

Here Where We Live: The Evolution of Contemporary White Australian
Writers' Responses to White Settler Status.

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Contents

Abstract	1
Declaration	3
Acknowledgements	4
Exegesis: The Evolution of Contemporary White Australian Writers’ Responses to White Settler Status.	
Introduction	6
Chapter One <i>Remember the dead, cry for them</i> : The “Haunted” Approach	10
Chapter Two <i>Life now, fires lit, laughter now</i> : The “Contemporary Representations” Approach	21
Chapter Three <i>And a new day calling</i> : The “Stepping Back”/“Stepping Forward” Approaches	31
Conclusion	43
Creative Work: <i>Here Where We Live</i>.	
A note on the relationship of the short story collection to the exegesis.	47
Country:	
<i>My Good Thing</i>	50
Ghosts:	
<i>Drought Core</i>	55
<i>Night Blindness</i>	66
Ways We Learn Things:	
<i>Stuff White People Like</i>	86

<i>Karko</i>	101
<i>Free With the Animals</i>	111
Country:	
<i>Oak Trees in the Desert</i>	116
<i>Her Thoughts Heading North</i>	138
List of Works Cited	144
Selected Bibliography	147

Abstract

The Exegesis: The Evolution of Contemporary White Australian Writers' Responses to White Settler Status.

It is proposed that Australians of white settler heritage writing on the subject of Indigenous Australians in the period from the early 20th Century to the present day take a combination of three common approaches. The “haunted”, “contemporary representations” and “stepping back” approaches represent an evolving attitude in contemporary white Australian writing on Indigenous themes. This evolution occurs in a rough chronological order, however within this chronology the writing may exhibit a fluidity, moving back and forth between the three approaches. Texts by Patrick White and Judith Wright are used as primary examples of the three approaches, with secondary examples given from a range of contemporary white Australian writers.

The evolution of Indigenous Australian writing is discussed within the “stepping back” approach. Parallels are drawn between the evolution of white and Indigenous Australian writing on Indigenous themes, with the argument that Indigenous writing displays both the “haunted” and “contemporary representations” approaches. The final approach for Indigenous Australian writers, however, is the “stepping forward” approach. The poetry of Kath Walker/Oodgeroo Noonuccal is the principal example given to illustrate this section, with additional commentary on a range of contemporary Indigenous Australian writing.

Examples of the three approaches' influence on the creative component of this thesis are discussed throughout the exegesis.

The Creative Component: *Here Where We Live*.

The creative component of the thesis, *Here Where We Live*, is a collection of short stories that examines contemporary white Australians' sense of place within the South Australian landscape. Awareness of environment and attitudes

towards Indigenous people are constant, but not always dominant themes. The three approaches discussed in the exegesis are represented within the different stories. As each of these approaches involves the concept of Indigenous invisibility, Indigenous people and issues are sometimes represented as being on the periphery of the white characters' awareness.

The short story collection is divided into three parts, each of which corresponds to one of the three approaches in the exegesis. Part One, "Ghosts", corresponds to the "haunted" approach, Part Two, "Ways We Learn Things" corresponds to the "contemporary representations" approach, and Part Three, "Country", to the "stepping back"/"stepping forward" approaches.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide.

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Cassie Flanagan Willanski, April 2012.

Exegesis: The Evolution of Contemporary White Australian Writers' Responses to White Settler Status.

Introduction

In her introduction to *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1965), Judith Wright begins:

Before one's country can become an accepted background against which the poet's and novelist's imagination can move unhindered, it must first be observed, understood, described, and as it were absorbed. The writer must be at peace with his landscape before he can turn confidently to its human figures.

But in Australian writing the landscape has, it almost seems, its own life, hostile to its human inhabitants; it forces its way into the foreground, it takes up an immense amount of room, or sometimes it is so firmly pushed away that its obvious absence haunts us as much as its presence could do. (*Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* xi)

Wright attributes this hyper-awareness of the Australian landscape to its symbolism for white Australian writers as “the outer equivalent of an inner reality; first...the reality of exile; second...the reality of newness and freedom”. (*Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* xi)

On reading the introduction, it seems that a third reality can be said to over-arch that of “exile, newness and freedom”. This is the reality of postcolonialism – or, as I use it within this exegesis, the reality of belonging to an ongoing white settler society such as Australia's.¹

Wright's pivotal first meeting with Indigenous poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal, then Kath Walker, took place two years prior to the publication of *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, (Rooney 18) and the evolution of Wright's “white settler” consciousness will be discussed throughout this exegesis. In the 1965 introduction, it is not directly articulated. One particular sentence, however, stands out: “The writer must be at peace with his landscape before he can turn confidently to its human figures.”

This sentence, for me, evokes a paradoxical question: what happens when the “human figures” are understood to be Indigenous - descendants of the people whose land the white Australian writer's ancestors colonised – and therefore a

¹ Where the term *postcolonial* is used, it is to be understood in the sense of “white settler society”, rather than as a reference to the original people of a country that was previous colonised who have since gained independence. For a detailed discussion of the various interpretations and problems involving the use of this term see Peter Childs, R. J. Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (London: Prentice Hall, 1997).

constant reminder that he (sic) is *not* at peace with his (sic) landscape?

The observations in this exegesis arose during the research and writing of the creative component of my Master's thesis in Creative Writing, *Here Where We Live*, a collection of short stories that examines contemporary white Australians'² sense of place within the South Australian landscape, as people of white settler heritage.

My aim, as a white South Australian writer with a theoretical and practical background in environmentalism, was to address within the stories my own, and I imagined, other white Australians' need to define a relationship to the postcolonial landscape. I mean by this the need to find a sense of place both within the physical landscape - *Here Where We Live* - and the broader terrain of postcolonial Australian writing.

My initial thesis was the idea that white Australian writers' feelings about landscape and Indigenous people are inexorably linked, and that they are generally uneasy – the discomfiting portrayal of one arising directly from the discomfort felt towards the other, and vice versa. This was supported by the majority of contemporary Australian novels and poetry that address landscape and Indigenous issues.

Novels such as Patrick White's *Voss* (1957), and *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), Thea Astley's *A Kindness Cup* (1984), Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005), Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2009), the recent Vogel winner Rohan Wilson's *The Roving Party* (2011), and poems such as Judith Wright's "At Cooloolah" (1955), all employ what I call the "haunted" approach, framing Indigenous subjects within either a colonial landscape, or one that is perceived as "haunted" by a faded Indigenous presence and the ghosts of colonial atrocities. The "haunted" approach, then, is the subject of Chapter One.

Within the "haunted" approach, representations of Indigenous people as a continuous, contemporary culture are absent. However, it was the "contemporary representation" of Indigenous people that I was interested in approaching within

² Because of the specific baggage this entails for writers of this particular heritage, I use the term "white Australian" throughout this exegesis to refer to an Anglo-Celtic person whose ancestors were Australian settlers.

my own writing.

Other white Australian writers' attempts at "contemporary representations" of Indigenous people will be discussed in Chapter Two. It will be demonstrated that writers who have taken the "haunted" approach have also attempted the "contemporary representations" route. The change to a different approach will be presented as an evolutionary step forward for writers Patrick White, Judith Wright, Thea Astley and Thomas Keneally.

Within my own writing, I encountered various problems with the "contemporary representations" approach. My white Australian characters appeared to be ignorant of the existence of urban Indigenous people; they also failed to engage with Indigenous characters other than at arm's length, through a series of contrived interventions on my part, and these Indigenous characters remained one-dimensional stereotypes. Although I had planned to do so, I realised that I was not comfortable writing an Indigenous character in the first person.

This realisation led me to turn to a related investigation of the phenomenon of Indigenous invisibility, which occurs across society on a number of levels, including within the Australian literary world.

I began to see the aforementioned tendency by white Australian writers to use the "haunted" approach, described above, as an example of contemporary Indigenous invisibility, and my own and other white Australian writers' less than successful attempts to engage with Indigenous characters and subjects within a "contemporary" approach as a further expression of the phenomenon. The practice of white Australians writing "for" Indigenous people, I realised, was a form of Indigenous invisibility.

At this point I had an epiphany. It was appropriate that both the "haunted" and "contemporary representations" approaches had failed to represent Indigenous people completely, because they were undertaken not by Indigenous writers, but by white Australians. I experienced a paradigm shift with the realisation that a large body of Indigenous literature exists alongside the literary attempts of white Australians to engage with Indigenous people, the landscape

and their own white settler status.

This seemingly obvious realisation refocused my short story collection, which would be about white Australians exploring what postcolonialism meant for them, rather than trying to write about the experience of Indigenous people. Judith Wright's and Patrick White's evolution into this final phase of postcolonial writing mirrored my epiphany and provided a framework for the "stepping back" approach, discussed in Chapter Three.

This last chapter of the exegesis contains a twist. Chapter Three introduces the "stepping forward" approach currently being employed by Indigenous writers, with a discussion of contemporary Indigenous literature by Kath Walker/Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Sally Walker, Leah Purcell, Marcia Langton and Anita Heiss. In a further twist, a parallel will be drawn between the evolution of white Australian approaches to writing about Indigenous people and Indigenous approaches to the same.

As in Chapters One and Two, Chapter Three will conclude with an analysis of the "stepping back" approach within my own creative writing.

This exegesis, then, will examine the three literary approaches used by contemporary white Australians attempting to address their status as postcolonial writers. These are the "haunted" approach to Indigenous representation, the "contemporary representations" approach, and the approach of "stepping back", out of respect for the existence of the ongoing tradition of Indigenous writing. Contemporary Indigenous writing will be discussed in Chapter Three as the "stepping forward" approach.

While each approach has merit, I will argue that when presented consecutively, they suggest a powerful evolution, a way forward for both Indigenous and white Australian writers seeking reconciliation with each other and with their own roles in the postcolonial landscape.

Chapter One

“Remember the dead, cry for them”: The “Haunted” Approach

i) An uneasy inheritance.

The Literature of Extinction.

In an article written for “Blak Times”, the 2006 Indigenous-themed edition of Australian literary journal *Meanjin*, Andrew McCann traces the social-Darwinist roots of white Australian 19th Century literature, and its continued influence on contemporary white Australian writing.

McCann’s piece, “The Literature of Extinction”, describes the 19th Century colonial view that Indigenous races would inevitably become extinct in favour of Caucasian. This belief, McCann says, inspired early white Australian writers to create a “literature of extinction”, based around a tokenistic lament at the “inevitable” departure of its original inhabitants (51).

McCann suggests that the “literature of extinction” continues to influence postcolonial white Australian writing on landscape and Indigenous people, using Judith Wright’s “At Cooloolah” as an example. Certainly Wright’s early poetry on Indigenous subjects, published between 1946 and 1955, contains frequent repetitions of the words “haunted”, “shadow” and “gone”.

What differentiates these mid-20th Century poems from the 19th Century literature of extinction, however, is Wright’s simultaneous use of words such as “fear” and “guilt”. While McCann points out the “flippant” tone of colonial poems like “Victoria; or Past and Present”, noting its casual use of Indigenous displacement to create a Romantic literary trope (49), there is no doubt that in “haunted” poems such as “At Cooloolah” and “Bora Ring”, Wright expresses a postcolonial guilt that is genuinely and painfully felt. As McCann puts it: “The difference between the colonial and postcolonial versions of this legacy consists

in a degree of self-awareness that the poet registers [...]”. (“The Literature of Extinction” 53-54)

The “haunted” approach.

I refer to these postcolonial versions of the “literature of extinction” as taking the “haunted” approach to Indigenous representation. This chapter will interrogate the use of the “haunted” approach in postcolonial white Australian literature, specifically, in the early poems of Judith Wright (1946-1955), Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976) and, in less detail, Kate Grenville’s 2005 novel *The Secret River* and *The Roving Party* by Rowan Wilson (2011). It will also examine the influence of the “haunted” approach on my own creative work.

ii) “Butchulla People Welcome You to Country”: Judith Wright, Patrick White and the “haunted” approach in the Great Sandy Region, Queensland

“At Cooloolah”.

“At Cooloolah” was published in 1955, the year Judith Wright turned forty. It is one of several similarly themed poems written following Wright’s belated realisation that the land she loved had been stolen from its Indigenous inhabitants by her ancestors, a pastoral family. An exploration of white postcolonial guilt, “At Cooloolah” movingly conveys Wright’s sense of “haunted” culpability and trespass – expressed as rejection by the landscape itself (“being unloved by all my eyes delight in”). (Wright *The Two Fires* 140)

The guilt (“for an old murder’s sake”) refers firmly to past events; in a double “haunting” both Wright and her grandfather (“riding at noon and 90 years ago”) are confronted by ghosts of the former occupants of the country (in Wright’s case the ghost is woven into the very fabric of the landscape in the form of a “driftwood spear”). “The dark-skinned people who once named Cooloolah” are firmly historicised by use of the past tense, and Wright watches enviously as the waters are enjoyed by the blue crane whose inheritance “of lake and evening” is “certain” - unlike her own (*The Two Fires* 140)

But what sort of poem would Wright have written if, when walking near Cooloolah³, she had come across the following sign-posted message?

*Galangoor djali! Galangoor./ Butchulla bilam, midiru K'gari galangoor nyin djaa./
Ngalmu galangoor Biral and Biralgan bula nyin djali!./ Wanya nyin yangu, wanai
djinang djaa.*

(Good day. Welcome! Butchulla people, Traditional Owners of K'gari, welcome you to country. May all our good spirits be around you throughout the day. Wherever you go leave only footprints.)

Today, these words greet visitors to K'gari, or Fraser Island, close to Cooloola. Obviously no such sign would have been permitted when Wright published "At Cooloolah" in 1955. A further nine years would pass before Wright would meet Kath Walker, later Oodgeroo Noonuccal, an Indigenous poet of North Stradbroke Island (some 300 km south of Butchulla Country), and realise that the "ghosts" of the land she loved were flesh and blood humans with their own stories to tell (Rooney 18-19).

"longer than our centuries..."

In her article, "The Eliza Fraser Captivity Narrative: A Tale of the Frontier, Femininity, and the Legitimization of Colonial Law" (145-84), Larissa Behrendt writes of the contested version of events surrounding the kidnap/rescue of Eliza Fraser, following a shipwreck, and after whom Fraser Island was named by Europeans. The Eliza Fraser story has been retold extensively, and the accounts vary greatly between white and Indigenous sources.

Fraser, and those who took their lead from her story, claimed that she was held captive by the local Indigenous people, while Behrendt cites Butchulla spokeswoman Olga Miller (272-74), who in "K'gali, Mrs Fraser and Butchulla Oral Tradition" refers to the alternative Indigenous narrative in which Fraser was protected and cared for by Miller's ancestors (McNiven, *Constructions of Colonialism* 21).

The point is that Olga Miller was quoted by Behrendt in the year 2000. Even allowing for a fluctuating population due to 19th and 20th Century

³Today spelled *Cooloola*.

assimilation policies and recovery from the same, at least *some* Butchulla People, or ancestors with a different name, must have maintained a continuous presence in the Great Sandy Region for the same amount of time as Wright's blue crane who has "fished there longer than our centuries" - in fact, somewhere between 5,500 and 25, 000 years (McNiven, *Fraser Island Archaeological Project* 4).

The Moving Image.

Wright seems to have been unaware of local, contemporary Indigenous occupancy at the time she wrote not only "At Cooloolah", but several early poems about colonialism with equally "haunted" themes. Most of these were originally collected in her 1946 volume *The Moving Image*. "Bora Ring", about a sacred site on Wright's uncle's property, is typical:

The song is gone; the dance
is secret with the dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in an alien tale. (*Collected Poems 1942–1985* 8)

In "Niggers Leap: New England", Wright uncovers a 19th Century massacre at her family's favourite picnic spot. The poem explores her guilt at the discovery, having only recently become aware of the fact that Indigenous "blood channeled our rivers, and the black dust our crops ate was their dust". (*Collected Poems 1942–1985* 15-16). Meanwhile, "Half Caste Girl" (Wright *Collected Poems 1942–1985* 19) is written from the point of view of the ghost of an Indigenous young woman, speaking, literally from the grave.

These poems exemplify the "haunted" approach in that they mourn previous events but don't acknowledging a contemporary Indigenous presence. Rooney points out this disconnection with reference to McCann's literature of extinction: "[...] the conventional elegiac form [used by Wright] is rhetorically continuous with the literature of extinction and [...] this depoliticises her subject." (*Literary Activists* 63)

A Fringe of Leaves.

A Fringe of Leaves, Patrick White's 1976 retelling of the Eliza Fraser story described earlier, is another interesting example of the "haunted" approach. In researching the novel, White travelled to Queensland and spoke to a local Indigenous man, Wilf Reeves (Marr *Patrick White: A Life* 352), whose alternative version of events seems to have inspired White's departure from the settler accounts based on Eliza Fraser's own story, in his reinterpretation of Fraser as the character Ellen Roxburgh.

Where Fraser's description of her Indigenous rescuer/captors was in keeping with the racist beliefs of her time (and in fact Larissa Behrendt points out the story became more and more exaggerated and sensationalised for international audiences) (167), White's Ellen Roxburgh is more ambivalent, transformed by life with her "captors" in an inversion by which White suggests that the real "savages" of the piece are the "civilised" settlers, rather than the Indigenous people.

Despite this important departure, *A Fringe of Leaves* does not appear to have incorporated Indigenous accounts of traditional existence in the Great Sandy Region, remaining faithful to the "facts" of the Fraser-based accounts in terms of inaccurate descriptions of Indigenous "savagery" and details of daily life (Biber 635).

In his biography of White, David Marr explains that White went on to consult an anthropologist who told him that the details he sought were unknown – at least to white historians: "[...] there was almost nothing in libraries and museums" (*Patrick White: A Life* 512). White therefore made up some details, and seems to have stuck closely to the Fraser accounts for the rest (Marr *Patrick White: A Life* 511-12).

But Larissa Behrendt was able to access the Butchulla knowledge of traditional cultural practices. White's more casual research (he seems to have spoken once only to Wilf Reeves) (Marr *Patrick White: A Life* 352) meant that he did not contest "givens" such as the 19th Century Indigenous practice of cannibalism (Biber 635), as well as the foul appearance and brutish behaviour of Eliza's "captors" (Behrendt 145-84).

As Behrendt states, the Butchulla oral tradition provides a contrasting account, one in which Eliza Fraser/Ellen Roxburgh is rescued from shipwreck, cared for and protected, especially by the Butchulla women (Ellen's primary tormentors in *A Fringe of Leaves*). While both accounts agree, for example, that the Indigenous women smeared the naked Fraser with fat and soot, this action is misinterpreted in the Fraser-based accounts due to cultural ignorance – in this case, protection against hypothermia is mistaken for humiliation and torture, and is portrayed as such within *A Fringe of Leaves* (Behrendt 150).

The contemporary Indigenous people of the Great Sandy Region, unrecognised by Wright in "At Cooloolah", were discounted by White as a primary source of information for *A Fringe of Leaves*. Although the novel plays with the notions of "savage" and "civilised", this subversion occurs within a misinterpreted white narrative, and as such sums up the "haunted" approach to Indigenous representation.

iii) "How can you forget a past that's present?": Anxiety, Avoidance and the Politics of Memory.

Forgetting Aborigines.

How does this Indigenous invisibility come about?

Patrick White stated in 1983 that, "I've only known one or two Aborigines in my life. [...] I don't know what Aborigines think of my books." (Shoemaker *Black Words White Page* 95). Speaking of her childhood, Judith Wright recalled contradictorily in 1982, "There were very few Aborigines around us at the time, though [...] some worked for us." (*Black Words White Page* 183).

Cultural theorist Chris Healy's book *Forgetting Aborigines* is about the ways in which white settler Australians repeatedly "forget and remember" Indigenous people (9). Healy reports a similar phenomenon to Wright's and White's discounting of their experiences of Indigenous people, experienced by journalist Mungo McCallum: "[...] his memories are troubling to him; he had visited parts of New South Wales where significant Indigenous communities lived, yet he claims to have 'no conscious memory of ever seeing a black

Australian’.” (*Forgetting Aborigines* 30)

“Cycles of Discovery”.

Healy believes the examples above are typical of a selective blindness towards contemporary Indigenous people exhibited by the broader white Australian community (30). He argues that this blindness (or forgetfulness) occurs in a cyclical nature and is ongoing, giving the example of Henry Reynolds’ book *Why Weren’t We Told?* (1999) (Healy 15-18).

Like Wright, Reynolds looks back in shocked discovery at Australia’s colonial history; *Why Weren’t We Told?* has a sense of uncovering hidden truths and of disbelief at the ways in which white Australians “did not know” about them until after they had become part of the past.

Healy, however, is critical of the “not knowing” expressed in *Why Weren’t We Told?* He quotes Meaghan Morris, regarding white Australians “not knowing” (for example, about the stolen generations):

It is important to clarify that many [...] white Australians ‘were not “aware” of what was happening’ *not* because we did not *know* it was happening (we did) but because we were unable to or did not care to *understand* what we knew [...] So we whites have not, ‘just found out’ about the lost children; rather, we are beginning to remember differently, to understand and care about what we knew. (Healy 18)

Strategies of Avoidance.

While Healy’s and Morris’ explanation seems to point to a simple lack of interest, a callousness on the part of white postcolonial Australians, a paper by social psychologists Fiona Barlow and Winnifred Louis of the University of Queensland suggests the reverse may be a factor. *Why anti-racist strategies in Australia don’t work : Guilt, anxiety and avoidance* (2006), implies that the faulty memory and selective blindness of white postcolonial Australians may in fact be motivated by a collective guilt regarding Indigenous people:

Whilst at low anxiety collective guilt may motivate those suffering it to atone via apology or restitution, high anxiety may in effect prevent them from doing so. It is proposed that the anxiety will freeze or inhibit positive reparative intentions, and link guilt to avoidance rather than atonement. The present study [...] tests the proposition that *at high anxiety*

*White participants will be driven to reduce feelings of guilt by avoiding Aboriginal people and issues, rather than supporting them, or offering apology.*⁴ (Barlow 1)

I believe that Healy's "cycles of remembering and forgetting" are based upon a deeply felt guilt in the sense understood by Barlow and Louis, manifested as avoidance. When this guilt is expressed (or rather, repressed) by white Australian writers, the "haunted" approach to Indigenous representation results. Within the "haunted" approach, the concern white Australian writers feel about contemporary Indigenous issues is able to be addressed at arm's length; it is historicised, rather than faced in the present.

iv) The History Wars.

Chapter Two will examine ways in which the "haunted" approach evolved into that of "contemporary representations" in the second half of the 20th Century. (Healy would say that a "cycle of remembering" occurred at this time.) In the 21st Century, however, the "haunted" approach has returned to popularity, with the appearance of novels such as Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) and 2011 Vogel award winner Rowan Wilson's *The Roving Party*.

Healy's "cycle of forgetting" (manifesting as Barlow and Louis' "guilt-based avoidance") may play its part in the preference for "haunted", colonial representations of Indigenous people by Grenville and Wilson. Their primary inspiration, however, seems to be one of a broader political nature. I refer specifically to the late 20th Century emergence of the History Wars.

Background to the History Wars.

The History Wars unfolded in the 1990s following an article by Geoffrey Blainey complaining of the inaccuracy of both the "black armband" and "three cheers" versions of colonial history (Mcintyre 81). These terms were promptly mustered as unironic positions by various academics, public intellectuals and politicians - illustrating Blainey's point. "Three cheers" became known as

⁴ My emphasis.

“whitewash” and the battle to prove the “black armband” and “whitewash” versions of Australian history began (Mcintyre 77-83; Taylor).

Chief of the “history warriors” Keith Windshuttle and Robert Manne (“whitewash” and “black armband” respectively) were joined by politicians John Howard (in Windshuttle’s corner) and Paul Keating (in Manne’s) in their attempts to prove and disprove each other (Mcintyre 77-83). The stalemate was partly broken by Kevin Rudd’s public apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008 (Nile).

The Secret River Controversy.

Writer Kate Grenville entered innocently enough into this political minefield following publication of her 2005 novel *The Secret River*, an account based loosely on her ancestor Solomon Wiseman’s participation in a 19th Century massacre of Indigenous people, which afforded him a piece of land on the Hawkesbury River. Following an unfortunate radio interview in which she described herself as looking down on past events from a stepladder (Koval), Grenville was criticised by historians for putting herself “above” the history warriors and attempting to “write history” – a claim she denies making (“Kate Grenville - Australian Author - Official Web Site”).

“completely appropriate...”

I argue that *The Secret River* and subsequent sequels *The Lieutenant* (2008) and *Sarah Thornhill* (2011), intentionally portray a version of events that fall into the “black armband” camp, and speculate that this approach may have been inspired by the prevalence of “whitewash” views in the Australian cultural landscape at the time of writing. Grenville, however, backed into a corner by big guns such as historian Inga Clendinnen (1-72), is understandably coy on the subject (“Kate Grenville - Australian Author - Official Web Site”).

Meanwhile Rowan Wilson, winner of the 2011 Vogel award for his novel *The Roving Party*, which is based on John Batman’s role in the Black Wars in frontier Tasmania, is unapologetic about his “black armband” version of events. In an *Age* article entitled “Vogel winner follows in contentious footsteps” (presumably Grenville’s), Wilson is quoted as saying:

I'm not pulling any punches in this book at all. I'm trying to paint it as I think it would have been. [...] There are historians who think genocide is too strong a word and there are others who think it's appropriate. From my reading, and reading both sides [of the argument], I think it's completely appropriate. (Steger)

v) Responses to the “haunted” approach within my creative work.

Of my own stories, the one that reflects most closely the “haunted” approach is a ghost story with a twist. In “Drought Core” (55), a single mother and her three daughters move to an Indigenous country centre and discover that their farm house is “haunted”. The ghost turns out to be flesh and blood, but on the way to this revelation the family examines different possibilities for its identity – the Indigenous victim of a genocidal white farmer or the guilt-ridden farmer himself? The notion of acknowledging the past but celebrating survival is built into the story.

Motifs of guilt and shame about past Indigenous treatment are examined in “Oak Trees in the Desert” (116), the story of the widow of a Maralinga nuclear test veteran who is “haunted” by the fact that neither she nor her husband spoke up about the treatment of Indigenous people at the test site. The twist on the “haunted” approach in this story is that the woman comes to terms with her guilt by interactions at a conference with contemporary Indigenous victims of the nuclear industry. In this way the past is linked to the present, rather than replacing it as the main focus of attention.

In “Night Blindness” (66) the young protagonist experiences a quasi-spiritual relationship with the landscape of Hindmarsh Island. She remains oblivious, however, to the potential connection this gives her to a group of local Ngarrindjeri women (who oppose the bridge being constructed between the Island and mainland, in breach of their secret spiritual beliefs). In this way she illustrates the paradoxical “remembering and forgetting” described by Healy in *Forgetting Aborigines*, as well as the invisibility of contemporary Indigenous people within the “haunted” approach.

Conclusion.

The “haunted” approach is a developmental stage with roots in the 19th Century “literature of extinction”. It may be based upon a frozenness caused by shame and guilt, a strategy of avoidance, and an attempt to negotiate these.

While its authors appear to be aware of this shame and guilt, expressing a culpability and distress that the 19th Century literature could only caricature, this very distress causes them to revisit over and over the “haunted” colonial model. This revisitation may also have become a necessity in the 21st Century, a redefending of territory following the History Wars.

No matter the reasons, contemporary Indigenous people and issues are missing from the “haunted” scene. Chapter Two will examine the subsequent developmental stage, “contemporary representations”, where postcolonial white Australian writers attempt to fill this gap, and write about Indigenous characters who exist in the modern era.

Chapter Two: “Life now, fires lit, laughter now”: The “Contemporary Representations” Approach

i) Symbol versus Humanity.

Eipper’s epiphany.

My great-great-great grandfather, Christof Eipper, was a German Lutheran missionary at Zion Hill, Moreton Bay, between 1838 and 1843. Family tradition states that he was nicknamed *Booral Moom* by the local Indigenous community, or “Big Bum”.

Zion Hill was the first “free settlement” in what was to become Queensland. It was established by John Dunmore Lang as a sort of outreach post, in an attempt to mitigate the perceived threat (following reports of the Elisa Fraser episode discussed in Chapter One) of Indigenous “savagery” towards shipwrecked white survivors on the eastern Australian coast.

In an 1841 fundraising pamphlet written to Governor Gipps, Eipper presses home the mission’s urgent need for funds to convert the local Indigenous people to Christianity, by describing them in the most exaggerated of negative terms:

The picture they present is one of gross darkness and misery. Their God is their belly; their will, or rather their passions, are their law[...] and the testimony of the Scripture, that “the dark places of the earth, are full of the habitations of cruelty” finds in their case an awful verification. (“Statement of the Origin, Condition, and Prospects, of the German Mission to the Aborigines at Moreton Bay.” 9-10)

A year later, however, in the privacy of his personal journal, Eipper expresses a compassionate awareness of the same Indigenous peoples’ humanity. His journal from 1842 provides a first-hand account of the aftermath of an attack on an Indigenous camp by a group of soldiers. Eipper’s empathy for the Indigenous people in this account, his recognition of their humanity and,

interestingly, property rights, is in extreme contrast to the sentiments expressed in his earlier public petition:

These two natives said that the previous night the Duke of York natives had been disturbed at Barrambin by 3 soldiers who came with a gun demanding black gins & when they were refused or rather had frightened the whole camp so that men, women and children ran in every direction they set fire to the huts, burnt and broke spears, tomahawks, nets & dillies.

[...] what shall be said of soldiers who are paid to protect their Majesty's subjects, invading a camp of peaceful natives banditti-like, for the purpose of satisfying their brutal sensuality. What if the natives had, as they undoubtedly had a right as British subjects [...] killed these intruders on the spot – for a hut is as much a native's castle as a gentleman's house." ("Journal of the Brethren Eipper and Hartenstein, Who Resided among the Natives on the Pine River from November 4-11, 1842." Entry for 9th November 1842)

The evolution of attitude demonstrated in Eipper's contrasting accounts of the Indigenous people near Zion Hill⁵ is reminiscent of an epiphany that takes place towards the end of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, discussed in Chapter One. While the novel, with its focus on colonial events is an example of the "haunted" approach, Sal Thornhill's epiphany reflects the "contemporary representations" approach, as Sal realises that the Indigenous people she and her family have forced to leave their land are fellow humans with an equal, (in fact, greater, by way of an infinite continuity of presence), investment in the place:

[...] she [...] mov[ed] around the camp, looking at the things that made it a home: the way the stones were arranged around the fire so there was a flat place to put the food, the pile where the bones and shells had been neatly collected at the edge of the clearing. When she got to the broom she picked it up and brushed once at the ground before dropping it. [...] *They was here*, Sal said. [...] *Like you and me was in London*. [...] *Even got a broom to keep it clean, Will. Just like I got myself*. (Grenville *The Secret River* 287-88)

This white realisation of Indigenous humanity, then, is the theme of Chapter Two, which will examine the white postcolonial Australian literary journey from the "haunted" phase of Chapter One, in which Indigenous people are represented as either absent or symbolic, to the "contemporary representations" phase, where Indigenous people are recognised as existing in the present, and as individual human beings.

⁵ (Whether this was due to the difference between his public and privately stated opinion, or a radical change in attitude is open to speculation.)

The “contemporary representations” approach.

The heyday of the “contemporary representations” approach occurred between 1961 and 1990 with poetry by Judith Wright and novels by Patrick White, Thea Astley and Thomas Keneally representing Indigenous people in more immediate, in-depth ways than those employed within the “haunted approach”.

Judith Wright’s poetry from this period is particularly illustrative of the “contemporary representations” approach, with “Two Dreamtimes” (1973) and “The Dark Ones”(1976) expressing an emerging acknowledgement of Indigenous survival.

Patrick White’s *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) and Thea Astley’s *It’s Raining in Mango* (1987) are examples of fiction representing the “contemporary representations” approach, where Indigenous characters are presented in the present, with names, descriptions and detailed character representations. Thomas Keneally’s *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972), meanwhile, is an interesting blend of “haunted” and “contemporary”, based as it is around an historical event, but told from an Indigenous man’s point of view.

The use of the “contemporary” representations approach within my creative work will be discussed at the end of the chapter.

ii) Judith Wright, Patrick White and the development of the “contemporary representations” approach.

Possession.

The genesis of the “contemporary representations” approach within Judith Wright’s collected poems seems to be a passionate identification with the characteristics of landscape. I recognise this “love of country” within my own writing, and the writing of each of the postcolonial white Australian writers discussed in this exegesis. Poems such as “Reminiscence” (1973), give voice to a possessive relationship with a landscape filled with particular colours, smells and sounds.

The suggestion of intimate ownership of the land is never more clear than in the lengthy “Two Dreamtimes”, Wright’s complex poem of postcolonial

anxiety, written for then Kath Walker in 1973. There is a similarity in this poem between Wright's childhood feeling of possessing the land she loved:

I riding the cleared hills,
plucking blue leaves for their eucalypt scent,
hearing the call of the plover,

in a land I thought was mine for life. (*Collected Poems 1942–1985* 316-17)

with that of Patrick White, who, in this reminiscence from his autobiography *Flaws in the Glass* recalls his childhood relationship with the landscape as a feeling of exclusivity:

As a child at Mount Wilson and Rushcutters Bay, relationships with even cherished friends were liable to come apart when I was faced with sharing surroundings associated with my own private mysteries, some corner where moss-upholstered steps swept down beside the monster *deliciosa*, a rich mattress of slater-infested humus under the custard apples, or gullies cracking with smoky silence [...]

[...] I often flung stones at human beings I felt were invading my spiritual territory.[...] Once I set fire to a gunyah to show that it couldn't be shared with strangers. (*Flaws in the Glass* 16)

White's character Miss Hare, one of the four "riders in the chariot" from the 1961 novel of the same name, feels an exclusive ownership of the landscape that seems to be drawn directly from White's childhood experience.

So there was Miss Hare, on the track [...] which led down from Sarsaparilla to Xanadu [...] Although no other human was actually present, she did resent what must eventually recur. [...] All that land, stick and stone, belonged to her, over and above actual rights. Nobody else had ever known how to penetrate it quite to the same extent. [...] (*Riders in the Chariot* 12-13)

Indigenous ownership acknowledged.

Although viewing most other whites as intruders, both Patrick White and Miss Hare are willing to admit the existence of an Indigenous appreciation of country that matches their own. In Miss Hare's case, this is represented by the person of Alf Dubbo, an Indigenous painter and fellow "rider in the chariot" (or person of visionary insight), whom she runs into on an excursion in the bush near

her house. The two share a moment of recognition: “[...] they had exchanged a token of goodness which would remain forever in each other’s keeping. From behind closed eyelids each had recognized the other as an apostle of truth.” (*Riders in the Chariot* 68-70)

Spiritual truth, for Dubbo and Miss Hare seems to be represented by a relationship of worship with the world, and nature: “At one stage she fell upon the knees of her earth-coloured, practical stockings [...] because it was natural to adopt a kneeling position in the act of worship [...]” (*Riders in the Chariot* 13)

Appropriation and transcendence.

As to his childhood self, regarding the jealous stone throwing and fire lighting, White goes so far as to confess: “Years later I persuaded myself that I hadn’t been acting merely as a selfish child, but that an avatar of those from whom the land had been taken had invested one of the unwanted whites.” (*Flaws in the Glass* 16)

Like White’s words in the paragraph above, Judith Wright’s poetry expresses an identification with Indigenous relationship to country bordering on appropriation, however in Wright’s case this attitude was transcended within her poetry in its journey from the “haunted” approach to that of “contemporary representation”.⁶

Wright’s entrance into the “contemporary representations” phase was marked by the realisation that Indigenous people had not only survived, but were in many cases thriving, writing poetry and demanding equal treatment and rights to land (Rooney 18-19).

Hugely significant in Wright’s recognition of the contemporary humanity of Indigenous people was her meeting with Indigenous poet Kath

⁶ White’s approach to Indigenous representation is an interesting example of the way the development from “haunted” to “contemporary” does not necessarily occur within a linear chronology. White’s novels fluctuate between attitudes throughout his career, with the “haunted” *Voss* (1957), preceding the “contemporary representation” of Alf Dubbo in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), to be followed by a return to the “haunted” approach for *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), (which, perhaps tellingly, was first conceived of by White more than a decade earlier).

Walker/Oodgeroo Noonuccal in 1963. In the years to follow, Wright's representation of Indigenous people changes from a neat, symbolic mourning to a wrestling with the difficult emotions engendered by the painful and courageous admission that it may be more confronting to have to share the country she loves with contemporary Indigenous people than to mourn their ghosts alone.

Wright captured the terrible, guilt-based fantasy of postcolonial Australian society for a neatly completed genocide with revealing candour in "The Dark Ones" (1976):

In the town on pension day
mute shadows glide.
The white talk dies away
the faces turn aside.
A shudder like breath caught
runs through the town.
Are *they* still here? We thought ...
Let us alone. (*Collected Poems 1942–1985* 355)

Her greatest articulation of the white postcolonial struggle, however, was a poem written for Kath Walker/Oodgeroo Noonuccal in 1973. "Two Dreamtimes" follows the twists and turns of Wright's journey from ignorance to acceptance of contemporary Indigenous humanity. Initially describing the innocent time when Wright believed the country was hers exclusively, ("[...] a land I thought was mine for life"), the poem continues with Wright's realisation that this land has been stolen from Indigenous people ("they hadn't told me the land I loved/ was taken out of your hands") and her subsequent grief at the loss of a guiltless connection to country. (*Collected Poems 1942–1985* 315-18)

Wright's anguish is initially equated with that experienced by Indigenous people over the loss of the same country, described in the poem as the loss of "two Dreamtimes" (Wright's and Walker/Noonuccal's) and the line "I mourn it as you mourn" (*Collected Poems 1942–1985* 315-18). However, in a final, powerful insight, the poem allows that this identification is not appropriate, but is rather, appropriation of a keener Indigenous suffering at a dispossession greater than

Wright's:

The knife's between us. I turn it round,
the handle to your side,
the weapon made from your country's bones.
I have no right to take it. (*Collected Poems 1942–1985* 318)

“Two Dreamtimes” is a lengthy and clever meditation, an encapsulation of Wright's unfolding postcolonial consciousness that apparently so moved Noonuccal she was unable to respond with her own dedication to Wright, “Sister Poet”, for some years after receiving it (Rooney 73).

iii) Sympathetic Outsiders.

Riders in the Chariot.

In *Riders in the Chariot*, Alf Dubbo, a major Indigenous character written in the first person, represents a progression in the depiction of Indigenous people by white Australian postcolonial writers, from absent and/or historicised, to “contemporary”.

White has been criticised, however, for making use of Dubbo as a symbol, rather than a fleshed-out character.

In *Riders in the Chariot* the Black Australian remains a symbol of an Aboriginal pariah, and does not have significance solely as a human being. Despite the fact that these writers progressed much further than their predecessors towards a picture of the unrepresentative Aborigine and appreciated far more completely the environmental identification of Black Australians as well as their deeply spiritual nature, they still used Aborigines to exemplify their own aesthetic and philosophical convictions. (Shoemaker 80)

Although it is true that Dubbo remains the most elusive and impenetrable of the four “riders in the chariot” – despite the first person narrative he remains closed to the reader, as if observed from the outside – the accusation of cipherism could be made regarding all four “riders”, who, regardless of their various races, can be recognised as universal symbols or archetypes.

White's equalising disregard for race in *Riders in the Chariot* could arguably be perceived as either insensitively racist or the reverse. Given his

support for Indigenous rights (Marr *Patrick White: Letters* 588), the latter seems more likely.

Thea Astley and Thomas Keneally - stirrings of unease.

The theme of the sympathetic outsider who can identify with the Indigenous love of country and denial of rights (and which was recognised by Judith Wright in “Two Dreamtimes” as containing elements of appropriation) is taken up by Thea Astley in several novels. Of these, *It’s Raining in Mango* (1987) is a good example of white characters sympathetic to the Indigenous experience of colonialism who publicly defend the novel’s Indigenous characters against racist attack.

These characters are almost caricatures of white privilege, eager to help, but hijacked by ego and rebellion for the sake of personal gratification. In their simplicity of approach the characters represent the golden age of “contemporary representation”, an innocent time prior to the development of a greater postcolonial self-awareness that was to follow, and which will be discussed in Chapter Three as the “stepping back”/“stepping forward” approach.

In this spirit of less sophisticated goodwill, Astley did not shy away from presenting first-person Indigenous characters, such as the ancestral line depicted in *It’s Raining in Mango*, beginning with Indigenous Bidiggi “Mumbler”, followed by his son Jackie, grandson Charley and great-grandson Billy Mumbler. Although each of these Indigenous characters are, like Alf Dubbo, somewhat distantly portrayed, the most well-rounded is Bidiggi, the child.

The first person narrative goes so far as to use a mixed voice, half Astley’s narrative tone and half “Bidiggi’s” “pigeon” English that makes a 21st Century reader uneasy, but the sensitive portrayal of the child’s point of view of a massacre is immediate and moving.

The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith.

Thomas Keneally has alluded to a change in awareness – what I view as a shift from the “contemporary representations” to the “stepping back”/“stepping

forward” approach to be discussed in Chapter Three - regarding his 1972 portrayal of an Indigenous protagonist in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. In a 2002 transcript of an interview with the ABC’s Robin Hughes, Keneally explains:

[...] my position is that I was young and reckless and we weren’t as culturally sensitive then and there weren’t as many Aboriginal writers visible as there are now. [...] I don’t say that you shouldn’t do it and there are many good books that show it can be done, but I felt that if I was writing ‘The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith’ now I would not [...] presume to put myself in the mind of a tribalised half-Aboriginal half-European. [...] And there are so many splendid Aboriginal writers around now, Leah Purcell and so on, that [...] it’s simply a matter of courtesy.” (Williams)

Some time after 1990, the “contemporary representations” approach seems to have become less popular, in part due, as described in Chapter One, to a resurgence of conservatism and the emergence of the History Wars, requiring of progressive authors a defensive return to the “haunted” approach. Ironically, it was also advances in postcolonial theory (as alluded to by Thomas Keneally), suggesting that it was inappropriate for white Australians to speak on behalf of Indigenous people, that contributed to a silence or gap in which “contemporary representations” have been put aside.

iv) The “contemporary representations” approach within my short story collection.

The bulk of the short stories in my collection exist within the “contemporary representations” genre, and demonstrate the different phases within this approach that have been discussed in Chapter Two. The sense of freedom alluded to by Wright is present in my character Oliver’s intoxication with the open spaces of the South Australian far west coast, in “Stuff White People Like” (86). The tie-in piece, “Free With The Animals” (111), contains a similar white settler wish to Wright’s in “Two Dreamtimes” for a guilt-free relationship to the Australian landscape. The passionate love of country discussed within this chapter, is represented by the semi-autobiographical “Her Thoughts Heading North” (138), expressed as the protagonist’s rushing to rescue the anthropomorphised (“mother”) landscape threatened by environmental degradation.

This story also contains an appropriated sharing of grief at the desecration

of Indigenous land with traditional owners, as well as an Astley-like, “sympathetic outsider’s” egotistical gratification in the championing of Indigenous and environmental rights.

“Karko” (101) reflects on a child’s possessive intoxication with a special place in the landscape, and the loss of innocence accompanying his discovery of the concept of appropriation.

The only story to attempt to feature first-person Indigenous characters, in the manner of White, Astley and Keneally, is “Oak Trees in the Desert” (116). While these characters are principally presented from the point of view of the white protagonist, the story contains short sections of their first person narratives.

Conclusion.

I share Thomas Keneally’s uneasiness at the concept of a white person writing a first-person Indigenous character. While I consciously intended to write about Indigenous people and the Australian landscape in a contemporary setting, this attempt, no doubt influenced by the factors mentioned so far in Chapters One and Two, remained somewhat obscure.

Although portrayed almost exclusively through white protagonists’ eyes, the Indigenous characters in my stories still suffer from the distance and stereotyping mentioned in discussions within this chapter of White’s Alf Dubbo and Thea Astley’s Indigenous characters in *It’s Raining in Mango*. These characters are secondary figures within the stories, filtered through the perceptions of the white characters and rendered what initially seemed frustratingly invisible, but would subsequently prove a catalyst for the shift in perception required to enter the “stepping back” approach to follow in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: “And a new day calling.”: The “Stepping Back/Stepping Forward” Approaches

i) “stepping back”.

Judith Wright and Patrick White – Bicentennial Activists.

Judith Wright boycotted the Australian Bicentenary in 1988, protesting the celebration of “200 years of exclusion, exploitation and misery of the Aboriginal prior owners of this land” (Layland 21) and calling for negotiations towards a Treaty. Patrick White refused to publish in the Bicentennial year; prior to 1988 he described the approaching anniversary as being an occasion “when we are supposed to celebrate our emptiness in a great shower of bullshit” (*Patrick White: Letters* 632). Claiming he’d be dead before the Bicentenary arrived, White demanded a Republic, and flew the Indigenous and Eureka Stockade flags in his garden when the time came and he found himself still alive (*Patrick White: Letters* 632).

White and Wright continued their political work until their deaths in 1990 and 2000 respectively. Both had been “political writers” throughout their careers, using their position as members of the owning class to champion the rights of the underdog. Both focussed on political action in their later years.

In 1985, Wright retired from writing poetry to concentrate on environmental and Indigenous rights campaigning; White “continued coming out [to speak publicly] on occasions which seemed to demand it” (*Flaws in the Glass* 226) from 1972.

The literary careers of both writers have been used within this exegesis to demonstrate the stages of growth in postcolonial consciousness from “haunted” to “contemporary representations”. White’s and Wright’s final movement into political activism can be seen to illustrate the “stepping back” approach to be

discussed in this final chapter.

The “stepping back” approach.

At the point when white Australian writers realise the limitations of the “haunted” and “contemporary representations” approaches, an epiphany occurs. This epiphany is the acknowledgement that Indigenous literature exists and has always existed parallel to white attempts at Indigenous representation, and that it is appropriate for white writers to “step back” in respect of this fact.

Chapter Three, then, will shift the focus away from white Australian writing and onto the parallel narrative of Indigenous Australian literature. It will include poetry by Kath Walker/Oodgeroo Noonuccal, autobiography by Sally Morgan and “chick lit” by Anita Heiss, as well as non-fiction by Heiss, Marcia Langton and Leah Purcell. Chapter Three will argue that each of these works by Indigenous authors demonstrates a continuous, surviving culture that speaks eloquently for itself.

The Indigenous literary tradition.

Anita Heiss and Peter Minter’s *Macquarie Pen Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* charts Indigenous writing in English from 1796 (the time of Bennelong’s letter to Governor and Mrs Philips) to the 21st Century (Tara June Winch’s 2006 story collection *Swallow the Air*). Heiss points out the broad scope of the term “literature” when applied to Indigenous culture: “I mean, literature is anything that is written or communicated... communicates a story.” (“Anita Heiss - Literature as a Political Tool”)

“Blackwords”, the Indigenous division of the online AusLit: The Australian Literature Resource, also acknowledges oral storytellers as authors, including those whose stories are not published. So, written words, in Indigenous languages and English, oral storytelling, art, dance and film constitute “Indigenous literature” in this broader sense. As such, the Indigenous literary tradition is ancient.

Parallels.

The scope of this chapter is enough only to acknowledge this fact; and to point out an interesting similarity between Indigenous written literature and the white Australian writers' approaches to Indigenous themes. Given the co-existence of Indigenous and white Australians in the period discussed so far, there have been parallels in the developing Indigenous consciousness regarding self-representation that have matched those of white Australian writing, discussed previously as the "haunted" and "contemporary representations" approaches. These parallels will be examined within this chapter.

The final approach to be discussed, however, is different for Indigenous and white writers. For white, it is the "stepping back" approach described above; for Indigenous, it is the "stepping forward".

ii) The "haunted" approach within Indigenous literature.

"I just found out."

Paradoxically, the denial of contemporary Indigeneity, or the "haunted" approach, is not confined to white Australians. Assimilationist policies of the 19th and 20th Centuries ensured that white and Indigenous Australians developed a similar illogical "blindness" to the existence of contemporary Indigenous people. The white version of this blindness was discussed in Chapter One with reference to examples including Henry Reynolds's *Why Weren't We Told?* In an interesting twist, Reynolds himself discovered as an adult that his grandmother was probably Indigenous – perhaps hinting at an answer to his original question, at least within his own family (Jopson).

In the same vein, Indigenous artist and writer Sally Morgan's mother and grandmother, as recounted in Morgan's autobiographical *My Place*, so effectively suppressed their Indigenous heritage, for fear of racial prejudice, that Morgan not only believed she was Indian until she was fifteen, but also failed to register until this time that her grandmother had dark skin: "I said, [to younger sister] 'Jill ... did you know Nan was black?' 'Course I did.' 'I didn't, I just found out.'" (Morgan 97)

“We Are Going”.

The “haunted” approach that denies an ongoing Indigenous culture was also expressed in Oodgeroo Noonuccal, then Kath Walker’s classic 1964 poem (and collection of the same name) “We Are Going”, as Brigid Rooney points out. Rooney observes that the poem’s elegiac tone closely reflects Judith Wright’s “Bora Ring” in its evocation of a dying culture (62):

[...] We are nature and the past, all the old ways
Gone now and scattered.
The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.
The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.
The bora ring is gone.
The corroboree is gone.
And we are going. (Walker 25)

“First Australians”.

Meanwhile, in the same way that white Australian authors like Kate Grenville and Rowan Wilson have found it necessary to contest “whitewash” claims made during the History Wars with novels set in the colonial period, a return to the “haunted” past has become necessary for Indigenous academics working in the 21st Century.

Rachel Perkins and Marcia Langton’s book *First Australians* is an account of Indigenous Australian history that starts pre-Dreaming, moves through creation stories to colonisation and ends in Mabo. Langton’s prologue makes her perception of the necessity of such a book clear:

Only a handful of historians, mostly amateurs, persist in vilifying the original inhabitants of this continent and their descendants. Despite their less than rigorous skills in the discipline, their few works have an enormous influence, principally because they propose racially slanderous views that most educated people would reject, but remain attractive to those who prefer to imagine the Australia of the old school books. (Perkins xxiv)

iii) The “contemporary representations” approach within Indigenous literature.

“Dawn Wail for the Dead”.

Like Judith Wright, Kath Walker/Oodgeroo Noonuccal made the journey from the “haunted” to the “contemporary representations” approach within her poetry, the acknowledgement of a continuous Indigenous culture. Where Wright’s evolution was to be a slow unfolding over the course of her writing life, Walker/Noonuccal rapidly traversed the range of approaches within her earliest volume of poetry and continued to do so throughout her career.

In other poems from “We Are Going”, Walker/Noonuccal illustrates the “contemporary representations” approach, presenting a surviving, resistant Indigenous culture. “I Am Proud” contains the lines: “We were conquered but never subservient,/We were compelled but never servile” (14), and “Song of Hope” begins: “Look up, my people,/The dawn is breaking,/The world is waking/To a bright day” (40).

Walker/Noonuccal was able to reconcile the injustices of the past with hope for the future. “Dawn Wail for the Dead” (30), elegantly expresses the complexities of this process, truncated into one short poem. If “We Are Going” echoes Wright’s “Bora Ring”, “Dawn Wail for the Dead” is reminiscent of Wright’s “Two Dreamtimes” in its grappling with the journey from the “haunted” approach to “contemporary representations”.

“Dawn Wail for the Dead”, however, contains a neater resolution than “Two Dreamtimes” and will be discussed in detail in the coda. Having achieved a reconciliation within her poetry, Walker/Noonuccal was able to write about a broader reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in poems such as “United We Win” (27).

Questions of authenticity.

Indigenous attempts at self-representation in a contemporary setting run into some of the same problems as those of white Australians writing about Indigenous people in the “contemporary representations” phase. Where white

writers have struggled with issues of stereotyping, inappropriate representation and appropriation, Indigenous writers have had their authenticity questioned by parts of white society, with a narrow range of Indigeneity being viewed as legitimate.⁷

Anita Heiss tackles this issue in her 2012 memoir *Am I Black Enough For You?*; the book includes Heiss' account of her win in court against journalist Andrew Bolt whose 2009 article "It's so hip to be black" questioned Heiss' professionalism and identity as an Indigenous writer ("Andrew Bolt Blog"; "Anita Heiss Blog").

Bobbi Sykes' autobiographical *Snake Dreaming* series and Morgan's previously mentioned *My Place* have also attracted controversy from white audiences. Sykes, a long-time Indigenous rights activist who spoke of the struggle of growing up "black" in Australia, faced criticism when it was revealed that her father was African-American ("a bright, passionate chameleon"). Defenders of Sykes have commented that, as she was perceived to be Indigenous, suffering the racial prejudice that accompanied the perception, her views on Indigenous matters remain legitimate (Humphries).

Morgan's account of her grandmother's and mother's lives, meanwhile, was contested by Alice Drake-Brockman, whose father, the autobiographical *My Place* implied, was both Morgan's grandfather and great-grandfather. Drake-Brockman's claims that Morgan's grandmother was a family friend rather than exploited servant, who had constant access to her daughter following her happy placement in a children's home, were picked up by conservative critics during the History Wars and run with as part of the argument against the veracity of accounts of forced removal made by members of the stolen generations (Thomas).

iv) The "stepping forward" approach within Indigenous literature. ***Indigenous Australian literature in the 21st Century.***

What then of 21st Century Indigenous literature, the literature that is

⁷ Questions regarding Indigeneity are not confined to white critics, however, due the constraints of word allowance, the issue of "who speaks for whom" within Indigenous culture is too complex to go into within this exegesis.

“stepping forward” where white Australian literature is “stepping back”? An emerging theme of 21st Century Indigenous Australian literature seems to be a resistance to categorisation, and a sense of ease with cultural fluidity. In her introduction to the book *Black Chicks Talking*, Leah Purcell identifies this fluidity: “There are families out there who are living quite happily in both worlds of black and white, but there is always the preferred world, and that is black – it allows us to be us, no gamin.” (111)

Black Chicks Talking explores the complexity of exchange between urban and traditional communities and between these states within individual Indigenous people. The women in the book interviewed by Indigenous actor and writer Leah Purcell come from a variety of Australian Indigenous cultural backgrounds, and are not equally secure in their sense of Indigeneity; through an exchange of information the women support and encourage each other to explore the missing elements of their lives.

The theme of cultural exchange between urban and traditional Indigenous people has a long tradition within Indigenous Australian literature. The previously mentioned *Macquarie Pen Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* and (controversy aside) Sally Morgan, Tjalamina Mia and Blaze Kwaymullina’s 2007 *Speaking from the Heart*, as well as MumShirl and Bobbi Sykes’ *MumShirl: an autobiography* (1981) are examples of an exchange that works both ways. The traditional women and those with deeper cultural knowledge in *Black Chicks Talking* are constantly encouraging the less knowledgeable women to visit “country” and are respectful of their claims to Indigeneity.

Anita Heiss - resisting categorisation.

An interesting example of the ability to embrace multiple cultural realities and identities is the writing of previously mentioned “writer, satirist, activist, social commentator and academic” Anita Heiss (“Random House Authors - Anita Heiss”), a Wiradjuri woman whose “chick lit” novels *Not Meeting Mr Right* (2007), *Avoiding Mr Right* (2008), *Manhattan Dreaming* (2011), *Paris Dreaming* (2011), and 2012 memoir *Am I Black Enough For You?* provide a portrait of one

version of modern Indigeneity that is a foil to anyone looking to pigeon-hole both contemporary urban Indigenous women and Heiss herself.

Manhattan Dreaming is the story of a young Indigenous woman from Goulburn, via Canberra, who takes an internship at the Museum of the American Indian in New York. References to shopping, the TV series *Sex and the City* and dating sit comfortably with political and cultural discussions of Australian and Native American Indigeneity. *Manhattan Dreaming*, which earned Heiss her third Indigenous cultural *Deadly* award in 2010, bucks multiple stereotypes in its portrayal of a modern Indigenous woman with strong links to her culture.

Heiss' academic writing is another example of the "stepping forward" approach of Indigenous literature in the 21st Century, in which Indigenous expertise on Indigenous culture is demonstrated. Works such as *Dhuuluu-Yala to Talk Straight: Publishing Aboriginal Literature in Australia* (2003) and the aforementioned *Macquarie Pen Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* explore the world of Indigenous literature and publishing. Heiss embraces the twist of writing in academic English and the use of Indigenous writing as a political tool:

I write obviously in the coloniser's tongue and I still enjoy that writing. For me I enjoy it because I'm using the coloniser's language to write about what they have done to us and then that written piece about assimilation or colonisation or attempted genocide or the struggle for survival [...] then goes back to the UK for readers over there to read. ("Anita Heiss - Aboriginal Writing: literature as a political tool")

v) The "stepping back" approach within white Australian literature.

White Australian postcolonial writers of the 21st Century.

When white writers "step back" from representations of Indigenous culture they are able to turn a spotlight of enquiry onto their own. What are some of the ways that white writers are illustrating the "stepping back" approach?

Academia is an obvious example, where postcolonial studies, whiteness studies, cultural studies and creative writing provide opportunities for white writers to "unpack the knapsack of white privilege" (McIntosh *Working Paper #198* 1) and explore their own postcolonial status and feelings about reconciliation.

The satirical “handbook” *Stuff White People Like* (2008), by Christian Lander, pokes fun at the white propensity to view its own culture as cultureless – that is, as the norm or default against which all other cultures are viewed as the “other”. I refer to the “handbook” in my short story of the same title (page 86), which will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

Collaborations such as that between Christobel Mattingley and Indigenous editor Ken Hampton, (*Survival in Our Own Land: Aboriginal Experiences in South Australia Since 1836* (1992)), and between Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe in their book *Reading the Country* (1982), facilitate the storytelling of Indigenous people in a respectful way – although some might argue that there are plenty of Indigenous writers who could co-produce the same work.

Heiss, for example, has said:

It's our life experience that they've been writing about for however long. And [...] we want to say, “Well, actually, we want to write about ourselves. We don't want you writing about us anymore. Thank you for opening the doorways or whatever, but now we are quite capable of doing it ourselves.” [...] We have two groups of writers writing about the same people, right? So, I'm in competition with non-Indigenous writers to write about what is essentially my life experience. That is, of being black. (“Message Stick - Stories”)

Meanwhile, white Australian writers such as Kate Grenville and Thomas Keneally are exploring their own heritage in books such as Grenville's *The Secret River* and Sarah Thornhill (2011), and Keneally's *The Great Shame: A Story of the Irish in the Old World and the New* (1998) .

vi) Transcending Shame – white participation in Indigenous culture.

“I am Proud”.

Judith Wright, in the persona of her colonial grandfather, wrote of the Indigenous people's “soft obstinacy that was almost gaiety” (*The Generations of Men* 156) in their refusal to be subjugated to the colonising whites. Oodgeroo Noonuccal, then Kath Walker, put it a different way in a poem celebrating Indigenous survival, “I Am Proud” (1964). The word “proud” is a common self-descriptive term used in contemporary Indigenous culture (as is “strong”); almost

all of the women in *Black Chicks Talking* use both epithets by way of self-introduction, as in the following from Liza Fraser-Gooda: “I take my mother’s side and that’s Bidjara, so I’m a strong Bidjara woman.” (111)

The “stepping forward” approach, then, is a celebration of survival, a skilful negotiation of fluid identity and culture, a declaration of independence and the readiness for reconciliation.

Are there ways in which people of white settler heritage can transcend the obvious flip-side to Indigenous pride – white guilt?

Claiming “migloo”.

Indigenous writers have illustrated the fluidity of identifying simultaneously with two cultures. Is it possible for white Australians also to identify with two cultures at the same time?

Rosanna Angus in *Black Chicks Talking* tells of the excitement of white people when she encourages them to reclaim their whiteness in Indigenous terms, while Leah Purcell elaborates:

Like “migloo” in Queensland for white person, claim it. Find out the area in which you live; i.e. if you’re white and you live in Murgon, you can say you are a migloo and you’re from the Wakka Wakka region, and so the white people can be part of that community. ... It’s about feeling that you belong and that there is connection in the communities. It’s what you identify with that puts your heart at ease, whether you’re black or white.” (343)

For white Australian writers interested in this sort of cultural exchange, the challenge will be to find ways to participate in Indigenous culture, while focusing more on their own stories and less on those of Indigenous people who are able to speak for themselves.

vii): The “stepping back” approach within my creative work.

One element of white privilege is the ability to opt into and out of this exploration. My story “Night Blindness” (66) illustrates this point. Set at Hindmarsh Island during the time of the bridge controversy, this story sees its white protagonist opting into an awareness of the matter and a boycotting of the bridge not so much in support of the Ngarrindjeri women who oppose it, but to

antagonise her estranged (white) father .

The existence of Hindmarsh Island as a threatened sacred site sits underneath the surface of the girl's consciousness of the Island as the idyllic holiday place of her middle-class white Australian childhood. Her obliviousness regarding the bridge saga, as well as her parents' divorce and environmental problems affecting the region, represents a deliberate obtuseness about painful issues, and the story is about her facing up to these things.

Likewise "Oak Trees in the Desert" (116), a story about an old woman wracked with guilt for refusing to acknowledge her serviceman husband's reports of negligence towards Indigenous people at Maralinga during the British nuclear tests, contains elements of the white ability to opt into or out of the issue of Indigenous rights.

The closing piece "Her Thoughts Heading North"(138), in which a retired environmentalist returns to campaigning following the announcement of a nuclear waste dump on Indigenous land, does the same.

Meanwhile, "Stuff White People Like" (86), the story that directly references Christian Landers' satirical investigation of whiteness studies of the same name, looks at the courage required to "own whiteness" while attempting to participate in reconciliation with Indigenous people.

The "stepping back" approach led me to abandon a planned story told from the point of view of an Indigenous girl, set in Yellabinna (Kokatha) country. Instead, I transformed some of the ideas into the short opening piece "My Good Thing" (50), about a woman whose husband's family and daughter are Indigenous, rather than writing directly as an Indigenous person.

This story was also proofread by the people upon whom it is based at their request that it follow correct cultural protocol.

The short piece, "Free with the Animals" (111) details a white woman's urge to seek solace in the landscape from a personal grief, while feeling alienated from the country and wishing back towards a time of common ancestry.

Finally, the story "Karko" (101) illustrates the potential for white Australians to move between two cultures in ways that are crass and appropriating or more subtle and respectful. The main character, an eight-year-old boy, experiences each of these approaches, while his Aunt demonstrates the former

only.

Conclusion

This exegesis has described the ways in which both white and Indigenous Australian literature has followed the developmental approaches of “haunted”, “contemporary representations” and “stepping back”/“stepping forward”, and the ways in which this development has represented corresponding societal attitudes towards Indigenous people both in white and Indigenous communities in the 20th and 21st Century, and within my own stories.

Does the concluding “stepping back”/“stepping forward” approach, then, leave each culture writing about itself inside a vacuum? I argue that from this position of greater equality, it is possible for both cultures to write not only about themselves, but about the borderlands where cross-cultural exchanges occur.

Any real sense of country must acknowledge the continuous Indigenous presence *and* the white presence, acknowledge the present day influence of each culture on the other. Literature, it seems, is an ideal place to work through the anxiety around this and other stages leading to reconciliation.

Judith Wright’s poetry allowed her to move through difficult emotions and emerge as a champion of environmental and Indigenous rights. Patrick White expressed a natural affinity with the underdog in society and a respect towards Indigenous people that was ahead of his time.

Kate Grenville and Rohan Wilson returned to the past to set the historical record straight while Thea Astley and Thomas Keneally attempted portrayals of Indigenous characters that were sympathetic, if coming from a place of imagination rather than experience.

Each of these attempts at engagement with Indigenous culture by white Australians represents important developments leading to the “stepping back” approach. Indigenous writers have followed a similar journey leading to the “stepping forward” approach, from Kath Walker’s “haunted” “We Are Going” to her “stepping forward” “I Am Proud”, Marcia Langton’s “haunted” defense of

history, Sally Morgan's and Bobbi Syke's autobiographies and collaborations with Indigenous storytellers illustrating the "contemporary representations" approach, to the modern "stepping forward" depictions of Indigenous women by Leah Purcell and Anita Heiss.

The three approaches have been shown, too, to be in a situation of flux; illustrating in turn the legitimacy of mourning, the need for constant vigilance regarding conservative revisions of history, the "cycle of remembering and forgetting", as described by Chris Healy, and finally, the legitimacy of Indigenous success in the paradigm of white Australia, as well as in Indigenous traditional and continuing culture.

Coda: "Dawn Wail for the Dead".

Kath Walker's brilliantly realised illustration of this last point is the 1964 poem "Dawn Wail for the Dead". The title, clearly "haunted" in nature, suggests an elegy, but the poem progresses through stages of grief to emerge in an evocation of contemporary life in the lines "Then it is over, life now,/Fires lit, laughter now". The final line "And a new day calling." expresses the need to work towards a future of reconciliation. In short, the poem is a recipe for a three step process of healing that seems to have been embraced by many of the Indigenous writers in this study, with the white writers close behind: 1) Mourn the past sincerely 2) Acknowledge and celebrate the present 3) Work towards the future.

Dawn Wail for the Dead

Dim light of daybreak now
Faintly over the sleeping camp.
Old lubra first to wake remembers:
First thing every dawn
Remember the dead, cry for them.
Softly at first her wail begins,
One by one as they wake up and hear
Join in the cry, and the whole camp

Wails for the dead, the poor dead

Gone from here to the Dark Place:

They are remembered.

Then it is over, life now,

Fires lit, laughter now

And a new day calling. (30)

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