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**White Australia's Black History: Writing Australian cultural sensitivities**

Abstract

In recent years there have been a number of Australian novels attempting to rewrite history from a more culturally sensitive point of view. In this type of writing the author becomes a mediator between an already written historical past that has become the basis of a nation's psyche and a cultural present where history is constantly being rewritten as awareness of historical silences brings about a more complex set of ethical engagements. In this context, the author who attempts to mediate these realities becomes a witness for change. But this role can raise complex issues for the non-Indigenous author sensitive to the silences around Indigenous representations. Recent novels such as Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) and Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008) focus on Australian history and point to a way in which non-Indigenous Australians have attempted to write back to the colonising forces that have constructed the nation we call Australia. For non-Indigenous authors this type of writing can involve a vexed journey that touches at the core of what it means to be Australian in the 21st century. By comparing the writing strategies in the novels *The Secret River* and *Wanting* plus Eleanor Dark's novel *The Timeless Land* (1941) alongside discussions of my own process in writing *Beneath the Grace of Clouds* (2010) I will discuss the difficult ethical questions that face non-Indigenous Australians when they try to represent the fact that white Australia does have a black history.

Biographical Note

Janie Conway-Herron is an award-winning senior lecturer in Creative Writing at Southern Cross University. She has been published in a number of journals and anthologies, and has been editor of three collections of work from creative writing students. Her novel *Beneath the Grace of Clouds* was published in 2010. Janie spent the first two decades of her adult life as a singer-songwriter, touring the east coast of Australia in a number of different bands. She is passionate about human rights and travels regularly to the Thai/ Burma border to run creative writing workshops with Burmese women refugees.

Key Words

History – Fiction – Indigenous / non-Indigenous Writing

### **Introduction: Terra Incognita**

The implications arising from British colonial practice in Australia date back to Captain Cook's charting the eastern coast of a country named by 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch explorers as 'Terra Australis Incognita', or unknown southern land. The question of what is known and what is not known, what has been told and what can be told about contemporary Australia is intimately connected with a colonial past that has its roots in this moment. For non-Indigenous writers writing back to this colonial past, their writing is contingent on acknowledging that Australia has an Indigenous history. In 1940, Eleanor Dark writes in the preface to *The Timeless Land*:

My aim has been to give a picture of the first settlement of Sydney, which is always true in broad outline and often in detail, but I can make no claim to strict historical accuracy either in my dealings with the whitemen or the black. With regard to the latter strict accuracy would hardly be possible. There are many accounts of those people in the journals of those who came to Australia with the first Fleet; but as was inevitable between races unacquainted with each others' languages, and unfitted to appreciate the significance of each others' customs, there were constant misunderstandings, and in the light of research which has been made in recent years, one is bound to regard some of their statements with suspicion (1991:7).

Seventy years later Dark's dilemma remains. Many writers describing encounters between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have attempted to move beyond ideas and assumptions connected with a colonial state, but the very colonial markers they are resisting inevitably affect their writing, placing it in an in-between space fraught with the tension of unresolved racism. Dark was a non-Indigenous woman who resisted the writing of a white supremacist version of history, and attempted the kind of writing that articulates what Jane Durie (2003) in describing whiteness as an underlying factor in an Australian cultural subjectivity frames as:

A concept of the subject that enables a space between white identity and whiteness as a concept, a subject conceived as becoming, rather than set and essentialised either as racist or anti-racist (140).

This resonates with Ghassan Hage's notion of the 'memory wars' referring to the history wars that were waged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, where whiteness, coupled with John Howard's notion of a black-arm-band-history, contributed to a silencing and lack of recollection of the way that in Australia 'there remain two separate communal identities with two separate memories trying to live together in one state' (Hage cited in Haggis: 56).

### **Choosing fiction: Writing History**

There is a tension in Australian literature that reflects a painful history of subjection to a colonial foreign power. Here the space between, this translatory space, connecting the two separate memories Hage refers to, is littered with gaps and fissures. For every space that is filled another space appears; spaces that speak to the very unsettling coupling of identity and belonging in a postcolonial context. In writing against the grain of a white cartography of place, we draw attention to the silences, gaps and

fissures in previous histories. As a non-Indigenous writer wishing to acknowledge Indigenous peoples, I might wish to transcend the emotional and material ramifications of history, but, at the heart of my project lies the statement 'white Australia has a black history', with all the nuances and ambivalences this phrase suggests.

Ethical guidelines for conventional research have been clearly defined, but when ethical motivations in fiction are considered, the defining boundaries of research guidelines become porous, open to interpretations that seek to make the realm of the imaginary an inviolate place, untouched by the rules and regulations of the material world. But, the world of the imagination is influenced as much as the material world by external forces, and so fiction, like any other representational form, has ethical concerns at its core. Once a story is categorized as fiction and relegated to the realm of the imaginary it is difficult, in Western European culture, to say who owns a story unless we are dealing with direct plagiarism. However, if we focus on issues of appropriation that have dominated the Australian literary world in recent decades, we can see how it brings particular ethical consequences to both history and fiction.

Penny van Toorn (1995:121) writes that 'history is deeply implicated in the colonial project' through becoming 'a marker of the colonists' higher civilization', one which regarded the colonised as lacking a history of their own. This came at a time when 'rapid and aggressive imperial expansion necessitated a devaluing of indigenous cultural practices' (1995:122) and contributed to the appropriation of indigenous narratives not only by historians, but also by anthropologists, journalists, visual artists and fiction writers. Indigenous people the world over have rightly become sensitive to issues of appropriation, subjecting Western cultural practices to a questioning of their 'own truth value', which would allow for 'history to know itself differently' (van Toorn, 1995:124). In a world where the history of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australia is so divided, to represent or not becomes a cornerstone of the writing project. As Non-Indigenous writers if we represent Indigenous culture then we need to be mindful that we are not appropriating material for our own gain or being tokenistic but if we leave Indigenous life out of our narratives, we could be writing stories that, Nadia Wheatley suggests represent 'a white Australian monoculture and inadvertently foster racism' (Cited in Heiss A, 2003: 14).

In 'Naked Peoples', Irene Watson ascribes the historic invisibility of Aboriginal Australians to the inability of colonisers to come to terms with their own shame. 'It is as though we were never there; as though being naked we were invisible to the coloniser' (1998:3-4). Watson goes on to show how these attitudes have influenced conceptions of Australia as *terra nullius* and contributed to a lack of recognition of Indigenous peoples. In a history that privileges a white cartography of imperial progress, they become ghostly figures in a gendered and racialised landscape.

In recent years a number of Australian novels have attempted to rewrite history from a more culturally sensitive point of view. Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) and Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008) focus on Australian history through the lens of whiteness and point to a way that non-Indigenous Australians can write back to the colonising forces that have constructed the nation we call Australia.

In writing *Secret River*, Kate Grenville describes wanting to fill the 'empty space in my own family history where Aboriginal people belonged. ... I'd never known anyone remotely like the Aboriginal characters I was describing, not even from a distance. I was inventing them from the only resources I had: stereotype, cliché and guesswork' (2006:193). Rather than represent an Indigenous perspective, Grenville decided to show everything through the eyes of William Thornhill, a character based on her ancestor Solomon Wiseman. She also decided to, 'get rid of all the Aboriginal dialogue', feeling that 'while it might be historically accurate to have the Aboriginal characters speaking broken English, it made them less sympathetic more caricatured' (2006: 198). By choosing not to include 'Aboriginal dialogue', on ethical grounds, Grenville has in turn marginalized Indigenous characters by taking 'a subjective approach' to Thornhill and making his point of view central to the narrative. The focalisation inherent in taking such a subjective approach meant that the story was told through the eyes of this 19th century convict from cockney London and because his knowledge of Indigenous people was minimal the Indigenous characters were relegated once again to the edges of the narrative.

In *Wanting*, Richard Flanagan uses the landscapes of England and Tasmania in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as backdrop to the lives of Mathinna, a young Aboriginal girl and Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin, the couple who adopt her as an experiment in civilization. Mathinna is based on the daughter of Towtera and Wongerneep of the Lowgernown or Port Davey tribe. Flanagan sets this story alongside a narrative of Charles Dickens as he undergoes life-changing events while touring a play about a frozen wasteland. This wasteland resembles the Arctic landscape that Sir John will ultimately disappear into as well as metaphorically representing Dickens's 'frozen' emotional landscape; one that he finds hard to escape from. This powerful story sets reason against the ultimate capacity of desire to undo us all – hence the title, *Wanting*. Flanagan writes in notes on the novel:

Perhaps because I am drawn to questions which history cannot answer, and because these characters and events thus become the motley thrown over the concerns that are the true subject of this novel, I am disinclined to research. Accordingly, I have leaned heavily on a very small post made up of only a few books. I do not know if they are definitive, only that they were useful (2010).

Flanagan asks what is wrong with fiction writers using history, indicating that Shakespeare, Tolstoy and Dickens have used history to comment on their own societies. He describes *Wanting* as a 'meditation on desire and the terrible cost of trying to control that wanting by reason' (cited in Steger, 2008). This story resonated with Flanagan because of the way 'The Age of Reason played itself out in the treatment of Mathinna' (Flanagan, 2010). But the focalisation in *Wanting* is also problematic; the reader is constantly looking at Mathinna through colonial eyes. At times the focalisation is on Mathinna but her view of the world is always framed by a colonised subjectivity from which there is no escape. The ultimately frightful ending of her life, based on actual reported events, does nothing to further the cause of Aboriginal sovereignty, instead reinforcing the 19<sup>th</sup> century notion of soothing the pillow of a dying race.

### **Indigenous Protocols: Cultural appropriation**

For Anita Heiss there are a number of questions to do with Indigenous representation that arise in all these kinds of writings, including the fact that many academics, historians and fictions writers whose credibility has arisen from 'giving voice' to Aboriginal people have also carved a reputation and career out of writing about 'Aboriginal society and that 'this is unacceptable to many Aboriginal writers who are tired of competing with white writers for the opportunity to write and be published in the areas directly related to their lives (2003:10). Heiss also discusses arguments put forward by Indigenous writers such as, Jackie Huggins, Kenny Laughton, Robert Bolpho and Alexis Wright about their concerns with Non-Indigenous writers who write from the outside of Indigenous culture rather than having experienced it in their own lives. Heiss quotes Cathy Craigie as tacitly approving the need for all Australian to recognise Indigenous people in their writing. Craigie believes that:

... any writing that's done on any theme that comes out of Australia ... should have Aboriginal undercurrents, acknowledgement, or whatever. There is no such thing as the great Australian novel unless it has included that side. If you want to show the psyche of Australia you've got to do that. ... all Australian writers have to be able to put that stuff in, but there are certain things they can't talk about (Craigie cited in Heiss, 2003: 12).

What Craigie is referring to here is customary law and spirituality as well as fundamental worldviews. For many Aboriginal people stories belong to a particular place and come from a landscape that forms the history of that place; special permission is needed if people from outside that place want to tell these stories. This puts a further responsibility on non-Indigenous writers who are used to taking bits and pieces of story from wherever they want.

The Australia Council has published a guide for people entering the terrain of Indigenous representation. Writers are urged to be aware that:

Some of what has been written about Indigenous people has served to develop stereotypes that do not adequately reflect the diversity of Indigenous people and their culture. ... Attention must be paid to the cultural accuracy of using Indigenous knowledge, cultural information and stories. Questions of authenticity and appropriate cultural protocols require thought when writing Indigenous cultural information (2007:6).

Grenville's *The Secret River* and Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002) are given as examples of novels with Indigenous themes that have used consultation and authenticity of information as part of their process. Grenville's third novel *Sarah Thornhill* (2011) a sequel to *The Secret River* is based on the main character in *The Secret River*, William Thornhill's, youngest daughter. In between these two novels Grenville has written *The Lieutenant* about the friendship between William Dawes and Cadigal girl, Patyegarang.

Just prior to Kevin Rudd's apology in 2008 and in the middle of the history wars, when Keith Windschuttle (2002) and other apologists were denying Australia's brutal colonial history, Grenville's timely book was criticized by historians Inga Clendinnen

(2006) and Mark McKenna (2005) for her position on writing history and the way she claimed that as an author of fiction she could represent history without taking sides. In 'Writing the Past: History, Literature and the Public Sphere in Australia', McKenna argues that 'Grenville's book is merely the most recent in a series of examples of 'novelists parading as historic authorities' that have 'eroded the traditional authority of professional historians' (McKenna cited in Nelson 2007).

In an interview for *The Weekend Australian Magazine* (2011) Grenville describes feeling beleaguered by the reception of *The Secret River* where 'debate turned on what she'd said and hadn't said' (Cosic, 2011: 35). For Grenville the real problem in the controversy of history versus fiction is the way it has displaced other discussion, 'not even of the books but of the issues contained within them' (Grenville cited in Cosic, 2011: 35). For Grenville the debate about history or fiction has displaced the real concerns of history itself and what has happened there, exemplifying the way concerns around discipline or genre can overwhelm the actual debate engendered by the content of a story and once again silence Indigenous Australians.

### **The Importance of Listening: Memoir as mediation**

Madan Sarup writes, '[w]hen asked about our identity, we start thinking about our life-story: we construct our identity at the same time as we tell our life-story' (1996:15). A history that examines issues of identity will, by nature, focus on the minutiae of human lives. The identities we bring to the present of our lives are influenced by every moment of our past.

In 'Respect V Political Correctness' Jackie Huggins writes:

The best books written about Aboriginals by non-Aboriginals are by those who have some relationships and friendships with Aboriginal people. Having a respect and knowledge of Aboriginal culture, history, social issues and what was happening to Aboriginal people in the era in which they are being written about is imperative to how one writes Aboriginal characters and situations (1994: 12)

In the 1980s I worked with Aboriginal musicians and the memoir section of my novel, *Beneath the Grace of Clouds* (2010), is a fictionalised version of my experiences of that time. This contemporary narrative is interwoven with the story of my First Fleet convict ancestor, Elizabeth Hayward, and her journey to Eora country. Coincidentally it is also fact that my ancestor lived under the same roof as a young Wallamatagul girl, Booron, who was brought into the British hospital tent suffering from smallpox. Interwoven with the story of my First Fleet convict ancestor, Elizabeth Hayward, and her journey to Eora country. Coincidentally it is also fact that my ancestor lived under the same roof as a young Wallamatagul girl, Booron, who was brought into the British hospital tent suffering from smallpox. In 1995 when I began my research into the same kinds of historical facts that Eleanor Dark covered in *The Timeless Land*, I had no more access to information than she did. As I continued, new research on Indigenous Australian history began to emerge, shedding further light on my writing. But I still faced the dilemma of how to represent Indigenous characters without further colonising them? If I wrote entirely from a

white point of view, the focalisation would depend on only seeing the Indigenous characters through colonising eyes. Indigenous characters would be voiceless without a perspective of their own, relegated to the edges of the page like they were in my 1950s school textbooks. I felt compelled to give Indigenous figures in my narrative voice, vision and point of view and that over three decades of relationships with Indigenous Australians had given me some insight into the way Indigenous characters might see the world. Weaving a fictionalised memoir of my experiences in *Rock Against Racism* and my corresponding search for my grandmother's identity, created a way to show the complex nature of identity and belonging in Australia and to relate historical situations to their contemporary consequences.

Recently there have been a number of memoirs written by non-Indigenous Australians that have opened up understandings between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. John Danalis's memoir *Riding the Black Cockatoo* (2009) describes his returning an Aboriginal skull that had been on his family's Queensland mantelpiece for decades to its belonging place in Western Victoria. At the beginning of the book, Wyrker Milloo, Gary Murray writes:

Reconciliation is about balancing the book of history. It is about balancing out the injustices of our past with justice for the future so we can be at peace with our families, other people and the environment we live in. ... One ugly stain in our shared history can become a glorious but profound point in our journey. Wiran, the black cockatoo with red feathers, had taken us on a flight of beauty and wonderment returning our lost Ancestor to Country (Murray cited in Danalis, 2009).

In the foreword, Boori Monty Prior writes about a Wik woman describing John Danalis as a 'whitefella who's learned to listen' and *Riding the Black Cockatoo* as being: 'Selfless in its search for sanity of the soul, magic and poetic ... a nation's journey through its growing pains of race and colour' (Prior cited in Danalis, 2009).

Ros Moriarty's *Listening to Country: A journey to the heart of what it means to belong* (2010) is the story of the author – a former linguist and journalist for Radio Australia – and her experience of Indigenous culture through her marriage to John Moriarty. Moriarty weaves her personal family story into a journey across the Tanami Desert in the Northern Territory with Law women from the Gulf of Carpentaria. In weaving the personal and the spiritual, with the shameful, painful history of the every day, this book is an uplifting story of Aboriginal Australians surviving the harsh realities of a brutal history. In an interview with Peter Thompson John Moriarty describes himself and Ros as being connected by 'this bond, the love of the natural world, that ties us together. We really do represent black and white Australia' (2010). In the same interview Ros describes the notion of listening to country as a way of seeing it, that 'if you listen, then you'll know where to go'.

In *The Hard Light of Day* (2010) Rod Moss describes the many people in a football photo, taken by him in 1985, who have died. He has a special friendship with Arrenye whose spiritual presence is omnipresent in the memoir and who provides the impetus for Moss's writing. But Moss insists:

This story is mine. It isn't derived or motivated by historical archives. It is about

personal stories, travelling and enduring friendships. ... I want to be clear that this is a memoir, not an official history (xiv).

Moss has chosen to live in Alice Springs and sees his Arrernte friends as being 'crucial to (his) experience of this place' (xiii). It is the stories of these friendships and the lives and deaths of so many of his friends that nourish the memoir that spans more than twenty-five years. In the final pages Moss writes of his friend:

What stories would Arrenye be telling today? Who would be listening? In twenty years we are told, half the Territory's population will be Indigenous. ... The Larapinta Valley is straining to hold its people together – this strange brew of whitefella and blackfellas with its complex ruptures. How do we begin to understand the ambiguities and transmuted traditions transpiring in this deeply creased, cupped palm of country? (2010: 250).

Perhaps the answer might come with listening; that gentle art of making space in our hearts for the stories of both whitefellas and blackfellas and the imaginary or actual worlds they inhabit. Stories by non-Indigenous Australians who have had the opportunity to experience Indigenous cultures create an opportunity for readers to understand something of the cultural ambiguities that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and the history that has transpired as a result of their meeting. They are important stories for all Australians.

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