

Telling Stories of Colonial Encounters: Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant* and *Sarah Thornhill*

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Kate Grenville's concern with family stories and past discovery, which has influenced most of her narrative, has been a prominent feature of her latest novels from *The Secret River* (2005) to the most recent *One Life: My Mother's Story* (2015). Giving evidence of a fruitful interrelation, for the purposes of fiction, between official historical records and unofficial storytelling, Grenville admits having drawn extensively on personal anecdotes and episodes handed down orally by her mother and grandmother when writing her three history-based novels: *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant* (2008) and *Sarah Thornhill* (2011). In these novels, indeed, the overlapping of personal and historical planes result in the importance of spoken (or unspoken) words that give shape to the relationships of Grenville's fictional characters and, at the same time, provide the reader with an alternative, subversive version of historical knowledge. It is by telling their own instalment of the story and by speaking to each other (or, alternatively, by remaining silent) that the characters in the three novels shed new light on the dark side of white settlement. As a matter of fact, the trilogy, which covers the first fifty years of white Australian settlement, investigates into the national past in a way that contributes to the dismantling of old stories on the sacrifice and mateship of heroic explorers and brave pioneers, constructed and promoted by what is generally known, in the expression coined by Russell Ward, as the "Australian Legend"¹. By telling stories of horrors and blood, of violence and misappropriation, of guilt and shame, the three novels challenge and reject the narratives of a mythic past that had shaped and celebrated the nationalistic Legend of legitimate and egalitarian white 'Australianness'. Instead of "all those tales that had only told half the story, and left out the shadows" (Grenville, "Searching"), Grenville's novels aim to tell those stories that had been buried under the splendour of the Legend, whose over-privileged male, white-settler version had eclipsed the presence and massacres of Indigenous people and marginalized the perspective of women. But, above all, they narrate stories that tell, stories in which people strive to talk, to communicate, to denounce, to let things be known, which may be regarded as a first step in the process of reassessment of historical truth and reconciliation² between Indigenous and white Australians towards a new concept of national belonging.

I am aware of the wide-ranging and heated debate about a novelist's use and abuse of history, and the risk for white Australian writers of "whitewashing" the past that these novels (*The Secret River* in particular) have given rise to.³ I aim here to focalize not on "contested territory" (Bradley 24) of literature and history, but on the importance of (story)telling and to investigate into the function of the spoken word in the different colonial encounters portrayed by Grenville's trilogy. In an interview with Ramona Koval, Grenville claims that the clash between settlers and Aborigines originated mainly from the "tragic inability to communicate across a gulf of culture" (Grenville, "Interview with R. Koval"). Starting from this assumption, my point is to observe how in the three novels communication and, conversely, incommunicability and miscommunication (implying misunderstandings, the refusal to speak and the conceiving of secrets), play a fundamental role in establishing, or failing to establish, relationships and in creating, or in trying to solve, conflicts, both between Europeans (or, later, white Australians) and Indigenous Australians, as well as among Europeans themselves.

In this light, the capacity of literature to tell and share stories, recreate social and cultural contexts, unveil hidden histories, propose different perspectives, provoke discussions, and, in a sense, provide a therapeutic effect, appears to be crucial in novels that are engaged with the issues of atonement and reconciliation raised since the late 1990s by the broader context of the so-called "Australian Sorry Movement". Following Prime Minister John Howard's refusal, at the first Convention on Reconciliation in May 1997, to formally apologize to Indigenous Australians on behalf of the Australian government, a series of symbolic acts of reparations (a "sorry movement" indeed) took place all over Australia in order to express non-Indigenous people's regret and sense of communal shame. It is worth mentioning the 1998 march across the Sydney Harbour Bridge; the signing throughout the country of "Sorry Books" containing official apologies; the institution in 1998 of a National Sorry Day as a form of commemoration. This national battle for apology finally obtained in 2008 the much expected apologies of the Australian parliament in the person of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

Grenville's trilogy is meant to contribute to the fictional genre defined by Sue Kossew as "the Sorry Novel" ("Saying Sorry" 172), indicating a series of narratives by non-Indigenous Australian writers. These narratives emerge from a cultural climate of postcolonial collective guilt for the dispossession and the stolen generations of Indigenous Australians. They attempt to express Australia's sense of contemporary shame for benefiting from the legacies of colonization. "Sorry novels", which have been very popular in Australia in the last decades⁴, have been an object of controversy for the ambivalence that critics such as Weaver-Hightower have seen on the issue of non-Indigenous collective guilt and on the defence (or even repression) they can provide against this sense of guilt: "By expressing collective guilt, [these] novels act as a sort of cleansing ritual for readers who identify with characters and experience catharsis... [They] can also

serve to depict the conflict of settlement as an event of only the past, safely displacing guilt onto one's ancestors" (138-139). If this position can certainly be subscribed, it is nevertheless undeniable that narrative texts like Grenville's can have a crucial role in the denunciation of colonial injustices and in the ongoing debate about the need to disclose past violence and talk about it with critical awareness and, above all, with a view to making it a starting point towards political and social changes. As Sue Kossew underscores, by reworking, rewriting or reimagining history, and thus resisting the comfortable narratives of the past, these novels can make a political point about the present ("Saying Sorry" 172). Telling these stories, therefore, becomes fundamental to prevent forgetfulness, avoid celebratory positions, and fill in the emptiness left by historical silence and repressed guilt. As Anthony Moran suggests, commenting on former Prime Minister Paul Keating's 1992 Redfern Speech, a sense of guilt should be approached, "not with fear but in a spirit of reparation" (693).

In the three novels analyzed here, Grenville goes back to the colony's early history of white settlement by taking the recorded past as the starting point of her novels, and by carefully revisiting real historical characters based on official notebooks and accounts of the times of the penal colony (*The Lieutenant*). Grenville then avails herself of stories passed on in her family for five generations, as well as reminiscences from other people (*The Secret River* and *Sarah Thornhill*). The process of storytelling is here a relational activity, in the sense given by Kristeva (Reineke 73), that is, an exchange of stories shared among and through others entailing "the co-implication of selves and others in the loop of storytelling" (Davis 133), and giving rise to memory and testimony. Moreover, storytelling appears to be both the source of Grenville's writing and its target because, as the writer herself underlines, her aim is not to reconstruct the past but to tell stories set in the past that help understand the present (Grenville, "Background"). In this light, by investigating the guilt and responsibilities at the core of colonial encounters, storytelling becomes, in the three novels, further evidence of the bond with the afore-mentioned Australian Sorry Movement, in which the practice of telling individual stories was a fundamental step in the discovery and denunciation of a too long suppressed past. A project, undertaken in 1995 by the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia, and significantly called "Telling Our Stories", for instance consisted in interviewing Indigenous people who had been removed from their families and in collecting their testimonies in a report (later to be used in the 1997 *Bringing them Home Report*).

Each of the three novels offers different perspectives of the colonial encounters between Europeans and Indigenous Australians during the first half century of white settlement (1788-1838). But despite presenting different stages of evolution (or involution) of the co-presence and interaction between the two groups, the diverse "contact zones" where these encounters take place, remain, as Mary Louise Pratt observes, "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, in highly asymmetrical relations of

domination and subordination” (6). In order to follow the development of this approach to white-Indigenous encounters, I will consider the novels in the chronological succession of the events occurring in them and not in their order of publication.

The Lieutenant (2008): Meeting Through Language

The Lieutenant (TL) is set at the time of the arrival of the First Fleet in New South Wales in 1788, at the beginning of white invasion. As Grenville points out, in this period of early encounters “there were many different kinds of settlement and many different kinds of settlers”, so the novel gave her “the opportunity to explore a more positive side of that period” (“The Lieutenant: Interview”), when communication and relation between the British soldiers of the penal settlement and the Indigenous people of Australia were to some extent still possible. As a matter of fact, although glimpses of violence, exploitation and 18th-century assumptions of European superiority lie in the background of the novel, the story tells of the friendly relationship and the efforts of conversation between the white protagonist, British officer and astronomer Daniel Rooke, and an Aboriginal girl named Tagaran (based on the historical accounts of William Dawes, a First Fleet officer, and Patyegarang, a young Gadigal girl, respectively). The encounter portrayed here opens the way to expectations of mutual understanding between two cultures by means of linguistic exchanges; nevertheless, this meeting through language is not presented in the romantic terms of “first contact” as national myth. Indeed, as Eleanor Collins observes, if national myths are supposed to tell a shared history that gives the idea of a nation’s coherence and validity, the stories of first contact at the beginning of Australian white history are instead stories of division, misunderstanding and miscommunication (169). Grenville presents the story of this exceptional friendship as the story of two individuals, and not of two nations. The story is narrated in the third person but it is mainly conveyed through Rooke’s consciousness, which contributes to shifting the narrative focus on a personal experience that remains forcibly constricted within the boundaries of the colonial system.

When the British officers on board the convict transport *Sirius* (one of the ships of the *First Fleet* whose actual, historical name Grenville chose to retain) land on the shores of New South Wales, the opportunity to find a channel of communication with the natives becomes one of their main concerns, although determined by diverse reasons for each of them. For the Governor General, who instructs his men to treat the Indigenous people “with amity and kindness” and to “open friendly intercourse with them” (TL 62), the need for a peaceful dialogue is evidently a matter of political convenience: “Without their cooperation, the progress and even the existence of this colony will be threatened. His Majesty has instructed me to establish good relations with the greatest possible despatch, and to become familiar with the native tongue as swiftly as opportunity may make possible” (TL 62).

Cordial relations with the natives are quite obviously not dictated by respect for the Other but by the Mother country's fear that the survival of the colony might be put at risk without the collaboration of native people. For Captain Silk, instead, meeting the natives is a personal opportunity: "New South Wales was not simply four years of full pay and the chance of advancement... For Silk the place promised other riches. New South Wales was part of a man's destiny" (*TL* 66). His obsession to put down on the page all sorts of verbal or physical exchange and to find the right words to amuse the English reader is but a reflection of the colonizer's need to contain, rationalize, and categorize the alterity of the colonized in order to dominate it: "Silk's impulse was to make the strange familiar, to transform it into well-shaped smooth phrases" (*TL* 139). The written word is a colonial weapon for Silk, and storytelling a sterile act of self-fulfilment meant to exploit the encounter as an exotic colonial adventure that is not supposed to open up a new world but, on the contrary, to cage its strangeness and tame it with familiar English words: "The natives are what I need", he admits, underlining that "the worse it is to experience, the better it will read on the page" (*TL* 87). For officer Gardiner, the encounter with Aboriginal people is the result of a mandatory act of miscommunication and violence that awakens his European guilty conscience: "I wish to God I had not done it! He should not have given the order, but I wish to God I had not obeyed!" (*TL* 113). Ordered by the Governor to take part in an expedition to kidnap two natives, with a wild view to forcibly getting from them what they are unwilling to give, that is, their language and their respect, Gardiner will be haunted by remorse: "By God you should have heard them crying out, it would break your heart... They may be savages, we call them savages. But their feelings are no different from ours" (*TL* 111). The profound sense of shame Gardiner is invested by finally engages with a question at the core of the whole trilogy. This question works for Grenville as a sort of metanarrative review of the role of literature: "Who will say how it really was? Tell the truth about it?" (*TL* 112). Language and the act of telling, in this case, paradoxically contribute to concealing rather than revealing, suppressing rather than confessing. The violence of colonization is indeed concealed under a fake profession of benevolence, as the Governor's words pretend to do: "On the matter of the natives... it is a source of regret that they have proved so reluctant to come among us... We have nothing but good will towards them" (*TL* 107-8). The grievous act of kidnapping is unspeakable for Gardiner, as words fail him when he confesses it to Rooke ("his voice cracked so he had to cough and start again"; "He was silent for so long that Rooke thought he might say no more", *TL* 109-110). Turned into just another exotic resource to be stolen, possessed and moulded to the colonizer's own needs, the natives' language is also reduced to unspoken expressions of grief, with the cries and wails of the two kidnapped Aboriginal men that will keep tormenting Gardiner's conscience.

Lieutenant Rooke represents a thoroughly different kind of approach to language. The latter perceives communication with the

natives in sublime terms, as “one universe in the act of encountering another” (TL 137). Unlike Captain Silk, Rooke is attracted to the strangeness of this new world and wishes to enter and lose himself in it: “The unknown was his daily bread... Difference held no fear for him. He knew that strangeness was commonplace when you inhabited it” (TL 152-153). For that reason, when some natives begin to visit his observatory and interact with him, he gets down to a meticulous work of word recording, filling his notebooks with newly learned words and expressions, but he soon realizes that this is not the right approach. Language is more than a list of words, and learning it means “entering into a relationship with the people who spoke it with you” (TL 233); a journey “into the cosmos they inhabited” (TL 154).

In a different perspective from the Governor’s, the encounter becomes for him an attempt to interact on equal terms, but in order to make this possible he must get rid of the chains of his Western status and dismiss the hierarchical relationship between colonizer and colonized. As an officer of the British Empire, in spite of his good intentions, he necessarily occupies the position of colonizer. Nevertheless, being mostly stationed in an observatory built on a promontory, far from the main settlement, that is, from the centre of colonial power, he finds himself in a sort of “Third Space”. As theorized by Homi Bhabha, the Third Space represents the precondition for the articulation of cultural difference and for the production of meaning (*Commitment* 157). As Bhabha puts it: “The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space” (*Commitment* 156). And he adds: “The intervention of the Third Space ... challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force” (156). In Grenville’s novel, the “I” of Rooke and the “You” of the natives, most notably of Tagaran, are thus “mobilized” in the passage through the Third Space of the observatory, where colonial rules collapse and the sense of historical identity of both characters is indeed challenged. Here Rooke is brought down to the level of an everyman, an unremarkable, possibly naked, Other in spite of his uniform of white British officer. He is divested of his historical and cultural roles which, in the ambivalent Third Space of the observatory, lose their hierarchical importance. The fact that Rooke learns that he and his people are called *berewalgal* further confirms Bhabha’s argument that the Third Space ensures the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity (157). In the Gadigal language, spoken by the indigenous people living along the southern side of Port Jackson, the word means the “great-distance-off people” (TL 143). This makes him realize that “none of the mysterious belongings or impressive skills of the white men – the ships, the muskets that could split a shield, the telescopes, the gold braid – gave them any special standing. They were just one more tribe” (TL 143). Again, in the Third Space, cultural symbols lose their original meaning, which is no longer fixed, as “even

the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew” (Bhabha, *Commitment* 157).

Moreover, when Rooke tries to pronounce the word *berewalgal* he can only produce “a formless bubble of language such as an infant might make” (TL 141). As Lynette Russell points out, his position is turned into that of a child who is learning to speak for the first time (205), which once again underlines how Rooke has been cut down to size as a man of culture and power, and as a human being. The uneven power relationship of colonizer/colonized is here overturned: it is the Aboriginal Warungin who re-names the colonizers and teaches Rooke how to correctly pronounce the word, and has the authority to behave like an adult with a child who toils to understand: “Warungin said the word again, and Rooke tried once more...Warungin nodded curtly, as if thinking, *as near as he is going to get*” (TL 141). On the other hand, Rooke, the colonizer, is the one who has to be guided, and is hungry for the knowledge of a world to which he does not belong.

In this reversal of roles, the language of the natives also disempowers the English language of its colonial hierarchical superiority and, above all, ‘contaminates’ it: “The natives not only knew many words of English, but had already made them part of their own tongue, altering them as their grammar required. *Bread* was now *breado*, not simply borrowed but possessed” (TL 177). In a similar way, Rooke’s language is changed by the encounter, and is gradually hybridized with the words and grammar structures of the Gadigal language: “He was not simply learning another language. He was re-making his own. A boundary was being crossed and erased. Like ink in water, one language was melting into another” (TL 177-178). As in Bhabha’s definition of hybridity, this in-between language breaks the border between self and other: “By exploring this hybridity...we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (*Commitment* 157).

For Rooke, the use of language and the scope of communication are a quest towards human reciprocity and respect. The encounter built on these terms becomes a site of cross-cultural storytelling: Rooke and Tagaran tell each other stories, exchange anecdotes and jokes, share knowledge, and this fruitful talking is in stark contrast with the silence, the refusal to speak with which the Indigenous people react to the invasion of the Europeans. This silence is “neither war nor peace, but a null that paralysed” (TL 108). Silence is a form of colonial resistance, which implies the refusal to encourage any contact, to enter any relationship with the colonizer that might prove fatal. On the other hand, the reaction of the Europeans is to fill in the void left by the natives’ silence with their own voice of violence and exemplary punishment that soon turns into the “unspeakable”, into secrets that remain buried under the white version of history.

Hence, even if the encounter between Tagaran and Rooke renders permeable the boundaries between their own opposed categories as black and white, colonized and colonizer, this is limited to their own personal experience, while their historically determined identities, instead, cannot be changed. As Rooke himself points out: “if you were

part of that machine, you were part of its evil”, no matter “how many clever steps you took to make sure it failed” (TL 280). By the end, interaction with the natives through language changes Rooke “syllable by syllable” (TL 280), as he says, into a different man but still he cannot be redeemed from the guilt and shame of his own people. The gulf of culture that had been bridged by communication is finally reopened when Rooke is sent back to Britain for his insubordination. Tagaran and he are unable to speak to each other because “there was nothing to say” (TL 301) to contrast the iron laws of place and time, but still their silence is more eloquent than any words.

The Secret River (2005): Miscommunication and Silence

The possibility of conversation/communication envisaged and tested in *The Lieutenant*, although on a very personal level only, is violently brought to an end in *The Secret River* (SR). Set some twenty years later, the encounter of the growing population of free settlers and ex-convicts with the Indigenous people results in the violent usurpation and dispossession of the latter. Here verbal exchange is replaced by misunderstanding and miscommunication, and scenes of pervasive, unbearable silence predominate. This is a different kind of silence, though, from the one that leaves Rooke and Tagaran with nothing to say in the face of the overbearing weight of their historical roles. In this context instead, silence is meant to hush stories that cannot be told, to conceal the unspeakable that is not to be revealed. It is what Professor W.E.H Stanner, in the Boyer Lectures delivered in 1968 and broadcast on ABC Radio National, labelled as “The Great Australian Silence,” that has suppressed the secret river (hence Grenville’s title) of blood in Australian history.

At the very outset of the narrative, the first encounter between William Thornhill, an English convict deported to the penal colony of New South Wales, and an Aboriginal man, appearing from the forest with a spear, immediately emphasizes the impossibility to communicate and to establish a relationship between invader and colonized. The scene portrays a scared Thornhill commanding the man to go away, and the Aborigine shouting back at him the very same words: “*Damn your eyes be off*, he shouted...*Be off!*... They were close enough to touch. In the fluid rush of speech Thornhill suddenly heard words. *Be off*, the man was shouting. *Be off!* It was his own tone exactly” (SR 5-6). This short symmetrical verbal exchange between two men echoing each other’s words and close enough to touch but extremely distant in their positions, provides the background for miscommunication between settler invaders, who claim their right to own the land “by virtue of [their feet] standing on it” (SR 137), and dispossessed Indigenous people, who strongly assert their belonging to the place. By reiterating the white man’s warning to go away, and adopting the same tone of voice, the Aborigine “mimics” the dominant discourse of the English man (what Bhabha calls “the edict of Englishness”), and metaphorically subverts the position of power of

the colonizer: “For it is between the edict of Englishness and the assault of the dark unruly spaces of the earth, through an act of repetition, that the colonial text emerges uncertainly” (*Signs* 40). Moreover, he entails a reversal of perspective and emphasizes that it is the white man’s presence that threatens the native, not the other way round. The white man is the intruder in a country that does not belong to him: he is the one who is supposed to leave, to be off. In the light of this, the reader is made aware that communication and the establishment of a relation on an equal basis between the two cultures are inconceivable. As Eleanor Collins points out, “if the meeting of two such different cultures were to be peaceful, great imagination would be required... There is no common language or cultural literacy, and there is no empathy” (175-176). In other words, a tragic resolution of the growing tensions, henceforth generated by this gap of communication and by Thornhill’s pragmatic colonial stance and thirst for social ransom, appears to be inevitable.

Indeed, in the third section of the novel, Thornhill, having served his term as a convict, takes (up)⁵ a piece of land on the banks of the Hawkesbury river, but his attempts to settle there, to cultivate the land and to claim his possession of it gradually lead to conflict with the Aborigines who belong to this land. Thus the banks of the river, like the promontory of Rooke’s observatory, become a liminal place, a contact zone, but whereas in *The Lieutenant* contact implies a mutual give-and-take of two different languages constructing a map of relationships and melting the one into the other, here instead it determines a violent collision between different, irreconcilable languages of ownership. There is no intention to mediate here, no attempt to use language as an opportunity of intercultural understanding because, as the narrative voice, reflecting Thornhill’s consciousness, underlines, “there were too many people here, and too little language to go around” (*SR* 151). Language does not create any cultural bridge, on the contrary it paradoxically represents an obstacle to communication and understanding. Miscommunication and misunderstanding between Thornhill and the Aborigines living by the Hawkesbury derive, indeed, not from their reciprocal ignorance of each other’s language, but from a different approach to the world and to concepts of “belonging” and “ownership”. According to Kenyan postcolonial theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, this is what makes a language:

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world... Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human being with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (267)

At this stage of the novel, the impossibility to communicate is actually reflected by a different relationship of the “white invader” and the “black owner” to the surrounding world, and by their opposite perceptions of themselves and others in this world. This is emphasized for example when Thornhill refers to Aboriginal people as animals:

“At last he felt that there was nothing to be done but walk towards the men, speaking as to a couple of wary dogs” (SR 148). And again, unable to understand what they say, he compares their speech to barking: “‘You ain’t making no sense to me, mate’, he said, ‘Not a blinking word... You might as well bloody bark, mate’” (SR 149). In line with a colonizer’s orientalist perspective, by turning to the semantic field of animals, Thornhill puts himself in a position of human superiority (as a white man speaking English). He degrades the Aborigines, as black people speaking “meaningless words” (SR 148), to a de-humanized state, thus preventing any form of mutual understanding and communication on equal terms.

The Aborigines, on the other hand, keep on speaking their language, cutting across Thornhill’s words as if they were of no importance to them: the assumed superiority of the English language, that the white man seems to be taking for granted, is therefore overturned and a gap of incommunicability remains to separate the two sides. This creates a situation of meaninglessness and inaccessibility that is not to be overcome. If in *The Lieutenant* Rooke experiences, in his early attempts to communicate with the Aboriginal girl Tagaran, the same incapacity to get through to her and to be understood, feeling like an infant making “a formless bubble of language” (SR 141), he nevertheless tries hard, and manages, to learn the Gadigal language in order to talk to her. Thornhill, instead, begins “to feel like an imbecile” (SR 148) when he does not understand the words pronounced by the old Aborigine. The term “imbecile”, unlike the vital image of the babbling baby associated to Rooke, conjures up the idea of a static condition of deficiency and, as a consequence, the impossibility of an intelligible verbal exchange between the two parties.

This passage proves how the expectations and fruitful potentials of enlightened scientists like Rooke are supplanted by the eagerness for material possessions of subsequent settlers. But the difference in the approach of Rooke and Thornhill may also be interpreted by considering the implications of *The Secret River* being published before *The Lieutenant*, in spite of being set later. Indeed, the character of Thornhill, who embodies the British colonist, is unwilling to understand the concept of ownership of the land as it is for Aboriginal people, and unable to communicate with them. His depiction is to be read, as suggested above, as evidence of Grenville’s intervention, with this first novel of the trilogy, in the national debate about Australia’s colonial past in a way that intended to present in a new light historical accounts that justified the occupation of the land, and to denounce the silence over violent misappropriation. On the other hand, the portrayal of the protagonist of *The Lieutenant*, Daniel Rooke, based as already mentioned on the educated and proto-liberal historical figure of William Dawes, can also be seen, as Brigid Rooney observes, as a choice of Grenville’s to prove, in response to earlier criticism of *The Secret River*, “that the leap across the divide, from past to present sensibilities, from historical subject to contemporary Australian readers, may not seem so great” (36). Grenville thus challenges allegations by historians like Hirst and Clendinnen to a novelistic

structure that “betrays Thornhill’s character as the mere fabrication or projection of a modern liberal sensibility...[and] remains blind to historical and cultural difference” (28-29).

Thornhill’s incapacity to understand the Aborigines’ sense of belonging to the land, and therefore to create a channel of communication with them, is given further evidence by the recurrent metaphor of a wall and a barrier. The Thornhills conceive their presence on the Australian land in terms of “a line [that] had to be drawn with the blacks” (SR 199). This inscription of fictional power and ownership on the soil not only clashes with the sacredness of Aboriginal rock carvings, but also reveals its inconsistency through the evanescent words pronounced by Thornhill to assert his exclusive presence. Thornhill’s words seem to “drop out of the air” (200); they swell and pass, “leaving silence behind” (200); they “evaporate, thin and silly, into the air” (202); they “flow past the man as if they mattered as little as a current of air” (203). Thornhill’s words reveal the flimsiness of his claims over his alleged piece of land. The Aboriginal woman he attempts to send away reacts by speaking back to him and by breaking off any possibility of accepting what he wants to impose on her: “She began to speak, brusque and emphatic, her deep-set eyes catching the light...After she spoke she turned away as if shutting a door between them” (201). The boundaries and fences that Thornhill wants to build onto the land to delimitate his belongings are metaphorically represented by the wall of incommunicability he himself has erected, thus preventing any opportunity of peaceful coexistence and exchange on equal terms: “A conversation had taken place. There had been an inquiry and an answer. But what enquiry, which answer? They stared at each other, their words between them like a wall” (204). As Dolores Herrero argues, “Will begins to realise that the barrier between self and Other is as insurmountable as one wants to make it” (94).

In the final sections of the novel, when violence takes over, miscommunication becomes silence. Thornhill takes part in a massacre of the Darug people living by the Hawkesbury River, and who are seen by white settlers as a menacing presence. In this context, the slaughter of men, women and children, described in tremendous detail, speaks loud enough, so that meaningful words remain unsaid. Only screaming, roaring and cries occupy the verbal space of the scene, while words fail to express the horror and to produce any meaning:

Thornhill opened his mouth to call out...[he] could hear now that he was roaring just one word. *No, no, no, no, no*...Ned was shouting, his face twisted, furiously tamping down another shot. Thornhill could not hear the words, only saw the frantic movements of his arms...Thornhill could see his mouth making words although he could hear nothing. (SR 319-21)

When devastation and death finally render an apocalyptic scene of “bodies lying like so much fallen timber, the dirt trampled and marked with dark stains” (SR 323), speaking becomes inconceivable, and only “a great shocked silence” remains “hanging over everything” (323).

This very silence dominates the last part of the novel. Thornhill, who has finally been able to own the land and to make it “Thornhill’s Place”, must now cope with the unspeakable. So, referring again to Grenville’s above-quoted sentence, the tragic inability to communicate is not only the cause of violence but also its direct consequence. Silence, like a physical presence, grows between Thornhill and his wife and leaves them unable to speak about the past:

He had not thought that words unsaid could come between two people like a body of water...it was a space they both inhabited. But it seemed there was no way to speak into that silent place. Their lives had slowly grown around it, the way the roots of a river-fig grew around a rock (SR 339).

Silence also relates to the painful shame of Thomas Blackwood, the only white man in the area who was opposed to the massacre and who will not speak to Thornhill anymore. Silence is Black Jack’s refusal to accept food from Thornhill. As the only Aboriginal survivor of the massacre, badly injured and crippled, Black Jack represents the horror and pride of the dispossessed who refuse to communicate with the invaders but borrow their language to claim, “This me...My place” (SR 344). Silence is the patch of bare earth on the site of the massacre burned by the bonfire: “Nothing was written on the ground. Nor was it written on any page” (340). Silence is the alternative version of history; it is the piece on the Gazette telling of natives guilty of “depredations and outrages” and “dispersed” (337) by settlers. It is also the well-made up story of Thornhill who invents for himself a new and less humble identity to match the newly achieved role of owner, of king, as newcomers see him. But silence also stands for the sense of emptiness Thornhill feels in spite of his prosperity, and for something he will never have no matter what has been hushed, buried, hidden, distorted: “A place that was part of his flesh and spirit” (344). In other words, silence is, as Julie McGonegal puts it, the blankness left by secret gaps, occluded histories and suppressed memories “constitut[ing] the forgotten colonial archive that must be opened if reconciliation is even to begin (75).

Sarah Thornhill (2011): Storytelling as Discovery/Recovery

Silence, miscommunication and the unspeakable also frame the narrative texture of *Sarah Thornhill* (ST), a sequel to *The Secret River*, where the encounter is no longer with a colonial Other but, we might say, with one’s own otherness. Hodge and Mishra label this as the “dark side of the dream” having to do with white Australians’ “anxiety about origins” in the “dominant constructions of Australian identity” (23), and “the secret of the Australian obsession with legitimacy” (24). In other words, the white settler’s dream turns into a nightmare of shame and a profound guilt complex for the young generations of white Australians, like the eponymous protagonist Sarah. Here communication and mutual comprehension have failed not only between two different cultures, but also between different generations

within the same culture. The process of storytelling has been abruptly halted due to the colonial culpability of the older generations, and turned into unspeakable secrets hidden in the womb of history. People have become affected by a metaphorical condition of aphasia from which recovery is only possible for the younger ones by means of painful discovery and of a healing recuperation of storytelling. The novel is indeed told from the perspective, and through the voice, of William Thornhill's youngest daughter. Sarah finds herself in the position of having to choose whether to face the consequences of her family's secrets and speak them up or pretend not to see the truth and share a silent guilt.

As apposed to the unfortunate ending in *The Lieutenant*, and to the atrocities of *The Secret River*, the interaction between Europeans and Indigenous Australians at the outset of the novel would appear to be ingrained in the social set-up of 1830s Australia: Sarah is deeply in love with Jack Langland, a boy of mixed aboriginal descent who is also her brother's best friend, and the couple intends to get married. But what at the beginning looks like the harmonious co-existence of a white girl and a half-black boy, apparently treated on equal terms ("What counted was not if you were half darkie, so much as if you could handle an oar or split a log", *ST* 34) turns out to be, right afterwards, only a fictitious acceptance of otherness in a narrow-minded and racist society. Indeed, when the two youths inform Sarah's parents of their plans to get married, they are strongly opposed on the colonial assumptions of Sarah's racial and social superiority:

Over my dead body you'll marry that black!...How dare you, Jack Langland! she shouted. Pushing your way in here!...When you're nothing! she said. Nothing but a black never going to amount to a pinch of dirt!...You're nothing but a black buck got your eye on a white girl (*ST* 134-35).

The verbal violence imbued with orientalist prejudices with which Sarah's stepmother gives vent to her dissent makes it soon clear that it is impossible for Jack and Sarah to envision a future without coping with a past of discrimination, brutality and abuse still unknown to them. If their young age makes them speak the same language of romance and future expectations, the past, instead, speaks against them, destroying their innocent dreams and their capacity to communicate. The terrible secret revealed to Jack by Sarah's stepmother aims at preventing their marriage, and concerns Thornhill's involvement in the massacre of Jack's own people. This strikes the boy with horror and makes him unable to speak and, at the same time, it precludes any verbal intercourse with Sarah and a future with her: "His face was strange. Swollen. As if from one minute to the next he'd got a mortal illness. Lashed out with his arm, pushed me away. Not a word spoken" (*ST* 137).

Likewise, when Sarah discovers the secret some years later, all the stories made up on her father's hard-won respectability and honesty become meaningless: "Such pretty pretty stories. I'd swallowed them down and smiled...Those stories were turned inside out like a bag" (*ST* 255). At the same time, everything around her starts to bespeak

ominous stories which put her own future at risk. She is forced to recalibrate her whole life: the pains for her romantic loss amounts to nothing in this new light, and the prospect of going on with her life on this land and having her daughter grow up on it seems impossible: "It would be with me now till the day I died... You had to live with it, and your children too. And their children, down the line. Whether they knew it or not, they lived in its shadow" (ST 260). The only way to face the future is to be able to cope with the past. She will never forgive her father, not even on his death-bed, but she accepts to carry on her shoulders the burden of her inherited guilt and the responsibility to tell its story.

The fundamental role that storytelling plays in the narrative is also emphasized by the hybrid and experimental style of the novel. This is a style aimed at reflecting Sarah's illiterate voice (her father has afforded her wealth but not education) by means of colourful terms ("Ma had a scurrying way with her, tilting forward from the waist like a hen in a hurry", ST 8), colloquialisms (the use of "of" instead of "have"), ungrammatical constructions ("we wasn't new anything", 3), a limited but locally inflected vocabulary ("no one said *sent out* or *worn the broad arrow*. Now he was what they called an *old colonist*", 5). Free direct speech (inverted commas are abolished) also allows Sarah's spoken word to prevail in a continuous flow of orality rather than to be caught into the written page. Grenville admits having worked hard to give her character "a flavour of illiterate speech" by using "plain simple words on plain simple sentences" ("Sarah Thornhill"). Indeed, the conditions of storytelling (and its therapeutic possibilities) are thoroughly recreated because Sarah is actually 'talking' to the reader as she is unable to write to him. Sarah's orality, which can easily be associated with indigenous traditions of storytelling, seems to implicitly emphasize the in-between, hybridized identity of a nineteenth-century white Australian woman (a "currency") who makes use of a "transcultural form within the contact zone produced by colonization" (Ashcroft et al. 108), in order to "find a way to tell... of those things left undone that we ought to have done, and those things done that we ought not to have done" (ST 303). The author's choice to let an illiterate nineteenth-century woman tell the story seems to be aimed at proving that anyone (no matter what their social position, gender or education are) can have an active role in the country's history making and take a position: Sarah is illiterate but she is not ignorant, she chooses not to be ignorant, she wants to know and, in order not to be an accomplice, she wants to tell. The fact that she cannot read or write does not prevent her from doing so, even if this understandably limits her stories' reach.

Storytelling also has different implications in relation to different characters. Telling Thornhill's secret story becomes a weapon in the hands of Ma, William's second wife, used to maintain a social and moral control over her step-daughter: "She'd stored her knowing away, brought it out like a knife when it suited her, to slice me from Jack, slice Jack from me" (ST 259). Ma is a representative of English, biased values and affected respectability, performing the part of a "God's

Police' exercising a moral policing and civilizing role within family and society" (Staniforth 3), and sent to the Antipodes to restore order and morality to the sinful colony of New South Wales. Ma behaves as an oppressive colonizer, she is the repository of Foucauldian knowledge-power: she is the one who decides whether, and when and what, to tell in order to obtain what she wants.

The same story told by Dick, Sarah's renegade brother, who has disowned his father and chosen to stay with the wronged, has the function of proving that fathers' sins are visited upon their children and grandchildren and that none of them is exempted from his/her father's guilt because their privileged lives have been shaped on it: "That man's blood in your veins, Dolly, Dick said. Mine too. No getting away from that. That man's money putting the food in our mouths and the clothes on our backs, and the money coming out of what he done that day" (ST 253).

With William, on the other hand, the process of storytelling is suspended. He will never tell his story ("Never look back," is the motto of old colonists like him) and when, on his death's bed, he thinks it is time for Sarah to know, he is unable to take on the responsibility to confess and sends her to Dick expecting he will reveal everything to her. His illness makes him physically unable to speak, but it is actually the unbearable shame for his past guilt that determines his aphasia, which is also a desire for historical amnesia. As Sarah notices, not to say means to pretend it never happened: "Once the story was gone, there'd be no bringing it back. All those things might as well never of happened. Shame would keep us silent, shame and the wishing that it was different" (ST 264).

Sarah, as well, reacts at the beginning with silence, as the "poisonous gift" (ST 264) her father has given her has a paralyzing effect on her verbal capacity: she cannot, and does not want to speak to her dying father ("Waiting for me to say something. I couldn't and I wouldn't. Any word would be like forgiving him", ST 258); she does not say anything to her brothers and sister ("They wouldn't hear, wouldn't believe", ST 260), and she falls into a long, silent sleep when she goes back to her husband and daughter after the painful discovery. She is confronted with a sense of shame which, as Timothy Bewes explains, signals "an event of incommensurability: a profound disorientation of the subject by the confrontation with an object it cannot comprehend, an object that renders incoherent every form available to the subject" (3). However, she then decides not to let silence be her shame, as she understands that there is "no cure for the bite of the past" (ST 260), no conceivable answers to many of her questions, and that the only possible answer involves taking the responsibility of asking questions, of investigating, of telling what one knows. As Sarah declares: "I'm never going to be able to tell what it was all about...I can only tell what I know. Cruelties and crimes, miseries on every side. But of all the crimes done, the worst would be to let the story slip away" (ST 304).

In the light of these words, for Sarah (but, metaphorically, for the whole country) storytelling is closely linked to the need of expiation

and her voyage to New Zealand, as well as the great importance that storytelling acquires in this context, mark the first step towards it. In the novel, New Zealand represents the site where colonial encounter becomes postcolonial cross-cultural communication, the place where Sarah is asked to tell the story of Rachel's death, her late brother's mixed race child, who was "stolen" from her Maori mother in order to be given the 'opportunity' to grow up white. In the new country Sarah does not speak the language of the girl's people; she does not understand the prayers or poems they recite, but the feeling of estrangement she experiences is, in a sense, cathartic. Dealing with a language and with a whole world that are strange and unknown to her (which is but a reflection of Rachel's own experience when she was forcibly brought to Australia) deprives her of any sense of self-assurance and stability, so that she is somehow stripped of her western certainties and re-born in this new land. Just like Rooke, she becomes a child who has to learn how to speak a new language, which is not the Maori language, but the intercultural language of empathy and sharing. Her instalment of the girl's lost story intertwines with the shreds given by her Maori grandmother and by Jack, and she soon realizes that it is not the details of Rachel's life and death in Australia that are expected of her, but the act of storytelling itself and its cathartic effects: "What she needed, what I was here for, was to watch me go through the telling of it. To hear the shake in my voice and see the twist in my mouth. To watch me see the pictures one by one and put them into words, word by sad word" (ST 301).

This process of discovery/recovery, denunciation and (re)affirmation through language also appears to associate storytelling with the process of shaping one's identity, and with the capacity to come to terms with one's own self. Another fundamental concern in *Sarah Thornhill* is, indeed, represented by the liminal identities of the protagonists and by their efforts to claim, assert, and speak out their belonging. The early nineteenth-century white Australian society portrayed in the novel is already stratified in terms of class and money, and it is one in which the difference between first and second generation settlers plays out in their respective relationship with the place and with their hybridized sense of self. William, Sarah and Jack are all Australian but their 'boundary identities' imply different degrees of ambiguity and acceptance. Their Australianness can be read, again, as Bhabha's Third Space: an ambivalent space of enunciation where "even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (Commitment 157).

When Sarah compares her sense of being Australian to that of her father, she realizes that if William is caught between two cultures and two places, her own centre is instead Australia: "Pa was still English. The way he spoke, the memories in his head... But I wasn't English. I had no other place in my bones than this one. The ones like me had no back to go back to" (ST 218-9). Sarah claims her centrality in the place of her father's de-centrement and exile and she challenges her father's homogenizing sense of historical identity. What was 'new' for the older generation has always been there for the younger one: "They

called us the colony of New South Wales. I never liked that. We wasn't new anything. We was ourselves" (*ST* 3). Sarah cannot conform to the idea of newness because it implies something that comes before, in another place, in another time. But her only place is here and her time is now, she is fastened to a present with neither past nor future, and yet still, it is only by facing the ghosts of her missing past and by speaking them out that she can envision a future. Storytelling becomes for her also a necessary step towards self-definition and belonging.

William, on the other hand, is a representative of what Australian writer, Swiss-born and Europe expatriate Martin Boyd (1893-1972) calls "geographical schizophrenia", that is, the typical dilemma of the migrant who gives rise to a sense of dual identity without being able to fully develop a sense of belonging to either the host or the home country. In addition to this, William embodies the schizophrenic nature of the white Australian settler, as a colonizer and a colonized. This dislocated identity stands in a controversial relationship with the metropolitan centre. William is an old colonist now but in the past had been an English convict "sent out", and as such, an outcast. As Sarah underlines, "as far as some people went, sent out meant tainted for all life" (*ST* 5). While epitomizing the insanity of the whole colonial project, William's "doubled form of consciousness" (Hodge and Mishra xv), as 'oppressed' under the British Empire and 'oppressor' of the indigenous people, reflects the latter's inability to cope with his secret, unspoken shame. His silence to the very end asserts his non-belonging, and precludes him from the cathartic liberation of storytelling: "The final day, you could feel Pa restless...He stirred and muttered...His eyes flickered open, his lips shivered. But if he wanted to speak after a lifetime of silence, it was too late" (*ST* 261).

Finally, Jack's split, half-white, half-black identity is a consequence of colonial madness and a condition he has to learn to accept, which implies coming to terms with a past he is not aware of, and being able to choose and to declare his future identity. His hybrid self is another colonial secret. His father refuses to tell him anything about his mother. Even Sarah, who admits that the colour of his skin makes no difference to her, later in life realizes that this had not meant to accept his hybrid identity, but to erase a part of it: "Brushed aside his darkness, proud of myself for doing it. Couldn't see what I was telling Jack, that I'd take the white part of him but not the black" (*ST* 260). Jack grows up as a white man ("You can pass for a Portuguese" (*ST* 57), his father keeps telling him), while his blackness becomes "a truth no one wanted to own" (*ST* 260). Only when he comes back from New Zealand, where he has started a new life in a Maori community, and has finally thrown off his Fanonian white mask, can Jack claim his blackness and communicate it through the language of skin and a face completely carved by tattoos: "He'd chosen who to be, and to show it on his face. This Jack had travelled into a different self. Another man had been carved out of the one I'd known" (*ST* 275). The tattoos on Jack's face are his storytelling, every line a story to be told and read, claiming his belonging and allowing his re-birth.

The difficult task of telling is therefore presented as a necessary step in the process of redefinition and reconciliation that, as Julie McGonegal suggests, “must be conceived as an open-ended, perpetually on-going, and always unfinished conversation” (78). By the end of the novel Sarah’s story merges and communicates with Jack’s story, with Rachel’s story and with all the interwoven stories, in the attempt to re-awaken on a broader level that desire of mutual conversation that had animated Rooke and Tagaran in *The Lieutenant*. This is what Grenville herself in an interview with John Mullan defines as “the talking cure”, adding that “to tell stories truthfully is the essential starting point” (qtd. in Kossew, “Saying Sorry” 174). Even with the moral ambiguities that writing from the position of a white Australian implies (Kossew, “Voicing” 17), Grenville proves, by giving a predominant role to storytelling in her trilogy, that the talking cure performed by characters like Rooke and Sarah may be a starting point to try to build a bridge across that gulf of culture in which William Thornhill drowns instead in his inability to communicate. The importance given to storytelling in these novels also relates to the necessary stage that narrating the past represents in the ongoing discussion about white Australian collective guilt and in the process of national apology. Nevertheless, as Herrero, quoting Eva Mackey, emphasizes, the association of storytelling with apology emerging from Grenville’s novels should not reduce the apology to a “speech act” (101). Telling stories of colonial encounters nowadays is not only essential to unbury hidden secrets, to say the unsayable, and to revisit distorted historical truth. As Rebecca Weaver-Hightower underlines, it also requires taking “a hard look at past colonial practices and continuing injustices...[that] must come accompanied by social change and action” (147), as well as by material forms of reparation that can open the way to a reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and to a future of equal opportunities.

Notes

1. Written by Russell Ward in 1958, *The Australian Legend* is the title of the influential account of the origins and development of the Australian national mystique. Ward examined the Australian national identity as it was shaped in the course of the nineteenth century, and the elements generally assumed to define what was “typically Australian.” Ward gathered that the stereotypical Australian was intimately connected with the bush and the common folk: he was a practical man, stoic, sceptical of authority and distrustful of outsiders. This “bushman’s ethos” reached its apex during the nationalistic 1890s, when, popularized by the magazine *Bulletin* (“The Bushman’s Bible”), it became idealized as the symbol of an emerging nation. See R. Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1966.

2. The word “reconciliation” has been extensively used (even abused in some cases) in the last decades. It is taken from the process promoted by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, established by

the Commonwealth Parliament in 1991, that attempted to rebuild the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. A series of court decisions and enquiries took place in the 1990s (the 1991 report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the 1992 Mabo decision to abolish the *terra nullius* policy, the 1997 publication of the *Bringing Them Home Report* by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission). These gave rise to a reconciliation process which implied for white Australians the confrontation with the atrocities committed against the Indigenous people since white settlement, and with their own sense of guilt and shame.

3. The controversy was mainly fuelled by historians Inga Clendinnen and Mark McKenna who blamed Grenville for invading a field that did not belong to her as a fictional writer. Clendinnen attacked Grenville on the basis of appropriating and distorting the historical record in *The Secret River* and of attempting to “bump historians off the track”. In addition to this, McKenna accused novelists like Grenville of “parading” as authorities on aspects of Australian history, and of considering fiction as superior to history. See I. Clendinnen, “The History Question. Who Owns the Past?”, *Quarterly Essay* 23, Oct. 2006: 16-17 and M. McKenna, “Writing the Past.” *The Best Australian Essays 2006*. Ed. Drusilla Modjeska. Melbourne: Black Inc. 2006. For an examination of the discussions and debates surrounding the publication of *The Secret River*, see Sarah Pinto, “History, Fiction and *The Secret River*.” *Lighting Dark Places. Essays on Kate Grenville*. Ed. Sue Kossew. Amsterdam: Rodopi. 2010. 179-197.

4. Besides Grenville’s trilogy, relevant titles include *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) by P. Carey, *Remembering Babylon* (1994) by D. Malouf, *The Wisdom of Stones* (1994) by G. Matthews, *Sorry* (2007) by G. Jones.

5. In *Searching for the Secret River* Grenville explains that a fundamental moment of enlightenment when she was re-thinking the Australian past occurred to her during a conversation held in London with the Aboriginal writer Melissa Lucashenko in 2000 at the celebrations for the Centenary of Federation. Grenville realized for the first time the real implications of the phrase “taking up land”, generally used to refer to white settlers’ taking possession as owners or tenants of a grant of crown land. When Grenville described her research on her family history to Lucashenko, she said that her great-great-grandfather took up land on the Hawkesbury. The immediate reaction of the Aboriginal writer was indeed to redefine the meaning of “taking up”: “What do you mean ‘took up’? He took” (Grenville, *Searching* 28 Print). Thus, she underlined that when white settlers took up what they considered as crown land, they were actually taking the land from its Aboriginal owners who had been living on it for thousands of years.

See Kate Grenville. *Searching for the Secret River*. Melbourne: Text Publishing. 2006. Print.

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