock on which the Aborigines have engraved fish and the *Hope*. The house itself is a disappointment. Physically, it is described as being gauche and uneven. There is the intimation that the fish and the boat beneath are at least partially responsible, and that Thornhill's efforts to cover up the history of his land – to inscribe, palimpsestically, a new history – have been unsuccessful. Even the massacre was not a complete success, because "[i]n spite of everything, it seemed that the blacks were not going to disappear" (327). At the same time, there is an undertow of remorse in Thornhill's dissatisfaction. His days watching the cliffs through his telescope appear to exhibit his regret at the level of success they *did* achieve in eradicating the local Aborigines. The bench where he sits begins to feel "like a punishment" (333), although for what, exactly, the text is reluctant to articulate.

It seems likely that at least part of his sense of regret and dissatisfaction is due to the fact that, despite all his labours, he still has not been able to achieve a sense of belonging: neither a true belonging to his land, nor having his land truly belong to him. In reaching what appears to be the conclusion of his search, he is still unable to feel fulfilled. This is summarised neatly in Thornhill's encounter with Long Jack, who lives on a small bit of land that Thornhill has given him as a

kind of “penance” (327). Thornhill “watche[s] Jack’s hand caressing the dirt. This was something he did not have: a place that was part of his flesh and spirit” (329). Even dispossessed, and physically and neurologically scarred by the shots from the massacre, Jack has something that Thornhill can never find: belonging.

In the end, then, the quest for a sense of belonging is unfulfilled, not just for Thornhill but also for the reader. At the end of his journey, and ours, he achieves what he believed were his desires, but is left baffled and void of the “triumph” he had expected (334). We, too, are left uncertain of the meaning of this journey. There is a confusion in Thornhill’s last ruminations. Does he experience an almost anachronistic regret at his role in exterminating the Indigenous occupants of his land? Or does he instead feel inadequate because the genocide might not have been as complete as they had hoped it would be? Is this a reflection of Lawson’s assertion that the Other must remain and never be *replaced* but only *displaced*? Or is Thornhill simply an old man looking back on his life and pondering the meaning of it all?

Here it is important to return to the other voice of the composite narrative, Kate’s, and to examine the conclusion of her journey of longing, which is remarkably similar to Thornhill’s. In “Into the World,” the final chapter of *Searching for the Secret River*, Kate lets go of her book – which for a long time was *The Wiseman Book* but has finally resisted Kate’s urges for non-fiction and become *The Secret River* – and also of her quest. *The Secret River* is the result of her search for a sense of belonging, for an answer to Lucashenko’s question. While the completion of her book, much like Thornhill’s completion of his house, fulfils her longing, in an overwhelming sense she feels exactly as dissatisfied as Thornhill. She sends her final proofs to the publishers: “[i]t should have been a joyful moment, but it was an anticlimax, even something like panic: a gap in my life where this book had been for the last five years. *What now? What do I do now?*” (218). These plaintive questions might be read as a subtext for Thornhill’s silent gazing at the cliffs. At their conclusion, both *The Secret River* and *Searching for the Secret River* are inundated with a sense of helplessness. The desire for belonging, for both Kate and Thornhill, has been powerful enough to fuel their narrative. But in completing the journey, neither are able to satisfy their longing. This, paired with the title of Kate’s narrative which specifically

privileges the journey and not the conclusion – a *search* and not a *finding* – hints that perhaps longing, as a condition, is inherently irresolvable.

CHAPTER TWO

Impossible Longings

While a geographical longing might make for an engaging textual journey, nostalgia's temporal counterpart is more problematic and dangerous. The word nostalgia, denoting a longing which can refer either to spatial or temporal locations, still carries connotations of distress: its etymology encompasses the Greek *algos*, or pain. As David Lowenthal reminds us, the word nostalgia in the seventeenth century actually described a physical affliction, "an illness with explicit symptoms and often lethal consequences" (10). The temporal form of nostalgia retains this sense of pain and danger in that its particular longing – for the past – acknowledges the impossibility of fulfilment. A geographical nostalgia, or a geographical longing for belonging, makes no predictions about outcomes (the nostalgia or longing might provoke travel to the location of desire, or it might simply remain a motivating imperative which is never realised), but temporal longing can only ever be an irresolvable tension because the site of the nostalgia can never be visited. Grenville's writing in both *The Secret River* and *Searching for the Secret River* suffers from this unrelievable longing. Susan Stewart discusses narrative itself (both textually, and in a broader sense which encompasses souvenirs and collections) as "a structure of desire" and locates within this structure "the social disease of nostalgia" (ix). In a discussion of the souvenir as an object of desire, she suggests that "[t]emporally, the souvenir moves history into private time" (138), and this is also the effect of Grenville's composite narrative comprising historical fiction and personal memoir.

This chapter diagnoses symptoms of temporal nostalgia in Grenville's composite narrative, noting that these symptoms are embodied in both stylistic and narrative decisions. The temporal nostalgia or longing is tied to, yet distinct from, the geographical longing examined in chapter one, and is manifest throughout the composite narrative in several ways. Most simply, it refers to Grenville's naive and puzzling reversion to a very conventional and, in a sense, outdated mode of storytelling. Despite flirting with a postmodern construction in *Joan Makes History*, in *The Secret River* Grenville echoes a more traditional, realist form of historical fiction, enacting a stylistic nostalgia. The temporal

nostalgia is also present in a very personal form: in Grenville's private longing, which becomes public through *Searching for the Secret River*, to trace her genealogy and to find a connection to her individual heritage. But at its most complex – and most interesting – the temporal longing becomes an instance of what Carolyn Masel calls belatedness. The term is an appropriation of one Harold Bloom coined in *The Anxiety of Influence* with reference to a Freudian compulsion in poetry for the emulation and yet necessary misrepresentation of the fathers, of the collective “prior poet” (Bloom 30). This chapter explores the intersections of these multiple forms of nostalgia, noting the damaging effects on the overarching body of the composite narrative, particularly when Grenville's approach in *The Secret River* is juxtaposed with her approach in *Joan Makes History*.

Masel's adoption of the term acknowledges Bloom's usage but recasts the condition of belatedness as an anxious preoccupation with place and belonging, particularly in postcolonial texts (Masel 162-63). Specifically she identifies the need to achieve authenticity in postcolonial textual representations of place and belonging, and draws this together with an understanding that these postcolonial histories are often already “so well known” as to become “no longer tellable” (161). This conception of postcolonial literary belatedness reverberates with a Derridean sense of *mal d'archive* – a troubling state of “painful desire” to inhabit the ontological space of the archive, accompanied by a simultaneous need to “account for the desire” (Derrida 85). Inherent in Derrida's *mal d'archive*, as in Bloom's and Masel's belatedness, is an extreme and perhaps irresolvable tension between the compulsion to rehearse the past and the knowledge that this rehearsal will be endless, self-regenerative, and impossibly distant. This is the understanding of belatedness which underpins the following discussion.

The first manifestation of temporal nostalgia in the composite narrative is a stylistic one, and is apparent in Grenville's decision to write *The Secret River* as a traditional historical novel, with *Searching for the Secret River* as an accompanying text, rather than integrating a historiographically metafictional voice or attempting a more experimental form combining the two discrete narratives. Grenville's earlier and more experimental attempt to examine an Australian colonial history can be seen in *Joan Makes History*, a cautiously

postmodern odyssey in which the main character, Joan, becomes wilfully and selectively omniscient and omnipresent at various pivotal moments of Australian settlement history. Through Joan, Grenville experiments with a style approaching the metafictional, her authorial voice thinly disguised as Joan's many variations throughout history. Joan is overtly aware of her feminist role in rewriting history, speaking to us in *précis* form at the beginning of each historical "scene" before telling us how she made history on each occasion. In each of these prefaces, she outlines the factual event, reminding us that "[t]his is history, and well known" but that each time we must also understand that "[l]ess well known is that I, Joan, was there in one of my many manifestations" (9). Joan's awareness that she is "making history" is an indication that Grenville is similarly aware of what she is doing, and that she intends her readers to be equally aware of the extent to which a *re*-making of history is occurring.

Interwoven with the thirteen scenes recounting Joan's historical appearances is the narrative of a unified contemporary embodiment of Joan. Where the other versions of Joan proclaim their integral and unsung presence at critical historical moments, this Joan travels only through her own history, recounting her life "simply as Joan ... who has cooked dinners, washed socks and swept floors while history happened elsewhere" (xiii). However, ultimately this version of Joan comes to the realisation, in the epilogue, that she herself is all the other Joans and indeed all other histories; she in fact personifies "the entire history of the globe" (279).⁷ Joan, then, is Grenville's vehicle for claiming a part in history and a right to narrate it. In doing so, she revisits historical moments, traversing a fragmented version of Australia's European settlement, in which she decentres familiar narratives such as the 1788 Botany Bay landing and retells them from marginal and imagined perspectives. Joan becomes a subaltern voice proclaiming variant (and often deviant) glimpses of histories which are "well known."

Yet, having experimented with these imaginative liberties in *Joan Makes History*, Grenville seems unwilling to carry the experimentation any further in her next historical novel eighteen years later. She returns instead, in *The Secret River*,

⁷ Interestingly, Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman argue that the novel's grand conclusion becomes a "mythologizing gesture that ultimately deprives history of any meaning" (165), criticising Grenville's attempt to discuss both the "private experience" and the "public event" of history (164).

to a realist style of historical novel and, despite discussions in *Searching for the Secret River* about the possibilities of telling the story with “flights of fancy” and “speculation” (147), *The Secret River* is never fanciful or speculative in the ways that *Joan Makes History* is. Rather, it strives for what is a fundamentally problematic historical verisimilitude. Grenville presents Thornhill’s story in a confident voice at times resembling that of a biographer – a style for which she confessed to feeling a need in the telling of his story (*Searching* 165). The traditional form and voice are untroubled by the multiplicities or fracturing of voice which complicate Joan and her story. Nor is the narrative inclined to the flexibilities of chronology available in *Joan Makes History*. The direction of time in *The Secret River* is relentlessly teleological, the plot violating its chronology only once, in the positioning of the description of the Thornhills’ first night in Sydney. Thornhill’s encounter with an Aboriginal man during this first night appears as the prologue, but properly belongs in the space occupied by a decorative tilde on page 82, and is the only section of the narrative shifted out of its logical chronological context.

This unforgiving unidirectionality of time strains against the backwards-looking nostalgia which characterises both form and narrative content of *The Secret River*. While in *Joan Makes History* Grenville visits other eras through the many Joans, achieving an exorcism of some of the nostalgia inherent in revisiting a single period of national history, *The Secret River*’s narrative is trapped within the era of its own setting, never consenting to the presence of other perspectives, nor acknowledging the influence of a contemporary consciousness. Of course, such an influence is not absent, merely unacknowledged. Grenville, in attempting to reimagine history in *The Secret River*, is confined by her own temporality, and allows her contemporary perspective to suffuse Thornhill’s consciousness anachronistically. But the realist approach to the narrative precludes any textual recognition of, or reparation for, this.

The effect of a stubborn persistence with chronological consistency is that *The Secret River* appears to assert its retelling of history as immutable, authoritative, and singular. In *Joan Makes History* Grenville creates possibilities, invites speculation, and even risks altering histories which are “well known,” choosing, as Giselle Bastin applauds, to “widen the frame of historical inquiry”

(31). But in *The Secret River* Grenville presents a closed rather than an open text; a text which prefers, even advocates, Roland Barthes's conception of a readerly rather than a writerly reception. The multiplicities and self-consciousness of *Joan Makes History* actively encourage the reader's involvement in the production of the text, where the unity of time and the authoritative, biographical voice of *The Secret River* discourage such participation, limiting the possibilities of readers' writerly engagement.

In place of acknowledging the fraught nature of historical documentation and the impossibility of certainty in any postcolonial history, in *The Secret River* Grenville longs for a kind of pre-postmodern voice which is permitted authority and continuity, even if fictional. Atwood, a writer familiar with the challenges of historical fiction, proposes that "[e]very novel begins with a *what if*" (*Curious Pursuits* 323). The difference between *Joan Makes History* and *The Secret River* is that the first asks this question ("*what if*") over and over, presenting itself as a series of inquiries, while the second asks the question only once, and proceeds to answer it. As James Ley quips, "[a]t every turn, the novel [*The Secret River*] asserts This Is How It Was" (23).

This tendency to answer rather than ask questions hearkens back to an earlier style of the historical novel. While Jago Morrison suggests of contemporary fiction that "there is a widespread recognition amongst writers that the narrative constructions of history must always be partial and problematic" (24), Grenville's choices in *The Secret River* do not demonstrate such a recognition. The simplistic narrative of Thornhill's interaction with Aboriginal characters does not interrogate the problematic nature of its own facts: that not only were colonial race relations characterised by monumental misunderstandings, at both linguistic and cultural levels, but also that *our* contemporary perceptions of these relations are complicated by our chronological, and thus social and philosophical, distance from the events.

Even when textualising Thornhill's – and Wiseman's – history through the more investigative and self-reflexive form of *Searching for the Secret River*, Grenville still does not substantially acknowledge the difficulties and consequences of the "partial" nature of historical documentation. In *Searching for the Secret River*, Kate expends much energy chronicling for the reader the

difficulties of chasing Wiseman through the archives, and she details numerous false starts, red herrings, and dead ends. She finds Wiseman, previously a reliable figure in her solid family history, to be “slipperier” than she had expected (84) as she observes him, before her very eyes, “doubling, trebling, quadrupling” into a multitude of moments, a deluge of documents and dates (65). Yet while she recognises this difficulty of the historical record, she never allows it to alter her unshakeable belief that “Solomon Wiseman really had existed” (37), and that somehow, somewhere, the facts of this existence anticipate her in the archives. She is adamant that “the real man,” and not simply “a story or a set of entries on a website” await her discovery (24). Kate clings to this possibility of a single and verifiable historical truth, so that when she admits “the difficulty of establishing even the simplest fact” (38) she is still not deterred, but rather is seduced by the apparent veracity of text. For example, she finds with delight and relief that, amongst the muddle of possible Wisemans, at least “[t]he transcript of the trial was a fact,” and she determines to lean on this “fact” while she follows her compulsion to “find a pattern” even where there “might not be one” (38).

This refusal to question the veracity of the archive reveals a nostalgia for an earlier, simplistic faith in the archive, before Morrison’s “widespread recognition” of the ellipses plaguing historical documentation. Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman speak of these gaps as comprising an “absent or suppressed ‘true history’” (142), but they never speak of the possibility of this “true history” being complete or available. Grenville, on the other hand, seems to suffer a nostalgic delusion that if she can simply eliminate enough of the red herrings, she will be left with Wiseman’s (and more broadly, the colonial frontier’s) “true history.” Grenville’s understanding of a true history, however, as expressed in her various paratexts for *The Secret River*, lacks the validating self-conscious irony that Peter Carey’s use of the phrase employs for his *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000).

A mode of storytelling which invites a more readerly response than *The Secret River*, such as the historiographic metafiction Linda Hutcheon analyses, is able to address these absences and suppressions by exhibiting what Hutcheon describes as a “self-consciousness” which helps prevent the text from being “conclusive and teleological” (*Poetics* 110). While *Joan Makes History* displays a degree of this self-consciousness, *The Secret River* avoids it at all costs, longing

instead for the security of historical certainty and truth. In *Joan Makes History* Grenville is able to acknowledge the problematic and partial nature of the historical record, and Joan herself strives to do this, accounting, by her very existence, for the absences and suppressions of various possibilities in Australian colonial history. In *The Secret River*, however, Grenville commits herself to an authoritative history which is not just Wiseman's story, but also "the larger one of what happened when white met black on the edge of settlement across the country" (*Searching* 120). In this instance, the danger of Grenville's nostalgia for a history and a form of historical novel untroubled by doubt is that academic criticism and historical scholarship have both moved well beyond such a view of history, and her nostalgia implies that Grenville may be unaware of these developments. As Peter Middleton and Tim Woods note,

historical realist fiction tends to assume that the literary narrative has a special power to present the past in a language of the present and give direct access to the thoughts, speech and events of that other time without distorting their significance. (21)

Grenville's choice of form for *The Secret River* suggests that she endorses these assumptions of historical realist fiction, and it is perhaps because of her refusal to acknowledge the "distorting" effect of fiction upon history that critics have been particularly aggressive about her liberties with various historical details in the novel. In reaching backwards towards a more traditional realist style of fiction, which is not interested in recognising either the multiplicities of narrative or the impossibility of simple "truth," Grenville appears to be longing for something easier and safer. Morrison describes this earlier style as "the comforting, coherent, linear-historical" construction which is "characteristic of realist fiction" (34). Implicit in this description is the potential danger of such formal nostalgia, as Morrison subtly appeals to the word's connotations of "pain" when a temporal longing is inspired by a need for "comfort." McKenna similarly refers to the undesirable notion of seeking the comfort of a non-threatening and familiar form of historical narrative ("Comfort History" 15). Paradoxically, in attempting to create a "comfort history," Grenville's stylistic nostalgia has made her work more vulnerable, as critics have taken umbrage with her methods of asserting narrative coherence.

The desire for comfort can be linked to the second form of nostalgia which permeates the composite narrative: Grenville's personal longing for belonging, in a temporal sense as well as the geographical sense explored in chapter one. This desire to anchor her history is an instance of what Masel describes as a "need to rehearse individual stories of settlement," and for Grenville it seems to embody the belated postcolonial "sense of unsettledness, almost of displacement" that Masel identifies at the root of such iterative rewritings of history (169). Kate's earliest reasons for beginning the research leading to *The Secret River* are discussed in *Searching for the Secret River* when she describes meeting the eye of an Aboriginal woman during the Reconciliation Walk, and experiencing a kind of epiphany relating to their shared history. In that moment of eye contact, she says, "everything swivelled: the country, the place, my sense of myself in it" (13). While she later locates this experience in the context of a geographical search for a sense of belonging, it initially refers exclusively to a temporal belonging. She experiences a compulsion to trace her ancestry and, through that ancestry, to understand her position within a chronological representation of "place." In order to connect herself fully to this chronology, Grenville finds it necessary – she says she felt the need "urgently" – to discover as much as possible about a focal moment in the lineage (13). In this case, that nucleus is Solomon Wiseman, and the point at which Grenville family history and Australian colonial history intertwine. In distilling a chronology into this single point, Grenville hopes to anchor her own genealogical identity and, in doing so, to find a comfort in her own sense of Australianness, and of belonging. This search for comfort through looking backwards can also be described as nostalgia.

This second instance of nostalgia in the composite narrative is linked also to another form of longing, the authorial longing to identify and work with tangible "traces": to dredge historical lives and realities from the past by tugging at their exposed ends (be they letters, objects, historical sites, or other relics). This particular form of longing, which applies particularly to Kate's journey in *Searching for the Secret River*, is so overwhelming that it even reproduces itself on a micro level within the fictional narrative of *The Secret River*. For example, the longing for and dependence on physical remnants is apparent in Sal's

attachment to the piece of roof tile from London, and in the way she uses it to reinscribe her memories of home over the new and unfamiliar Australian landscape (*The Secret River* 88-89).

The tile exists in both *The Secret River* and *Searching for the Secret River*, and has similar weight in both texts: in *Searching for the Secret River*, Kate finds a broken terracotta roof tile when she visits the Thames, and she takes it with her, a reminder of the place that Wiseman belonged to, the place that belonged to him (55-57). She clings to this tangible trace of the past with a kind of reluctantly obsessive determination. She shows it proudly to a group of writers with whom she is travelling in London, but when they question its value as a narrative object, she declines – or is unable – to elaborate on her connection to it. The writers ask “[i]s this all?” and “[y]ou didn’t find anything else?” and “[s]o where will you go next?” (57). Kate does not share with the other writers the thoughts she had on picking up the tile near the river, as she appeared to try to whip herself into some kind of archival frisson: “[o]ld roof tiles ... Maybe very old. From Wiseman’s time? From Wiseman’s house?” (55). Perhaps she is already sensing the impossibility of a return to the past through physical objects, the hopelessness of imaginative time-travel, the affliction of nostalgia – and this is why she remains silent in the face of the writers’ questions. Ali Behdad, with specific reference to a “mimetic desire for identification” with the Oriental Other (*Belated Travelers* 59), notes that the collection of tangible objects “makes the belated traveler a kind of ... antiquarian who attempts to reconstruct an ‘imaginary’ past through the materiality of the objects collected” (61). The pairing of the words “traveler” and “antiquarian” here helps to collapse time into distance, invoking the problematic image of the past as a foreign country. L. P. Hartley’s phrase, which Lowenthal adopts for the title of his book *The Past is a Foreign Country*, complicates an understanding of the past, at once making it more accessible to us in the present and also reminding us of the impossibility of travel to such a country. Historical fiction tends to promote itself as a vehicle in which to traverse this temporal space, and in a novel like *The Secret River*, physical objects become the direct modes of transportation. However, this nostalgic transport must always be imperfect. Patrick Buckridge refuses to acknowledge this, when he avows that “[t]he past is another country ... But its otherness is no more absolute and

impenetrable than that of any other foreign country” (142). Kate’s hesitant attachment to the tile hints that she is teetering on the edge of an understanding which contradicts Buckridge’s statement.

The crossing of the physical fragment between the two texts is a demonstration of how the composite narrative spans both texts. For Sal, more conclusively than for Kate, the tile is tangible proof that the past existed. More importantly still, for Sal it is a sign that she might actually return to the past; that feat which Kate is persistently unable to manage, and which in the end Sal, too, finds impossible. Sal clings to the broken tile – her only remaining possession from home – as though it is “a promise, that London was still there ... and she would be there too one day” (*The Secret River* 89). Through Sal’s hopes of, and convictions about, returning home, the broken tile becomes Grenville’s transport not only through space but also, more interestingly, through time. In this way, Kate hopes to combat the resolution-resistant nature of temporal nostalgia. It should be noted, however, that Sal never does return home to London, but instead comes to accept that she will die in the colony, and asks that Thornhill bury her under the poplars she plants in an effort to reinscribe England on the Australian soil. Thus Kate’s travel plans in her research – across time rather than seas – become thwarted too: for all her efforts she is unable to reverse time for Sal, and therefore her own transport backwards into history is stalled. Nostalgia, here a sense of textual belatedness, establishes itself as a persistent tension.

The temporal relation between the two texts is an interesting one. According to a reading of *Searching for the Secret River* as public marginalia to *The Secret River*, the former would be described as “responsive” to the “pre-existing written words” of the latter, its primary text (Jackson 81). A reading under a paratext model would similarly emphasise chronology of production. A composite reading of the two texts, however, allows a more complex understanding of chronology as a continuum through the two texts, even while each is temporally discrete. Sal’s experience with the tile is one example of this: the composite reading not only offers a new depth to both Sal’s and Kate’s connections with the tile, but facilitates a temporally-based interpretation of Kate’s attachment to it. No longer is Kate clinging to this historical object for history’s sake alone; instead, the tile in the composite narrative represents for Kate a kind of marker in an enduring search

for belonging. The tile for Sal is a displaced object – much as Sal feels herself to be – and in Kate’s search she, too, feels displaced. She is yet to discover her heritage and thus her place of belonging, but in the tile she has found a means of connecting to this heritage. Although, chronologically, Kate clings to Sal’s tile before Grenville has actually created Sal, Kate’s experience can still be conceived of unproblematically as taking place *after* Sal’s. The composite reading encourages a flexibility around strict chronology, so that we can read Kate’s connection to the tile as a belated echo of Sal’s connection, just as Kate’s contemporary journey temporally echoes Sal’s colonial one.

Similarly, Kate’s search for belonging can be read as a nostalgia towards the material desire for land experienced by Thornhill. While Kate’s search is troubled by understandings – and misunderstandings – of indigeneity and by an experience of postcolonial settler anxiety, Thornhill’s desires are concerned principally with the quest for a physical space to call his own. When reading the composite narrative for a figurative chronology, a relationship between Kate’s and Thornhill’s experiences of belonging becomes apparent. We are invited to read, into the very idea of belonging, an interplay between *ownership* and *relationship*. Belonging becomes an interaction – between what is possessed, and what safety or companionship is gained in return. The composite narrative insists that in order to exist at all, the notion conjured by the abstract noun form of belonging is dependent on the notion evoked by the verbal noun form. In other words, Kate’s sense of belonging *to* something is contingent upon Thornhill – for the purposes of the composite narrative, her textual ancestor – *having* belongings in the first place. Kate’s connection to the land is contingent upon Thornhill having first forged this connection, as he battles the bush and clears vegetation, trying to tame the land and fence in the soil (*The Secret River* 249-50). In *Searching for the Secret River*, Kate echoes his efforts, as she struggles to find “the feeling of having roots to discover” (73). The composite reading allows Kate and Thornhill’s relationship to function in this direction, rather than requiring a strict chronological reading where Grenville creates Thornhill *after* experiencing her own desires for land.

Masel’s discussion of belatedness, and her analysis of a “double consciousness” (164) of “here-ness” (colony) and “there-ness” (empire), provides

a framework (169) which enables an understanding of Kate's colonial conceptions of place. A double consciousness such as Masel describes seems to underpin Kate's postcolonial struggle to reconcile her searches for both a sense of identification with her originary "mother country," and a sense of connection to place and privilege in her home in Australia. Robert Dixon casts this kind of conflict as a "colonial nostalgia" (212), a phrase which neatly encapsulates Kate's experience, as well as her performance of what Masel calls a "compulsion to replicate narratives of immigration and settlement" (163).

The final expression of nostalgia in *The Secret River* and *Searching for the Secret River* is a very personal sense of belatedness which is encoded in the seemingly obsessive repetition of imagery across not only this composite narrative, but also *Joan Makes History*. The most explicit example of this is a set of stone lions which Grenville first described in *Joan Makes History*: they come all the way from England and are erected on stone columns on either side of iron gates (115-16). In *Joan Makes History*, Burchett, an emancipist like William Thornhill, imports the lions, which are replicas of a set in the "Old Country," and invests them as sentinels at the entrance to his property (116). The placing of the European-constructed lions is an undeniably palimpsestic colonial inscription of ownership:

The yellow blocks rose shout by shout, and when the columns stood with their lions in place beside the heavy iron gates, there was no mistaking that this piece of dirt, barricaded behind such stone and iron, belonged to someone. (116)

These stone lions recur in the contemporary Joan's husband's response to her question "*Are eyes the windows of the soul?*" (217). He replies that eyes are "*the windows and doorways and gravel driveways and gateposts with lions, if you want*" (218). This slippage of an image between characters in disparate sections of a novel might be unremarkable, except that this particular image is ubiquitous in Grenville's works addressing Australian history. Burchett's actions foreshadow Thornhill's desire to mark out the land as his own, with replicas of the stone lions he remembers from his Bermondsey childhood. By the time Thornhill imports his lions near the end of *The Secret River* (315), they are already familiar to us from Thornhill's encounters with the originals in London in his childhood (10), and

also from his experience of his mother's deathbed-nightmares, when she relives, "again and again," her own childhood encounter with them (19). The image of the lions even resonates into Thornhill's interpretation of the unfamiliar Australian landscape when he first traverses the Hawkesbury: "[a] blunt headland, the shape of a hammer, rose up to port. To starboard a lion of rock reared up, baring its stone breast out to the sea and the unending winds" (99).

Again, this rehearsed imagery might seem unremarkable unless we read the parallel rehearsal of the same image in *Searching for the Secret River*, where the lions roar their way into Kate's existence as a "short-sighted" child visiting Wiseman's property (6-7). Kate's experience with the lions is corporeal – although she cannot see them properly, she runs her fingers "into the grooves" of the sandstone (7) in a gesture of fascination which hints at her later connection to the roof tile. Barbour notes that in his attempt to make sense of the world around him, Thornhill "incessantly spins and reprises the slender thread of his past, present, and future" (423), and this almost visceral image could equally describe Grenville's persistence in textualising her own past, and therefore her present and future.

Grenville's obsession with the image of the stone lions is linked to her nostalgic desire to textually revisit an authentic and corporeal past – her personal past as well as her family history and a colonial past. This obsession recalls Stewart's description of narrative as a structure which "both invents and distances its object and thereby inscribes again and again the gap ... that is the place of generation for the symbolic" (ix). In her compulsive rehearsal of the image of the stone lions, Grenville performs a belated need to understand the past, as she attempts to fill the "gap" with a symbolic interpretation of history which might somehow make sense of her experience. Masel's discussion describes just such a behaviour: "in order to come to terms with the present, you have to go backwards in time, seeking to know how you yourself are implicated in the web of history and taking responsibility for it, no matter how belatedly" (175). Yet, in the endless repetition of this backward-looking search, Grenville also enacts a belatedness in her writing, which itself becomes a history that is "so well known" that it is "no longer tellable" (Masel 161). Despite Buckridge's assertion that the term nostalgia has "undergone a major ... semantic shift from pathology to

pleasure” so that it now refers to “those cultural texts and practices which cultivate the pleasure of an imaginary return to a familiar past time” (133), it is clear that nostalgia, when located within a literary climate of postcolonial belatedness, still produces pain rather than pleasure. In Grenville’s case, this pain describes not only the problematic reception of her readerly text, but also the implacable textual anxiety of an incessant rehearsal of specific imagery and narratives, both personal and national. Thus the “well known” histories in *The Secret River* are so belated as to become “no longer tellable,” as their iteration eventually confines them into a narrative space of reductive circularity.

CHAPTER THREE

Beside the Secret River

Historical fiction is complicated not only by the challenges of translating historical events into fictional narratives – which requires a negotiation of both ethical and artistic responsibilities – but, more disruptively, the form is increasingly troubled by dilemmas implicit in managing its own awareness of such challenges. As early as 1979, critics including Robert Scholes had declared the traditional historical novel a “worn-out form” (205). However, postmodernism has given fiction in general – and historical fiction in particular – the opportunity to harness new modes of narrative, such as the wilful defiance of temporal unities in order to incorporate contemporary critical concerns into historical fiction. Amongst these new narrative modes, Morrison has observed in contemporary fiction an abdication from an earlier narrative duty to “ensure a comfortable continuum” and to “function as a healer of time” (34). Instead, a more “fractured and unsettling” approach to historical fiction is becoming prevalent (Morrison 35). *The Secret River*, however, takes a traditional realist approach to form and voice, and therefore its capacity to accommodate a self-conscious awareness about the process and challenges involved in its own production is limited. But when the novel is considered within the frame of the composite narrative, this awareness is provided by *Searching for the Secret River*. Instead of a “fracturing” within the form, Grenville’s paired texts demonstrate an expansion of the boundaries of the historical novel, which facilitates a degree of meta-critical self-consciousness without compromising the formal values of a traditional historical narrative. This reading permits *Searching for the Secret River* to contribute to *The Secret River* an integral commentary which is similar to the intratextual commentary offered by a metafictional voice in postmodern examples of the form.

This chapter will explore the presence of a historiographic self-consciousness in several texts which can be usefully compared with *The Secret River* in order to offer a perspective on Grenville’s decision to segregate the narrative-proper and the authorial interrogation of that narrative. The chapter introduces two other contemporary works of Australian historical fiction –

Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* and Simpson's *The Curer of Souls* – and will also re-examine Grenville's earlier historical novel, *Joan Makes History*. These three examples have been selected because they address similar Australian settlement histories, and at the same time exhibit a self-consciousness about the process in which they are participating. Both *Gould's Book of Fish* and *The Curer of Souls* were released within five years of *The Secret River*, and therefore delineate a contemporary publication cohort for the novel, while *Joan Makes History* has been chosen for its rendering of Grenville's decisions in writing Australian historical fiction prior to *The Secret River*. In this way, the composite narrative is positioned both diachronically within Grenville's oeuvre and also synchronically amongst its peers.

The chapter will particularly concentrate on identifying in each of the comparative texts instances of historiographic metafiction, in order to illustrate a common strategy for addressing an awareness about the process of writing historical fiction. Metafiction, as Patricia Waugh asserts, is able to “explore a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction” (2). Waugh further defines metafiction as a device ensuring that fiction “explicitly and overtly lays bare its condition of artifice ... thereby explor[ing] the problematic relationship between life and fiction” (4). This relationship can be read to signify not just the association between life and fiction, but also between history and fiction. In her extensive work on historiographic metafiction, Hutcheon discusses qualities of auto-representation and self-reference which form “dominant and constitutive” features of such narratives (“Canadian Historiographic” 228), and which enable the text to acknowledge the “implications of the rewriting of history” (*Poetics* 110). Historiographic metafiction encompasses not only a recognition of the process of production, but also an anticipation of the text's commercial and critical reception. Authors of metafiction acknowledge, paradoxically, both “the *reality* of the past [and] its *textualised accessibility* to us today” (114).

As Gay Raines observes, Australian literature has long been in the business of employing “new formulations of history” (106) in the hope of recovering what Scholes describes as the “worn-out” form of historical fiction. Raines, writing from a cultural and temporal perspective just after the 1988 bicentenary, analyses developments in Australian historical narrative since

Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life* (1874). Although Raines's article cannot accommodate more recent trends in Australian literature, the argument is compelling in laying foundations for a working analysis of a stylistic evolution which has continued to advance into the present century. This progression is conceptualised as one of movement from a conventional narrative in the form of "documentary historical drama" (108) to the more "convoluted configuration" of the "politically pointed" *Doin Wildcat* (1988) by Mudrooroo (112).⁸ Raines, in tracing this progression from what Jo Jones calls "[t]raditional linear, realist representations of history" (115), asserts that a growing recognition of the problems of historical fiction in Australian literature requires that historical novelists harness increasingly sophisticated and experimental forms in order to address both the troubling nature of the genre, and the widespread awareness of this. For example, she proposes that the "linear treatment of time and plot" common to the pre-1970s texts she discusses is particularly limiting, and that experimentation with techniques such as metafiction and magic realism is able to relieve these limitations (111).

Implicit in Raines's discussion of form is a kind of teleological judgement about the efficacy of various forms of historical fiction. The traditional "realism which seems necessary in the writing of historical fiction" (111) is seen to be restrictive, and it is only through the development of a historiographic self-consciousness that Australian literature is learning to overcome the challenges of the form. This sentiment is echoed by Gelder and Salzman, who claim that "recent and more inventive novels have attempted to dig under the surface of populist/nationalism mythologies, or at least, to expose imaginatively the cracks in that surface" (148), suggesting that the development of new forms in historical fiction is integral to achieving deep representations of Australian history. Drawing on her observations of narratives from Clarke to Mudrooroo, Raines concludes her argument with cautious predictions of how such representations might continue to be expressed formally, and posits the probability that contemporary

⁸ It should be noted that Raines's article predates much of the ongoing controversy surrounding this author's name and cultural identity. For an extended discussion of these issues, see Maureen Clark; Goldie ("On Not Being Australian"), pages 92 and 94 in particular; Goldie ("Who is Mudrooroo"), especially the first half and the concluding three paragraphs; Maggie Nolan and Carrie Dawson, chiefly the middle section; Graeme Dixon, Tom Little and Lorna Little; and Lucy Frost.

Australian historical fiction will continue to experiment with ways of exhibiting an awareness “that history is also itself a fiction” (112). Raines intimates that where historical fiction has previously “engaged primarily in narrative interrogation of the past and its meanings” (111), there is now a tendency for a meta-interrogation instead: an interrogation of that narrative interrogation of the past. This meta-interrogation, or self-consciousness, is increasingly afforded a presence within the narrative itself, rather than exclusively in the space of critical and academic reception, where it has previously resided.

Middleton and Woods, in a more recent discussion echoing Raines’s analysis of developments in Australian historical fiction and extending the period of analysis beyond the bicentenary and towards the millennium, observe that perhaps “realism has become too conservative to be adequate” for historical novelists to manage the increasing challenges of the form – both artistic and political (54-55). As Middleton and Woods recognise, this argument applies not just to historical fiction, but to the broader category of contemporary fiction, where postmodernism contributes “both critique and solution” to the challenges posed by a shifting social perspective on the responsibilities of fiction (55). Particularly, this suggests that realism is no longer adequate to accommodate the need for a self-reflexive recognition of these challenges. Middleton and Woods rely heavily on Hutcheon’s work for their argument, but they also note that at times her discussion “underestimates” the problems of marrying history with fiction (66). This inability of historiographic metafiction to account fully for the oppositional nature of history and fiction indicates that perhaps, as Raines argues, historiographic metafiction is not an endpoint but an element of a progression.

Hutcheon, too, acknowledges this progression, when she declares that metafictional techniques are continuing to encroach upon the territory of traditional realism in an “ever more self-reflecting” fashion (*Narcissistic Narrative* 36), and ponders whether perhaps earlier periods of realism might represent a stage “containing within itself the seeds of its own transcendence” (38). As this chapter argues, Australian historical fiction participates in an ongoing revision of the form, continuing to push formal boundaries in order to meet the challenges implicit in the genre.

This is not to suggest that all Australian historical fiction will now

conform to a model which incorporates historiographic self-consciousness. The realist approach is still validated by peer and commercial support: in recent years, the Miles Franklin Literary Award shortlist has featured numerous historical novels – including the 2005 winner *The White Earth*, by Andrew McGahan, and 2006 winner *The Ballad of Desmond Kale*, by Roger McDonald – which address Australian history through narratives that avoid explicit metafictional strategies. However, the proliferation of novels employing new modes is testament to the changing tenor of Australian fiction; again the Miles Franklin shortlist can be used as an indication of the positive reception of such novels. For example *Gould's Book of Fish*, which was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin, is a novel which rejects a realist approach to historical fiction.⁹

“ ... a curious & ... disturbing correspondence to reality ... ”

Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish* navigates an account which is epic in scope, and tends towards magic realism in style. It is an imagined history of William Buelow Gould, of Tasmanian penal settlement, of colonial rule on Sarah Island, and of violent relations between settlers and Indigenous peoples. These imagined histories are offered through a complex net of stories, and the “twelve fish” of the subtitle comprise the twelve chapters of *Gould's Book of Fish*, but are also the twelve illustrations of the colonial artefact which is the *Book of Fish*, the book-within-a-book. The novel is framed with the voice of a contemporary character, but this is not a simple framing device; by its conclusion, the novel has turned back on itself with the inevitability and claustrophobia of a Mobius strip, as characters become each other, and the chronology inverts. This cyclic structure is endorsed self-consciously within the narrative: “[s]tories are written as progressive ... yet the beauty of life in its endless mystery is circular” (352). Frequently, Flanagan's stories do brush up against actual recorded histories, but the facts of *Gould's Book of Fish* (to appropriate the words of its

⁹ As Nathan Hollier notes, while the Miles Franklin Award may not sufficiently measure the scope and breadth of contemporary Australian writing, it is still a valid and vital referent for the reception of Australian literature which is critically “concerned with Australian history, society and culture.” Similarly, Morag Fraser, a recent Miles Franklin judge, suggests that the award is able to illustrate current trends, as award-standard writers are able to “pick up the vibrations of the cultural ether” (qtd. in Steger, “Tale of a Convict”). The award is thus a relevant resource for contextualising a novel like *The Secret River*.

first narrator) “concur with the known facts only long enough to enter with them into an argument” (16). As Kate Hall notes, Flanagan’s revisionism, rather than rehearsing the familiar notion of history’s instability and fiction’s permission to stabilise, “suggests that the relationship between history and fiction is not one of opposition, but of ambivalence” (82).

Although the novel is largely peopled with characters of pure invention – characters whose lineage is not traceable to any historical figure – other characters and locations in *Gould’s Book of Fish* boast real-life counterparts, either historical or contemporary. Gould himself is a central example, his fictional incarnation based on the historical William Buelow Gould, a convict artist assigned to the colonial surgeon in Van Diemen’s Land (Allport). Further examples of such characters include Jorgen Jorgensen, Matthew Brady, and Kim Pearce, while locations include Sarah Island, the Archives Office of Tasmania, and the Republic Bar. In some cases, these characters or locations seem to share with their factual equivalent a name alone, and in other cases Flanagan borrows more than nomenclature for his narrative. For example, Thomas Lempriere, the historical counterpart for Flanagan’s Tobias Lempriere, was a colonial merchant and a coroner, and later an assistant penal commissary general (Ellis). He was also an artist and diarist who keenly documented his experiences in the colony. Tobias Lempriere shares with his namesake an interest in collecting, and in sending specimens and information back to the Royal Society in London. But this may be where the similarity ends: while Tobias Lempriere is the surgeon to Flanagan’s semi-fictional settlement, Thomas Lempriere’s contribution to the new colony of Van Diemen’s Land was principally as a public servant. Certainly, Tobias Lempriere’s idiosyncratic, comic, and almost grotesque speech patterns (one of his most intriguing and amusing characteristics) appear to have no basis in the historical Thomas Lempriere.

In fact, as Zach Weir notes, identity in *Gould’s Book of Fish* comes to have only the very slipperiest powers of signification, so that, ultimately, Gould himself seems to adopt some of Thomas Lempriere’s characteristics as well as those of other historical characters. Thomas Lempriere, for example, was valued for his artistic abilities, and often painted portraits for colonists (Ellis). Flanagan’s Gould, also an artist, is charged with the duty of painting the colony’s fish,

although in Gould's mind, these fish gradually come to represent the various characters of the settlement around him. Weir explains the knotty relationship of fictional to historical truth – “[f]rom the name alone, identity does not exist” – and reads Flanagan's novel as manifesting the difficulty of anchoring “true” Tasmanian colonial identity through language, and even as an expression of the “amorphous nature of postcolonial guilt.”

There are less direct borrowings, too, where historical figures' names are twisted before being endowed upon fictional characters – but rarely are they twisted beyond recognition. In accordance with the extravagant and often carnivalesque magic realism of the narrative, these characters' almost-familiar names seem to reflect their historical counterparts with a sense of uncanny distortion reminiscent of a funfair hall of mirrors. “Guster Robinson,” for example, crookedly reflects the historical George Augustus Robinson, protector of Aborigines in Van Diemen's Land, while “Matt Brady” is a subtly warped version of the bushranger Matthew Brady. These perplexing likenesses are designed to simultaneously guide and confound, like the falsifying reflections in a hall of mirrors. When we encounter Guster Robinson, the experience is one of rounding a corner and glimpsing a familiar face, but at the same time there is something not-quite-right, and we are forced to reconsider our expectations of the narrative, and of our relationship with it, at this juncture in the labyrinth of the text.

Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs have argued for the place of Freud's notion of the uncanny in conversations about reconciliation and relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, suggesting that it encourages an enlightening dismissal of the “usual binary structure on which much commentary on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations is based” (24). In *Gould's Book of Fish*, Flanagan's manipulations of familiar historical figures into *unheimlich* or uncanny figures is similarly unsettling in denying us a comfortable binary of colonial past and present. Instead, we are forced to read a kind of past-present, where historical figures are textually embodied but are imbued with a self-conscious awareness of the postcolonial contemporary.

Throughout the first chapter, Flanagan incessantly primes us, in an entirely self-conscious manner, for the novel's persistent marrying of truth with fiction. The novel's narrator, Sid Hammet, a contriver and vendor of forged antiques and

historical fakes, gradually instructs us on how to manage this blend of history and reimagined history, how to understand the process of creating this tale, and how to understand our own struggles in reading it. From the very beginning he asserts that “[w]e – our histories, our souls – are ... in a process of constant decomposition and reinvention, and this book, I was to discover, was the story of my compost heap of a heart” (2). This at once introduces the form of history that is to be understood in this narrative – a revisionist history continually evolving and being consciously reconstructed – and invites us to collapse into “this book” not only the *Book of Fish* that Hammet has found (and later the second, text-less, copy he finds and, later still, both copies as Gould composes them), but also Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*. At this early point in the novel, the unnamed first-person narrator might easily be mistaken for an authorial voice intruding into the text, offering us a preface for the fantastical tale to come. Indeed, this is the function that Hammet’s chapter fulfils, providing Flanagan with a direct conduit through which to express an authorial perspective on the work of the narrative. Although Hammet is primarily situated in the first chapter, his integral involvement in the cyclic structure of the narrative ensures that his powerfully self-reflexive voice is still inextricably woven into entirety of the text. Even Mr Hung, one of Hammet’s associates in the fake antiques racket, “ventures the suggestion that books and their authors are indivisible” (29). This is a clear authorial invitation for readers to speculate that through Hammet, Flanagan is conducting a self-conscious ventriloquism and injecting an authorial self-reflexivity into the text.

Perhaps the strongest argument for the confounding of Flanagan and Hammet can be found in Hammet’s discussion with Professor Roman de Silva – an academic and historian to whom Hammet brings the *Book of Fish* in the hopes of validating the book as a genuine historical document. But to Hammet’s frustration the professor, at this point synecdochically signifying the entire academic pursuit of historical knowledge and historical truth, dismisses the document definitively. He makes quite a show of demonstrating for Hammet what a “fake” historical object (in this case, a convincing imitation convict ball and chain) looks like: a “piece of kitsch that has nothing to do with history” (18). He then proceeds, unceremoniously, to drop the *Book of Fish* on the table beside the

fraudulent ball and chain. This less-than-subtle symbolic alignment of the *Book of Fish* with a fake – the kind of souvenir object that Hammet himself would happily sell – contributes to the prefatory effect of this chapter; it cautions the reader that the narrative we are poised to consume is one privileging an aesthetic concern over a historical one, and that in this novel we should believe only what we choose.

Professor de Silva's pronouncement on the book has a second function, which is to strengthen the link between Flanagan and Hammet. This can be seen in the way Hammet chooses to identify the book at this moment. Until this point and, with only two exceptions, for the remainder of the chapter Hammet's narration refers to the book as simply "the book," or "the *Book of Fish*." But at the moment when the professor literally and figuratively places the book into a category beside other "fakes," Hammet calls it "Gould's *Book of Fish*" (19). Although "Gould's" here is not italicised, we are clearly being invited to imagine that it is not just the fictional *Book of Fish* which is being rejected by historical authority, but equally Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*. In fact, not only does de Silva scorn the historical value of the *Book of Fish* (and by implication, *Gould's Book of Fish*), he also manages a simultaneous slight on the state of Australian literary culture with the malediction that, were the *Book of Fish* to be published as a novel, "the inevitable might happen: it could win literary prizes" (21). Here Flanagan permits himself a very thinly veiled and confident jibe at the state of Australia's "national literature" (21), in the service of ensuring that the problems of historical fiction are foremost in our minds as we embark on this novel. The self-consciousness here is not merely an act of indulgent dexterity for its own sake, but fulfils the same duty that Genette assigns to paratextual function: a responsibility to operate as a device "always subordinate to 'its' text" (*Paratexts* 12) and "at the service of a better reception for the text" (2).

Weir discusses the "seemingly fluid boundaries separating the Word from the World" in *Gould's Book of Fish*, and Flanagan exploits the permeability of this boundary between fiction and fact, in order to ensure that we read his novel as evidence of the dangers scattered along such an uncertain frontier. Hammet's voice, and indeed his story, embodies an awareness of these dangers. To begin, he warns us against reading his story as any kind of truth: "[d]espite what may come

to seem to you as mounting evidence to the contrary, I value truth, but ... where is truth to be found?" (3-4). This comment displays an acute consciousness of the idea that "true" historical narrative, either in traditional historical documentation or in the context of a novel with a more reliable narrator, might only ever be a fiction.

A self-consciousness about working with history in *Gould's Book of Fish*, however, is not always so superficial. Hammet's livelihood, for example – the forgery of antiques and the sale of forged colonial artefacts to tourists – can be read as a rather blatant metaphor for the historical novelist's art. As Jesse Shipway notes, Hammet's work "mirrors, disreputably and in false, flip-side symmetry, the occupation of Flanagan himself" (133). Hammet feels no compunctions about deceiving the cruise-ship tourists who pay naively for his fakes – on the contrary, he convinces himself that he is able to offer tourists the kinds of fictional comforts they desire (8-9). While he notes rather bitterly that what the customers wilfully believe to be the "flotsam of the romantic past" is in fact "evidence of a rotten present" (5), he still reassures himself that what the tourists are truly interested in buying is "the story, really" (6). What the tourists really want, and, we are encouraged to conclude, what consumers of contemporary Australian historical fiction really want, is simply a good narrative – and if it is adorned with a facade of historical authenticity, no matter how translucent, then so much the better.

The other notable level at which an extended self-consciousness is exhibited is in the artefact of the book itself. Hammet's descriptions of the book and, importantly, his subsequent re-writing of the book, "[f]rom memories, good and bad, reliable and unreliable" (28), patently invite a reading of the object as a metaphor for the novelist's activities in researching and reimagining history. However, in keeping with the slippery nature of signification in *Gould's Book of Fish*, the metaphor is not a clean one; the book sometimes represents the historical archive, sometimes the act of traversing that archive and writing historical fiction, and sometimes the resulting novels. To further complicate the metaphor, there are also times when the book simultaneously represents all three of these levels of historiography. For example, Hammet comments that whenever he opens the *Book of Fish* "what amount[s] to a new chapter miraculously appear[s]" (24).

Here, the book is constructed as a metaphor for the archive itself: for the multiplicitous and incomplete nature of the historical record. As Bloch notes, “knowledge of the past is something progressive which is constantly transforming and perfecting itself” (58), and Hammet’s experience with the *Book of Fish* replicates Bloch’s conception of knowledge of the past. But when Hammet notes that much of the book “seem[s] to concur with the known facts only long enough to enter with them into an argument” (16), and later Gould himself describes his self-referential history as a work of “ludicrous nonsense though not without a curious & sometimes disturbing correspondence to reality” (335), Flanagan is using the book to describe the formal qualities of historical fiction as well as the potential reception of such novels. When Hammet is forced to re-produce the book from memory after the original disappears, he “is no longer sure what is memory and what is revelation” or “[h]ow faithful the story . . . is to the original” (29). These descriptions of the book clearly cast the object as a metaphor for the act of creating historical fiction. Finally, in an example such as “you see, it sometimes seems so elusive, this book, a series of veils, each of which must be lifted and parted to reveal only another of its kind” (32), the book represents the archive, the novelist’s use of the archive, *and* historical fiction.

Another symbolic manifestation of the novel’s complex relationship with history is the image of Hammet pressing his face to the glass of Mr Hung’s fish tank, trying to reach into the tank and trying to reach into history, into fiction, into the narrative – a journey which, through sheer force of will and imagination, he achieves. Here begins his metamorphosis into a weedy seadragon, who in turn was once Gould, and in the novel’s conclusion the three become inseparable as we return to the nursery rhyme lines echoing those of the first chapter, though here the lines are distorted; they are reflected in the same defamiliarising mirrors Flanagan has used to create character names. It is not only the three characters who are inseparable in this last chapter. Flanagan too, as author, is finally conflated with the three; as Mr Hung foreshadows in the first chapter, author and book become indivisible. Although a “*rat-a-tat-tat*” earlier is described as being the sound of Gould’s brush hitting the page (92), the “click-clack” and “*rat-a-tat-a-tat*” which now find their way into the distorted versions of the nursery rhymes (403) might easily be the sound of the author typing the story.

To Flanagan's credit, the fluidity between fact and fiction is such that he manages to convince readers of the essential historical truths of his narrative, though they may be buried beneath strange cross-species metamorphoses, the Commandant's carnivalesque gold mask, the mysterious dissolution of the annotated copy of Gould's original *Book of Fish*, the bizarre homicide committed by Castlereagh the pig, and numerous other magnificent and horrific elements of magic realism in the novel. As evidence of the impact of blurring fact and fiction, Weir, in an otherwise astute analysis of the novel, astonishingly misreads the afterword to *Gould's Book of Fish* as "an actual archive." This critical misinterpretation is testament to the many dangers of writing and reading historical fiction, but the level of self-awareness in *Gould's Book of Fish* is such that these dangers are, paradoxically, recognised and illuminated within the text.

"... dabbling among contradictory ghosts ..."

Recognising these dangers within the narrative is not the only way of acknowledging the difficulties of the form. Although Simpson's novel *The Curer of Souls* does exhibit some historical self-consciousness within the narrative proper, it also contains an authorial postscript which, like Grenville's *Searching for the Secret River*, provides a site for explicit authorial awareness about the practice of writing historical fiction. Unlike *Searching for the Secret River*, Simpson's marginal space is physically appended to the novel, but unlike the prefatory chapter in *Gould's Book of Fish* the commentary on the process of constructing the narrative is quarantined to a paratextual space beyond that narrative. Simpson's voice, then, is permitted to intrude more into the narrative of *The Curer of Souls* than Grenville's into *The Secret River*, but less than Flanagan's into *Gould's Book of Fish*.

Just as in *Gould's Book of Fish* Hammet eases us into an understanding that what we are about to read is a work of imagination which might bear only passing resemblance to any historical truth, in *The Curer of Souls* Lydia Frankland, the central character, carefully guides us along the journey of reimagining a life. Lydia is the stepdaughter of Lady Jane Frankland, who is based on the historical figure Lady Jane Franklin. When we meet her Lydia is in London, sorting through Jane's diaries and letters after her death. The novel

follows Lydia on a voyage back to Port Arthur in Van Diemen's Land, where she had spent a significant part of her childhood, and where she hopes to learn more about Jane's life. The island is now called Tasmania, and Lydia struggles to integrate not only the new name, but the place itself into her own history and memories. In the character of Lydia, Simpson creates a vehicle to convey experiences of, and ideas about, reading historical documents and attempting to piece together lives from them. Although the voice is Lydia's, the experiences, as we learn later in the postscript, were Simpson's own.

While reading Jane's diaries, for example, Lydia finds herself wishing she could "intervene in the past in the same way a writer might decide on a plot for a novel" (46). Lydia could be describing Simpson's own experiences of borrowing from, and reconstructing, the past in order to devise a plot for her historical novel. Similarly, Lydia feels herself to be "dabbling among contradictory ghosts, looking for solutions to her questions" (149). These brief moments of metafiction are dispersed through the novel, as Lydia re-lives history (in this case, often her own personal history) through Jane's words, and with these moments, a concern with the notion of "truth" plagues the novel. Lydia's maxims on truth appear throughout the narrative, for example: "[t]ruth, [Lydia] thought, is a strange thing. It was what she sought, yet now she had found it, she no longer wanted it" (181). This preoccupation with truth emerges particularly towards the end of the novel, when Lydia evaluates her own search: "[w]as the truth important? Lydia battled with the question" (325). Finally, in compiling Jane's diaries for publication, Lydia's conclusion is that truth "[i]s a fine thing as long as it d[oes]n't damage others" and she notes that she has "begun already to edit out the sensitive parts" of Jane's diaries and, therefore, her history (328).

Although *The Curer of Souls* is not told in the first person, Lydia's discussion of truths in relation to researching and re-presenting historical fact clearly evidences a self-conscious authorial awareness. Lydia's experience can be read as Simpson's commentary on her own reading of Jane Franklin's diaries, and on her decisions about how to manipulate these documents. In fact, given the thinly veiled names of historical figures in *The Curer of Souls* – "Frankland" for "Franklin," "O'Mara" for "O'Hara" – perhaps we are being invited to read "Lydia" as a thinly veiled version of "Lindsay"?

But this consciousness about the writing process in *The Curer of Souls* is not fully embedded in the narrative, as it is in *Gould's Book of Fish*. Instead, Simpson straddles the divide between a traditional form of historical narrative, where the narrative voice never steps outside its own reality, and one in which a “textual anxiety about history” (Woods 166) makes its presence felt. While some of Lydia’s remarks can be understood as Simpson making cautious comment on the challenges of writing historical fiction, Lydia’s opinions on truth, and on reading and re-experiencing the past, still do not pull her beyond the realist boundaries of her own narrative, like Gould’s and Hammet’s do in *Gould's Book of Fish*. To account for this, Simpson employs the paratextual convention of the authorial postscript.

It is in the “Author’s Note” to *The Curer of Souls* that Simpson explicitly comments on her own creative process, beginning with the justification for her decision to fictionalise Jane Franklin’s story – despite the fact that she set out on her research intending a biographical work. Like Grenville, Simpson worked on her creative text as part of her doctorate at the University of Technology, Sydney, and the text was therefore accompanied by an exegesis from which it seems likely that Simpson has extracted material to fill her postscript. Not only is this generative situation similar to Grenville’s in writing *The Secret River*, but the justifications echo each other also: Simpson says that her “original intention ... was to write a work of non-fiction, but there were too many gaps ... too much that was left unsaid” (338). In Grenville’s paratextual commentary, in order to fill the archives’ “absolute silence” on certain matters (*Searching* 95), she finds herself “leaping to fill in the blanks” with fictional constructions (81): this despite the fact that she, like Simpson, when beginning her research had hoped that perhaps “there might be a non-fiction book of some kind in the material” (14). Both Grenville and Simpson here self-consciously anticipate the reception of their texts and of their creative decisions.

For Simpson, the postscript is an important vehicle for justifying and explaining her fictional work. She details where she has taken actual events from “primary source material” (345), and where she has invented characteristics without archival basis, particularly where these might be seen to be negative characteristics. It seems she shares Lydia’s belief that truth is acceptable as long

as it does not hurt anyone, and so she is careful to note where she has strayed from this “truth.” She also expresses the caution that even she, as author, “cannot always say where the real begins and the imagined ends” (339), paratextually skirting the dangers for the historical novelist of those porous boundaries Weir identifies between “World” and “Word.”

The difference between Flanagan’s and Simpson’s methods for incorporating a self-conscious awareness about these porous boundaries is that Simpson accomplishes only the fragile intensity of “dabbling” where Flanagan is prepared to risk whatever is necessary for the sake of a sweeping narrative: his text makes no apology to living descendants of historical figures, or to individuals who might value a sacred settlement history. Flanagan’s approach to the appropriation of the archive is audacious, grand, and flippantly confident, and the result is a novel which challenges readers and makes firm decisions, which are justified self-referentially along the way, about the liberties it is prepared to take in creating a fictional narrative out of the historical record. Simpson, on the other hand, makes careful note of the respect she intends to pay the archive.

For Simpson, unlike Flanagan, truth, or perhaps even more restrictively a deference to that truth, must come before narrative manipulation during the creative process. The result is a novel which is neither “true” nor especially engaging in its fictionalisation. In altering the final letters of her name, Simpson does not succeed in remaking Lady Jane Franklin as a more intriguing, narratively satisfying, or artistically complete individual. As Cameron Woodhead has noted, Simpson’s “meticulously researched historical fiction” relies on “her own historical obsessions” and “extensive readings” of colonial documents, and as a result the novel’s plot is “weak and faintly realised.” The tentative metafictional references to the difficulties of truth and fiction, and the brief and obsequious Author’s Note, are not sufficiently caesuric or destabilising to allow *The Curer of Souls* to move beyond its archival origins and the limitations of such a dependence. Nor do they integrate a sophisticated metafictional awareness into the text itself. This is not simply because the metafictional presence is very faint: other Australian historical novels manage, with only a subtle employment of such devices, to enrich their historiographic awareness and sophistication. Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda* (1997), for example, contains what Sigrun Meinig describes

as “rare [but] well-placed and decisive disturbances” (149). But *The Curer of Souls* does not capitalise on its own metafictional content. Instead, the novel’s representation of time and history remains trapped in the conservative, realist, “comforting, coherent” mode described by Morrison (34). This complacency echoes that which McKenna identifies in decrying what he calls “comfort history[ies]” – narrative histories which refuse to confront and interrogate challenging truths (“Comfort History” 15).

“ ... history being made in front of your eyes ... ”

Unlike in *The Curer of Souls*, a confident metafictional representation of the act of making (and re-making) history is present from the very beginning of *Joan Makes History*, Grenville’s 1988 narration of Australian colonial history. This historiographic self-consciousness is impossible to ignore, and confronts us in the title, even before we traverse this first paratextual threshold to reach the text.

The Joan of the title refers to the compound character composed of the many Joans who permeate the text, navigating Australia’s colonial past and taking great pride in “making history” before our very eyes. The Joan who first introduces herself to us in the prologue is the central character in the text’s overarching narrative. This contemporary Joan relates her life in a series of chapters each entitled “Joan,” juxtaposed beside the chapters entitled “Joan Makes History” which are subtitled with scene numbers, emphasising the performative aspect of constructing and narrating histories. As Paul Carter asserts, “[a]ccording to our historians ... Australia was always simply a stage where history occurred, history a theatrical performance” (xiv). The performance scenes inject Joan into a number of pivotal and familiar moments in Australian history, giving us a subaltern version of the event. Each of the historical Joans colonising these scenes speaks to us in first person, and explicitly reminds us that every “Joan Makes History” chapter represents merely one in a multitude of silenced histories.

In the first “Joan” section, Joan concludes her introduction with “watch, and you will see history being made in front of your eyes” (7). As with the early moments of *Gould’s Book of Fish*, this provides clear instruction to the reader: the journey on which we are about to embark is indeed one of historical events, but of historical events re-made before our very eyes, in a form of narrative designed to

entertain and amaze. It is almost as though Joan (and through her, Grenville) is beginning to conjure histories for us, and is launching the theatrical production that she and her cast of everywoman-Joans will perform for us.

Two pages later, the first of the historical Joans assures us that the narrative she is about to relate is not the familiar and authorised history of Captain Cook's landing but is, instead, her own version of events. The instruction to watch history being made before our eyes ensures that we read Joan's claim – "[h]ere, told now for the first time, is the true and complete account of that famous event" (9) – with a sense of irony. We understand, already, that the nature of "truth" here is dependent on its fictional context. This exemplifies the level of self-consciousness throughout the novel – particularly in the historical Joan sections, but also in the contemporary Joan's story. The novel's compound Joan, in her self-conscious reconstruction of history, is clearly differentiated from the other characters who lack this extra-realist perspective. For example, when the historical Joan of Scene Two, in an incarnation as a "snivelling, lecherous" convict (29), declares that she will "make history" (30) by jumping into the water at Botany Bay, her companion, Dot, is completely flummoxed by the notion. Joan scornfully notes that "Dot had never heard of history, you could tell by the way she looked scared and opened her mouth as if to understand this difficulty by eating it" (30).

Like the historical Joans, the contemporary Joan is determined to construct grand futures for herself, which she envisions as "histories ... each one larger than the last" (43). These range from her youthful plans to be "*a great writer*" (here, perhaps, Grenville surfaces for a moment) to her hopes to "*be Prime Minister*" (43). The schoolgirls who surround Joan, and for whom she has little respect, are "blind to the beckoning finger of history" (43). This serves to heighten the impact of Joan's preoccupation with history. It is Joan alone, in each of her many manifestations, who shares with us an awareness of history, and a self-reflexivity regarding her own role in this narrative of reconstructing and reimagining history.

In *Joan Makes History*, the level of metafiction exposes the artifice underlying Grenville's reconstructions of history. *The Secret River* fundamentally lacks this, and, even when reading the composite narrative and thus incorporating the degree of awareness afforded by the autobiographical forum of *Searching for*

the Secret River, the narrative is never as self-conscious about its methods of “doing history” as is Grenville’s earlier novel. Even the contemporary Joan is capable of drawing our attention to the constructed nature of her narrative, and thus of all histories. For example, in analysing her own existence with reference to the corporeal experience of pregnancy, Joan says “I had a mad feeling that if only I could step out of time and place for a short spell, and collect my thoughts, it would be all right” (108). She is reminding us that this is the privilege of the writer of historical fiction – to be able to step out of the time and place they are writing about. As Meinig notes, fiction is one of many modes of representation which “do not operate as mirrors of reality, but possess performative potential that transforms that which is represented narratively and artistically” (43). This is something Grenville appears to have wilfully forgotten by the time she writes *The Secret River*. In telling Thornhill’s story, it seems Grenville is desperate to step back into his time and experience life as it “really was” for him – which, of course, is impossible – rather than working with her awareness that she is reimagining his era from a position which is distinctly, empirically, and teleologically outside of this era.¹⁰

Joan Makes History shares with *Gould’s Book of Fish* a reluctance to assign too much significance to names. While it is important to the novel that the name “Joan” is recycled and rehearsed repeatedly (interestingly, the contemporary Joan is a character who has already appeared in *Lilian’s Story*, an earlier novel of Grenville’s), names do not seem to belong firmly to other characters. This is manifest in three slightly different ways. Firstly, there are numerous characters identified only by occupation or role. For example, in Scene One Joan refers to “the Captain,” “the Swede,” “the artists,” and “the dandy” so that the characters’ roles in their narratives come, metonymically, to stand in for their identities. Again, this emphasises the slippery nature of historical “fact,” as well as Joan’s superiority in not only being aware of her history and her ability to make history, but – perhaps because of this awareness – in managing to retain a stable identity

¹⁰ In one of the less problematic sections of her *Quarterly Essay* argument against *The Secret River*, Clendinnen elegantly elucidates the difficulties and dangers of this kind of imaginative time travel, when she criticises the “contemporary delicacy of mind” which can infect a narrative as a result of such naivety (19). Hirst, similarly, asserts that “[t]he leading character in [Grenville’s] novel is not an eighteenth-century waterman at all; it is herself” (85).

throughout that history. This is not undermined by the fact that her identity is of a compound, “everywoman” kind, rather than an individualistic one.

Secondly, several important characters, including the contemporary Joan’s parents, remain nameless for significant lengths of time, being referred to only by physical descriptions: for example, “the thin woman” (her mother) and “the balding man” (her father). It is not until the third contemporary Joan scene that Joan’s family acquires a name – Radulescu – and even this is only bestowed upon them in order to take it away again. For less than two paragraphs Joan’s family history has a genealogical truth; then, in an effort to make them “*loyal Australians*,” her father re-names them “Redman,” fictionalising their history as he does so (41).

Finally, the signification of proper nouns is disempowered through the failure of lesser characters to completely inhabit their own names. For example, “Jack the cabin boy” from Scene One (19), an “extra” in one of Joan’s many historical journeys, relinquishes his appellation to Joan herself, who, in a later contemporary chapter, becomes “Jack, the friendliest of the waiters” when she chooses to “[make a] bit of history ... as a man” (187). Similarly, there is a “Will” in Scene Six, and a “William” in both Scene Seven and Scene Eight. Joan expresses no surprise at encountering these proliferating Wills, and there are no direct links between them to indicate that these characters might be played by the same actor in each of the possible histories. There is simply the implication that signification is as slippery as any other “fact,” and as malleable and vulnerable to the will (or multiple “wills”?) of the writer. Once again, this example embeds a self-consciousness about the role of the writer in reconstructing histories through fiction. As Waugh observes, in metafiction character names can “display the arbitrary control of the writer, and the arbitrary relationships of language” (94); metafiction seeks to “focus attention ... on the problem of reference” (93). In turn, readers may be forced to account for these relationships without assistance.

It should be remembered, too, that a William appears in *The Secret River*. Yet while the multiplicity of Williams in *Joan Makes History* can be seen to raise the problematic issue of reference, in *The Secret River* this does not occur.

Searching for a secret self-consciousness

It is clear that *The Secret River* does not offer the kind of historiographic metafictional commentary present in these cognate novels reimagining Australian colonial history. However, in pairing *The Secret River* with *Searching for the Secret River*, there is a self-consciousness to be read in the relationship between the two texts. The two texts' fundamental connection allows Grenville's self-consciousness in *Searching for the Secret River* to be read into *The Secret River*, even though the texts are physically divided. This returns to the concept of a "phantom limb" sensation addressed at the outset of this study: a subtextual awareness, when reading only a single text, that there is an absent compositional element. Reading *The Secret River* alone does not provide evidence of any self-consciousness about fictionalising colonial events, and about the potential implications of such creative decisions, such as is provided by the other historical novels examined here. A critical reading of *The Secret River* without this awareness is destined to invite the sorts of condemnation from historians which *The Secret River* has indeed received. These censures suggest that Grenville has not adequately acknowledged the difficulties of constructing historical fictions within the volatile literary and cultural environment of an anxious postcolonial society like Australia. But when reading the composite narrative, we can take into account the perspectives of *Searching for the Secret River*, where Grenville discusses the challenges implicit in her endeavour.

A simple illustration of this capacity of the composite narrative can be seen in the conclusions of both texts. As discussed in chapter one, both texts end with their central characters exhibiting a strong sense of discontent. These experiences of Kate's and Thornhill's may each be read as partial representations of an essential disillusionment within the composite narrative itself. This central experience is in turn a representation of actual cultural and social issues underlying both texts: Grenville demonstrates a common experience of postcolonial settler anxiety, and dissatisfaction with a collective Australian inability to resolve – or even begin to understand how to resolve – issues of reconciliation. This holistic reading is only available through the composite narrative and without it, because of their limited narrative scope, both Kate's and Thornhill's experiences may only ever be read as individual and idiosyncratic responses to their own searches for belonging.

CONCLUSION

Continuing Histories

As I reached the closing stages of this thesis, Grenville published her next novel, *The Lieutenant*, another work of historical fiction exploring early Australian colonial settlement. *The Lieutenant* is the story of Daniel Rooke, Grenville's fictional version of the lieutenant and scholar William Dawes (1762-1836). Dawes arrived in New South Wales on the First Fleet and subsequently created a significant record of the language of the Aboriginal people in the area (Mander-Jones). The source for much of Dawes's knowledge of the language was a young Aboriginal girl with whom he shared many hours of conversation. Dawes documented these conversations meticulously in his diaries, on which Grenville has relied for all her dialogue between Rooke and Tagaran, her fictionalised version of the Aboriginal girl. In Dawes's recorded dialogues, Grenville has found a means to access the Aboriginal "consciousness" which she was so reluctant to explore in *The Secret River* (Searching 199). In *The Lieutenant*, Grenville maintains her refusal to invent any Aboriginal dialogue, this time claiming that Dawes's notebooks offer her "in writing the conversations" she lacked for *The Secret River*, and with the support of these notebooks, she feels free to invent "a context in which those conversations could happen" ("Interview with Kerry O'Brien"). This recalls Grenville's surprisingly credulous reliance on the veracity of historical documents while researching *The Secret River*. In *The Lieutenant*, she once again fails to interrogate the potential for editorial omissions or biases in her primary sources, instead leaning heavily on these documents. Critics including Kerry Goldsworthy have also exhibited this credulity regarding the archive. Goldsworthy's conviction that the use of only "actual" historical dialogue allows Grenville to evade "the pitfalls of representing Aboriginal characters and consciousness from a 21st-century white perspective" is remarkably naive. Clearly, Grenville reimagines these historical conversations from her own twenty-first-century white perspective, and thus *The Lieutenant* is inevitably bound to stimulate controversies like those incited by *The Secret River*.

Located in similar chronological and geographical sites to *The Secret River*, and addressing similar issues of colonial settlement and racial contact, *The*

Lieutenant is already extending the debates raised by *The Secret River*. Despite this, Grenville engages in a self-conscious performance of her apprehensions about provoking a further fray between historians and novelists. In *The Lieutenant's* Author's Note – which Clarke attacks for its “muted pugnacity” (“Still Not Settled”) – Grenville asserts that *The Lieutenant* “is a novel; it should not be mistaken for history” (307). However, the novel itself takes no intrinsic steps to prevent such provocations. Like *The Secret River*, it presents its alternative history in a traditional realist form which promotes singular rather than divergent readings of its narrative, and, as with her previous novel, Grenville has already made numerous public claims for the historical validity of the events and relationships with which she constructs her novel. In doing so, she stands by her endorsement of the coherent and linear forms of historical narrative which Morrison and McKenna denounce as complacent and dangerous. Her insistence on the efficacy of such forms means that, as Clarke contends, “*The Lieutenant* is harder to defend than *The Secret River* against McKenna’s accusation that novelists slip too readily towards ‘comfort history’” (“Still Not Settled”).

This thesis critiques Grenville’s compulsive fascination for narrative revisitation of both personal and cultural histories, and identifies formal and thematic symptoms of nostalgia which evince not only Grenville’s but also a broader contemporary Australian literary and societal slide towards “comfort histories.” Grenville’s recent works exhibit an enduring need to textualise the national settlement history of which she finds herself, often uncomfortably, a part. The popular reception of, and critical response to, such formal conservatism indicates a hope that such histories might stabilise our notions of belonging, thereby alleviating an anxious postcolonial condition. That such texts are insistently generated, and discussed in both popular and literary milieux, suggests a particular willingness of contemporary Australian literature to accommodate an ongoing examination of the experience of colonial subjectivity. Contemporary social and cultural inclinations to negotiate a historically and politically acceptable sense of belonging resonate in the Australian literary zeitgeist, and are embodied in the composite narrative of *The Secret River* and *Searching for the Secret River*, and in Grenville’s reassuringly “comfortable” stylistic approach to unsettling histories.

The Lieutenant, like *The Secret River*, maintains a realist coherence which precludes the intrusion of a metafictional voice. While in the composite narrative *Searching for the Secret River* provides a reprieve for those critics unsatisfied by the traditional realist mode of *The Secret River*, in *The Lieutenant* Grenville actively resists Scholes's assertion that traditional historical fiction is a form in need of renaissance, and refuses to compromise or challenge the authoritative voice of her narrative with a metafictional component. Instead, she concludes her Author's Note with the assertion that if it were not for the inspiration of historical fact, *The Lieutenant* "could not have been imagined" (307). For a writer who is (according to the novel's dust jacket) at her "peak," this seems a curiously disempowering final word to offer on the agency of the fiction writer.

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