

## Going Against the Flow: Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* and Colonialism's Structuring Oppositions

Anouk Lang  
University of Strathclyde

In her essay "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse" (1987), published one year prior to the Australian bicentennial celebrations, Benita Parry invokes the anti-colonial imperative to "dismantle colonialist knowledge and displace the received narrative of colonialism's moment" by refusing the founding concepts of the problematic of colonialism (28). For Parry, as for Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha and others, this problematic is perpetuated through nationalist historiography and rooted in the "naturalized antitheses"—set up within colonial discourse between the colonisers and the "other"—which form the base on which an entire system of metaphysical oppositions, crucial to the structuring of colonialism's discursive field, depends.

Thinking about how useful Parry's formulation might be in the contemporary Australian context, how the representation of Aboriginal peoples might have adhered to, or diverged from it since the bicentennial, and how these changes might have registered on literary texts in the last several decades, I want, in this essay, to take a recent Australian novel and look at how successful it is in employing one of the strategies for "repossessing the signifying function appropriated by colonialist representation" that Parry identifies as a necessary, yet insufficient, strategy for laying bare the rhetorical underpinning of the colonial enterprise (28). This strategy is that of "expos[ing] how power secretly inheres in colonialism's system of natural differentiations" and undermining and repositioning such dualisms as interdependent, conjunct, and intimately entwined with each other (29). In its retelling of the narrative of colonial settlement in Australia, Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) is a fruitful text to choose, as its focus on the relationship between a family of settlers, the Thornhills, and the Darug people on the Hawkesbury River resonates with debates over Aboriginal self-determination and government intervention in contemporary Australia, though these contemporary resonances are never explicitly invoked.

The fact that this text is Australian also complicates its position in relation to Parry's formulation, because the representations whose signifying function it might repossess, and the traditions against which it might assert itself, are those of its own literary forebears, rather than the representations of an alien culture under which it has experienced the

threat and the reality of erasure. The division in Parry's argument between the invaders and those who write back to them is self-evident, but the distinction is not such an easy one to draw in contexts such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada, where those who descend from—and inherit a level of privilege from—the individuals who settled the country may feel themselves entirely distinct from their invading forebears. Stephen Slemon's observations about this tension continue to resonate a quarter of a century after he initially penned them: that the work of critics and writers in "second world" settler nations is frequently ignored "because it is not sufficiently pure in its anticolonialism, because it does not offer up an experiential grounding in a common 'Third World' aesthetics, because its modalities of postcoloniality are too ambivalent, too occasional and uncommon, for inclusion within the field" (35). Texts from settler nations may contain ambivalences and ambiguities which are not adequately accounted for within the most globally prominent strains of postcolonial theory. I will return to this question of the applicability of Parry's formulation towards the end of this essay, but for the moment I want to see how far her ideas are useful in understanding *The Secret River's* interventions.

My argument is that Grenville's novel succeeds, to an extent, in reconfiguring the signifying relations between Australian settlers and the original inhabitants of the country. It does this through a retelling of three potent national myths, identified by Eleanor Collins as 1) the convict who does not deserve the punishment meted out upon him; 2) the hardworking pioneer; 3) the narrative of first contact (39–40). Each of these mythic tropes has already been worked over in many Australian literary texts; indeed, as Collins observes, cultural texts are much more likely to cover the fraught territory of first contact than they are to examine present-day encounters between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and the themes and elements are much more consistent in the former than in the latter (40). A reason for the richer symbolic resonance and greater aesthetic potential of the historical narrative of first contact is suggested by Terry Goldie in his study of the representation of Indigenous peoples in Australian, Canadian and New Zealand literature, when he sums up the fascination of Canadian settlers with indigeneity as follows:

The white Canadian looks at the Indian. The Indian is other and therefore alien. But the Indian is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien. So the Canadian must be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada? (12)

The "problem" of Indigenous inhabitants, whose presence reminds invaders of the inauthenticity of their connection to the land they are attempting to claim as their own, is a central tension for national myths of origin. It is this problem of Aboriginal alterity that stands in the way of understanding oneself as possessing, and being authentically native to, the new nation, that Grenville's text examines, and why there is a continual worrying-away at the question of difference throughout the novel. I seek

to show that the text not only deconstructs national myths, but that the approach it takes to this task is a significant one, founded as it is on the dismantling of otherness, and the deconstruction of binaries. Power “secretly inheres in colonialism’s system of ‘natural’ differentiations” (Parry 29) because the divisions are never equal, and the element which is represented as superior—more intelligent, more hard-working, more rational, more civilised—can justifiably be put in charge of the other. If the thematic content of the novel “revisits and revises mythologized accounts of pioneering triumphs on the frontier, replacing them with conflict, violence, and loss,” (Pinto 182) then this can be observed to occur at the level of the discursive as well. In what follows, I show how the text’s subversion of various tropes about Aborigines goes beyond providing a corrective to racist myths to reveal what lies at the heart of such stereotypes: it strikes at the heart of the oppositions that structure the way settler/Indigenous relations are represented, and disrupts the idea that one group is completely different from, and entirely unreachable by, the other.

First, though, it is worth laying out some of the contemporary debates that have arisen around *The Secret River* about the role of fiction writers as opposed to that of historians, and the relationship of historical fiction to history, because these offer some insight into the wider cultural reception of this text. Grenville’s novel has been the subject of some controversy, spurred in part by comments she made in an interview on ABC Radio on 16 July 2005. Asked where she would situate her book in relation to debates over the “history wars”—the term given in Australian public discourse to debates among historians and public figures over the extent to which white settlement was destructive and exploitative, and the extent to which it was driven by humane and generally positive impulses—Grenville offered the following in reply:

Mine would be up on a ladder, looking down at the history wars. I think the historians, and rightly so, have battled away about the details of exactly when and where and how many and how much, and they’ve got themselves into these polarised positions, and that’s fine, I think that’s what historians ought to be doing; constantly questioning the evidence and perhaps even each other. But a novelist can stand up on a stepladder and look down at this, outside the fray, and say there is another way to understand it. You can set two sides against each other and ask which side will win ... Or you can go up on the stepladder and look down and say, well, nobody is going to win. There is no winner. What there can be, though, is understanding, actually experiencing what it was like, the choices that those people had. And once you can actually get inside the experience, it’s no longer a matter of who’s going to win, it’s simply a matter of, yes, now I understand both sides and, having understood, the notion of one side being right and the other side being wrong becomes kind of irrelevant. So that’s where I hope this book will be. It stands outside that polarised conflict and says, look, this is a problem we really need, as a nation, to come to grips with. The historians are doing their thing, but let me as a novelist come to it in a different way, which is the way of empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events. (Grenville, “Interview”)

Following this interview, Australian historians, most prominently Inga Clendinnen and Mark McKenna, objected strenuously to what they took to be the entirely unjustified rhetorical move on Grenville's part of elevating historical fiction above history, and thereby claiming that narrative offered a superior method of understanding the past. Grenville refuted this, pointing out that she had been quoted out of context, that she had never laid claim to the mantle of historian, and that she had been clear that her text was something quite different from a historical account. The main contours of the debate are sketched by Brian Matthews (345–6), and at the time of writing, a selection of Grenville's responses to her critics were available to view on her website ("Facts and Fiction"). I am not going to address this debate in detail here, in part because it has already been worked over at length by other critics such as Sarah Pinto and Brigid Rooney. I have sketched its outlines at the outset, however, because I want to present my own argument as adding a different perspective to this debate by considering how the text challenges the binaries of colonial discourse, and in so doing point to some of the ways that influential strains in wider postcolonial discourse have not been particularly well suited to the context of settler-invader countries. I suggest that the text's disruptive potential comes not from its thematic or (putatively) historical qualities but from its engagement with discourse and ways of thinking about the other. I will return to how this perspective might lead us to resituate the novel in relation to the Australian history/ literature debates in which it has become embroiled below.

As many critics in postcolonial studies and critical race studies have observed, binaries such as savage/civilised, physical/rational, and animal/human saturate discourse about Indigenous peoples in relation to European settlers, both in the Australian context and elsewhere. One of the central moves that *The Secret River* performs is to foreground many of the tropes that have structured—and continue to structure—discourse about Aboriginal people, and to interrogate the oppositions on which they are based. The text blurs the distinction between savage and civilised, for example, through Will Thornhill's gradually dawning awareness that far from being savages, the Darug have a social structure which is beyond his power to grasp. When Will and Sal order Dick not to play with the Darug children, the explanation Sal gives is "*They's savages, Dick. We're civilised folk, we don't go round naked*" (222). Yet in the paragraphs that follow, we see how spurious this apparently "civilised" nature is when Will flies into a violent rage.

The process of undoing another pernicious antithesis—the association of Aborigines with the physical body and Europeans with the mind—begins right from the prologue, when the first Aboriginal man Will meets is able to imitate English words (5-6), while Will has no success at producing Aboriginal words either initially or later. Sal's statement, "*Why, you're no better than a dumb animal*" (207), which operates in conjunction with another binary, that of animal/human, is directed at the Darug, but is more applicable to the Thornhills themselves. The Darug

prove their shrewdness when they get the better of the Thornhills on several occasions, for example in the transaction over the kangaroo meat (235-236), and they are evidently cleverer in their use of cultivation and hunting techniques. These episodes also speak to another opposition: that of Europeans as naturally hard-working and Aborigines as naturally indolent. Against the backdrop of the settlers' grumbling that the Darug are lazy, Will comes to realise that in fact it is he who is not making the most effective use of his time in trying to provide food for his family, for example when he observes the way the Darug do not spend effort and energy fencing in kangaroos, but rather drive them to a particular place and then kill only as many as they need. When the Thornhills first notice the daisy yam plot, Will tells his sons that "*Them poxy blacks don't plant nothing*", thinking that "like children, they did not plant today so that they could eat tomorrow. It was why they were called savages" (146). This is so clearly untrue that it is given to a child, Dick, to point out that the Darug do in fact cultivate crops, "[p]lanting them things like you would taters" (146). Later, when Dick, points to the superiority of the Darug's farming methods—"no damned weeding the corn all day" (223)—this is so unwelcome that, for the first time in his life, Will gives his son a beating. The fury Will feels, it seems, arises not from Dick's unwillingness to work but from the epistemological challenge to his way of thinking about the Darug as something other than civilised.

The narrative suggests a reason for the construction of the myth, aired repeatedly throughout the narrative, that Aboriginal people did not cultivate crops: it is not that they did not farm, but that the settlers did not recognise the farmed plots as agriculture. Moreover, when Will does unwillingly admit to himself that the patch of soil has been farmed, and that it is prime territory for the crops he wants to plant, he wants to take the plot for himself and thus uproots what the Darug have planted there. The obvious material benefits behind the assertion that "everyone knew the blacks did not plant things" (146) are made clear. The text not only foregrounds the power of discourse to establish differences in the face of clear evidence to the contrary, but puts forward reasons for why this might be such a powerful and lasting claim: if the Indigenous inhabitants of the land did not farm the land, they could not be using it, and it was much easier for the settlers to develop the *terra nullius* doctrine and to assert ownership. Another means by which it achieves this is by persistent doubling between the settlers and the Darug: the two methods of farming, the two methods of making fire, the two patriarchs at the end of the novel. Sal learns that the Darug women have their own routines of domestic work and childcare that resemble hers, while Dick—the child born in between England and Australia—plays with the Darug children, learns their language, and shows that it is possible to live in both worlds, until he is forbidden by his parents from associating with them any further. These interventions into popular (mis)understandings about the apparently innate differences dividing Europeans from Indigenous peoples, which have been used to legitimate the control of the latter by the former, may be

Grenville's fictionalisation of the actual agricultural and hunting practices along the Hawkesbury in the early nineteenth century. Nonetheless, they are effective in the decolonising textual strategies Parry draws attention to such as "identifying the loaded oppositions used to organize colonialism's discursive field" and "demystify[ing] the rhetorical devices of its mode of construction" (Parry 28). The novel goes beyond simply contradicting pervasive stereotypes about Aboriginal people, and functions to dismantle more fundamental metaphysical binaries separating settler Australians from Aborigines that still circulate today in mainstream discourse such as in the popular press.

These episodes and others like them serve to subvert established narratives about Europeans as naturally hard-working and Aborigines as naturally indolent and unable to cultivate crops. In this way, the novel takes on familiar tropes about Indigenous peoples which have come to have a particular force within the Australian context and which continue to circulate in popular discourse today, not only around laziness and an inability to farm, but also around alcohol addiction. Terry Goldie terms such tropes "commodities"—recurrent motifs that operate reliably within the representational economy of texts in which Aboriginal people are represented. Such commodities represent the "few basic moves" which Indigenous "pawns" are permitted to make in the semiotic chess game within which they are portrayed (15). With respect to the commodity of the Aborigine as an alcoholic, the text initially fulfils expectations. One of the first Aboriginal men to appear in the narrative is an alcoholic and a figure of fun: when drunk he can be made to dance for the entertainment of the settlers and also for the good of Will and Sal's business (94-95). However, along with Will, as we spend longer in the world of the text and encounter greater numbers of Aboriginal people, the picture becomes more complex: the obvious dependence of the settlers on alcohol implicitly undermines the association of Indigenous peoples with alcohol abuse. Indeed, the means by which Will builds up his own wealth to the point where he can claim Thornhill's Point is by illicitly siphoning off liquor destined for the governor.

As Parry observes, the system of "natural" differentiations underpinning colonial ideology is pernicious because power inheres in these oppositions (29): she argues that one of the textual strategies that can be used to effect a "change of terrain" is to show that such oppositions are "interdependent, conjunct, intimate" (20). The achievement of *The Secret River* is to demonstrate these conjunctions and connections without moving into the banal territory of a "shared humanity" in which meaningful variations—and their material consequences—are bleached out. One of the ways the novel dismantles the system of oppositions is by setting up stereotypes in the settlers' perceptions, and then ironising them using the events of the narrative, in order to show how frequently the settlers fall foul of their own distinctions which are designed to differentiate themselves from—and paint themselves as superior to—the Aborigines. On the first occasion where the Hawkesbury settlers gather at

Thornhill's Point, Sagitty complains that the Darug have stolen his fowls, and Will remembers how he and Sal stole a hen back in England (169). Shortly afterwards, when Smasher rages that the Darug "ain't nothing but thieves . . . Don't know how to do nothing but thieve off honest men!" (175), Blackwood points out that Smasher is himself a thief. In a similar vein, there are many equivalences drawn in this episode between humans and animals. However, while the settlers repeatedly describe the Aborigines as animals or insects, the text keeps reiterating the animal-like characteristics of the settlers. Smasher likens the Aborigines to flies—"It's like the bleeding flies . . . Kill one, ten more come to its funeral" (169) yet is the first to appear like a bug "out of the woodwork" (167) when alcohol is on offer. Webb says "*They's vermin . . . the same way rats is vermin*" (170) yet is himself infested by nits and the first to have his crops eaten by corn-grubs, as well as having the nickname Spider (170). Beyond the emphasis on vermin, there are broader equivalences drawn between the settlers and animals: Sagitty has a "scalp ridged like a bulldog's face" (168), Smasher a "scaly" (170) face, and Spider "hair rough as a dog's" (168). The accusations and metaphors used by the settlers keep being undermined by the settlers' own behaviour: Spider's claim that the Darug will "*cut us up like you would a beast*" and "*[e]at the best bits*" (170) recalls the description of his wife cooking chicken in a pot a few paragraphs earlier.

In this taxonomy of human/animal characteristics, the figure of Blackwood takes on particular significance, as he is the settler who is most closely allied with the Darug: he assumes some of their characteristics, forms a relationship with one of the Darug women, and is wounded in the massacre. During the episode above, Blackwood tells how he exchanges a mullet for some daisy yams (a significant symbol because, as we have seen, it represents a rebuttal to the myth that Aborigines did not engage in the cultivation of land), which, in light of the animal metaphors outlined above, can be read as a way of refusing the human/animal opposition which the settlers keep trying to draw and which the narrative voice keeps inverting.

*They give me a couple [of daisy yams] when I first come, Blackwood said . . . I gone and give them a nice little mullet for them, he said and shook his head at the memory. They was lumpy sorts of things like a monkey's balls. (174)*

By being commodified, the fish is made into a symbol not of a human being, but of something quite different: capital. The "monkey's balls" too, are a metaphor, but they are used to amplify meaning rather than to mark the inferiority of one group of people to another. In its description of the settlers, the text rebuts every accusation they make about the Darug using animal or insect associations. Blackwood makes reference to two new animals, however, and this can be seen as a way of escaping the trap of oppositions, where contradicting a binary is still to accept the bifurcation of the world it establishes. In the face of these relations of antagonism and

distortion, Blackwood proposes a different kind of association: one of co-operation and exchange. The animal signifiers help to foreground the extraordinariness of the proposal. Instead of stealing, killing and misrepresentation, the text asks us to consider what it might have been like to establish a settler/indigene relationship on a collaborative basis, in which the two sides would need to work together towards the mutual understanding of symbols rather than their misuse. There are other fleeting glimpses of this kind of relationship, for example Sal's exchange of sugar and a bonnet for a wooden dish from the Darug women (208). The text does not present commercial exchange as a panacea for solving settler/Indigenous conflict—and indeed historical situations such as those of European fur traders and the Métis in Canada show that inequity and exploitation were just as prevalent in commercial exchanges as much as any other colonial context—but rather offers it as an example of an alternative mode of relating in which both sides must make an effort at mutual understanding.

What kind of wider significance can be drawn from this animal/human patterning? In its insistent undermining of the dichotomies that underlie the settlers' discourse—and its demonstration that the settlers exhibit the same characteristics for which they deride the Aboriginal population—Grenville's novel can be seen in the line of what Canadian literary critics have theorised as historiographic metafiction. This is a sub-genre of literary fiction in which texts employ the self-reflexive tactics of metafiction while being simultaneously grounded in social and historical reality, in order to engage with established narratives of national becoming and to deconstruct national myths. In Linda Hutcheon's words, as readers of these texts we are "lured into a world of imagination only to be confronted with the world of history, and thus asked to rethink the categories by which we normally would distinguish fiction from 'reality'" (17). I see *The Secret River* in this line because while it maintains an apparently straightforward appearance of historicity and truthfulness, it is also upfront about its status as fiction, most obviously in the acknowledgments after the text, but also in episodes such as Governor Phillip's historically documented act of slapping an Aboriginal man, which is transposed in the novel to Will. It is the reflexive reverberation between these two states that generates the metafictional character of the narrative.

Moreover, rather than participating uncritically in the mythologising of the story of Australian settlement, the novel lifts the curtain on the way such mythmaking develops, and shows how strongly its discursive formations depend on the establishment of particular binaries and dichotomies. The episode discussed above illustrates how the settlers sought to establish the distinction between themselves and the Darug by aligning them with the non-human side of the human/animal binary. The text also drives home the performative and social function of the language with which such myth-making is achieved. As Will says to himself about Loveday's tale of being speared while relieving himself, "it was only a

story to entertain some newcomers” (171), yet it is clear that this tale is very much more than a story: it is a way of inducting those not yet familiar with the semiotic landscape into a particular way of understanding the Indigenous inhabitants, and illustrates the way that pernicious discursive formations are constructed out of apparently innocent or lighthearted exchanges. Towards the end of the novel when Smasher embellishes the story of the attack on Sagitty, Will recollects the way the prisoners at Newgate would fabricate their stories in order to advance their own versions of events, and thereby establish their own innocence:

When Smasher arrived he took the story over. Anyone would have thought he had been there himself. Every time some man came in who had not heard it, he told it again, adding another detail. There were fifty of them. They forced him to cut his own dog's throat. They scalped him. . . . Thornhill drank and said nothing. He was reminded of what he had not thought of for years, the yard at Newgate, the men rehearsing their stories so often that they took on the substance of fact. (309-10)

The objection by critics such as John Hirst that Thornhill is an anachronistic projection of a modern liberal sensibility is a further piece of evidence of the self-consciously metafictional character of the text. Thornhill is so palpably a creation of a twenty-first century literary sensibility, and his narrative so clearly an interrogation of the state of settler/Aboriginal relations as seen in historical retrospect, that these features are not ahistorical shortcomings but rather clues about how to interpret the text. Collins reads the novel differently, seeing “no confessed doubt about the possibility of authentic narration, and little deliberate exposure of the hazy line between objective facts and subject reproduction of facts” (41). I disagree with this reading because it seems to me that in giving her narrative a “historical” appearance when it is clearly a fiction, Grenville makes the disjunction between history, fiction, and national mythology all the starker. Indeed, were the text to spend a lot of time playing with form or convention, for example by adopting a magical realist approach, then it would lay itself open to the charge of being playful with things that are not playthings: the historical reality of Aboriginal massacres and the ongoing material inequities that divide one group of Australians from another, that are clearly visible in such demographic realities as reduced life expectations and infant mortality rates. Such an approach would also place the novel well within the mainstream of academically fashionable ludic metafiction. It seems to me much more effective to tell the story through a troubling pastiche of historical verity that is disrupted by counter-narratives in forms that are not conventionally viewed as legitimately “historical”: Aboriginal texts such as the rock painting of the fish and the ceremonial dance, and Sal's dream of home in England.

Such alternative epistemologies and ways of knowing are presented to us at every turn, such as the invented tale which Will takes from Loveday and pretends to the artist is his own:

This story had William Thornhill not born in dirty Bermondsey but in clean Kent . . . Had not been caught greasy with fear at Three Cranes Wharf, sweating over pieces of timber belonging to Matthias Prime Lucas, but by the excise men on some pebbly beach with a boatload of French brandy. Had not swung for it, because on the outward trip he had worked for the King, carrying English spies into France. It was a well-made story, every corner of its construction neatly finished, as it had come to him from Loveday, whose story it had been. No one was the poorer for the theft. . . . Loveday had found a new story, too, involving a young girl, a cruel father and a false accusation. He was not going to ask for his old one back. (335-6)

Neither Will's constructed narrative nor either of the portraits subsequently painted of him manage to capture anything remotely close to what the novel has related of his life, though in their form they are recognisable as the kind of trustworthy sources—personal narratives and paintings—on which historians find themselves relying. Indeed, by giving her novel the appearance of straight-faced historical verity, just as other more overtly untrustworthy narrators have throughout her narrative, Grenville implicates herself in the construction of national history as myth. Even a critic such as Odette Kelada, who argues that Grenville's text defends colonialist discourses and racist stereotyping under the guise of critiquing them, finds the novel riven with unsettling ambiguities, such as the tendency of the narrative voice to slip in and out of omniscience (10). Such slippages signal to the reader the impossibility of a reliable narrator, or an objective view of history.

A further achievement of the novel is that it not only forces a re-examination of national(ist) myths and the metaphysical foundations on which they have been built, but that it also draws attention to the way that the interpretive acts—and shortcomings—of those in control of the means of nationalist representation are of central importance in this re-examination. The primary myth which the novel subverts is that of *terra nullius*, taking pains to show not only that the land is inhabited and that the settlers are very well aware of this, but also, most significantly, that this awareness is revealed in the way that the settlers' discursive constructions figure the Aborigines. From his first night on Australian soil Will is aware of the presence of Indigenous people, though it requires an adjustment to his sight to see them: "It seemed at first to be the tears welling, the way the darkness moved in front of him. It took a moment to understand that the stirring was a human" (5). His own feelings literally colour his perceptions of the Aboriginal man in front of him. Here and elsewhere, Will's powers of perception are portrayed as inadequate—he finds the stars "unreadable, indifferent" and "as meaningless as spilt rice" (4). The novel insists that it is not beyond the power of colonisers to learn to distinguish what Parry terms "polymorphous native 'difference'" (28): the narrative could be read as the story of Will's learning to distinguish the different Darug men and women as individuals, rather than as blank signifiers of otherness. Ultimately, though, he makes the conscious decision to read them in terms of white Europeans rather than on their own terms:

Thornhill would have said all the blacks looked the same, so it was somewhat surprising to realise after a time how easily he could tell them apart. He began to give the men names: humble sorts of names that made their difference less potent . . . The old man reminded him, in the grimness of his mouth and the whiteness of his stubble, of a certain old Harry who had sharpened knives around Swan Lane, and so was christened forthwith: Whisker Harry. Thornhill kept to himself his knowledge that this stern old man was nothing like any London knife-sharpener. (205; see also Kossew 16)

Sal performs the same manoeuvre of domestication when she gives the Darug women humble working-class names such as Pol and Meg (206). When Will watches the ceremonial dance, he can only understand it in terms of his own cultural referents: he grasps that it is “like Christmas at St. Mary Magdalene” but also that his own understanding is insufficient. The dancer is as inscrutable as one of the books in the Governor’s library: “[t]hey could reveal their secrets, but only to a person who knew how to read them” (254).

Here, as elsewhere, the text is at pains to show how crucial language and discourse are in creating distinctions and sustaining relations of domination. The formal and pseudo-scientific language used by Loveday—“*Their innate indolence renders them inattentive to the very means of subsistence*” (269)—lends his racist talk the sheen of scientific objectivity. Reminders of the social construction of language are given throughout the text: trying to find a way to describe the Darug, Will tries to remember “a word he had heard someone use . . . *them primitives?*” (223). Once in the midst of the Darug, watching their bushcraft, Will notices that the distinction between black and white skin becomes meaningless: “it was amazing how quickly it became the colour that skin was.” Yet in the next instant he cannot stop himself using it to articulate the contrast between himself and the Darug man: “*Even though your arse is as black as the bottom of a kettle*” (221-2). The performative nature of this utterance is clear, as Dick responds to it with a laugh. Such discursive constructions, the text repeatedly suggests, do not have a mimetic function but a social one, as their function is to enforce distinctions and exert power, a point which evokes Bhabha’s observation that in colonial contexts, realism functions as a productive, non-mimetic discourse whose power derives from the apparent transparency of its representations (97). Indeed, Grenville’s novel as a whole could be seen in this light, with its narrative understood to be operating as a form of “productive,” rather than mimetic, or historiographic, realism. When on an earlier occasion Will cannot understand what is being said to him and begins “to feel like an imbecile,” he begins to adopt the tone taken towards him in England by those above him on the social scale: “*Bugger me, you are making no sense whatsoever!* It was the way gentry had spoken to him, wanting him to row faster and cost them less” (148-9). It is the sheer act of articulating words in this pastiche register that imbues Will with confidence, albeit temporarily: he speaks in a tone of false joviality, making himself laugh

and attempting to take control of the situation. But the text makes it clear that the authority remains with the Darug elder: “When he spoke again it cut across Thornhill’s humour like water on a flame” (149). Will and Sal also articulate to their children a rationalisation of their antagonism towards the Aborigines that rehearses the rhetoric of modern-day paternalism towards Aboriginal people. When Bub asks, “*Why didn’t they spear us, Da?*”, Sal replies “*They got no call to spear us . . . We give them the victuals and that, they leave us alone*” (152). The patently poor quality of the victuals—decaying meat that smells so bad that the Thornhills themselves must hold their breath to eat it—underscores that this is not a good bargain for the Darug, and recalls other unevenly balanced “bargains” of care and food for land made not only with Indigenous peoples in Australia but elsewhere around the globe.

While the work of Parry, Spivak, and Bhabha illuminates aspects of this novel in helpful ways, what it also illustrates is the way that canonical postcolonial theory is not always a perfect match for the Australian context. The assumed opposition underpinning Parry’s and Fanon’s strategies—where there is a clear line of demarcation between the representations issuing from the colonisers and those put forward by the colonised—takes no account of situations complicated by the constitutive ambivalence of settler-invader countries, in which texts critical of colonialism and its ongoing effects are being produced not only by those who have been subjugated but by descendants of the colonisers themselves. As Fiona Probyn-Rapsey observes, apparently straightforward accounts of domination and resistance need to be complicated by an understanding of the role played by complicity, “a condition of relations and encounters between Others” which brings out settler Australians’ proximity to, rather than separation from, the legacy of colonialism (65, 71). *The Secret River* is, of course, not written by an Aboriginal author, but instead by one who explicitly self-identifies as a descendant of the individual on whom the central protagonist has been based, and if her own complicity is seen as submerged in the novel itself, it is treated much more explicitly in Grenville’s account of writing the novel (Grenville, *Searching*).

In thinking about how the question of the dismantling of binary constructs works in a specifically Australian situation, where the oppositions in the contemporary world may not be so clear as in the historical situation, it is worth considering debates that have arisen in other settler-invader contexts around questions of indigeneity. Critics including Stephen Slemon and Cynthia Sugars have argued that settler subjects internalise the dichotomy of coloniser and colonised, to the point that it forms “a constitutive element of national—even postcolonial—identity” (Sugars 104). As Slemon points out, “the *illusion* of a stable self/other, here/there binary has never been available to Second-World writers,” with the result that even the most insistent postcolonial critiques issuing from texts and writers from the white literatures of Australia, New Zealand, Canada, or southern Africa find themselves unable to direct their

anti-colonial resistance to objects or discursive structures which can be seen as external to the self” (38).<sup>1</sup> For Deena Rymhs, attempts to move in the direction of reconciliation will always be stymied if they cannot move beyond repeating and rehearsing these dichotomies (118) so as to get beyond this “economy of guilt” (119). Seeing *The Secret River* as engaged in probing this opposition and the ideological basis on which it rests offers a different way of approaching the history/ literature debates that the novel has provoked: it can be seen as working through the complicity of its white readers and its own complicity as discursive object. This is perhaps a central part of what has roused the ire of historians such as Clendinnen, who makes plain her impatience with the idea that literature can help readers to imaginatively enter into the past through narrative (21). What objections of this sort do not take into consideration, however, is the very different interpretive modes in which different kinds of readers are trained. While historians interpret historical sources in particular ways fostered by their scholarly training, readers without that specialist training are unlikely to approach historical writing in the same way. For these readers, literature offers a way of understanding an unfamiliar context which includes having their empathy excited and their imaginations provoked. Rooney makes the salient point that some historians have used the power of narrative to reach readers: “[t]he fact that historians have adopted some of the tools of fiction (analogy, story, personal voice, imaginative organization of materials) suggests the power fiction has, albeit in promiscuous and strangely digested forms, to repackage, recycle, and deliver information to readers, and to promote their sympathetic engagement” (34).

However one interprets Grenville’s authorial comments on the position her novel occupies in relation to history, it is possible to see the validity in the objections historians have raised to it, for example Hirst’s critique that the projection of contemporary liberal concerns onto the character of Thornhill panders to the desires of modern readers and thereby obscures historical differences (Hirst; see also Rooney 28-9 and Pinto 191-2). Without wishing to minimise the force of such critiques, I want to suggest that it is also important for scholars to bear in mind that even though a text such as this may violate scholarly norms, there are ways in which it can also be understood as performing a valuable intervention. This seems particularly important in the case of *The Secret River* given that, as Rooney points out, the book “was marketed and received [. . .] as an intervention in contemporary debates about Australia’s past” whose authority and influence was bolstered by Grenville’s growing reputation as a public intellectual (29). Indeed, as Pinto observes, given that a significant part of Grenville’s project is to go back to the origins of settlement—“where it all went wrong”—in an attempt to understand how problems in the present developed from past events and actions, her investigation resonates with those of academic historians of national pasts, particularly those that are contested such as Australia’s. If it is understandably trying to professional historians that

non-specialists use novels rather than historical material in the attempt to come to terms with Australia's past, it seems to me nonetheless valuable that Grenville's novel should have prompted the public contemplation of questions of historiography, "the ways in which history should be made and told, of what history should be" (186). Indeed, Pinto makes the case that the novel attracted the amount of attention it did "because it offered a focus for a discussion of the historical project in Australia at a time when an interrogation of this project held so much importance" (194). The provocations of the novel are not without value, in other words: public debates about the novel have not been solely about the history of Australian settlement and colonisation but about how that history has been articulated and understood. If the controversy around the novel has reified the division between history and fiction, what I have sought to do here in bringing Grenville's text into conversation with the work of Parry and others is to demonstrate the value of focusing on the novel's treatment of discourse—the textual fabric through which narratives both historical and fictional are mediated—and understanding how it shapes our knowledge of the past and of others. Seen in this way, the preservation of a sharp division between these categories may recede somewhat in importance. While the novel's act of creating a fictionalised version of history is not unproblematic, I find it nonetheless heartening that debates about the political and cultural ramifications of this process came into public prominence, as they suggest that historiography—not just history but the way it is represented—is something with the capacity to engage readers outside the academy and outside the specialised discipline of history.

While it could also be subject to the charge of colonial nostalgia in returning to the site of a national myth of origin, *The Secret River* does, on my reading, succeed in drawing attention to the dichotomies on which the Australian "economy of guilt" has been constructed, and the material realities of subjugation that have resulted, as one step towards their dismantling. Indeed, this may give us a clue about the novel's popularity, suggesting that it might speak to the seductive pull of narrative satisfaction: what Hayden White characterises as the desire for formal coherence in the "discovery of the 'real story' within or behind the events that come to us in the chaotic form of 'historical records'" (8). McKenna is another historian who points to how much is at stake with texts such as Grenville's, observing that frontier history is "so potent, so threatening to the national story, so crucial to the nation's legitimacy, that there is a strong subconscious desire for a history—fiction or non-fiction—that will dispel these dilemmas and tensions, and point the way forward" (McKenna 106). If readers are pulled by the need to resolve events into a formal and aesthetic order, how much stronger might this desire be when material and historical resolutions cannot occur? Collins suggests that this is one reason Australian cultural products repeatedly return to the moment of national origin: they do so in the hope that it "holds an explanatory key to all that has come afterwards" capable of resolving the guilt and

conflicts of the nation in the contemporary moment. Perhaps, Collins suggests,

we keep reworking this particular national myth precisely because it does not work as a national one. National myth should unify. It should define and bind the nation, should give the idea of the nation coherence and validity . . . But the stories of first contact with which white Australian history must begin are almost always stories of division: of misunderstanding and fear, of brutality and suffering. (40)

In revisiting the much-traversed representational terrain of the narrative of national origin, Grenville's novel risks laying itself open to the charge of reinforcing and fetishising not only Indigenous alterity, but the idea of an ordinary national moment, and thereby running the risk of "folding back into the kind of authenticating teleology that it sought to interrogate in the first place" (Sugars 104). Seen in this light, it also performs what Margery Fee sees as a decolonising move: a demonstration of the ways settler privilege has been discursively and ideologically constructed in both the historical past and in contemporary Australian society (688). This is a significant step towards a recognition of our complicity in the ongoing subordination of others (Razack 159, qtd in Sugars 113), and a glimpse of the ways in which we can start to think about the historical past and contemporary Australian society, that is, ways that avoid reinforcing and reanimating such divisions. To return to Parry, though, merely reappropriating the signifying function of colonialism is necessary, but insufficient. What readers do within this new discursive field is a larger and more challenging question to answer.

## Notes

1. It is salient that in 1990, some fifteen years prior to the publication of *The Secret River*, Slemon includes Grenville in a list of nine settler authors whose writing consistently works away at the problem that anti-colonial resistance cannot be disentangled from precisely the colonialist machinery it seeks to critique and displace (39).

## Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi K. "Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism." *The Theory of Reading*. Ed. Frank Gloversmith. Brighton: Harvester, 1984. 93-122. Print.
- Clendinnen, Inga. "The History Question: Who Owns the Past?" *Quarterly Essay* 23 (2006): 16-28. Print.
- Collins, Eleanor. "Poison in the Flour." *Meanjin* 65.1 (2006): 38-47. Print.
- Goldie, Terry. *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literatures*. Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989. Print.

- Grenville, Kate. "Facts and Fiction". *Kate Grenville—Australian Author—Official Web Site*. Web. 3 May 2013.
- . Interview with Ramona Koval, ABC Radio National. Web. 16 July 2005.
- . *Searching for The Secret River*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007. Print.
- . *The Secret River*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006. Print.
- Hirst, J. B. *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History*. Melbourne: Black, 2009. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.
- Kelada, Odette. "The Stolen River: Possession and Race Representation in Grenville's Colonial Narrative." *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 10 (2010). Web. 22 Jan. 2014.
- Kosew, Sue. "Voicing the 'Great Australian Silence': Kate Grenville's Narrative of Settlement in *The Secret River*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 42.2 (2007): 7-18. Print.
- Matthews, Brian. "Riding on the 'Uncurl'd Clouds': The Intersections of History and Fiction." *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*. Ed. Peter Pierce. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. 344-59. Print.
- McKenna, Mark. "Writing the Past." *The Best Australian Essays 2006*. Ed. Drusilla Modjeska. Melbourne: Black, 2006. 96-110. Print.
- Parry, Benita. "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse." *Oxford Literary Review* 9.1-2 (1987): 27-58. Print.
- Pinto, Sarah. "History, Fiction and The Secret River." *Lighting Dark Places: Essays on Kate Grenville*. Ed. Sue Kosew. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010. 179-97. Print.
- Probyn-Rapsey, Fiona. "Complicity, Critique, and Methodology." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 38.2-3 (2007): 65-82. Print.
- Rooney, Brigid. "Kate Grenville as Public Intellectual." *Lighting Dark Places: Essays on Kate Grenville*. Ed. Sue Kosew. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010. 17-38. Print.
- Rymhs, Deena. "Appropriating Guilt: Reconciliation in an Aboriginal Canadian Context." *English Studies in Canada* 32.1 (2006): 105-23. Print.
- Slemon, Stephen. "Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World." *World Literature Written in English* 30.2 (1990): 30-41. Print.
- Sugars, Cynthia. "Settler Fantasies, Postcolonial Guilt: The Compromised Postcoloniality of Jane Urquhart's *Away*." *Australian Canadian Studies* 19.2 (2001): 101-18. Print.
- White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1980): 5-27. Print.