

Tracking Our Country in Settler Literature

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'Tracking for Blackfellas is like reading for whitefellas.'
(Aunty Lil Smart nee Croker 1887–1980)

Aunty Lil was my Grandmother with whom I grew up.

This is a narrative paper that tracks a story of Aboriginal representation and the concept of nation across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries through some important Australian texts. I read this assemblage of settler literature through the cultural metaphor of tracking, because tracking is as much about anticipation as it is following. Tracking is about reading: reading land and people before and after whitefellas. It is about entering into the consciousness of the person or people of interest. Tracking is not just about reading the physical signs; it is about reading the mind. It is not just about seeing and hearing what *is* there; it is as much about what is *not* there. Tony Morrison wrote of mapping 'the critical geography' (3) of the white literary imagination in her work on Africanist presence in American Literature, *Playing in the Dark*. This paper tracks the settler imagination on Aboriginal presence in Australian literature in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Barbara Johnson (148) argues that if we believe that texts present major claims which attempt to dominate, erase, or distort various 'other' claims whose traces, nevertheless, remain detectable to a reader, then reading in its extended sense is deeply involved with questions of authority and power. My aim is not to question the status of such acclaimed authors or the value of their works in writing a settler nation. Nor is it to be dismissive or to disregard the works of literary scholars who have critiqued these works through postcolonial, ideological, poststructural and feminist readings, although I do point out that the critics also largely assume a settler readership. My aim instead is to see these texts as settler cultural terrains and to focus on both the represented and those who assume the authority to represent as cultural agents for settler culture, and the literary uses the represented presence of 'the Aborigine' has served in settler nation writing. Most importantly, my intention is not to advocate or imply that these and other settler works of Aboriginal representation should not be studied. On the contrary, what motivates and excites me is the idea of more culturally grounded readings of settler and Aboriginal authored works. These literary relationships, I believe, are central to understanding the way cultural identities have been and continue to be formed and informed in Australia. A further aim is to contribute to existing debate and scholarship by adding an Aboriginal standpoint from which to consider these national settler narratives.

I read across the following novels: *Coonardoo* (1929) by Katharine Susannah Prichard; *Capricornia* (1937) and *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975) by Xavier Herbert; *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976) by Patrick White; *Remembering Babylon* (1993) by David Malouf; and then finish briefly with *The Secret River* (2005) by Kate Grenville. I do this because along with their representations of Aboriginal people, these works are more significantly journeys into the interior of the settler mind and consciousness and its understanding of the phenomena of 'the Aborigine' and are deeply involved with questions of authority and power. 'The Aborigine' is the first renaming and therefore representation of us.

This is a journey into settler texts written at the interface or the intersection of Black and White, Aboriginal and Settler relations at particular times and places; all are set in emerging contact zones—new frontiers for settlers—and they are metaphors for new frontiers in settler consciousness. Martin Heidegger has written of ‘boundaries’ (152) as spaces not where something ends but where something else begins its presencing. These texts are examples of settlers’ changing consciousnesses of Aboriginal presence, of their own presence here and of their quest to belong. Quests and journeys are recurring themes.

The works of Prichard, Herbert, White, Malouf and Grenville represent some important boundaries in the settler psyche which form a literary continuum: a story of a quest to belong to country. Intricately intertwined with this is representing: claiming in a foreign language and therefore containing those who already belong. All these works continually play on the motifs of boundaries, borders, frontiers, fringes, edges, unknowns and ‘unsettled places.’ These spaces—‘frontiers, unknowns, borders, boundaries, fringes’—are cultural constructs of country and more importantly the beginning of a renaming process where Ngarla or Yuracumbunga or Larrapuna or Badtjala, Yuru and Giya become ‘settler spaces’ and the people become ‘the Aborigines/the Blacks.’

I would like to offer an Aboriginal standpoint on some familiar tropes in British settler diaspora literature that have written and still write the Aborigine in the white imagination. It may be tempting to think, as the permanent invaders of this Country, that the British might be ‘settled’ but the journey for settlement and resettlement is ongoing; the two post-Mabo texts I look at show that the continuing settler quest is to ‘write a nation’ because you do have to write nation. In contrast, you do not have to write Country because Country *is*. But a nation, as Benedict Anderson pointed out in his seminal work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, is an imagined political community (5). In Australia, the nation attempts to write over many Countries. This paper tracks Aboriginal containment in the settler quest to belong.

Before I go on to discuss the tropes, I need to say a word about standpoint because standpoint theory has attracted some criticism. To summarise criticisms: it is argued that a researcher/scholar is ‘blind’ to their own standpoint. As Alison Ravenscroft put it, the ‘paradox’ of standpoint theory is that the ‘coordinates that one can name are always in the field of one’s own making, the field one can see, the field one’s own epistemologies can describe’ (213). But not everyone operates in a field entirely of ‘their own making.’ An Aboriginal person in Australia, for example can see two epistemologies: the one you are born to—your cultural stance—and the introduced one—the colonial perspective. This criticism may be valid for one colonial researcher responding to another but it does not necessarily stand up when the position or standpoint one occupies has come about through continual representation in otherness by the ‘other.’ On that note it is Aboriginal people who are often identified in literary discourse as ‘the other,’ but from where I stand, critics and scholars could be the ‘other.’ More importantly for me, this standpoint allows an appreciation of what has been missed from representations—such as agency, resilience, different knowledge systems and different cosmologies. In other words, as Aboriginal scholars Aileen Moreton-Robinson (*Talkin’ Up*) and Martin Nakata (*Disciplining*) have shown, we can see the position we have been assigned in dominant discourse, the standpoint we own, but which may not be recognisable from an outside perspective and the standpoint from which we are being represented.

The twentieth century elicits very distinctly the racial and spatial nature of Australian literature. In 1935, Australian born essayist and author Percival Reginald Stephensen (1901–1965) wrote in an essay for the *Australian Mercury* called ‘The Foundations of Culture in Australia: An Essay Towards National Self Respect’: ‘A new nation, a new human type, is being formed in Australia’ (1). This new nation, as Stephensen’s argument evidences, imagined itself white: ‘Culture in Australia, if it ever develops indigenously, begins not from the Aborigines, who have been suppressed and exterminated, but from British culture . . .’ (1). Race, space and ‘white indigenes’ are recurring tropes in settler literature.

J. Healy (*Literature*) and later Shoemaker (*Black Words*) noted that from Federation onwards, Australian literature reflects an intense desire to be distinct from the colonial literature of the nineteenth century. The new nation wrote its own myths and its ideological sense of itself and Healy described Aboriginal Australians in the literary landscape of twentieth century Australia—in particular in this process of writing the nation—as ‘moths caught in webs of words’ (xvii). So, that’s another trope: containment.

Blood is a recurring motif that I read across all six texts. There is of course the shedding of blood literally but also of more interest to me is the blood that defines Aboriginality, and in the frontiers, borders or boundaries that are settler constructs there is also a mixing of blood, black and white, across *Coonardoo*, *Capricornia* and *Poor Fellow My Country*, and this mixing is seen predominantly as inevitable, but also largely as problematic. The half-caste, mixed race characters as defined by blood in these novels are as tragic as the full bloods are savage—as represented for example by Bobwirridirridi in *Poor Fellow My Country*. There’s a distinct divide here in Aboriginal representation between the savage and the tragic.

In the later novels, *A Fringe of Leaves*, *Remembering Babylon* and *The Secret River*, the Aboriginal characters are all full-bloods and these representations present Aboriginal country and characters as sites of ‘knowing’ the self and belonging, by taking the reader back to an imagined past in order to belong or somehow settle in the present. And, in the reconstructed past and the representations of Aborigines there’s a ‘foundation story’ an Indigenisation story for settlers.

All these novels are set in *places*; not just empty spaces, they are named already by the original inhabitants and then renamed by contact, overwritten. The Country of the Ngarla becomes Wyaliba Station, Prichard’s frontier. Larrika and Lapurna Country becomes Herbert’s Port Zodiac. Badtjala becomes White’s ‘fringe,’ Yuru and Giya become Malouf’s border settlement and Dharug lands become Grenville’s Hawkesbury, Wiseman’s Ferry. The act of dispossession comes through strongly in the place names of all these texts.

***Coonardoo*: Katharine Susannah Prichard (1929)**

In writing *Coonardoo*, Prichard made a radical departure from other narratives written to that date which featured Aboriginal characters. She was the first author to represent a mature Aboriginal character with an emotional domain, however limited. As Vance Palmer pointed out, she constructed mature Aboriginal characters and cast them in relationships with non-Aboriginal characters (Palmer Collection MS 1174). Nettie Palmer noted that in *Coonardoo*, Prichard constructed Aborigines as individuals (Palmer Collection MS 1174). Her representation is certainly a distinct departure from the pathetic and/or ‘comic’ minstrel-like representations of the nineteenth century such as William Aytoun’s 1845 poem ‘The Convict to his Loubra’ or Brunton Stephens’s ‘To a Black Gin’ (1873) (in Healy 99–100). *Coonardoo* is

also framed quite differently from early nineteenth-century frontier narratives such as Jeanie Gunn's *Little Black Princess* (1905) and *We of the Never-Never* (1908), which were noncontroversial because of their focus on the impact of a highly educated city woman on Aboriginal children.

Healy (139) points out that established authors such as Prichard, Palmer and, later in the 1930s Xavier Herbert, sought to capture the growing awareness and changing consciousness of the Australian public towards 'the Aborigine.' Healy writes that Prichard's interest in 'the Aborigine' as a subject of fiction in the 1920s was a product of a reemergence of metropolitan interest in Aboriginal affairs stemming from a number of devastating incidents in the centre and northwest of Australia.¹ Prichard's interest may have been an instance of urban consciousness, but I see her motivation as also voyeuristic. Prichard was politically conscious but the setting of *Coonardoo* is microcosmic and apolitical. The exotic, the primitive and what was considered at the time, fleeting glimpses of the last real Aborigines, motivated her.

Coonardoo was inspired by a story Prichard was told by a friend who lived on a remote cattle station in the north-west of Western Australia. It was the story of an Aboriginal woman mustering cattle with her child slung against her body who flung her baby with desperate rage and abandoned it among the rocks of a dry creek bed. It was here too that she witnessed a Corroborree and wrote to Vance Palmer in 1927: 'As I saw the corroborree it was the most thrilling and dramatic performance I'd ever seen. It *could be produced*' (Palmer Collection MS 1174, my emphasis). Here's a captive narrative then: Prichard capturing, what she thinks and represents as Aboriginal life.

It is very significant that in the opening chapters of *Coonardoo* Prichard re-presents a corroborree and reduces it to a very white perspective:

'What was it all about?' Coonardoo heard Mumae say to Saul Hardy, next day, although she dared hardly confess the eavesdropping to herself even. 'I don't know. It had some sex significance, I suppose. Fire is male. They believe smoke caused by the men in these dances impregnates some female spirit of things which dispenses life—for birds, beasts, coolyahs, bardis. The abos themselves, I think.'
(25)

This sets the tone for the rest of the story. It reduces Aboriginal spirituality and behavior to the purely sexual. Aboriginal sexual appetite, contrasted to that of the whites, is, according to Prichard, what drives and motivates Aboriginal behaviour. *Coonardoo* in particular is constructed as more a victim of her own sexuality than she is of colonial encroachment.

Prichard made the journey to the north-west of Australia accompanied by her young son, Ric Throssell, in 1926, and wrote later that it was through watching the childhood games of Ric and the Aboriginal children on the cattle station that she conceived the idea of the tragedy of an Aboriginal girl's love for a non-Aboriginal man. From this it is clear that it was always going to be a tragedy.

From an Aboriginal standpoint, *Coonardoo* is a white man's tragedy. The controversy amongst some of the reading public was evidenced by the *Bulletin* receiving hundreds of letters in protest at the serialisation of *Coonardoo*. In 1928 Mary Gilmore wrote in a letter to Nettie Palmer that the novel was not a depiction of station life: it was 'vulgar and dirty' (in Throssell 54). But the controversy was not so much the portrayal of the degradation of Aboriginal women, much less

their dispossession, but the possibility of love. Retrospectively, scholars such as Drusilla Modjeska ('Foreword') and Margaret Williams ('Natural Sexuality') have critiqued the work for its sexual violence and exploitation but it was the attraction and the desire and the rawness with which it was written that was the immediate issue.

The tragedy of the novel is the mixing of blood. Mishra and Hodge point out that what Prichard grasped when she came to the frontier was, from a settler perspective, 'the problems of legitimacy and inheritance on the frontier' (54), now that white men were in relationships with black women. The white protagonist, Hugh Watt, loses his property, his inheritance and his mind due to his love of an Aboriginal woman. Coonardoo is 'passionate, intense, loving and loyal to the white station owner, Hugh, beyond his merits—but intellectually she is not far above a faithful horse or dog' (54). Winni, their only male heir, is illegitimate, inherits nothing and, with mixed blood, goes off to a bleak future. He doesn't belong in any world and, symbolic of the union through blood of Aborigines and settlers, is ill fated.

Running parallel to Hugh as the symbol of the white settler on the frontier is Sam Geary. He is drawn for the reader as rough, crass and immoral. I read him differently. He is not Brumby Innes, whose exploitative sexual practices and violence towards all women have been aptly critiqued. The question I ask is: is Geary any worse than Hugh in his treatment of Aboriginal women? Prichard casts him in a very unfavourable light compared to Hugh, yet she does not have him rape or beat Coonardoo. Instead Coonardoo succumbs easily to his advances. One may argue that she submits to the inevitable but her animal urges come to the forefront and overtake her capacity to resist; she's a slave to her own sexual instincts as much as the white man. Prichard writes: '[she] could have moved past and away from him in the darkness' (*Coonardoo* 180). Geary practises polygamy, which offends British sensibilities and religious practices—but not Aboriginal ones at the time—as Coonardoo is happy to be Warieda's second wife when she is old enough. Geary is described as a 'gin-shepherd' (sic. 54) because he lives with Aboriginal women and has a 'family of half-castes' (54). In one scene his wife Sheba appears at Wyaliba Station wearing a silk dress and a gold watch; Hugh's wife comments that she is dressed better than most white women.

Yet Geary is the symbol of white transgression. He offends white sensibilities and is constructed as the opposite of Hugh: unintelligent, irrational, excessive, rough, uneducated, indecent, deranged and debauched. Hugh on the other hand, is rational, well educated, moderate, considered, couth and decent. Modjeska puts forward the case in the foreword to the 1990 edition of *Coonardoo* that the tragedy of Hugh is that he is too decent and, for a decent man in such times, miscegenation was morally wrong. Hugh's decency is the demise of Coonardoo. So are Aboriginal women then to be 'the property' of rough, uncouth, indecent men? Geary does inherit the land, but will his mixed Aboriginal children inherit the land? The novel ends in irresolution and an uneasy future. What I find disturbing is that in emphasising the reality of her novel, Prichard emphasised that Geary was based on a real person: 'Geary exists' she wrote and had been 'dealt with' by the Aboriginal Protection Board (5). I would take this to mean, given that it was the late 1920s or early 1930s and set in the same part of the country and historical period as *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (Pilkington 1996), that the children, who were of mixed blood, were removed.

***Capricornia* (1938) and *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975): Xavier Herbert**

Herbert's two narratives which represent Aboriginal people are over twenty years apart in terms of production and over thirty years apart in terms of publication. As an Aboriginal reader, the

most vivid and striking thing for me about these two works is that in both works he is asking the same questions of his readers (by his own admission) and raising the same ‘problems,’ which he perceives to be not only unresolved but accentuated as time has passed. And the problems are still blood, land and belonging. In *Poor Fellow My Country* he asks the same questions as in *Capricornia* but does so more explicitly, more forcefully and more brutally. To me, his consciousness of Aboriginal presence and future in the nation is the bleakest and most pessimistic of all.

Herbert actually knew Aboriginal people personally, whereas Prichard merely encountered them. As Geoffrey Dutton noted, Herbert grew up amidst the raw material of *Capricornia* (162) and as a child and adolescent with ‘full blood Aborigines’ and ‘mixed-blood fringe dwellers’ (159). It is the ‘mixed-blood fringe dwellers’ that are the real concern of his work. The motifs of blood and fringes are very poignant. He worked for a Darwin newspaper and also as a fettler in the Northern Territory Rum Jungle where he boasted of ‘inheriting a harem of young lubras from his predecessor’ (in Dutton 162). Among other jobs, between 1935 and 1936 he was Superintendent of Aborigines in Darwin. For ten years he struggled to write a novel called *Black Velvet*. With the help of his wife Sadie Nordern, this manuscript became *Capricornia* in the early 1930s. Angus and Robertson rejected the manuscript in 1934 as ‘too long and too depressing’ (Healy 156). Arguably some of Herbert’s unflattering representations of settlers played a part in this rejection. Of all the authors chosen, Herbert is the most critical of settlers.

In 1938, W.J. Miles took on and published *Capricornia* in time to enter and win the Sesquicentenary Literary Competition. Herbert wrote to Miles Franklin after winning the prize and reported:

When the news came I was stunned for a moment, but only for a moment; I promptly bought a case of beer and called in all the bums, bagmen and Greeks and Chows and Yeller-fellers about and got well and truly tanked. (in Dutton 162)

It is the Yeller-fellers who occupy Herbert’s consciousness because, no matter how small or how large their quotient of Aboriginal blood may be, the blood is obvious and has an impact on their ability to be truly black, but at the same time prevents them from being white or acceptable to whites either.

There are two representations of Aboriginality that span Herbert’s novels: the full-blood/savage, most vividly read through Bobwirridirridi in *Poor Fellow My Country*, and the mixed blood fringe-dwellers in both societies, embodied by Norman in *Capricornia* and Prindy in *Poor Fellow My Country*. Norman’s mother is Yuracumbunga (Marrowallua) and his father is white. In a brilliant visual image, the reader’s first image of Norman is of someone who is ‘the colour of the cigarette stain on Mark’s finger’ (*Capricornia* 33). The image of mixed race children as ‘a stain’ on the white man’s hand has been an enduring one.

Norman is an essentially flawed character because he dwells in two worlds but belongs to neither. He is sent south to be educated like a white man. He emerges from his southern sojourn as elegant, intelligent and highly skilled. But on his return to *Capricornia* and the Northern Territory, he is just a ‘Yeller Feller.’ Norman’s ambivalent identity has an impact on his ability to form meaningful relationships with blacks or whites. When he flees to the bush to avoid trouble he hears the ‘Song of the Golden Beetle.’ Later when he is lost and stranded because he is unable to read the weather he is rescued by ‘full bloods.’ An older Aboriginal man tells him:

‘Proper good country dis one. Plenty kangaroo, plenty buffalo, plenty bandicoot, plenty yam, plenty goose, plenty duck plenty lubra, plenty corroboree plenty fun plenty ebrytings. Number-one good country. More better you sit down all-same blackfella—hey Norman.’ (*Capricornia* 307)

But Norman cannot own his Country. He dismisses the beetle’s song and the lifestyle of the ‘full bloods.’ When dealing with whites, Norman repudiates his Aboriginal heritage. In this way he is, for the settler imagination, a true ‘half-caste’: caught between the ‘full-bloods’ who accept him but whom he disavows and rejects and the whites whom he emulates but who reject him.

This ambivalent situation leads to the tragedy at the end of the novel and raises the question: where does Norman belong in the nation? Even though he acquires a white man’s legitimacy through his inheritance of Red Ochre, he has no children, no prospect of a white partner who will accept him or a black partner who he will accept. Thus his capacity to continue this re-inheritance is tenuous at the least, and most likely impossible.

Poor Fellow My Country (1975) opens with Prindy described in terms of blood:

[He] could pass for any light skinned breed, even tanned Caucasian but his eyes were grey—with a curious intensity of expression probably due to their being set in cavernous Australoid orbits . . . his nose fleshed and curved in the mould of his savage ancestry . . . he could be anyone; a beautiful creature to any eye but the most prejudiced . . . but in Australia he was as just a boong. (8)

The plot of *Poor Fellow My Country* is a custody battle for Prindy. It is a battle for the heart and mind of a young boy who could be many things to many people. It is, however, his Aboriginal blood, even though he is described as a quarter-caste, which is his strongest point of identification and which leads to his demise. Every religious viewpoint, every cultural force, every family connection wants a piece of him, from Bobwirridirridi (a sinister representation of an Elder) to Dr Cobbity to Faye McPhee, journalist, to Kitty Wyndyer, classical musician (he is a musical genius), to Rifkah, a holocaust survivor, to Monsignor Maryzic—even Lord Vaisey (Lord Vesty of Victoria River Downs Pastoral Company)—all want to claim Prindy because he is a genius. Prindy grows from adolescence to manhood through a series of events, some of which are comic and many of which are tragically violent, but it is his Aboriginal blood that dictates the course of his life.

In one of his many letters, Herbert wrote:

[I]f whitefellers don’t confront and fully understand or make reconciliation with what has happened in the invasion of black Australia (and mucking up the initiation and other processes) they will keep stuffing up even if their hearts are in the right place as Jeremy’s is. The rest of them will be spineless, cowardly bastards who have no love or understanding of the country they live in. (De Groen and Hergenhan 268)

A failed initiation scene concludes *Poor Fellow My Country*. The author never witnessed an initiation and admits to constructing the scene to make a point. But it is a very problematic one. The initiation procedure itself is cruel. The Aboriginal Elders are like automatons devoid of human emotion and empathy. Led by the Pookarkka (Bobwirridirridi), they rape and

brutally murder Prindy's pregnant fiancé, Savitra, for intruding on the ceremony. Prindy then undergoes 'trial by ordeal' and is speared. Prindy's white grandfather, Jeremy, who wanted him to belong to both worlds and did not oppose the initiation, is also brutally killed in this scene. In trying to think like a settler, for whom Herbert predominantly wrote, I ask: how can one be expected to embrace his representations of Aboriginality for the future?

In both narratives, the mixed-blood children, Tocky, Prindy and their offspring, die in tragic, violent circumstances. Herbert's discourse on Aborigines purports to disdain racial prejudice, but his use of racial stereotyping for fatalistic, comic and melodramatic effect serves to feed the prejudices it attacks.

Poor Fellow My Country depicts post-war Australia from the vantage point of the 1960s and early 1970s. Looking back on the history of Country and people from where I stand, these decades were for us times of heightened activism, radical change and reasonable optimism for our future. For example, Aboriginal scholar Cliff Watego ('Backgrounds') asserted that the most important waves of social change filtering from abroad were the ascendant position and activism of the Blacks and the swiftness of the media to report on such events. Watego went on to say that during the 1960s many educated Australians were conscious of the indications of change despite the conservative Menzies era and went on to argue that the prevailing mood abroad cannot be discounted as having a profound influence on race relations at home. The 1946 Aboriginal Stockman's Strike, the 1963 Yolngu Bark Petition, the 1966 Wave Hill Walk Off, 1965 Freedom Rides, the 1967 Referendum and the reestablishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra in 1972 all evidence this. This raises the question: whose Country does Herbert see as poor in the face of such resilience?

***A Fringe of Leaves* (1976): Patrick White**

Patrick White constructed representations Aboriginal people in three of his works: *Voss* (1959), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976). I want to focus on *Fringe* for this discussion because it is here that I leave the voices of Aboriginal people. While Prichard and Herbert wrote through 'a white flame' they did give some dialogue to Aboriginal characters. In the last three texts, White, Malouf and Grenville write retrospective rather than contemporaneous accounts of encounters with Aboriginal people—but perhaps not even people—these representations become more symbolic and silent than those of Prichard and Herbert. There are sounds—mainly inscribed in the language of savagery—but voice has gone and so, for the most part, have individual characters, although Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* does rename a few individuals of the Dharug in English, such as Polly and Jack. By 1976 the political climate had changed—certainly since the time of *Coonardoo* and *Capricornia*, but not so much since *Poor Fellow My Country*. But *Fringe*, *Remembering* and *Secret River* move away from the mixing of blood. *Fringe* took a long time to write and during this time there was a referendum, shortly followed by a national definition of an Aborigine which, in short, endorses blood and at least on a systematic level de-emphasises quotients as a necessary part of Aboriginality. White developed a political interest in Aboriginal issues in the late 60s and 70s and decided to support the Whitlam election campaign because he felt Whitlam 'tried to come to grips with complex problems of Aborigines and poverty' (Marr 544). It is interesting to note that, from the 70s onwards, novels, or at least those described as 'classics,' appear to suggest a different sense of belonging through immersion. White was writing of and representing the Badtjala people but he makes the Badtjala story a generic representation of Aboriginality by renaming the people as 'the tribe' and the Country as a fringe.

White states in a letter to Geoffrey Dutton in 1963 that *A Fringe of Leaves*, despite being inspired by a historical event, is not a historical novel; rather it deals with states of mind, and the content is very contemporary (Marr 245). He also points out in a letter to Peter Sculthorpe in 1974 after the completion of the novel that ‘all other characters in *Fringe* are there for Ellen’s sake’ (Marr 252). I read this statement about the incidental nature of other characters from an Aboriginal standpoint; White’s representation of Aboriginal society is a vehicle through which Ellen gains new awareness and knowledge of her own social origins, values and practices. Kay Schaffer is critical of *Fringe* for its appropriation of Aborigines and women in a ‘white man’s mythology’ (75). Schaffer reads White’s narrative as a foundation myth, but rejects it as a woman. I agree with that but note Schaffer’s poignant and significant comment: ‘our quest is to follow Ellen’ (75). By this she means, I think, that the reader follows Ellen on a journey, presumably to belong and to understand the other: the Aborigine. But this raises further important questions. Whose quest? What quest? Who feels like they do not belong? *Fringe* deals with states of mind, and more specifically for me, shifting states of mind; it offers a new way of claiming Country, as do the Malouf and the Grenville texts. So now I am tracking these writers into headspaces; while Prichard and Herbert dealt with literal frontiers these authors are moving into frontiers of the mind.

David Marr (*Patrick White*) Kay Schaffer (*First Contact*) and Cynthia Vanden Driesen (*Writing*) point out that in the course of his research, White met with Wilf Reeves, a descendant of the Badtjala people who rescued Eliza Fraser and who advised him to be skeptical of non-Aboriginal versions of the event. White also knew that the Badtjala people’s version had been handed down orally as well as having been recorded. White was not concerned with either side’s version of historical events but rather constructed the predicament of his central protagonist for his own purposes. Nevertheless, White’s refusal to buy into either side does not confer neutrality, as White’s textual production is firmly embedded in wider contestations of historical truth.

In *Fringe*, individual characters dissolve into the generic language of savagery. White’s first task in taking readers on this journey into Aboriginal society is to draw the Aboriginal character, through Ellen’s eyes, as a recognisable savage. Without this, there is no contrast through which to force her reflections, prepare her to reconsider the assumptions on which her notions of what is civilised and savage are based, and to illuminate her consciousness of her own society. Aboriginal subjects in these ways are framed through familiar colonial discourses. In positioning Aboriginal characters and society in *Fringe*, Patrick White moves within these available discourses. While having little first-hand knowledge of Aboriginal people and having determined not to be swayed by any historical retelling of the Eliza Fraser story, White can only imagine his Aboriginal subjects by drawing on the historical, colonial, and anthropological archive of language, context and imagery for description.

For example the descriptors of Aboriginal characters are familiar colonial ones. Aboriginal subjects are unnamed. Individuals within ‘the tribe’ are distinguished from each other through physical characteristics, for example: ‘the old woman with heavy jowls,’ ‘the beefier woman,’ or the ‘wrinkled old man’ (236). The reader comes to know ‘the tribe’ through the narrator’s repeated and largely negative descriptions such as ‘hostile’ (238) ‘savages’ (239) who are ‘starving and ignorant’ (272), ‘all sinew, stench’ (242), ‘runtish’ (278), ‘hags’ and ‘nubile girls’ (243) who move around arbitrarily to escape their fleas (257), which set them ‘scratching themselves with the vigor of their similarly afflicted dogs’ (262). Aboriginal actions are those of the uncivilised and brutal men who ‘lounged about the camp . . . scratching themselves’ or ‘gorging themselves’ (247); ‘scornful blacks,’ ‘vindictive’ enough to ‘thrust a firestick into her

buttocks' (263). The children 'pinch' and 'jab with vicious sticks' (245). 'Wretched' women 'groveled' (248), 'slouched, grown slummocky' and 'the monkey-women snatched' (243). They are 'tormentors' (243) and 'depressed,' 'plodders, or innately dejected souls' (278), inclined to 'pinch or pull' (278). None of these characters speak for themselves. The men utter 'gibberish' (238, 279), 'emitted horrid shrieks' and 'howls' (239). The women are prone to wailing (248, 249), they 'glowered and cowered' (243) on hearing Ellen's voice. At night Ellen is surrounded by 'grunts and cries of animal pleasure' (254).

The colonial black savage is contrasted to and measured in terms of distance from the civilised white European. The 'blacks' are rendered as Other to 'whites' in the broader descriptions of the activities, through the eyes of Ellen. In these ways, Aboriginal characters are positioned towards the more familiar 'animal-like' rather than the 'fully human' end of the savage-civilised continuum. The women's minds do not produce thoughts but 'flitter on in search of further stimulus' (244). Their capacity for human feeling and grief is brought into question as the animal instinct to feed takes over. The burial scene captures this: 'At once their grief evaporated, except in the mother's case, who was prepared to keep up her snivels, but only a while, for they were returning to the fish feast' (261). For example, White's tribe could be any blacks; with the exception of a few signifiers in the form of native fauna, there are no specific signifiers of Australian-ness for me.

The representation of Ellen and of Jack Chance, the convict who 'rescues' her, is another trope that has since been taken up in settler writing of the 'white Indigene.' Malouf takes this up much more obviously. The most significant scene for me is the cannibal passage because it is not about 'truths' or 'untruths' of Aboriginal people or primitive people, but the scene, presented as a literary truth, is an amazing metaphor for containment and consumption of one by the other (in this case the settler other). The tribe is positioned for intellectual consumption and while White does not shy away from white cannibalism—even though it is constructed as deviant and depraved in the white world—in the Black world it is elevated to a 'rite' and the innocence of it is stressed.

More significant, however, is the incidental nature of the scene: the last of a line of transformations for Ellen. Ellen refers to it as 'the incident' of which she will never speak again; it is an incident in her journey. Aboriginal scholars Larissa Behrendt ('Eliza Frazer') and Lynette Russell ('Mere Trifles') have looked at the reiterations of the Eliza Fraser story as a white captive narrative. To me it is a Black captive narrative where 'the tribe' is captive and positioned for public consumption. Ellen's act of swallowing Aboriginal flesh is symbolic of a larger settler audience re-consuming the Aboriginal phenomena in 1970s Australia.

At this point in the narrative, readers have already been on a journey with Ellen from Cornwall, through the drawing rooms of Chelsea, to Van Dieman's land with her despicable brother-in-law, through a shipwreck, a still birth and the murder of her husband. By the time she arrives 'on the fringe of paradise' (233) and is discovered by the Badtjala, readers 'know her.' When the women strip Ellen of her colonial corset and stays, White describes her as being 'unhooked' and 'liberated' (244). Here perhaps is an invitation for settler readers to temporarily and metaphorically become unhooked from their western social mores and values and liberated from colonial prejudice to consider another cultural reality. This is how I read critics such as Schaffer when she suggests that 'our quest is to follow Ellen.' When the first available opportunity presents itself in the form of Jack Chance, Ellen re-hooks with her social moorings and colonial privileges and prejudices after she has been 'enlightened' by a comparative encounter, often described throughout the narrative as 'an ordeal.' Readers can

re-hook too and return to their social moorings having also experienced Ellen's ordeal and emerge, as she did, enlightened after a journey to 'the other side.' I argue that White's language of savagery and his continual reference to her as a 'slave' and a 'captive' reinforce colonial hierarchies and European hubris towards Aboriginal people rather than enlighten the settler world about any aspect of Aboriginal realism.

Vanden Driesen (*Writing*) claims that White's imaginative reworking of the Eliza Fraser story rewrites the nation by increasing the sense of belonging for those not Indigenous to the land. Her comments remind me that to rewrite the nation assumes creative licence to overwrite the Aboriginal standpoint. As Badtjala artist—a descendant of the people who rescued Eliza Fraser—Fiona Foley outlines:

In 1836 Eliza Fraser was marooned for five weeks on Fraser Island and her saga has been allowed to continue for throughout two centuries . . . the absence of dialogue with the Badtjala people has irrevocably damaged and put this people to rest. I often wonder when she will be put to rest. (165)

I think that Foley goes a long way here to reclaim the Badtjala narrative by describing it as a 'stranding' and a not a capture or kidnapping.

For me, Ellen's body and her consumption of Aboriginal flesh as a ritual in a journey to understand Country is an extended metaphor for the body of settler literature containing many Aboriginal bodies. The question this raises is: whose nation was Patrick White writing?

***Remembering Babylon* (1993): David Malouf**

Remembering Babylon is an immersion narrative. It was inspired by the life of Gemmy Morril, an English stowaway. Malouf drew on F.T Gregory's account of Morril's life and his knowledge of local flora and fauna gained from Juru, Gia & Ngaro people. From the vantage point of the 1990s Malouf constructs a fictional frontier scenario set in the mid-1800s, twelve miles from the newly settled port of Bowen in the colony of Queensland. The traditional owners here are the Yuru, Giya peoples, but like Patrick White before him, Malouf constructs a generic tribe. Once again, the sociopolitical context which produced the narrative has changed. Malouf is an early post-Mabo writer. This period in settler literature for me is the great unsettling. Arguably this climate has had the most striking effect on settlers. While all sectors of the Indigenous community applauded the overruling of *terra nullius*, the following models for Native Title claims have met with a more divided response. In contrast, I see the post-Mabo climate as having a unifying effect on settlers.

Malouf said in an interview in 1993: 'No white person here understands the aboriginal (sic) world enough to write about it' (Berne 2). *Remembering Babylon* differs from the other narratives I discussed because it does not directly construct any Aboriginal characters; rather, it represents Aboriginal presence through the presence of Gemmy, who is an in-between, hybrid character. Because he has spent time with 'a tribe' he is a 'black white man' by immersion.

In the post-Mabo context where Aboriginal people are now representing ourselves and unsettling settler claims to land and legitimacy, Malouf attempts to resettle the settler by casting some of the settler characters in the novel as enlightened. Some of the Scottish settlers

in this nascent settlement react to Gemmy's presence as a threat, but others see the potential for reconciliation, which is noble, but what is of great interest to me is, on whose terms?

Remembering Babylon provides further evidence of how settler authors continue to narrate the Aboriginal presence as subjects and objects of colonial discourse, even as the understandings of Aboriginal people change over time and in the post-settler bicentenary and post-Mabo climate, Aboriginal Australians engage the national consciousness on our own terms. The making of Australian consciousness and identity is a focus of much of Malouf's work and was also a theme of his Boyer Lectures in 1998. He expresses it as

an endless worrying back and forth about how we (settlers) were to ground ourselves and discover a basis for our identity. Was this identity to be grounded in what we had brought to this place or in what we found when we got here?
(Malouf, Boyer n. pag.)

What Malouf does through the construction of Gemmy is to create the notion, alluded to by White in his constructions of Jack and Ellen, of 'white indigenes.' In *Remembering Babylon*, some settlers such as the Reverend Frazer see the potential of 'white indigeniety' and seek to embrace it. He is one of the enlightened ones. In this way Malouf has rewritten settler history. Aboriginal scholar Gary Kinnane sees this as 'a gloss over reality, an attempt to replace historical fact with a more positive take on Indigenous-invader relations (in Byron 88). Mark Byron contends that 'Malouf offers readers a way to reconfigure objective identity into relational identity and how readers choose to respond will shape the meaning of the text' (91). In describing Gemmy as 'a forerunner . . . no longer a white man or a European, whatever his birth, but a true child of the place as it will one day be' (*Babylon* 132), Frazer suggests the possibility of settler indigenisation—belonging, through immersion in and appropriation of Aboriginal knowledge and environmental practices.

Frazer articulates the utopian dream for enlightened settlers—agriculture based on appropriating native flora, fauna and knowledge—the Aboriginal subject as the object of western knowledge. Reverend Frazer upholds the value of Aboriginal knowledge but it is for the benefit of the colonial project. Bill Gammage (*Biggest Estate*) and Bruce Pascoe (*Black Emu*) speak of clearings, burnings, culls and harvests in their recent research on Aboriginal agriculture. In describing the utopian dream of enlightened settlers, Frazer uses the language of the western pastoral dream of: 'supreme resolution and force of will and by felling clearing and sowing the seeds we have brought with us . . .' (*Babylon* 129). What I am reading is the transplanting of an Anglo-European pastoral dream into the Australian context where both land and people are resources and commodities in a capitalist colonial project.

Malouf's narrative, from my Aboriginal standpoint, signifies a significant shift in settler consciousness in the post-Mabo climate. He poses the question through Gemmy as to whether being Indigenous is a matter of blood or something that can be aspired to and achieved through immersion, respect and empathy with the original inhabitants and their descendants. This story legitimises a 'divine purpose' for settlers.

***The Secret River* (2005): Kate Grenville**

I read this narrative as a continuing stream of consciousness for white settlers. *The Secret River* was written and published during the 'History Wars' (see Windschuttle, *Fabrication* and McGuinness, 'Aborigines') when the Prime Minister joined the chant of right wing

historians and urged white Australians to feel ‘comfortable and relaxed’ about frontier history (Manne). Odette Kelada points out that, as demonstrated by its shortlistings for many major prizes and the award of the 2006 Commonwealth Writers Prize and the speed with which the work has made its way onto secondary and tertiary curricula, Grenville’s concern with settler/Aboriginal relations of the past appeals powerfully to the imagination of many readers (‘Stolen River’ 3). As such, it is a transmission text. This, I believe, is because it writes an alternative settler myth of foundation for emancipists. In this way it is an ongoing investment in nationhood and the reshaping of settler identity in the twenty-first century.

Grenville states on her website that *The Secret River* doesn’t judge any of the characters or their actions, it only invites the reader to ask: ‘What might I have done in that situation?’ (Grenville, ‘River’) But, what it really says to me is: ‘What would I like to do now?’

Researching and writing this novel was a quest (yet another that seeks to capture Aboriginal people) for Grenville’s great, great, great grandfather Solomon Wiseman. Grace Karskens (19) describes him as ‘a scoundrel’ involved in numerous ‘illegal and irresponsible activities’ to all of which the government of the day turned a blind eye because it was dependent on Wiseman—for the essential ferry link across the Hawkesbury River, for the use of several important buildings at Portland Head and for the essential public service Wiseman’s Inn provided at an isolated crossing place. In the process of research and writing, Grenville encountered Aboriginal author Melissa Lucashenko. Lucashenko took Grenville to task for her choice of words on the theft of Dharug lands. Grenville said her ancestor ‘took up’ land, thus positioning the Country of the Dharug as an empty space for settlers. Grenville’s use of the term ‘up’ here implies an ascendancy and elevation of Dharug Country under settler management. Lucashenko adamantly points out that Wiseman did not ‘take up’ he *took* (in Grenville, *Searching*). He stole and this tradition continues.

After some further discussion with Lucashenko about how she might tell the story of her ancestor, Grenville took David Malouf’s stance—that she did not know Aboriginal people well enough to give them dialogue so she would not try. But she needed to represent Aboriginal people to rewrite her own history as a national story. Quite dangerously, I think, Grenville (*Searching* 199) speaks of creating ‘a hollow’ which is meant to be the space for the Aboriginal story. But I cannot hear it and this hollow is highly symbolic. Grenville often uses the term ‘unreadable’ when she refers to the shadowy Aboriginal characters she creates and I’m wondering how people might be reading this hollow. I agree with Odette Kelada (‘Stolen River’) who notes that this limited engagement with ‘the other’ reduces the risk of disruption to and interrogation of one’s subject position.

The Secret River has been described as a massacre story, but as with the cannibal scene mentioned earlier it is a settlement story first and foremost, and a massacre ‘happens.’ And, as with the cannibal scene, the protagonists vow never to speak of the atrocity again. The fraught nature of this representation comes to light through comments by the author in her memoirs, aptly titled *Searching for the Secret River*, such as: ‘I’d learned in the course of my reading that it was useful to talk about “the Aboriginal people”’ (131, my emphasis). So here in the tracks of White and Malouf, we have the amorphous, anonymous and voiceless representations of us. And a further comment from Grenville: ‘I had to . . . re-frame the scene. I had to put *them* back into the picture’ (97, my emphasis). Mark McKenna (‘Writing’) and Inga Clendinnen (‘History’) took Grenville to task for using the metaphor of a ‘stepladder’ to look above historical controversy and I agree; I think this omniscient perspective assumes the

power to rewrite someone else's past in a quest for your own 're-framed past.' Grenville is still defending her position on this. In a 2012 interview with *Guardian Books* she commented with regard to such criticism:

we are as white Australians living incredibly privileged lives and we're doing it on the back of 200 years of oppression and misery and murder, basically. To actually look that fact in the face is extremely confronting, very difficult . . . when those historians really diverted the debate away from what I'd been writing the books about which is the massacre and what the beneficiaries do with that knowledge . . . was a chance to divert the debate into something more comfortable . . . is it history, is it fiction. (Grenville et al., n. pag.)

What the beneficiaries do with Aboriginal stories is an ongoing concern. In this case, 'diverting the debate into something more comfortable' means rewriting dispossession and massacre in a way that is more empathetic and less judgmental of settler perpetrators and their descendants. Furthermore, some white historians have engaged with and written of 'the facts' that Grenville has only more recently come to consider as 'extremely confronting' for quite some time.

Grenville went to a lot of trouble to rewrite and reinvent her ancestor in the colonial memory as a sensitive, reasonable man through the character of William Thornhill and in doing so she appropriated an Aboriginal story. The power to 'put them back' and to 'talk about them' is a privilege that all these settler authors have, and have enjoyed almost uninterrupted until the last two decades: *they* move Aboriginal characters in *their stories* like chess pieces to reconstruct the past and perpetuate the national narrative of settler foundation. It is arrogant to assume that Aboriginal people need settler authors such as Grenville, 'to put us back' in Australian history because we were always there. What is needed is for settler authors to stop appropriating *our* past for their own purposes.

The book reads like Malouf's before it in constructing enlightened and not-so-enlightened settler characters. Will Thornhill, for example, is amazingly sensitive and insightful for an illiterate convict. This alternative image of a convict is central because it offers a choice for the descendants of convicts in the present. *Some* could be descended from the more enlightened and repentant such as Thornhill. I was not convinced that Thornhill was repentant though; after all he did build his mansion on illegal monies and theft. He also built over an Aboriginal rock carving: 'the fish . . . [where] his children's children would walk about on the floorboards and never know what was beneath' (316). And some may claim that in writing this book Grenville has 'remembered.' I challenge this. She has not remembered the past, she has rewritten it. She also sows the seed in the settler mind, for all those descended from emancipists, that not all convicts were the same and even on the lowest rung of British society there was a moral economy embodied in her reconstruction of her ancestor. Ironically, though, the representations of Aborigines across these last three works are virtually all the same. They are all 'noble savages' and relics of a preindustrial 'primitive race.'

Grenville claims the horrors of the past and once these horrors are exposed, much like a wound as Sue Kossew puts it ('Voicing'), a process of recovery and healing is possible. The act of owning up to the past is offered as a sign of maturation for the nation. Kelada ('Stolen') and Kossew ('Voicing') note that national shame can be converted to national pride. I thought about the use of the term 'owning up': owning up to the past in the same way Lucashenko thought about the difference between *took* and *took up*, the difference between stealing and

elevating. I think that owning up to the past could be dangerously like *taking up land*. It might really be *taking it*: stealing it and appropriating it to write narratives of settler apologetics and to create new foundation myths for the present.

In her own words Grenville describes her position in the colonial project and her investment in the nation. Although she goes to some pains to de-emphasise her privileged position in her memoir, it is not hard to read the colonial affluence that reeks through such comments on her maternal ancestry: ‘All four generations had been rough country people—right up to her parents, who’d run a succession of pubs in country towns (*Searching* 4).’ This poses the question: in whose Country were these towns and pubs? And:

There were several convicts in the family tree. She was proud of them. They’d shown a bit of spirit, she thought, in trying to get something for themselves and their families. They were survivors. . . . Mum had scrambled into an education. She’d trained as a pharmacist and married our father, then a young solicitor with political leanings. (*Searching* 4)

All five authors have one overriding similarity across time and place as they leave their tracks: it is their comfortable and privileged position in the colonial project. They all assume the authority to talk *about* us and move us around the national picture as they see it. All these narratives offer settlers a way to reconfigure their identity which is appropriate to and in keeping with the political context of the time in which they were written. And the Aboriginal past is a vehicle—yet another resource to be appropriated for the settler present.

I have engaged more broadly with the last three books I have tracked because I am responding to the equally broad representations of Aboriginality being offered as these authors make tracks over time and place and as they displace and replace, dispossess and repossess Aboriginal people in their quests, still writing nation from Country. This is good place to end in the post-Mabo, post-Sorry climate of the Countries that have been rewritten as the nation. I spoke of representation and renaming as acts of possession and dispossession but to consider these is also to consider re-possession or co-possession. Emerging in quite a groundswell since the settler bicentenary are Aboriginal representations of ourselves, our histories and our encounters, past and continuous with settlers. I see this as a process of writing Country back to nation and that has changed the literary landscape again, but that’s another story.

NOTES

¹ The 1926 Umbali Massacre in the Kimberley region of Western Australia led to the formation of a Royal Commission. The findings were published in 1927 and had repercussions beyond Western Australia. Shortly after the publication of this report, the Conniston Station Massacre occurred on the Lander River north west of Alice Springs in 1928, which was followed by the Bleakley Report of 1929.

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