Title

Mapping the moral terrain: Australian novels written during and following the Reconciliation period and their representation of race relations through the enactment of remorse, trauma and shame.

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Abstract of PhD thesis

Mapping the moral terrain: Australian novels written during and following the Reconciliation period and their representation of race relations through the enactment of remorse, trauma and shame.

In fiction published after the *Bringing Them Home* Report (1997), the question of justice for Aboriginal people emerges strongly. This thesis explores the concept of remorse and of how Australia wrestles with its conscience in six Australian novels written during the official Reconciliation policy era (*Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation*) 1991 – 2000 and in the rollover period that continues today as *Reconciliation Australia* established in 2001. The novels examined include two Indigenous texts being Alexis Wright’s *Plains of Promise*, 1997 and Kim Scott’s *Benang*, 1999. The settler novels are Alex Miller’s *Journey to the Stone Country*, 2003; Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth*, 2004; Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*, 2005 and Gail Jones’ *Sorry*, 2007. The thesis begins with the two Indigenous novelists, looking at how they represent the impact of racism on the daily lives of their characters, inducing in them a sense of shame and a sense that they are not fully human. Of particular interest is the way in which remorse gets dramatised in the novels’ white characters. Can this be understood in itself as a gesture of reparation? In asking these questions the thesis shuttles between the genre of the novel and the non-fictional world of historical injustices committed against our indigenous people. I argue that shame alone is an impoverished emotion and that remorse is the response owed by the Australian nation to Indigenous people. I explore how the novels represent characters in a state of embryonic remorse, a state signifying in varying degrees the unresolved and ongoing moral dilemma of the community.

The thesis also explores the way in which trauma is dramatised in the novels through the motif of the vulnerable child. The child functions as a vehicle for the reader’s affective engagement, often promoting a sense of remorse on the part of the readers. In the end the thesis asks if these novels can be seen as offering a transformative engagement with others in the community, helping to build a bridge from the individual reader to a sense of shared community. The thesis explores a passage from the individual reader’s remorse to a community awareness of the need for a just remorse, one which moves beyond shame to form a productive link between the world of fiction and the community’s troubled and troubling awareness of ongoing issues to do with remorse and reparation.
Declaration

- I hereby declare that this thesis is comprised of my original work towards the Doctorate of Philosophy except where otherwise indicated.

- I have made due acknowledgement to all other materials used in the thesis.

- Exclusive of the bibliography and appendix the thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length.

Gloria Joy Prentice

Signed:
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Prologue

Raimond Gaita has commented that it takes an identification with country to experience and appreciate in a deeply significant way what it means for that country to be in moral discord through a brokenness yet to be resolved. He claims “National shame requires a historically deeper and more intense attachment, perhaps a more defining attachment, to country than citizenship.”¹ I relate to this premise as a fifth generation Australian with ancestors on both sides of my family going back to Tasmania in the early 1800s. This contextualises my motivation for this thesis and in so doing lends meaning to my sense of the weight this country carries in its unresolved moral wound to its first peoples.² As Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman have identified, the recognition of Aboriginal people’s prior occupation of Australia through Mabo has generated uneasiness because the reality of Indigenous people’s true connection to Australia overshadows the European presence: this unsettledness emerges in settler fiction which longs to forge a sense of belonging.³ Gelder and Salzman have suggested that this longing to belong is evident in various settler fictions in their assertions of a connection to land and by their appropriation of Aboriginal spirituality. Similarly “trauma envy,” which describes a writer’s appropriation of victim status for a non-indigenous character, arises from an underlying desire to claim legitimacy through indigeneity.⁴ Claiming trauma is another way of asserting a sense of belonging. As Gelder and Salzman explain, “dispossession and belonging are in effect two sides of the same coin, not opposites so much as mutually implicated” (p.22). Hence, the Native Title legislation which recognised the Aborigines’ prior ownership of land through the Mabo court decision created panic for some Australians.⁵ The thesis asks to what extent the novels examined in this thesis perpetuate the colonising process.

My motivation to reflect upon Australia’s moral responsiveness and conscience concerning Aboriginal people is multifaceted. This prologue is a reflection upon the factors that have drawn me to this area of research. Firstly, at face value, the decision to undertake a university degree in 1995 was prompted initially through a desire to study Anthropology: I was interested in learning more about Indigenous life and culture, and was concerned to promote justice for Indigenous people. Retrospectively, as someone committed to an alternative lifestyle, I can see that there was an element of the Western search for the authentic in my tendency to idealise Indigenous cultures. Yet there was something else besides this. Despite my ability to engage with the discipline of Anthropology, there was little opportunity to pursue Indigenous issues within the discipline at that time in the mid-90s.

² This proposition becomes more problematic when we consider the charge that contemporary settler fiction perpetuates a colonising discourse in its quest for a sense of belonging. In a sense by asserting my connection I am forging a sense of belonging too.
Additionally, I was deterred by doubts about the ethics of historical Anthropology as reflected in the shadows of British imperialism with its practice of objectifying the Other as an object for study. This resulted in a reconsideration of the direction of my studies and an eventual re-location into English, History and Philosophy. I gained exposure to Aboriginal intellectuals through an English subject, *Reading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Production*, and a History subject *Contemporary Aboriginal Studies*, in which I learnt about Native Title and the Heritage Act. In Philosophy I studied Raimond Gaita where I encountered an in-depth understanding of remorse. The sudden death of my father in 1996, whom I had not seen for two years which coincided with my studies brought me to a deeper understanding of remorse.

Despite my study it seemed presumptuous to want to work towards Indigenous justice or wellbeing, areas which I thought should be respectfully left to Aboriginal people. This hesitation, informed by a respect for Aboriginal self-determination, is both respectful of Indigenous agency but also fearful of being insensitive to boundaries, and finding myself out of place. For me this touches upon a deep sense of displacement originating in childhood experiences of finding myself on the outside. Hence, belonging or not belonging is a key factor in my life and perhaps my motivation for pursuing this thesis.

My decision to use fiction and moral philosophy as a focal point stems from the significance of fiction in my own life history. As a lonely child dealing with the destructive dynamics in my family I retreated into fiction where I found the friends and siblings I longed for, and the positive role models of kindly, affectionate mothers – an aspiration for my own parenting. In my reading, children mattered. Hence I believed fiction was a space where readers could engage personally through their own life experience. The philosophy of treating others with respect was a conviction that grew from the injustice I experienced and witnessed in my childhood, a conviction underpinned by Raimond Gaita’s writings on remorse, respect for the irreducibility of individuality, acknowledgement of wrongdoing through remorse, and compassion for human beings.

Inherent in my sensitivity to the mistreatment of Aboriginal people has been concern about inadvertently causing offence or acting inappropriately, reflecting a certain ‘political correctness.’ Noel Pearson, distinguished indigenous public intellectual from Cape York Peninsula, has reflected on non-Aboriginal responses to past treatment of his people, in an article entitled “White Guilt, Victimhood and the Quest for a Radical Centre” for the *Griffith Review*. The critique of Australian responsiveness by Pearson in his reading of Shelby Steele highlights political correctness as a phenomenon steeped in ‘white guilt’ which is sometimes incapacitating and certainly shallow in its impact. In the end, political correctness is more about self than Other. Pearson uses the term ‘morally vain’ to describe those who adhere to certain forms of political correctness. While my own particular history has rendered me susceptible to remorse and a heightened sense of responsibility, it is hard to reduce my position entirely to ‘white guilt’ in Pearson’s sense. Yet it would be unusual if there had not

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been an element of this in my concern to address what I understand as a neglected area of moral harm in Australia. Although no doubt my motivation for writing this thesis contains some ‘moral vanity,’ on another level I believe that my specific circumstances have fostered a deep sense of justice and intolerance for unjust treatment.

Not least in my motivation to pursue an Aboriginal theme has been my identification with the position of ‘the outsider,’ located on the margins of mainstream society. This began as a child moving every six months or so, placing me on the outside of established friendships as I faced yet another new school. The knowledge that we were poor, moving from one rented house to another while being pursued by debt collectors, increased my sense of living outside society. A knock at the door caused alarm in our household where isolation was a safeguard against others knowing our business. This sense of being an outsider was consolidated by my later experience of living on the fringe as a juvenile delinquent in and out of institutions. In my experience of being an outsider I was subjected to unresponsive and harsh systems of power. This brought about personal loss of integrity and freedom. While I identify with those who have suffered under unforgiving systems of criminal justice, I can only imagine the impact of racist practices upon people in addition to the punitive intersections of class, sex and ethnicity, delivered by authorities and embedded in pervasive social attitudes.

My earliest memory of contact with Aboriginal people was in an institution for adolescent girls. Some of the inmates had been placed there for their own protection, while others had grown up in institutions making it easy to graduate to the next stage via delinquency. There were three or four Aboriginal girls in the state-run institution, Winlaton, where I was placed after being made a ward of the state. My memory is that they were friendly to everyone, something that is memorable in an always potentially hostile environment. One girl in particular had an effervescent personality and a sense of fun and got along with all girls and staff; affectionately she called everyone ‘darl’ and ‘babe.’ I find myself wondering how she is or even if she is alive.

My next encounter was through my daughter’s crèche in the latter part of the 1970s. My daughter’s Aboriginal friend often came over to stay the night. Today, as 40 year old women with their own children they still meet when they can manage it. They have retained a bond that has survived time and differences in their outlook on life. My daughter’s friend was brought up by her non-Aboriginal mother and saw her Aboriginal father periodically as a child. However, her mother fostered links that made it possible for her daughter to develop a sense of her Aboriginality. At 18 she and her father strengthened their relationship. She went on to meet other Aboriginal family members and to work in Aboriginal organisations.

One encounter with Aboriginal people that I am not so comfortable about occurred when I worked as a caseworker in Preston for 18 months during the late 1970s. As an adult I wanted to move beyond my troubled adolescence so I trained as a welfare worker: I wanted to give something back. It seemed to me that the support I had received from some social workers, along with my own experience, was a solid basis for working in the field. I took up the position of caseworker with the Community Services Department, now Human Services. This department is forever changing its name as if to disconnect from past policy. My caseload included an Aboriginal family who I visited in a supervisory role. The children were
living with their aunt who was keen to show me how she had taken on the values and practices of the wider community. It embarrassed me to represent a community to which she strived to show her “decency” because I wanted to say, you have no obligation to prove anything to me as I am with you. But the truth of the matter was that I was also this representative to whom she attributed the power to remove children. The older girl turned her back on me after a family tragedy.

I realised what I represented to the older girl - a department which had intervened over the years, removing her and her siblings from her parents and extended family members and more generally removing Aboriginal children from their families. Her attitude towards me hit hard – I represented harm to her family. What I remember of her specific family history was a series of removals that made distressing reading, with decisions made on the basis of class and culturally-biased judgements about lifestyle. Identifying with working-class families and their nomadic relocations, I objected to the unnecessary removal of children, whether Aboriginal or white. Although I wanted her to see me as an ally, it was too much to expect that a 15 year old Aboriginal girl, who had just lost a family member who had been a constant source of protection for her, would be able to see beyond my role, to the person I was, with my inner critique of the system that had harmed her. In philosophical terms she could not see beyond the social determinates of my role to what was in excess of this, in human terms. Loss had been a theme of her life and I personified the reason for her loss. Even though I was critical of the system, at that time I did not have an awareness of the large-scale removal that had been implemented over the past 70 years, or knowledge of a eugenic biological engineering policy that supported this practice.8

Family separations – stigma

I abhorred the many tales of interruptions to family life that emerged from the pages of the departmental files. The recurring theme of loss from broken family connections has been a source of anxiety for me throughout my life. My desire to advocate on behalf of displaced children was fuelled by being placed away from home as a child during my mother’s periods of depression. For instance, my younger sister and my own short stint in a Salvation Army Home for girls, where my sister was beaten repeatedly by Matron Ruby Smite in 1963, has been a foundational experience for my acute sense of the need for justice for helpless and vulnerable children.9 Although we had not been ‘removed’ from home, many children we met there had been, and I witnessed firsthand the pain and suffering inflicted by uncaring, sometimes cruel and ill-informed adults driven by their own unexamined motives. As I witnessed my sister and others being beaten at the cruel hands of Matron Smite, I experienced helplessness and guilt.

My first experience of stigma may have been through the exclusions my mother suffered due to her psychiatric illness and hospitalisation. The coldness of a look from a neighbour at

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8 The removals began in 1911 and the eugenic policy introduced in 1933.
9 The matron’s name has been changed for legal reasons. Investigations have been underway regarding the abuse at this home. The location of the home is also withheld.
the baker’s van towards my mother pierced me. Later I re-experienced this as a pregnant teenager in the same outpost of suburbia in the 1960s. The fact that my mother, driven by her own obsessions and anxieties, mounted a campaign to have my first child removed, born when I was not quite 16, on the grounds that I was living a hippy lifestyle, has compounded my sense of injustice around separation and my need to play an advocacy role. Serving an outstanding youth sentence in an adult prison is no longer allowed, but in 1971 it was still happening.

The tracing of my own historical encounters with Aboriginal people is located within a complex nucleus of identifying my speaking position. Inadvertently this has led to a multifaceted intersection of not only exploring my encounters with Aboriginal people but also the foundational material that has informed my strong sense of justice. The relevance of exploring these encounters becomes even more poignant within the context of a dialogic model put forward by Marcia Langton through which an understanding of ‘Aboriginality’ is derived from contact with real people as opposed to that of media representations. Delving further into these encounters has involved trying to understand better what is embedded within them. The inclusion of my encounters here has emerged as a part of my overall assertion of an entitlement to speak, strengthened by having lived on the margins, outside the mainstream. Within this marginalised position I have mingled with Aboriginal girls as an adolescent sharing their sense of subjection to hostile institutional practices. Racial differences seemed secondary to a sense of our common powerlessness and vulnerability. Then, as I shifted to the other side of the welfare dualism of providers and recipients, I grappled with the systematic injustices inflicted upon Aboriginal families while also having to confront my own role within what I perceived as an oppressive system. These interchanges highlight an experience that has provided me with an insider’s knowledge of certain forms of systematic injustice. Therefore I speak as both a subject and as a witness to others in disempowered positions.

The decision to make visible my speaking position draws attention to the significance of two areas: one is a gesture of courtesy in respect of the numerous times members of non-Aboriginal society have assumed an authority to speak about Aboriginal people and culture without self-scrutiny. To this effect there is a conscientiousness which has an element of the ‘moral vanity’ about which Pearson speaks. In many instances, where the writing subject is withheld it nevertheless informs the orientation of the outlook. In relation to the representation of Aboriginal people, this absent self often speaks for Aboriginal people in an expert and authoritative language that hides its subjective position through assertions of knowing the Other. The invisibility of a subject’s speaking position renders that speaker omnipresent - bestowing a certain all-seeing power of perception. In saying this, I recognise that I walk a fine line between expressing insight and taking up a morally righteous stance.

Secondly, the act of revealing my own speaking position is energised by a sense of entitlement that I can speak about injustice. The act of becoming visible forms a part of an authenticating process, revealing my personal motivation to contribute to a process of justice,
originating in my own unheard voice and unwritten critique that now speaks and bears witness. My experience of being silenced through systematic blunders informs my understanding of just how important it is to be heard and acknowledged. Several instances stand out, such as when I pleaded with anyone who would listen within the justice system to allow my relationship with my eldest daughter to continue uninterrupted; or when, as an anxious and indecisive 20 year old, I asked the nursing staff at the Crown Street Women’s Hospital to give me my second baby because I had decided to keep her, at a time when forced adoptions were being phased out but harsh attitudes remained. Thus I struggled to be heard as a silenced child and as a troubled adolescent. My expressed concerns about the impact of a share-care arrangement with my sons’ father also went unheard. My sensitivity around not speaking for others or the Other is anchored in my experience of being unrecognised within oppressive systems that silence and diminish the subjective reality of individuals. I speak as both a victim and as a witness of others’ loss of agency and damage to integrity through these reductive practices.

In highlighting these crossroads of contact, I have brought my own life into the frame as a context out of which my sense of abhorrence of injustice against others has developed. A tentative metaphor for this thesis might be parallel stories shared while walking with Aboriginal people, alert to the moments in chance encounters where our humaneness is foregrounded and where race and culture become less prominent, if only momentarily.
Introduction

It is hoped that the reader may gain understanding of this recent cluster of Australian novels with its own complexity of risks and potentialities. It is imagined that the reader will have the opportunity to develop further insight into the concept of remorse and how this is dramatised in the fiction. You might join me in wondering what this means for the reader and for the community and how these two interact through the site of fiction.

Raimond Gaita’s representation of racism is important for this thesis because it highlights the injustice of not attributing a full humanity to others. The challenge is to keep an eye on philosophical ideas, such as Gaita’s concept of remorse, in the novels I examine. At the same time literary analysis as an art in itself must not be lost. Philosophy uses literature to illustrate a point while literature creates worlds. Both disciplines engage in representing the complexities of what it means to be a human being.

Gaita understands historical racism as a perception of Aboriginal people that minimalised their capacity for suffering. Instead there is an underlying assumption that the Other cannot suffer to the extent or for as long as the dominant class:

Racism of a certain kind – not all kinds for racism is a complex phenomenon, but the kind usually connected with skin colour – is best characterised as an incapacity on the part of racists to see that anything could go deep in the inner lives of their victims. For such racists it is literally unintelligible that parenthood or sexuality, for example, could mean to ‘them’- the victims of their racial denigration- what it does to ‘us.’

This is particularly relevant to the themes of removal of children and sexual abuse prevalent in the Aboriginal-authored novels I examine but racism is engaged as a theme in all the texts in this thesis.

I want to juxtapose Aboriginal-authored fiction with settler novels in order to grasp something of what emerges about our relations in fiction in the context of particular moments of history. The Aboriginal novels bring vital material that creates a sense of immediate lived experience. For example, Benang, written in 1999 just two years after the Bringing Them Home Report was released, characterises separation from family and community through a number of policies and practices including removals. Plains of Promise represents the impact of abuse upon an Aboriginal girl who is left traumatised and voiceless. These Aboriginal-authored texts were published before the settler novels, and will be considered first of all in this thesis. One question for this thesis is the extent

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to which the settler fiction responds to the themes and issues raised by Indigenous novels.

The question about who is entitled to represent Aboriginality is a difficult one, laden with historical appropriations of Aboriginal culture for colonial purposes. Writing about social justice and the representation of Aboriginal people is a complex one that highlights how previous forms of settler fiction produced either iconoclastic, ill-fated or shadowy forms of Aboriginal presence. These problems remain. Gail Jones’ decision not to inhabit Aboriginal subjectivity in her novel, Sorry, means that Mary, her main character, is neither quite present nor does she receive full justice in the novel.13 Kate Grenville decided not to inhabit Aboriginal subjectivity in her fictional account of first contact in The Secret River, resulting in the main sympathies being generated for the settler protagonist.14 Similarly, Inga Clendinnen, in her historical narrative, Dancing with Strangers, said she would not represent Aboriginal subjects, but instead created a shadowy presence: “We can’t know what the victims thought about any of this, only that they were terrified.”15 Creating a vague presence from the notes of early records of first contact, Clendinnen reflects: “We seem to hear the echo of ghostly black laughter rising from the page” (p.34).

Visibility is an important theme. Aboriginal people have been rendered invisible through segregation and assimilation policies. The criticism that settler fiction merely represents Aboriginal characters in novels for the purpose of forging a settler sense of belonging is discussed by Gelder and Salzman. These writers also note that “contemporary Aboriginal fiction … puts the predicaments of Aboriginal people right into the foreground … making them actual and urgent” (p.59). Yet non-Aboriginal fiction, especially pre-Mabo novels like Cloudstreet and Eucalyptus, reveal a narrative of “white settlement and belonging” in which “Aboriginal people either fade into the background or simply don’t appear at all” (p.59).16 This phenomenon is itself another form of denial of settler discomfort at not having a legitimate place in Australia. It is a form of denial driven by a motivation to forge a sense of settler belonging that disallows the actual history of occupation and displacement. The representation of Aboriginal characters by non-Aboriginal novelists is fraught with difficulty. Peter Pierce notes that Alex Miller was the first to take on the characterisation of an Aboriginal character since Keneally in 1962 with the Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith, from which Keneally then later recoiled.17 It is overtly obvious why this is the case, for too often Europeans have presumed to know what being Aboriginal means. This must then raise the question of how to engage with issues of justice and meaning-making in fiction in a way that is not insensitive to what has gone before. In creating worlds, fiction can also slip into

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delicate areas, possibly unforeseen. Does fiction have a responsibility to be self-conscious of its representation?

There is now a dispute over when Aboriginal fiction emerged due to the discovery that Mudrooroo, Colin Johnson, a self-proclaimed Aboriginal writer, was not born Aboriginal. There are different views amongst Aboriginal people as to his status, for despite the deception he lived a life misrecognised by the wider community as an Aboriginal person.\(^\text{18}\) The combination of lived experience as an object of the others’ gaze but with an absence of full authenticity is reminiscent of the character in *Remembering Babylon*, Gemmy, who is neither fully European in the cultural sense nor born to Aboriginal people.\(^\text{19}\) Johnson and the fictional Gemmy both inhabit an outsider space. There has also been controversy over people born Aboriginal but without specific lived experience, such as in Sally Morgan’s novel, *My Place*. The Aboriginal-authored novels in this study, *Benang*\(^\text{20}\) and *Plains of Promise*, both unravel the psychological impact of an outsider position.\(^\text{21}\) *Benang*’s character grapples with his white heritage as an obstacle to claiming Aboriginality while Wright’s character, Ivy, is an outsider due to the displacement of people from their homeland through colonial interventions. As Gelder and Salzman argue, the impact upon Aboriginal people is immediate and urgent in Indigenous novels.\(^\text{22}\) From 1965 to the mid-1990s Mudrooroo appears to have been one of the main figures representative of Aboriginal fiction.\(^\text{23}\) More Aboriginal novelists began to emerge in the late 1980s and especially the 1990s, with novels such as Ruby Langford’s *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* (1988) and *My Place* (1987). This marks the moment when Aboriginal people took over the representation of their own subjectivities and experiences in a western genre, within a post-colonial society.\(^\text{24}\)

While a large part of this thesis examines the enactment of remorse in settler fiction’s engagement with issues of justice, it also considers remorse in all of the novels while thinking about the particular form of contribution made by novels to a discourse of race relations. The aim of this thesis is to understand the contribution of fiction’s engagement with the unresolved tensions between Indigenous peoples and settlers in this country. These issues include justice and meaning-making, ethics of settler engagement with representation of Indigenous people, separation and dispersal of families and communities, shaming, disrespect, denial of full humanity, dispossession, massacre and denial of consequent harm. Many contemporary Australian settler novels highlight an underlying concern with the injustice arising from dispossession and the ongoing harm of settler-serving policies and the

\(^{18}\) As Gary Foley points out, “to acquire an Aboriginal identity (regardless of how) in 1965 was not exactly something that people were queuing up to do” (See Gelder & Salzman, p.55) pp. 54-59.


denial of this harm. Of these only the novel Sorry has taken up the issue of separation from families. Methodologically, the thesis approaches the genre of fiction through a number of angles, one of which is a lens of moral philosophy to illuminate the ethical issues dramatised in the dilemmas experienced by the fictional characters. Using a philosophical framework the thesis will consider the value of each novel as a gesture of remorse and how this remorse is made manifest in the fiction. The thesis is interested in affective engagement that evokes a remorseful response in the reader as a strategy with potential to carry over into the public sphere of community sorrow.

The site of fiction is approached as a site where the expression of moral emotions by novelists and readers finds free play through metaphor and characterisation. I am interested in the idea that this creates a pool of collective regeneration that transforms into a symbolic form of community responsiveness which touches upon remorse. My hypothesis is that it does this through a reciprocal relationship between literature as a product of culture that spreads out to touch individual lives, through which people discuss, reflect and re-form their perceptions; and the way in which the dialogic product of these encounters re-enters culture. As Wayne Booth suggests in his book The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction, “the work itself is being re-performed and transformed by us as we hold our conversations about it.” 25 My thesis argues that the settler texts engage with and dramatise the stirring of a nation’s conscience and its uncertainty in relation to its responsiveness to Aboriginal people in our shared history, potentially generating a collective sense of the injustice. Hence the value of this study lies in an increased understanding of how settler society continues to engage with its conscience in regard to issues of injustice to the first people of Australia, and how it does so in fiction. Furthermore, the thesis objective is to explore the capacity of literature to open up a space for individuals to come to terms with their relationship to Indigenous people as a subjective response through affective engagement with the novel. The thesis enquires into the reciprocal relationship of individual and community responsiveness as a dynamic that feeds back into community consciousness through fiction, in regard to Aboriginal injustice and disadvantage in society.

Hence I believe that fiction potentially enables a bridging of the gap between the space of community and individual where communal concerns are characterised through individual protagonists’ dilemmas and encounters with realities beyond the readers’ experience. I explore this process as a reciprocal one that evokes moral emotions. As Alexis Wright points out, the reality emerging from the Bringing Them Home enquiry was not news to Aboriginal people; it is knowledge that reverberates in the community until it erupts at a given time. 26 A question for this thesis is, how does a nation come to feel shame and is it possible for remorse as a deeper response to enter into the community sphere? In this context, it is conceivable that the reader feels remorse imagining how she would have felt if she had committed the harm in question. I would add, if we had experienced the harm. However, this proposition problematically reinforces the ‘everyman’ representation, which is ahistorical and can work

to absolve the nation of responsibility. Given that within a Western moral philosophical understanding, generated from the Enlightenment ideal of the human will, remorse is located within an individual paradigm, there is resistance to the concept of community remorse. This is highlighted in the concept of radical singularity attributed by Raimond Gaita to remorse in which there can be no comfort in community consolation.27 This thesis is committed to exploring what form of response it is that the community expresses beyond that of shame. The thesis explores the role that fiction plays in this. The metaphor of a bridge from individual to community responsiveness works to open up thinking about the fictional materials. Another bridge is enacted through the inter-textuality of Aboriginal and settler fiction. For example, Indigenous fiction fills a gap by representing the lived experience of Aboriginal people omitted by the mainstream novels.

The novels chosen for this thesis have all been written within the social and political background of the Reconciliation Movement which officially began in 1991, leading up to the significant and historically eventful gesture of sorry offered in 2008 by the Rudd Government. This acknowledgement has been deeply significant for some members of the wider Aboriginal community while others have felt that it did not speak to them. Significant moments in the post bicentenary period are the Bringing Them Home Report documenting the experiences of people impacted by the systematic removal of children, now termed as the Stolen Generations, the controversial Northern Territory Intervention, and the establishment of the National Congress of Australia’s First People incorporated in April 2010 as a peak body representative of Aboriginal people. As a private company independent of government, its role is to advise, advocate and monitor government programs. Historically, the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody overshadows these events with many of the recommendations still not implemented. This is curiously a topic which is missing from the novels.28 The Reconciliation Movement initiated by the Hawke Government in 1991 was steered by a council of Aboriginal people including Patrick Dodson and Evelyn Scott as chair people, known as the Council for Reconciliation. At the end of a nine year duration the council made six recommendations with specific responsibilities across government, private and community sectors. Reconciliation Australia remains today as an entity to provide leadership. There are varying degrees of support amongst Aboriginal people for the project with some who reject it. There has been criticism of it for being nothing more than political posturing, while others like Henry Reynolds, who was at first cynical changed his view after encountering the commitment of people at community meetings.29

28 The Royal Commission was announced on the 10/8/1987 with hearings beginning the following year. All in all 99 cases were examined and the final report released in April 1991.
Background – divided society

There is still debate and moral anguish within Australia as to what exactly needs to be addressed, and what form the community’s responsiveness needs to take in order to resolve the tension arising out of unfinished matters. This question is taken up by Noel Pearson in his reflection on white guilt and Australia’s responsiveness. There are also questions about what reconciliation might look like and where reparation is appropriate. The Australian community has been divided, as can be seen in Robert Manne’s Quarterly essay where he traces events leading to a climactic division during the Reconciliation Era. This essay provoked a high level of conflict over the validity of the Bringing Them Home Report (1997). Eventually a split occurred among Quadrant writers in 2001, resulting in a breakaway group that formed The Australian Quarterly Essay. The first essay in the series was “In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right,” written by Robert Manne. Raimond Gaita, a well-known theorist and philosopher, was in the midst of this conflict with strong views about the need for recognition of the injustice done to Aboriginal people. He joined Manne to campaign against those who dismissed evidence of a Stolen Generation – or venerated those involved in policies, among which was the removal of Aboriginal children from their parents and extended families over the years 1910-1970. Gaita’s A Common Humanity, first published in 1998, asserted his views that the nation and its people have a responsibility to acknowledge harm to Aboriginal people. While Gaita foregrounds shame as the response appropriate to this injustice his philosophy is steeped in a rich fabric of remorse. Human care and compassion are intrinsic to a sense of remorse.

Motif of the vulnerable child

It is an underlying premise of this thesis that the motif of the vulnerable child in fiction represents injustice across the settler and Indigenous novels. In some of the settler novels the reader is engaged in the suffering of the non-Aboriginal child whose position generates a sense of injustice to Aboriginal people. Informed and in a way authorised by my own personal experience of child abuse, it is clear that the figure of the vulnerable child works to engender a sense of injustice in the reader. It becomes a vehicle for the assertion of Aboriginal justice, accentuating the harm done to Aboriginal people past and present. The thesis explores how other themes generated within the texts relate to the motif of the vulnerable child. For example, the blindness of self-absorbed adults and their mistreatment of children are linked to an inability to respond to Aboriginal issues of justice and wellbeing. On the other hand, the child is represented as seeking reality, free of prejudice. This is foregrounded in some texts more than others but inevitably it is the child who peels away the layers of deception, as in Benang’s Harley. The child whose vulnerability is most strikingly raw is the figure of William in The White Earth while Ivy in Plains of Promise generates a

30 For Pearson see fn. 6 above.
lingering sense of hurt. In varying degrees the vulnerable children of the novels work to engage readers in a sense of felt injustice and moral discomfort. The reader is positioned to feel sympathy for the neglected, exploited and abused children who symbolise the greater and wider injustices to Aboriginal peoples. In *Benang* the Aboriginal child protagonist speaks directly of the trauma of abuse while Ivy represents the voicelessness of trauma in *Plains of Promise*. However, in the latter the child Ivy is abused and abandoned by both the white authorities and the Aboriginal people in the mission. The novel provides an explanation for this in the mixing of different language groups, with Ivy as a linguistic outsider. Ultimately, though, the responsibility lies with the colonisers. Rosanne Kennedy is curious about what she perceives as the presence of the “vulnerable yet complicit white child” in the novel *Sorry.* In *The White Earth*, too, the child William becomes aware of his complicity, bringing the reader along with him. In *The Secret River*, sympathy for the vulnerable child rests on the childhood of the protagonist, Thornhill, which is problematic. I argue that the vulnerable child is a narrative strategy that works to enhance reader sensitivity to injustice in several of the novels while also distancing the condemnation and blame that usually attends injustice towards Aboriginal people. This distancing does not amount to denial of responsibility but it suspends blame; this in turn can provoke defensiveness and thus obstruct compassion. One cannot be compassionate when under attack. The child character encourages the reader to become responsible for past injustices by lessening her defensiveness. My particular history alerts me to the presence of the vulnerable child in the novels. Equally vivid is the concept of trust, foregrounded in Janna Thompson’s response to Indigenous justice.

In her book *Taking Responsibility for the Past*, Janna Thompson highlights the concept of trans-generational responsibility as a commitment by each nation state to rectify past injustice. Thompson’s theory provides a model based on reparative justice that highlights the importance of attending to past injustices to repair relations of respect. Thompson’s research in ethics supports the argument that we do have responsibility to address the injustices of the past in relation to our Aboriginal people. A popular defence against acknowledging past harm is to move on to look to the future but Thompson understands that this is not possible without acknowledgement and reparation. She asserts that:

> We are entitled to trust the people with whom we interact, and if this trust is violated, however unintentionally, then we are unjustifiably harmed, and the person who violated the trust should take responsibility for repair (p.42).

Thompson’s emphasis on trust has particular relevance to this thesis as trust sits in a special relationship to a concept of remorse that endorses a model of human beings as vulnerable to harm from others in a way not often recognised. In her essay “Human Personality”, the French philosopher Simone Weil concedes that human beings are capable of harming each other, but she also outlines what it is that prevents this from happening. She highlights a

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premise of this thesis in relation to human inter-dependency, namely that sensitivity to the human vulnerability of others will sometimes prevail. Weil draws attention to an aspect of humanity that is embedded within each of us. She reveals that an encounter with another, the moral encounter, is a humbled acknowledgement of another human being. It concerns perceptions of vulnerability and fallibility in all of us. This premise is highlighted sensitively and perceptively by Weil, as can be seen in the following:

What it is exactly, that prevents me from putting that man’s eyes out if I am allowed to do so and if it takes my fancy?....What would stay my hand is the knowledge that if someone were to put out his eyes, his soul would be lacerated by the thought that harm was being done to him.

At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred.\(^{37}\)

This understanding of justice highlights the intrinsically personal vulnerability of the human condition. Thompson integrates the human need to trust within a perspective of broader community responsibility, in particular the broken trust experienced historically and contemporaneously by Indigenous people. This is less about shame and more about common humanity, penetrating the deeper fibres of one’s understanding of harm to another. Gaita contextualises Weil’s position by explaining that: “The wrong Weil speaks of is not primarily physical or psychological. It is the harm of being wronged”.\(^{38}\)

**Remorse**

The rich fabric of remorse as characterised by Raimond Gaita is very important for this thesis because it is fundamental to my argument that there is more to the community’s capacity for response than shame. In fact it would seem that nothing else, such as shame, has the depth of movement towards the other in the form of recognition, and concern to make reparation, that is inherently a part of remorse. Gaita’s characterisation of remorse reflects its depth: “Remorse as I have described it is an awakened sense of the reality of another”.\(^{39}\)

Gaita’s characterisation of remorse shifts it out of a tight connection with blame by focusing on remorse’s capacity of feeling concern for the victim. Gaita represents this through an example of remorse where a person is irreproachable but nonetheless experiences the weight of her involvement in a damaging outcome for others. In this context remorse is a response that is not locked into a paradigm of voluntary harm or wrongdoing but exists beyond this, including the possibility of involuntary harm to others. The focus is then on the moral significance of the suffering reality of the other. In Gaita’s theory a simultaneous

\(^{37}\) Cited in *Common Humanity*, p.51
\(^{38}\) *Common Humanity*, p.51.
\(^{39}\) *Good and Evil*, p.51.
awakened sense of another’s reality is inherent in the shock of having been the wrongdoer, or implicated in the harm inflicted through a failure to act or respond.40

The understanding of remorse I sketch here provides a framework that accommodates the complex responses of non-indigenous Australians to the harm that Indigenous people have suffered, and the injustice and harm currently experienced within the Aboriginal community. Gaita’s characterisation of remorse provides an understanding of the moral significance of the suffering reality of others that does not incur blame and accusation, but rather, responsibility. In this scenario an action may lead to unintentional harm of another, but still the person in remorse is profoundly aware of the impact of their actions or omissions upon the life of another. While they may not be deemed blameable through what Gaita refers to as “an unsavoury disposition to point fingers at another disguised as moral theory,” they have a sense of the moral significance of their actions through the impact of the pain of another upon them – a moral sensibility to others.41 In relation to this different sense of holding someone responsible for an act, Gaita explains:

To hold someone responsible in this sense means to hold them, to fix them, in a lucid response to the significance of what they did. It means that the moral significance of what they did must not be evaded, neither by them nor by us, but it does not thereby mean that we find fault with them, that we can accuse them or that we find them culpable.42

Congruent with this model, narrative space for remorse emerges through the child protagonists in the novels who engender a sense of justice but also symbolise blamelessness. This shift of the angle of vision not only works to open up remorse for unintentional harm but also destabilises the way wrongdoers are judged within a context of condemnation and blame. Child protagonists in the novels have the effect of lifting the ‘blame’ as children are less accountable, in a similar way that Gaita’s theory does for harm against another, intentional or not. He uses scenarios of inadvertent, unintentional harm to lift the blame, whereas his philosophy can also be applied to those guilty of intentional acts against another. Remorse is the redeeming factor.

I am teasing out the concept of remorse and shame in order to highlight the significance of the different focus of each. Gaita’s classic example of involuntary harm is given through a portrait of the Dutch woman who experiences remorse after she turns out three Jewish people she had been sheltering and who are later killed in a concentration camp. Involved in a plot to get rid of Hitler, she feared this plan might be in jeopardy if the Jews were discovered and she was interrogated. The woman’s remorse arises from her conviction that she is implicated in their deaths. She said that she hated Hitler most for having “made a murderess out of her.”43 Gaita claims that “No court would judge her” and “perhaps more significantly, no one could seriously say to her, nor even of her, that she was, morally speaking a murderess.”44

40 Good and Evil, p.51.
41 Good and Evil, p. 44.
42 Good and Evil, p.44.
43 Good and Evil, p.43.
44 Good and Evil, p.43.
However, her understanding of herself as a ‘murderess’ springs from her deep sense of the serious nature of her actions. This example illuminates the act of accepting responsibility regardless of intent. It illustrates how remorse refuses containment within the limits of culpability. This moral positioning, which places remorse as a central locus of responsiveness, is not about judgement but is rather about the impact of our actions upon others.

Hence, the appeal is that this model lifts remorse and responsibility out of the paradigm of intentionality, locating it instead within an individual’s sense of relation to another. Within this paradigm there is encouragement to accept responsibility for various acts, including inadvertent and unintentional harm to another. This kind of harm happens daily in intersubjective relations. The example above and the characterisation in general raise the question of implication in the harm of another, which is sometimes unfortunately devoid of remorse. People often claim innocence through lack of intention, enabling them to avoid facing any actual harm they may have inadvertently caused, through insensitivity, lack of attention to another, or being self-absorbed to the point of detachment from others. This is a reaction recognised by Noel Pearson as one frequently used as a rationale for refusing to apologise to the Aboriginal community.\(^\text{45}\) The question, what have we to apologise for, is a common refrain. This framework takes in the small and the huge harm done to others in both the realms of intentionality and involuntary harm, placing the emphasis on the experienced reality of another within a model of inter-subjective and inter-dependent moral responsiveness. In shifting this boundary Gaita is both opening up possibilities for responsiveness while disturbing the paradigmatic tension between action and intent, and non-intent as justification from acknowledging harm to another.

Within this understanding of openness to another there is no defensiveness, for the focus is not on the self but rather on the impact upon the other. Guilt and remorse are other-focused whereas shame is about self. As Gaita points out “remorse does not focus on the kind of person we are.”\(^\text{46}\) This is because it is neither about ‘us’ nor our pride or shame but rather an acknowledgement of failing each other. Denial becomes irrelevant when one is willing to acknowledge another’s reality and experience of suffering injustice. There is an acceptance of responsibility too because this is an integral element of remorse. As Gaita stresses, “We can say that a person is morally responsible for what may claim her and us in one of the many forms of serious and lucid response.”\(^\text{47}\) The novels reflect various stages along a trajectory of remorse.\(^\text{48}\)

So far I have outlined one aspect of Gaita’s characterisation of remorse, revealing its capacity to shift out of a context of blame and associated denial to one of taking responsibility for how others are affected. Pearson speaks of acknowledgement: “the optimum position for non-indigenous people to take is that of acknowledgment - of the past and its legacy in the present, recognising that racism is not a contrivance, that Indigenous


\(^{46}\) *Good and Evil* p. 50.

\(^{47}\) *Good and Evil*, p.45.

\(^{48}\) This trajectory is described by Cordner in *Remorse and Moral Identity*, Melbourne: Routledge, 2007, p.243.
people endure great hurt and confront barriers as a result of racism. They need to take responsibility for the fact of racism, and work to answer it” (p.18). Remorse has a depth of responsiveness equal to the seriousness of the claim that Pearson articulates. Characterising remorse as an affective acknowledgement of harm done and of the awareness of the breach of a human bond, Christopher Cordner gives language to another dimension of this response, evoking a capacity to transcend the structures of alienation that reduce the Other to less than fully human.

Remorse – a transsocial element

Christopher Cordner identifies what I believe is an important transcendental element to remorse. He claims that “In one’s remorse the reality of the other as a human being is given through the affective awareness of having violated him.” 49 In this awakening to the other there is a sense of the other’s vulnerability to human suffering which transcends whatever social relations may or may not exist. The wronged may be an unknown other – a stranger in the street, an enemy during warfare, a victim of a car accident, or someone encountered as a member of the public in a workplace. The victim ceases to be simply the sum total of their specificities and social determinations but rather becomes the person wronged, and in that moment there is a shared sense of humanness in all its frailty and its depth of being, pushing other factors into the background. Cordner describes this as “transsocially realized in remorse,” something which has the power to “transform our social relations, so that they may come to be understood, and lived, in the light of what is thus realized in remorse.” 50

I value Cordner’s model for putting a human face on the victim while engaging with a philosophical discourse that he believes has lost a sense of the significance of concern for the victim’s emotional experience, replaced by a focus on the individual’s process of self-realisation. He locates the victim at the centre of his portrayal of remorse which he illustrates by an explanation given by some who risked their lives to save Jews during the holocaust, who explained “we thought of them as human beings just as we were…that those others can (like us) be humiliated, abandoned, crushed, ‘persecuted’, reduced to despair; that they have a capacity for joy, laughter, hope; even that they have a deep need for justice; and infinitely much more.” 51 This dimension lifts the encounter beyond the immediate specificities of socio-familial localities into one of common humanity.

The transsocial element that Cordner attributes to remorse has a transformative quality that can carry someone beyond the usual obstacles to experiencing another in a real sense. For example, self-absorption and habitual ways of viewing lock people within the confines of their socio-political location. In experiencing remorse one is challenged and extended beyond self to apprehend another’s reality. We can extend this transformation of perspective to other moments – an accidental glimpse of one’s daughter in the street as if she were a stranger, and where her loneliness becomes shockingly apparent, or a son’s vulnerability in the space

49 Remorse and Moral Identity, p.240.
50 Remorse and Moral Identity, p.233.
51 Remorse and Moral Identity, pp.236 & 240.
between forgetting one’s own needs long enough to witness his in the moment. These resonate with an attentiveness to the other, outlined by Iris Murdoch also: “I have used the word ‘attention’ which I have borrowed from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent.” Cordner argues that this moral sensitivity develops through the recognition of oneself as the wrongdoer, or the unintentional cause of another’s suffering. Cordner claims: “I shall say that the bond realised in remorse with the other whom one has wronged is ‘transsocial,’ and that it realises both the victim and the subject of remorse – the one who experiences it – transsocially, as ‘more’ than his or her biologically, socially, culturally, and psychologically mediated identity.” Hence he understands the capacity of remorse to extend from one transcendent experience to the whole of one’s relations with others: “remorse thus, carries with it a universal significance.” Can this awakening to others through remorse signify in the social arena, providing as it does a rich responsiveness to others? A key question for this thesis is the following: is it possible that fiction exists as a medium to this awakening to awareness of others’ vulnerabilities?

Collective Responsiveness – shame alone?

In this section I examine the relationship between shame and remorse to create understanding about the importance of remorse as fundamental to responsiveness. In regard to collective responsiveness, and in the context of pursuing justice for Aboriginal people, Gaita claims:

Shame is as necessary for the lucid acknowledgement by Australians of the wrongs the Aborigines suffered at the hands of their political ancestors, and to the wrongs they continue to suffer, as pain is to mourning. It is not an optional addition to the recognition of the meaning of their dispossession. It is, I believe, the form of that recognition. While shame is foregrounded here, I show that Gaita’s theory about collective responsibility is characterised against a background of remorse. Within his own economy of meanings the richness of remorse gives context to what Gaita believes Aboriginal people are due, and that shame alone lacks this depth of response. For example, to highlight the inadequacy of a claim to understanding without remorse and reparation, Gaita gives the following scenario:

Imagine someone who says that he fully understands the wrong he has done in swindling a friend, and who says that, while he is more than ready to make up his friend’s losses, he feels no remorse and no need to apologise…Now imagine the other extreme of this misunderstanding – someone who often and tearfully expresses remorse, but is never prepared to make reparation… In the first

54 *Remorse and Moral Identity*, p.235.
55 *A Common Humanity*, p.92.
connection between remorse and understanding the wrong he has done comes apart. In the second, the connection between remorse and reparation has come apart in the same way.  

Bringing the question back to shame Gaita asks:

Is the same true of shame? Up to a point it is. The similarities are sufficient to yield a reply to those who say that protestations of shame unaccompanied by serious attempts to ameliorate the effects of the wrong done are self-indulgent and in the end harmful to Aborigines. Would anyone deny it? Would anyone seriously say that shame is of itself an adequate response to the terrible plight suffered by most Aborigines, or that shame amounts to anything when it is separated from a serious concern with reparation?  

I endorse Gaita’s assertion that shame alone is inadequate without a significant relationship to a remorse which embodies a ‘spirit’ of reparation in the acknowledgement of the other’s suffering.  

Relief of the material and psychological misery of many of the Aborigines will not count as reparation, however, unless the spirit in which that relief is given is informed by recognition of the wrongs suffered.  

Revealing the inter-relational condition between shame and guilt Gaita acknowledges a conflation of them: “Important though the distinction is between guilt and shame, it is not always sharp.” Highlighting the interdependence of shame and remorse he comments:

Acknowledgement of those wrongs as a source of torment distinct from and not reducible to their material or psychological consequences is, I believe, what the Aborigines desire when they ask for a national apology. One can debate whether remorse and shame constitute forms of understanding ………or whether their existence is a criterion for understanding ………The weaker one- that they are criterion for understanding the wrong one has done or been implicated in – will suffice.  

Hence, shame and remorse are again seen to be in close relationship.  

Importantly Gaita makes a space for responsiveness that is not based on guilt by highlighting a distinction between responsibility and guilt: “Because remorse – which I take to be the pained acknowledgement of one’s guilt – is taken as a paradigm of the acceptance of responsibility, people sometimes think responsibility must be restricted to what one has done or omitted to do.” To illustrate this Gaita negates the reneging of responsibility on the grounds of no causal relation to the wrong deeds of others, teasing out the difference between people’s relationship to past injustice and current lapses of responsiveness:

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56 A Common Humanity, p.100.  
57 A Common Humanity, p.100.  
59 A Common Humanity, p.94.  
60 A Common Humanity, p.101.  
61 A Common Humanity, p.93.
If one soberly judges one’s actions could achieve nothing, one might nonetheless rightly feel obliged to protest, perhaps so it be known that, or merely so it be true that, at least someone cared that wrong was done to people. But in such cases, one must be in sufficient proximity to the deeds to give sense to the guilty thought that evil was done and one did nothing to stop or to protest it. That is not a thought that can justifiably occasion guilt in later generations, although they may rightly feel guilty for not responding, in ways appropriate to them, to the fact that their ancestors did wrong, because they have not offered reparation, for example.62

In this passage there are several points merging. In the first instance it is about expressing something of the sorrow because it matters that people were wronged and suffered. Gaita clearly marks the distance from past actions as regards guilt, but allows a space for responsibility and guilt for non-action today.

As noted, Gaita believes that shame alone is empty without the spirit of remorse in the act of reparation. He acknowledges that there is a phenomenon akin to pollution that permeates the community. While Gaita has identified pollution as “a good metaphor for the way the guilt of its members can affect an entire community, including those who are not guilty” he has also expressed reservations.63 In a recent discussion Gaita has commented pollution is “too strong” to describe what it is that permeates the community.64 Instead he speaks of a certain “woe” that lingers and haunts a community’s sense of wellbeing. I believe that this partially identifies the subtle relationship that exists between remorse and the emotion which permeates the community in relation to the injustice that people have suffered. I believe the community’s sense of sorrow or ‘woe’ is informed by a capacity for remorse as a foundational moral layer of human capacity for responsiveness to another. It is because we can imagine what it is to have wronged another and to have been wronged, in Weil’s sense of laceration to the soul; that the community is infused with the sorrow of the past. While the past wrongs are unaddressed there remains a wound, unhealed. I bring to this thesis my own experiences of past harm as a victim, witness and agent of harm. These subtexts inform my sharp sense of injustice.

My thesis is exploring fiction’s capacity to serve as a bridge from individual to community. The thesis argues that fiction has the potential to evoke remorse which then taps into people’s moral code and sense of responsibility, the moral sensibility that informs a sense of compassion and injustice.

Bernard Schlink, a German lawyer and writer who offers a historical account of collective guilt characterises it as a phenomenon existing up until the Enlightenment which changed with a new emphasis on the individual within a paradigm of intentionality.65 Prior to this, communities were considered to be implicated by a member’s wrongdoing, which is why

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62 *A Common Humanity*, p.93.
63 *A Common Humanity*, p.97.
64 Raimond Gaita expressed this view in a prearranged meeting with the writer on the 16/2/15 at Melbourne University.
they repudiated certain individuals. Conversely, showing solidarity with the perpetrator entangled others and involved them in his or her guilt. However, Schlink argues that this shift to a conceptualisation of individual guilt has not been possible to contain since the holocaust which has spilled over into the community. Schlink argues that whereas once repudiation of prominent perpetrators worked, the entanglement in Germany with wrongdoing is such that it permeates whole communities.

This resonates with the ancient Greek conception of pollution. 66 Pollution permeates a society or families as misfortune signifying underlying moral discord. In Greek Mythology pollution is inflicted upon others by an individual’s wrongdoing, even unwittingly, as in Oedipus the King: “Polluted individuals were deemed to be contagious to their friends, relatives and society at large. Legal provision for the banishment from the healthy life of the city or a household was often made.” 67 The idea of pollution sheds light on what cannot be fully captured by shame: Gaita concludes that pollution “has aspects of shame and aspects of guilt” and may “explain why there has been such confusion in public debate about the appropriate way to acknowledge the wrong done to our indigenous peoples.” 68 It is these aspects of both shame and guilt that I believe is embedded within the community’s remorseful response. A community’s sense of implication is not unrelated to pollution.

My reading of the novels is based upon an understanding that shame as a moral emotion is largely about self and that remorse is fundamental to responding to injustice. Shame as represented in the Indigenous novels also figures as a burden carried by Aboriginal people, through the subordination of shaming. My understanding is that shame emerges along a continuum of experience from embarrassment to deeper shame in relationship to remorse. It can elicit remorse but in itself shame lacks the sorrow and compassion reflected in the depth of remorse. Steven Tudor, a moral philosopher, argues from a similar position in his analysis of shame and remorse in his book Compassion and Remorse: Acknowledging the Suffering Other:

My concern in this section has not been to reveal shame as a corrupt, immature, or somehow lesser moral emotion, but rather to contrast it at various points with remorse, and to show…that there are certain ‘moral tasks’ which it is not adequately equipped to perform. Foremost among these is the giving of attention to the Other whom one has wronged. Shame need not, to be sure, wholly ignore the victims of one’s wrongdoing, but it does not attend to them in the direct and fundamental way that is needed for an adequate acknowledgement of their moral

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66 According to Gaita, Schlink resists applying the concept of pollution to describe this sense of implication but rather argues that it runs through family and associative lines. Meeting with Raimond Gaita on 16/2/15. Gaita informed me of Schlink’s position based upon a conversation with him at a conference.
68 A Common Humanity, p.94.
reality – and which is found in lucid remorse. Shame’s Other is not remorse’s Other.\textsuperscript{69}

The debate about the value of shame over remorse is well documented.\textsuperscript{70} I support Tudor’s call for the recognition of the interrelated dynamic between remorse and shame; instead of trying to place these emotions in a hierarchy, it is better to understand how they relate to each other. Tudor uses the example of the habit of talking in a damning way about others behind their back as an occasion of both shame and remorse. He explains that we may generally feel shameful that we practise this, hence this is about a part of our character, but also experience remorse in particular instances of it. This highlights an intersection of shame and remorse within individualised instances.

Shame is relevant to my thesis not just because of its relationship to remorse but because it emerges in the Aboriginal novels as an emotion that is carried by the Aboriginal characters. Cheshire Calhoun is known for her work in feminist philosophy and marriage equality. In an article entitled “An Apology for Moral Shame” Calhoun discusses shame in relation to systems of subordination such as racism, sexism or hetero-sexism.\textsuperscript{71} These can evoke a sense of shame in those who may not themselves feel shame about their ethnicity or sex, or as some would see it, they are not in conflict with their internal ethical or sexual identity. This scenario aptly reflects the dynamic which Jean-Paul Sartre, known as forerunner of existential philosophy along with Simone de Beauvoir, describes – “I recognise that I am as the Other sees me” in his \textit{Being and Nothingness}.\textsuperscript{72} But is this only when the other sees me or is it internalised as the common term ‘internalised racism’ implies? Calhoun claims that it is not internalised but a shame that people are subject to in the act of shaming. Frantz Fanon, an Afro-Caribbean revolutionary thinker, philosopher and psychiatrist, has been influential in post-colonial studies and critical theory. Fanon writes of the process of decolonisation that involves disowning shame, but also the experience of being the object of shaming: “For if in fact, my life is worth as much as the settler’s, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone.”\textsuperscript{73} This expresses both the debilitating effect of shame that racism has upon people, and a disavowal of it. When it is systematically used as a tool of power to subordinate others, shame takes on a politically, socially, culturally and personally destructive character, as in the case of Aboriginal people in this country during the last two centuries. The fictional characters in the Indigenous novels enact this shame,

\textsuperscript{69} Tudor, Steven. \textit{Compassion and Remorse; Acknowledging the Suffering Other}. Edited by Professor Albert W. Musschenga and Professor Paul J.M. Tongeren. Belgium: Peeters, 2001, p.185.


\textsuperscript{72} Jean-Paul Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness} (London Methuen, 1976). p.122.

\textsuperscript{73} Frantz Fanon, \textit{The Wretched of the Earth}, London: Penguin Books, 1967, p.35.
highlighting the devastating effect upon lives wreaked by the shame of subordination. It is represented in the novels as an ongoing condition.

Janna Thompson echoes the language of remorse in her account of the significance of attending to past grievances, expressed by Indigenous communities worldwide. Speaking of symbolic gestures, such as an apology, she claims “But by demonstrating a remorseful acknowledgement of a past wrong, they can make it possible for nations to re-establish relations of respect” (p.51). Speaking from within a framework of “reparation as reconciliation,” she claims, “It is concerned with apology, forgiveness, contrition, atonement and reconciliation” (p.47). This reverberates with Gaita’s thoughts about grief that heals with time but not so with guilt:

Time, working alone, is denied the right to heal guilty suffering, if the suffering is lucid. What may heal it is as strange as the suffering itself - repentance, atonement, forgiveness, punishment. We are so familiar with this that we have lost a sense of its mystery (p.51).

Within a framework of remorse this thesis will explore the fiction of the past two decades, examining the novels as part of the ongoing dialogue of justice with Indigenous people. The thesis will investigate how aspects of remorse and shame are positioned within the novels to enhance the readers’ grasp of these responses in the context of bridge building through enabling a reciprocal flow between individual and collective forms of responsiveness. The enactment of moral unrest in the novels is represented in the characters’ expression of shame, guilt and remorse but also through the readers’ sense of remorse.

As a consequence of the harm arising from wrongdoing, Aboriginal people continue to experience inter-generational trauma. It is no surprise that trauma emerges within all of the novels in some form or another. Trauma shares a haunting theme with remorse, for the unresolved traumatic experience haunts the victim, just as in remorse, the victim haunts the wrongdoer. Some of the novels examined in this thesis embody strategies that signify the inexpressibility of trauma. There is a paradoxical conceptualisation of traumatic experience as beyond narration. However, while not examining trauma texts as such, the novels are performing trauma as distinct from examining testimonial texts with hidden trauma embedded within their non-explicit narratives. According to Ruth Leys, who traces the history of trauma theory, there are two overlapping models of trauma theory, the mimetic and antimimetic. In the antimimetic, neuroscience model, the subject is characterised as autonomous from the external traumatic event while still unable to access the memory, whereas in mimesis there is more negotiation within the psyche. Antimimesis holds that trauma is not integrated in the usual way but stored in a different part of memory; it is not integrated into the subject’s whole schema of experience, emerging only in fragmented ways via flashbacks which can be triggered through particular situations, people, smells or sounds – through the senses. Leys defines this as the “literal memory” whereby the trauma is kept

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intact, frozen in time. On the other hand, Leys reports mimesis resurfaced in Freudian theory, originating in hypnosis, through which traumatic memories emerged and were forgotten again: “Trauma was defined as a situation of dissociation or ‘absence’ from the self in which the victim unconsciously imitated, or identified with the aggressor” (p.8). She claims that resistance to this model came from “its threat to an ideal of individual autonomy and responsibility,” informed by an Enlightenment model of individual agency and control. Hence, two models of subjectivity collide or at times merge.

In fiction as performance, trauma narrative manifests in re-enactments for the reader, to give a sense of the character’s experience. The novels align more with a Freudian mimetic model, which holds that traumatic memory is repressed but accessible through symbols generated by the unconscious. Leys argues that “There has been a continuous tension or oscillation between the two paradigms, so that even the most resolutely antimimetic theory of trauma has tended to resurrect the mimetic theory itself” (p.10). If this is the case we could expect to find these tensions in the novels’ representation of traumatic experience and the subjectivity of the characters.

Susannah Radstone, a trauma theorist, advocates for psychoanalytic theories of trauma.”76 In her discussion of some main trauma theorists (Felman, Laub and Caruth), Radstone aligns with Ley’s critique. Raising the question of the subjectivity implied by each of the theories Radstone points out that there has been little attention given in trauma theory to the “model of subjectivity implied by trauma theory or the theoretical difficulties negotiated” remarks that there has been little attention given in trauma theory to the “model of subjectivity implied by trauma theory or the theoretical difficulties negotiated.” 77 In my examination of the novels they often depict an uncertain, fluctuating subjectivity.78 Radstone problematises trauma theory’s appropriation of the idea of a witness to an untraceable event. She claims that “what needs emphasising here is trauma theory’s moving beyond modernity’s coherent, autonomous, knowing subject to a model of subjectivity grounded in the space between witness and testifier within which that which cannot be known can begin to be witnessed” (p.20). This resonates with the reader’s position as witness to the characters’ sometimes silent suffering. In Ley’s understanding, neuroscience endorses a Cartesian knowing subject that remains unchanged by the trauma. The protagonists in the novels signify loss of identity and instability, silent and bare existence, self-doubt, all of which resonate with the fragmentary emergence of half glimpsed memory figured by trauma theory, reflecting more of a mimetic model of subjectivity.

76 Susannah Radstone, “Trauma Theory: context, Politics, Ethics” in Paragraph, 30, no 1, March 2007, pp. 9-29, p.16.
78 Susannah Radstone asks can a community be traumatised and problematises the seemingly easy transfer from individual psychological context to the community as she argues has occurred with trauma theory.
Chapter Outline

All of the novels discussed in this thesis look backwards to earlier historical periods. The thesis begins with the two Aboriginal-authored novels which set the scene depicting the pain and suffering from colonial interventions potentially evoking a remorseful responsiveness. The novels are presented in chronological order beginning with Plains of Promise (1997) set roughly in the 1940s, through which the inter-generational trauma of separation from family and community is foregrounded. This novel evokes a remorseful response through the devastating degree of trauma experienced by the protagonists. The impact on the reader is potentially haunting and I argue, reminiscent of a sense of remorse. The novel challenges the practice of blame which is cognizant with a model of remorse. It also highlights a lack of responsibility and remorse for the victims by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters. The novel represents the suffering caused by oppressive systems and discourses. For example, it identifies psychiatric discourse in its trope of madness and it reveals the intersection of racism and sexism in the oppression of Ivy, her mother and to a lesser extent her daughter, Mary. Shame is figured as an affliction forced upon Aboriginal people through the characters’ feelings of shame at their sexual exploitation and lost childhood.

The next novel Benang (1999), located in the 1990s and extending back over four generations, represents the lived daily experience of Aboriginal people under the various policies inflicted upon them. The novel enacts the theme of trauma through the sexual abuse of its protagonist whose flashbacks dramatise the unintegrated nature of the experience. Benang employs sophisticated subversive strategies to engage with and undermine central concepts of oppression. It brings shame to the surface when its characters reveal to Harley their childhood experience of dealing with racist attitudes. The novel links the causal relationship between the macro world of policy and the micro world of lived experience. It highlights the specificity of suffering through themes of loss, anger and resentment, denial, remorse and forgiveness. Again it provides grounds for a remorseful response. In a fictional, inter-textual sense it can be seen as laying the foundation for a response from non-indigenous novelists.

Journey to the Stone Country, published (2003), represents the guilt carried inter-generationally on account of the massacre and dispossession of Aboriginal people. In the historical context of the 1990s Mabo decision, the novel enacts a form of reparation through the character, Annabelle, which, I argue, sits uneasily with the lightness of its narrative. Discord is created by the juxtaposition of an almost flippant brush stroke that creates Aboriginal Bo and non-Indigenous Annabelle as opposites at play with the terrible secret of her grandfather’s legacy. Its lightness is disturbing when juxtaposed with the gravity of the Aboriginal novels. My view is that it lacks seriousness but makes a gesture of remorse within its flippant pages as if it is reluctant to take itself seriously.

In The White Earth (2004), the focus of chapter three, I argue that the depth of response awakened by the child character, William, reflects a remorse that is equal to the experience he is forced into by his uncle, of being complicit in retrieving the sacred bones of the people massacred by his great, great uncle Daniel McIvor. Set in the context of reactions against Mabo, I argue that this novel holds the weight of the past, heavy as it is shown to be. It
reflects the capacity of fiction to carry the reader through the process of denial and awakening to a full reality through its metaphor of the ‘eyes to see’ embodied by its motif of the vulnerable child. This figure emerges in all the novels in different ways. This novel substantiates my claim about the site of fiction’s capacity to engage, challenge and evoke remorse.

In chapter five on *The Secret River* (2005) I argue that this novel is problematic in its gesture of remorse for a number of different reasons. Not least of these is the sympathy it evokes for its perpetrator protagonist, Thornhill, through his own childhood vulnerability. While I argue that the form of remorse represented is arrested in its development, for me the novel reflects the swaying ambivalence and polarization that exists in the wider community around the issue of moral response and reparation. Consequently this book has polarized responses to it. Readers see it as either a novel that is seriously engaged with the issues in a remorseful way or as self-redemptive for the wider community. It has been the catalyst for a play that attempts to balance the story with Indigenous voices and language. A film is on the verge of release. This novel reenacts first contact between Indigenous and settlers, set in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

In chapter six I analyse the novel *Sorry* (2007) which I understand as a gesture of remorse that embodies the awkwardness of just how to offer this. It highlights a moment of waiting for a remorseful apology while revealing the complexity of race relations. I argue that the novel reflects the philosophy of Iris Murdoch in its preoccupation with the indeterminacy of almost every reality it offers. The outcome is disappointing for the reader as Perdita never gets to express her remorse to Aboriginal Mary who is wrongly incarcerated, reflecting the nation’s irresolution around moral matters. Through the dramatisation of Mary’s willingness to self-sacrifice for Perdita the novel raises the issue of displaced responsibility. It critiques religious influence in Mary’s life. Reading as allegory for race relations, I argue that this representation leaves the reader with a sense of something owing to Mary. It also resonates with the burden forced upon Aboriginal females in service to whites. Written prior to the national apology by the Rudd Government in 2008 the book posits an overdue and, in the end, too late expression of remorse. It is set in the 1930s and follows the characters’ lives for a generation to the 1950s.
Chapter 1 – Plains of Promise

The chapter is concerned with racism, separation, trauma and identity. The Plains of Promise is relevant to my thesis because it foregrounds these issues through the motif of the vulnerable child. As is the case with Benang it represents the impact of the colonial intervention of removing children of mixed descent from their Aboriginal parents. It is an uncanny coincidence that it was published at the same time as the release of the Bringing Them Home Report in 1997. While the novel was first published that year it was begun in 1989-90 and completed by March, 1995. Despite the novel’s completion before the report’s release, it reads as a fictionalised account of the damage caused to those now known as the Stolen Generations.

One of the contentions of this thesis is that fiction brings painful issues home to us through the immediacy of emotions. As a reader I engage with the painful representations of separation between mothers and children, the stigma arising from psychiatric discourses, and the victimisation of the outcast, vulnerable child. The main theme engaged by the novel is the removal of Aboriginal children from their mothers. The novel traces the impact of the separation between Ivy and her mother. The mother remains nameless, representing any and every Indigenous woman. The novel also encompasses themes of neglect, reflecting the poor conditions prevalent in mission stations. In particular, the novel highlights the impact of “the social engineered Aboriginal community” across several generations of Aboriginal people, whereby people were segregated according to classifications of skin colour (p.263). It also draws attention to a split between Aboriginal people who live in the city and their regional brothers and sisters, revealing in the process the gap between those who were removed as children and those who remained amongst their own people. The issue that links this wide range of experiences is that of Aboriginal identity. For example, a testimony from the Bringing Them Home report speaks loudly to the novel’s preoccupation with racism, separation, trauma and identity:

We may go home, but we cannot relive our childhoods. We may reunite with our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunties, uncles, communities, but we cannot relive the 20, 30, 40 years that we spent without their love and care, and they cannot undo the grief and mourning they felt when we were separated from them. We can go home to ourselves as Aboriginals, but this does not erase the attacks inflicted on our hearts, minds, bodies and souls, by caretakers who thought their mission was to eliminate us as Aboriginals (p.11).

The motif of the vulnerable child is central to our understanding of reader engagement with the injustice experienced by Aboriginal people. I argue that the child, white or black,

81 In an email from Alexis Wright, September, 2014, she mentions the coincidence of the novel’s publication in the same year as the Report. Her own words are that the Report “took what was already known, endured and implications to another level.”
works to engage reader emotions, inviting the reader to think more deeply about matters of concern to Aboriginal people. I believe that the motif of the vulnerable child suspends blame but not responsibility. This is central to Gaita’s theory of remorse, which looks to the moral significance of an act through the impact it has on the other. The focus is on the perpetrator’s awakened sense of the other, rather than on blame. In *Plains of Promise*, the vulnerable child works to reveal Ivy’s suffering to the reader, leaving us with a sense of the horror Ivy experiences. Ivy’s silence intensifies our understanding of her disempowerment, as she is almost voiceless. The gravity of the injustice towards the protagonist evokes reader remorse. The remorse within the novel from the other characters is slight, embodied in old Maudie, and later in Elliot, both Indigenous characters. This lack intensifies reader remorse. The shame experienced in the novel by Ivy flags a gap because remorse is warranted by the perpetrator of evil, Errol Jipp. As represented in the novel shame is carried by many Aboriginal people for the loss of children from colonial intervention. This is dramatised in the interaction between an Aboriginal character, Kathy, who has never found her family, and reveals to Ivy the shame the people feel for the loss of their children: “They too shamed to admit it” (p.75). This underlines a place for remorse by authorities.

As flagged already, my sensitivity to separation from my children informs my engagement with the issue of disruption to families. Janna Thompson explores the wider injustice notwithstanding the pain and suffering these international practices of child removal produced. Thompson asserts that “So understood the child removal cases I have described are instances of what can be called ‘injustices to family.’” 82 This disruption includes interference in “lifetime –transcending interests of parents and other kin” and “prevents children from acquiring an inheritance – religious, political or cultural” which destroys the possibility of “meaningful relationships between members of families and descendants” (pp.134 &135). All this is represented in Wright’s novel as the source of the terrible grief suffered.

*Plains of Promise* begins with a representation of mission life in the north of Australia. It represents the task of the mission as keeping children separate from their families through separate dormitories. The depiction of mission life is a generic one; it is a timeless place that might exist anywhere. This novel is set around 1950 or earlier. The theme of mission life in the novel is one of abuse and the Indigenous people’s struggle to maintain their culture. It also represents the discord created among Aboriginal people through colonial intervention. The novel dramatises what happens when people are placed together indiscriminately with no regard for language grouping, a fundamental organising principle of Aboriginal tribal life. The novel creates a world in which the racist practice of classifying people according to skin colour, part of a eugenics model of thinking that lighter skinned people are superior, is depicted as destructive. It is disruptive to tribal groups through displacing people out of country. This disruption is dramatised fictionally as one reason why the Aboriginal people of the mission reject the main protagonist, Ivy, the child of an outsider who they believe has brought about the trouble they are experiencing. Highlighting the grief reflected in the

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Bringing Them Home Report, Ivy’s mother, from another tribe, commits suicide after Ivy is removed from her and put in the dormitory.

A testimony from the Bringing Them Home Inquiry mirrors the concern of the novel with the impact of separation upon both mothers and children. As a witness in the Inquiry testifies:

It was wrong the way my natural mother was treated. Mrs Sullivan told my mother she should lock herself away. The Sullivan family told people my mother was crazy and the court gave us to the Sullivan family. My mother was not crazy she was only nineteen. She was the right one and shouldn’t have killed herself but she knew no better as there was no one to help her keep her children. I can remember the day she died – that has haunted me for the rest of my life. I remember the police coming to Mrs Sullivan’s place where we were and told her that mum Faith died I’m sure I heard that. I turned and said to Mrs Sullivan ‘Mummy Faith can’t take us away anymore.’ The day she died we died (p.7).

Subjected to psychiatric discourse, this woman is cast as crazy and blamed for being absent from her children, which hides the reality of the practice of removal. In an article entitled “Reading Madness in Alexis Wright’s Plains of Promise” Tomoko Itchitani remarks that the act of suicide is the act of those who are voiceless and that their suicides speak for them instead. 83 Itchitani explains, “The presence of the subaltern woman, such as Ivy’s mother is realised through their absence once they have committed suicide” (p.254). But as Itchitani points out, even this is denied Ivy’s mother when the records are falsified. Ivy’s mother’s death precipitates a number of suicides by Aboriginal mothers. For this reason, the elders perceive Ivy as the personification of evil. With the novel’s juxtaposition of this with the undiluted immorality of Jipp there is an obvious displacement of the evil that exists in their midst in the character of Errol Jipp, the manager of the mission and their so called protector.

The novel is divided into four parts and unfolds over four generations of females. Part one represents Ivy’s mother’s life. Parts one and two follow Ivy’s traumatic life experience incorporating the loss of her own child, born to Jipp after years of rape. Part two represents Ivy in a psychiatric facility where she remains for twenty years, making her around 35 years of age. Ivy eventually begins to feel some relief from silence and shame through Madam Sylvia Sadaan’s tuition, an insightful and caring woman who runs a belly-dancing class at the hospital. When the funding is cut and the facility is under investigation for misuse of power, Ivy is sent ‘home’ where a place for her is found with an elderly Aboriginal woman, Bessie. Ivy’s mental health deteriorates rapidly into psychotic delusions and paranoia in which she believes that Bessie is poisoning her. In an apocalyptic moment, the house catches fire and Ivy survives to live with the goats until they too are destroyed. In part three Ivy’s daughter Mary enters the novel as a 30 year old woman brought up by non-Aboriginal people, and searching for her Aboriginal identity. She seeks employment with an activist group Coalition

of Aboriginal Governments as a convenor of events. In part four Mary and her daughter Jessie return to her place of birth. Mary’s job involves motivating regional Aboriginal people towards self-government but she is also searching for her mother’s identity. The community deny her this information and the reader is led to imagine that this stems from their earlier distrust of Ivy as well as their guilt at abandoning Ivy to Jipp’s abuse. The local people, including Ivy’s peers, choose to believe that she was a willing participant in Jipp’s ongoing sexual abuse. Ivy was seven when her mother died and by the time she was fourteen she had given birth to Jipp’s child. The Aboriginal people distrusted her because they believed she brought misfortune to the community and that she influenced Jipp. Ivy then becomes the scapegoat for the string of suicides that befell the mission.

The motif of the vulnerable child works in the novel to engage the reader in an act of compassion and remorse. As a reader it is excruciating to witness Ivy’s grief for the loss of her mother, followed by sexual exploitation and rejection by her community. The novel depicts the worst case scenario of loss, grief, rejection and isolation. Alexis Wright, commenting on Plains of Promise in a paper titled “The Politics of Writing,” explains that fiction is a most powerful way of communicating depth. She states, “I felt fiction would allow me to create some kind of testament, not the actual truth, but a good portrayal of truth which I see, and that is the living hell of the lives of many Aboriginal people” (p.13). Wright extrapolates further:

Writing was a way of consoling myself in this crisis of the mind to the very real threat we were facing as Waanyi people. I had hoped to achieve some recognition for our land. I was interested in the notion of what it meant to be ostracised. Over many years in my work, I had seen people who had been on the outside of life, not only from mainstream society but within Aboriginal society as well. Nobody knew their story. These are the people who don’t talk and are treated like they don’t exist. I was concerned about how this could happen and what it meant to be a person who falls outside of life. In a way the story wrote itself and as much as it is a story about the main characters, it is a story about land and the powers that tie people to land. I wanted other people to see this (pp.12-13).

This passage suggests that Wright’s target audience is as much Aboriginal people as it is the wider community. The issues that emerge in relation to how an individual suffers in isolation amongst Aboriginal people reinforces this view. In a sense, Wright’s novel deconstructs conceptions of them and us by representing the failure to respond adequately to another’s suffering as a human failing that exists between Aboriginal people as well as between settlers and Aboriginals. Ultimately though, contextualised within a colonial setting of blatant human rights violations, the critique is targeted at the coloniser for fostering an environment in which human conflict can only intensify.

The character of Ivy personifies the outsider who barely speaks, is constantly misunderstood, and is regarded as malevolent. The settler reader is placed in a complex position

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here, witnessing Aboriginal people in the mission being cruel and unjust towards Ivy. Within this world the reader is forced to abandon any idealization of Aboriginal solidarity. We are made to see how our reader expectations are no more than unreal idealisation and a stereotypical representation of the Other. There is disappointment too that other Aboriginal people refuse to see that Ivy is sexually exploited against her will by Jipp. For example:

Everyone knew what was going on between this girl and Reverend Jipp. What sort of hussy she was turning out to be. And everyone blamed her for the affair. Ivy’s intimate relationship with the one who ruled the life of the community caused a lot of unrest among the people. What potential did she have to influence matters, they wondered” (p.49).

Reader sympathy is engendered for Ivy for even wise old Maudie, the only person resembling a friend, begins to doubt her. As a reader I engage with the silent, misunderstood child who is socially isolated. Ivy reflects that while Maudie has saved her from drowning and even taken her fishing, “ever since everyone started talking about her affair with Jipp Maudie had avoided her. She was just like everyone else” (p.51). On her death bed Maudie asks for Ivy’s forgiveness but Ivy doesn’t understand why she is sorry, which is curious given what Ivy knows. When Maudie adds “Your mother wanted to go” Ivy becomes hysterical demanding “Tell me about my mother” but it is too late (p.55). The witnesses to Maudie’s death react viciously to Ivy as they “dragged her away with slaps and punches” (p.55), further provoking reader indignation. They tell her “you are evil,” pushing her against the wall. And that “You come here from your sickness country. Spreading it all over this place here” (p.56). The novel’s dispelling of the motif of Aboriginal solidarity reflects Itchitani’s view that Wright resists idealisation in her desire to portray the reality of people’s experience of alienation from family and community. The trope of madness enters here in the form of “sickness country” (p.56). There is a place for remorse in this scenario, underlined by its absence.

Unrest in the community is highlighted by Ivy’s mother’s suicide by setting herself alight with kerosene. Here the narrator reveals the pain involved in the separation of mothers from their children, with Aboriginal community members arguing amongst themselves about who should take responsibility for Ivy’s mother suicide:

How’d I know anyone want to do that to themselves?” I only thought she was like that. Yep, crazy that’s what. A lot of people around here like that. Can you blame anyone, hey? I’m asking you that. Well don’t go around with your big tongue hanging out blaming me. I’m crazy myself – got kids of my own there too in the dormitory. That don’t make me happy either. But what can I do? What can anyone do to stop old Jipp and his mob? They run everything here. They in charge. Not me that’s for sure (p.8).

This passage draws attention to both a sense of loss but also to a sense of powerlessness to take responsibility for others. It creates the world in which loss features at a macro level evoking reader sympathy. The theme of mental instability emerges again as a descriptor to give some

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85 Maudie cannot be an elder because she will not relinquish her attachment to her homeland. Attachment to land is identified by Wright as something she wishes to bring out in the novel.
meaning to unbearable emotional distress. Madness stands in here to cover for an overflow of emotional pain and suffering, highlighting the conceptual slippage from pain into mental instability. This works in the world of the novel as a means of ignoring the actual source of the pain inflicted by authorities and by the mission residents. It signifies a gap of responsiveness. The trajectory represented by the novel is one of displacement of the mission residents’ shock, fear and anxieties, all of which are triggered by Ivy’s mother’s death. Infighting erupts amongst mission members:

The argument progressed into a lot of wrongs, which for some time had been left unsaid, floating around the place. There were facts to be aired, mostly to do with the inmates’ attitudes towards each other. Somehow or other it all became linked with the woman’s death (p.9).

In the economy of the text the movement is towards finding the source of evil, someone to blame. This blame is (later) transferred to Ivy when she is scapegoated for bringing harm to the community. Michelle Grossman, a literary theorist, in an article entitled “Reach On Out to the Other Side” in the journal Meridian understands the novel as critiquing blame as a response that obscures important issues. Her position, which will be discussed further in this chapter and is relevant to the perspective I bring to this thesis through the moral philosophy model of remorse that has no place for blaming. In this instance, blame obscures the suffering and an awareness about the absence of a remorseful response to Ivy’s mother and the others who are suffering.

Another element adding to this tension is the impact of Christianity. The novel wants to show how Christian religion in a colonial context creates division. Ivy’s mother’s death brings out the divide in the community over spiritual beliefs. For example, a scene erupts:

You all know nothing! One old waragu woman or madwoman yells in excitement, racing about excitedly and trying to hit people with her long hunting stick. She laughs hysterically at the top of her voice as the debate goes on” “you all know nothing!” (p.9). Another replies; “You the one now who sees things that not even there. Since when you cared about anything around here anyway? No wonder that woman gone now. Praise the good Jesus for taking her, what I say” (p.9). The waragu woman retorts “praise nothing. You churchpeople think nothing. Woman goes and kills herself and no-good Jesus got nothing to do with it…. ” (p.9). Those expressing Christian beliefs argue “At least we went to see her and talk to her – tried to settle her down” (p.9). “Sure you did” the waragu woman yells back; “What did you tell her? ‘God is going to look after you’, did you? God’s people take her child away and leave her there crying out like an animal for days afterwards. Only us here had to listen to her all day and half the night. Did whiteman’s God hear that (p.9).

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The trope of madness figured here describes a woman who speaks out against majority opinion, in what reads as a critique of Christianity and child removal. The reader is positioned to sympathise with this through concern for young Ivy left without a mother. This passage draws attention to the complexity and collision of spiritual beliefs. It juxtaposes the contradiction and hypocrisy of mission rhetoric with the realities of losing one’s children under Christian rule. Itchitani draws attention to the novel’s trope of madness, describing madness as a traditional form of resistance in women’s writing. She claims that “Wright utilises the theme of madness as a narrative tactic to explore questions of ‘otherness’ and ‘subaltern’ subjectivity.”

This draws attention to the impact of psychiatric discourse upon Ivy, which has historically interacted with sexist representations to cast non-conforming women as mad.

While drawing attention to the unjust treatment of Aboriginal people, the novel also represents Aboriginal people resisting colonial rule, defying the persona of victim. That there is some negotiation with Christian teachings can be seen in the behaviour of the community of elders. For example, at Ivy’s mother’s funeral the elders were “secretly performing their own ritual” (p.18). The reader is brought along with this, informed that they “mediate perpetual disputes between local estates and family groups” and the translation of “time immemorial boundaries into present circumstances” (p.41). This can be seen in the string of suicides, which they believe are related to another tribe. This mix of practices and discourses draws attention to the complexity of influences operating on the surface and out of sight in the novel. These contribute to the cruel manner in which Ivy is treated. She is located outside the walls of belief constructed around her; she is perceived as a threat to what is valued – either Christian doctrine or Indigenous cultural practices and spirituality.

The novel’s reception by the critics is described by Paul Sharrad as “divided” and “polarised.” He explores this reception in an article entitled “Beyond Capricornia: Ambiguous Promise in Alexis Wright.” Sharrad suggests that the initial negative reception by reviewers was due to the novel’s depressing representation of Aboriginal life: “This debut novel failed to gain reviewers approval largely because there seems to be little promise at all in its northern plains” (p.55). However, the point here is that the novel is dismissed because of the discomfort it creates. Sharrad comments on its profound impact upon him: “My first reading of her Plains of Promise some years ago stuck in my mind because of its powerful evocation of a traumatised mind and of a haunted landscape, but I am aware that the book never ‘caught on’ to the extent I thought it deserved” (p.52). Perceiving the book as a form of healing, he claims that Wright “aims to speak for herself and her people against misrepresentation and the usurpation of other voices, and in particular, to speak out the silences of a painful suppressed past” (p.53). Identifying Wright’s capacity to embrace the full complexity Sharrad writes:

the positive feature of the novel is the ability to orchestrate different voices to give a sense of the complexities and subtleties of cross-cultural negotiation in

87 “Reading Madness in Alexis Wright’s Plains of Promise,” p.247.
minority groups. Silences, indirection, invisible agendas permeate the story. They can generate conflict and express fear, but they also contain seeds of resistance (p.56).

Reiterating this view in a review entitled “A Powerful New Black Voice,” Liam Davison comments: “Alexis Wright has some important things to say in this novel, to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers. I only hope people will listen”. 89 He notes Wright’s honesty about the problems in Aboriginal communities and the failure of state interventions:

Neither does she view the Aboriginal community through rose coloured glasses. Aboriginal problems are presented as precisely that. Indeed, while many of them are direct consequences of state intervention, white methods are viewed as foolish and irrelevant. The divisions and in-fighting on the other side of the divide are presented as equal barriers to social justice as white oppression (p.42).

Alison Ravenscroft, a literary theorist who has written on whiteness as a pervasive reading position, charges white critics with misinterpreting and misrepresenting the novel. In an article entitled “What falls from View? On Re-reading Alexis Wright’s Plains of Promise” Ravenscroft critiques critics of Plains of Promise. 90 Reviewers’ complaints appear whimsical to her, as if the novel is there to please rather than be understood in its own terms. I agree with Ravenscroft’s criticism. Reviewers appear to overlook the seriousness of this novel in the context of this country’s colonial history and racism. Some reviewers are also completely off-message. For example, Tegan Bennett’s review “Abused and Beaten”, published in the Weekend Australian, expresses concern with the grammar of the novel, for its “poorly handled tense” and “awkward dialogue,” without offering any examples.91 She compares Ivy, the main protagonist, with Eadie from The Eadie from Ballad of Siddy Church, who (she claims), has an “innate sense of worth” a judgement which implies that Ivy’s damage is less worthy of recognition. Rosemary Sorensen from the Sunday Age is impatient with a novel which she says “doesn’t work.” 92 Sorensen also expects more from the ending where there is a “hint of recognition” when Mary meets her mother, Ivy, but is dismayed that “all that drops off the page.” 93 Curiously, there is no thought about the representation of loss and how it reverberates throughout the Indigenous community. Nicholas Jose, writing for the Sydney Morning Herald states “To marry the mythic with the mundane is a challenge for anyone. I lost my bearings here and there, worried about the characters left behind, felt disoriented by shifts of tone” and concludes that the editing is responsible for this difficulty. 94 Losing one’s bearings can work as a subversive device to create a reader experience of disorientation, mimicking the protagonist’s subjectivity, but in the end Jose

93 Review 8 above.
comments “With Plains of Promise Wright makes a claim on literature, plain and simple, and that’s not about submitting to anyone’s filters. It’s about making your own path” (p.9)

Reflecting the polarity Sharrad describes, Lisa Bellear in the Journal of Australian Studies recommends the novel, commenting on how it raises the issue of the ongoing “cycles of violence” perpetuated across racial categories against Aboriginal women.\(^{95}\) She points out that while some of the mission residents are from the local tribal lands, “most people were brought forcibly from their ancestral homelands to St Dominic’s” (p.1). Cornelius Renes in an article entitled “Discomforting readings: Uncanny Perceptions of Self in Alexis Wright’s Plains of Promise and David Malouf’s Remembering Babylon” characterises the novel in terms of uncanny realism.\(^{96}\) He glosses this term with reference to “the familiar becoming unfamiliar,” ultimately creating reader discomfort. This concept, he argues, speaks to the discomfort experienced in Plains of Promise from the novel’s unfamiliarity to a mainstream reader. From an international perspective, Carolyn Bliss from the University of Utah, admits that she feels disconnected from the characters, stating that they are inaccessible to her.\(^{97}\)

Similarly, this narrative strategy creates a sense of the disconnection between characters through colonial interventions. Michelle Grossman understands this as a subversive strategy.\(^{98}\)

Grossman characterises Plains of Promise as a novel that deconstructs representations of Aboriginality: “there is hardly a moment anywhere in the text where one version or another of ‘received Aboriginality’ is not scrutinised and challenged as a result” (p.85). Simultaneously, looking at Wright’s Plains of Promise and Grog War, Grossman investigates what she perceives as Wright’s refusal of polarities and her deconstruction of stereotypes of the idealised Aboriginal. Grossman explains that in Grog War, the reality of life at Tennant Creek is investigated by Wright in its full complexity. Grossman claims Wright “ultimately shifted Territorian paradigms that blamed only the Aboriginal consumers of alcohol by refocusing on the licensers, producers and retailers of alcohol, from Tennant Creek publicans all the way to the Territory’s Liquor Licensing Commission” (p.84). Grossman argues that both the documentary text and the novel are “preoccupied to some extent with exploring the politics of blame: how blame comes to be assigned, its meanings and impacts in different historical and cultural settings” (p.84). She argues that the novel explores the way blame obscures vital questions. This is dramatized in the scene where the local mission people argue over who is responsible for the death without even knowing how Ivy’s mother killed herself. The novel represents a community that attempts to circumvent blame through infighting but in so doing it loses sight of compassion and remorse. This reading interests me because it intersects with my own reflections on the novel. For example, in Gaita’s theory of remorse, blame slips away because the focus is on an individual’s or in this case, a community’s


\(^{98}\) “Reach On Out to the Other Side” p.85.
recognition of its responsibility for another’s suffering. An inner sense of having wronged another is foregrounded in remorse, but blame becomes redundant because the act may not even register in a community realm as wrongdoing. Remorse is about an inner sense of having harmed another and the responsibility that comes with this. This is illustrated most poignantly in a case of involuntary harm caused to another, as in the case of the Dutch woman, cited by Gaita.⁹⁹

Similarly, in a vein that identifies the subversive currents of the novel, Itchitani argues that Wright tackles the contentious area of the intersection of racism and sexism. In an article entitled “Negotiating Subjectivity: Indigenous Feminist Praxis and the Politics of Aboriginality in Alexis Wright’s Plains of Promise and Melissa Lukashenko’s Steam Pigs,” she writes:

Wright and Lucashenko carefully deploy a narrative tactic that enables their female characters to explicitly assert their Aboriginality through a relationship to a specific Indigenous land and ‘truth’ that form an integral part of a proud emergent identity. Focusing on Indigenous women whose identities are disrupted and formed in complex ways at the intersection of cultural differences such as race, gender, and class, Plains of Promise and Steam Pigs negotiate women’s subjectivity and present an Aboriginality that is not bound by racial or community politics.¹⁰⁰

In my view Wright’s boldness in representing Aboriginal male characters’ violence and mistreatment of Aboriginal women signifies an accommodation of feminist critique, but as Itchitani argues, this does not cause a loss of cultural identity. The historical context is one of dialogue between Indigenous and European feminists involving claims by Aboriginal women that their particular plight has been subsumed by white feminism.¹⁰¹ Western feminism has had similar charges laid against it by Indian feminists who have felt that their cultural specificity has been denied.¹⁰² Historically, an issue for Aboriginal women is that they cannot subscribe to a politics of division between Aboriginal women and men when the community’s activism is dependent upon their solidarity. In fact Western feminism has been seen by them as a divisive colonising practice. Additionally history shows that white women were oppressors of black women as domestic servants, an injustice represented in Wright’s novel through the character of Beverley, who takes advantage of Ivy’s domestic labour while refusing to acknowledge her husband’s abuse and Ivy’s suffering. Itchitani argues that the authors of both Plains of Promise and Steam Pigs negotiate this terrain through an assertion of Indigeneity by highlighting connection to land (p.198). The novel’s representation of the use of Aboriginal women as chattels to undergird colonial lives highlights an injustice about

⁹⁹ (See p.20 in the Introduction to this thesis).
reducing people’s humanity to a means of comfort and ease for others. Aboriginal people are not attributed with desire for control over their own lives in the way reserved for whites.

Alison Ravenscroft, a non-Aboriginal woman and critic of white readers brings a construction of whiteness to her examination of the novel within a frame of desire. In her article “What falls from View? On Re-reading Alexis Wright’s Plains of Promise” “She asks what scenes can white readers see when we read an Indigenous-signed text such as this one? What scene will our desires produce, and what might fall from view?”103 Although this is a question relevant to my concern with reading and writing Indigenous issues and subjectivities, Ravenscroft’s focus on whiteness is better placed to analyse settler texts where it is perhaps harder to escape some reproduction of oppressive discourse.

Ravenscroft’s representation of the white reader is one of arrogance that presumes to know all there is to understand about a text based upon what one desires to see. She argues for a reading position that remains open to elements that can otherwise slip by unnoticed: “Generally in reading we try to cover these gaps, bridge them in some way. It is the places where a white reader might remain blind before this text, however – the places where such a reader cannot make meaning, where the gaps cannot be bridged – that I am interested in here” (p.71). This is evident in some of the reviews which quibble over language, character inaccessibility and resolution. Ravenscroft points out that the minimal scholarly attention paid to this novel is due to white critics’ “failure to allow for places in the text where their own knowledge and vision fails” (p.82). Her representation of whiteness embodies an expectation of conformity to literary convention, in line with established genres, such as magical realism.

While Ravenscroft aptly critiques the limitation of some reviews, her own focus on whiteness in the novel appears to me to limit the extent of the novel’s affective impact. As Anne Maxwell and Odette Kelada, scholars of literature and post-colonial studies, point out in their response to Ravenscroft’s book, The Postcolonial Eye where she also offers a reading of the novel: “There is something disconcerting about a white reader using Indigenous texts to focus on and examine whiteness, particularly when based on arguments of radical difference and ‘strangeness.’”104

Ravenscroft argues that readers are positioned with Jipp throughout, identifying specific scenes to support her case, such as where Ivy’s mother has a nightmarish experience after Ivy is taken from her. This serves as an example of how readers are positioned to choose between Jipp’s view or Old Maudie’s viewpoint. Ravenscroft perceives a polarity between whiteness and indigeneity in Maudie’s perception of the imminent risk to Ivy’s mother and Jipp’s disavowal of Maudie’s knowledge: “Maudie tells Jipp what she has seen, and that she knows that the mother will die soon, but of course he trusts neither her vision nor her knowledge” (p.74). Ravenscroft claims that “Readers, too, are presented with a choice between believing

103 See FN 89 for full reference, p.70
in Jipp’s vision or, in this case, Old Maudie’s. It is the kind of choice that is posed to a reader many times” (p.74). However, this limits us to a literal reading of what is posed by the characters. Ravenscroft asks: “Is the reader to take these marks on the woman’s body as material evidence (as) that the bird does indeed pay its deathly visit?” or to deny along with Jipp (p.74)? Yet is there not another reading available that might provide insight into what is presented here? It is hard to believe that this scene is simply about polarised colonial and Indigenous perceptions of the suffering woman’s nightmares. While it may draw attention to the realm represented by Jipp and his denial of Aboriginal perspective, what kind of reality does he represent? As Ravenscroft argues he is blind to so much of the actual harm done to Aboriginal people, especially women and children, that we can only question the way he sees the world around him.

In my view, one thing that is not in doubt in this scene is that Ivy’s mother suffers dreadfully:

Alone she saw the blackness of the night and the men who came, small and faceless creatures. They slid down the ropes from the stormy skies, lowering their dirty wet bodies until they reached the ground outside the hut while she slept. There in silence they went after her, pulling at her skin, trying to rip her apart (p.14).

This speaks of a persecuted woman torn in two as her mother’s heart is ripped from her. The persecution continues, causing her eventually to internalise her persecutors’ hatred:

Taunting her as she tried to escape, to get out of the door of the hut. All the while pulling and jabbing her skin wherever they could with their sharp nails. Satisfied with their ‘bad woman’s weakened state’ they returned to the skies, beckoning her to come to them (p.14).

Ivy’s mother’s spirit is shown to be one which fights for her child’s wellbeing. Ironically, she is represented by the narrator, through station owner’s eyes, as “abusive to everyone” (p.13). This is then reversed by the narrator and reinterpreted by the reader as the product of racist judgements –for we are told Ivy’s mother is “bad by the outside world’s standards for Blacks” (p.13). Her nightmarish experience reveals the brokenness of her spirit through the loss of her daughter. The reader does not need to think too laboriously about the literal meaning of her night terror for the metaphoric realm profoundly reveals her anguish. Sharrad too has been affected by the “powerful evocation of a traumatised mind” which stayed with him after reading the novel (p.52).

Remorse as a frame of reference

With regard to the broader frame of remorse, considered as a form of responsiveness equal to the depth of another’s pain and suffering, the place of remorse in this novel can be seen in the multifaceted abuse endured by Ivy. The most prominent perpetrator in the novel is Jipp, an allegorical figure for colonial exploitation and injustice. He feels no remorse for sexual abuse but displaces his guilt onto Ivy: “Meanwhile he would, by God, push the evil out of the ‘she-
devil’ who was possessing him” while Ivy carries his guilt in the form of shame (p.32). In the following passage I agree with Ravenscroft that there is a slippage from Ivy’s soliloquy into Jipp’s subjectivity but this does not inevitably place the reader in his field of desire. The whole passage reads as follows with the lines quoted by Ravenscroft italicised:

Ashamed if her body responded but unable to move away beneath a weight that forced the air from her body. Desperate enough to keep living, she struggled to grasp air. But her worthlessness she swallowed to the pit of her stomach. She knew the sight of her nakedness sprawled out indecently in God’s place could never be forgiven. Meanwhile he would, by God, push the evil out of the ‘she-devil’ who was possessing him (p.32).

It is striking that Ravenscroft omits the lines that represent Ivy’s subjective experience of shame, juxtaposed as this is with Jipp’s disavowal of responsibility. I read the passage as drawing attention to what Ivy suffers, evoking remorse. Ravenscroft argues that the white reader is positioned with Jipp as the perpetrator: “In the course of these few sentences, the point of view has shifted from the ‘objectivity’ of a third person narrator to indirect discourse that carries Jipp’s interior voice to us- bringing with it a disconcerting intimacy with his pleasure too; pulling a reader into the field of his desires, with all the disturbance that this might evoke in readers. We begin by looking upon the girl’s rape from a position outside the act but we are then positioned with Jipp” (p.74). Ravenscroft’s omission of Ivy’s sense of shame masks the fact that her shame blocks readers’ affective engagement with Jipp. There is no affective sense of ‘intimacy’ to move towards as Jipp’s displacement of guilt onto Ivy through blame evokes repulsion and creates distance. It is not even desire but hatred he expresses. Readers’ sensitivity is already aligned with Ivy. However, to acknowledge Ravenscroft’s general claim of an uncomfortable white reader positioning by the novel, there is also a gap left for remorse in the novel, flagged by Ivy’s shame, in relation to the sexual abuse of Ivy, for which the white reader may well feel remorse.

Jipp is represented as incapable of feeling any responsibility or remorse for the damage he does to Ivy but disturbingly the same is true for the Aboriginal people around her. Little remorse is shown towards Ivy during her life at St Dominic’s. There are elements, such as Maudie’s apology, which Ivy cannot grasp, arguably because she is too damaged to believe that anyone cares. Towards the end of the narrative Elliot makes a gesture of remorse, by bringing Ivy into contact with Mary, at risk of alienation from his own community as he acts against the direction of the elders. However, given what Ivy has suffered, these acts seem no more than diluted forms of acknowledgement of the harm done. The issue of shame is raised by the novel largely through the displaced sense of shame experienced by the Aboriginal characters across a range of scenarios. These include the removal of one’s children, sexual abuse and exploitation, and that of failing others with whom there is a line of responsibility through relatedness in community and family. Shame’s relationship to remorse works to identify a gap.

As a reader it is hard to reflect on the failure of remorse due to Ivy. The novel represents the Aboriginal community’s awareness of their moral responsibility towards Ivy’s mother but oddly not her daughter. The narrator shows that the discord provoked by the suicide of Ivy’s
mother reveals an uneasiness stemming from shock and from the question of responsibility. This is illuminated by Gaita’s model of remorse, for although they are not the direct perpetrators of Ivy’s mother’s death, people are implicated in the guilt of it by failing to provide support. The community’s neglect of Ivy and her mother underlines the significance of the collective. The elders’ sense of responsibility is targeted at the wellbeing of the community. In this way the elders seek to resolve the problem which they believe Ivy has brought into their lives. The novel, in line with authorial intention, highlights the plight of the individual who is forgotten or misunderstood. It also asserts that suspicions about Ivy are not well founded. Gelling with Ivy’s experience that she “feels eyes of evil watching her everywhere she goes” (p.22), she is indeed watched carefully:

In secret the elders arranged the surveillance. But a loose tongue ensured the secret was shared throughout the whole community. Whenever they spoke about Ivy it was in a hushed tone, even though everyone knew that everyone else was doing the same thing. In fact, everyone kept an eye on Ivy and knew exactly what she was doing at any given time. No one spoke publically about it, and no one would admit to knowing anything sinister about her, but there was an unwritten dossier building up. Yet no one was any closer to establishing what it was about her that might be the root of the evil (pp.39-40).

Further contextualising the sense of evil that permeates the novel, the narrator reveals that St Dominic’s has become known as “A place of death. A devil’s place” from which suicides spread across Aboriginal communities (p.36). The narrator states that in the 1950s people feared being sent there. The campaign of eradicating evil is in fact propagated by Jipp. This reinforces the novel’s message that the ultimate responsibility for the evil lies with colonial intervention as embodied in the mission. The reader is able to infer that Jipp’s obsession with evil is a projection of his own inability to contain his desires, a fault which he then displaces onto the community and onto Ivy. The power imbalance shifts when Jipp becomes ill, placing him out of circulation, the elders then move into a position of power, to deal with the perceived evil: “The campaign finally slipped when the elders jacked up and stood in front of the church waving spears and nulla nullas, which they would have used if anyone had stepped into the firing line” (p.39). The perpetual suicides worry the elders who decide that something needs to be done because Jipp is useless. In what is almost a continuation of Jipp’s persecutory acts of eradicating evil, but within their own cultural terms, they send, Elliot, son of Pugnose, into Ivy’s mother’s country to investigate the cause of the evil believing that it is related to Ivy. In developing this scene, the narrator reveals that, due to the Protection Act of 1911, Elliot’s quest must be carried out secretly for a permit is required for Aboriginal people to travel.

The novel juxtaposes the subjectivities of Ivy and her daughter Mary in separate parts of the narrative, bringing them together briefly in an almost chance encounter at the end of part four. There is a hint of progress through Mary who begins to find her own place in the world whereas Ivy’s strengths are less able to emerge due to the trauma in her life. Despite this, the novel attributes sufficient strength to Ivy so that she is critical of what is happening, although often

105 Jipp’s loss of power and the elders’ assumption of it in the one paragraph creates a sense of merging with Jipp’s and the elders’ pursuit of Ivy as evil.
we are aware of her naivety and fragility in the novel. For example, Ivy has insight into Beverley’s marriage, noting that “Mrs Jipp doesn’t look happy” which she puts down to their separate bedrooms (p.63). She links this with an insight into Beverley’s personality, imagining that “Mrs Jipp would be very particular about anything interfering with her personal space where she slept, dressed and ate” (p.64). She imagines that she would “recoil from the unpleasantness of her middle-aged husband, yet be incapable of coping with the worse unpleasantness of expressing her distaste” (p.64). However, Ivy also has empathy: “She couldn’t blame the woman though. It was better than having his stale, stinking breath all over you” (pp.63-64). In the manner of complex emotions, Ivy also feels resentful towards Beverley, which in the novel’s pattern of displaced emotions can be understood as a displacement onto Beverley of the resentment Ivy feels towards Jipp: “She was incapable of keeping him at home” (p.64). Ivy’s resentment is easily grasped in the context of her powerlessness. More vehemently, after accepting the offer of a scarf to cover her shaved head, a punishment after being accused of absconding from the dormitory at night, the narrator reveals: “She took it without any further acknowledgement. It was, she thought, a small enough reward for doing this woman’s dirty work. Her with the biggest mongrel dog she don’t even know how to keep…sniffing all around the place at night” (p.64). This may suggest that Jipp’s abusive sexual practice is due to his lack of sex with his wife. The novel depicts Beverley’s complicity in her husband’s night absences but she also confronts him, with a nudge from Jipp: “You have made me taste the filth. Get out of my sight” (p.29). Blaming herself for withdrawing after the difficult birth of their son, Beverley continues the habit of “never speaking about what was wrong in their life” and instead takes it on as a punishment because she “had only herself to blame for the life they had led since the difficult birth of their son” (p.29). Beverley’s silence renders her complicit in Ivy’s abuse but she is also a victim. Ivy is a victim of a sexist discourse which blames and exploits women generally, but Aboriginal women are particularly affected by this discourse through the intersection of colonisation, sexism and racism. An intensity of oppressive representations, discriminations and prejudices come to bear upon the individual indigenous woman in historical time.  

Ivy’s emerging awareness and critique of the Jipps’ marriage is followed by a brief breaking of her silence. Ivy is able finally to express anger to Jipp after he has married her off to Elliot, who has left her with his father, Pugnose. The scenario is that she has fled from Pugnose who accused her of adultery and “did not need much prompting to hit her across the head” (p.149). The narrator reveals that “Ivy had learned that no one would help her, not even the Jipps, who handed her back to Elliot when she looked to them for help. When she began screaming accusations at Jipp she was quickly silenced by the mind-numbing blow of Elliot’s fist in her mouth” (p.149). The extent of the neglect on top of abuse evokes reader sympathy

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for Ivy who receives no medical care for the infection in her gums, resulting from this brutality. As such Ivy becomes a focal point for reader remorse. Ivy pays for speaking. She learns that “answering back Elliot’s claims and making frivolous challenges concerning his own extended absences” results in her being bashed semi-conscious (p.152). The narrator reveals the extent of Ivy’s victimisation: “Nowadays Ivy had learned to say nothing” (p.152). When Jipp questions Ivy about what happened: “Her face remained blank. She looked straight through him” (p.154). Ironically, the narrator reveals that “After this time, Pugnose learned to protect Ivy from much of the violence Elliot was capable of inflicting” (p.153).

The narrative represents the grief of separation and unjust removal of children. After the birth of her child Ivy asks “Where’s my baby?” but is told it is sick and “being cared for by the Jipps” (p.157). Again, when she is well enough she walks to the Jipp’s house pleading “I want to see my baby, please!” but is told her daughter is in hospital (p.157). The narrator reveals that “Ivy cried a lot for the baby girl she had not seen” and she “repeatedly went to the Jipps’ house asking for her” (p.159). Elliot can do nothing to regain Ivy’s child either but surprisingly he does go to see Jipp which suggests some stirrings of remorse. But he is ineffective because Jipp has power over him for brushing over the death of a man, Lawrence, who had stood up for Ivy, telling Elliot a man who beat his wife “was complete and utter scum” (p.153). Ironically Elliot cannot help due to his prior abuse of Ivy. In the world of the novel Ivy becomes almost a complete victim, succumbing to the brutality used to suppress her voice. As Itchitani comments “Rather than making the oppressed other speak, Wright’s attention is to deconstruct the discourse of madness and to expose the mechanism of the construction and exclusion of the other,” evident in the scenario above.107 This is further developed when Ivy enters the psychiatric hospital.

Mary – an insider/outside view

Compared to Ivy, Mary emerges as a stronger character. When Mary enters the novel it is as an accomplished 30 year old adult venturing into a new phase of her life that includes a search for her Aboriginality. Mary has been brought up by a non-Aboriginal family. She joins an Aboriginal activist group working towards self-government, whose role it is to co-ordinate regional meetings. The characterisation of Mary reflects a shared vulnerability to exploitation by men, through her relationship with Buddy, the father of her child. Unlike Ivy, Mary is able to take care of herself, although it is an ongoing learning process. Mary comes up against a hostile attitude from Buddy who undermines her claim to understand anything about being Aboriginal. The narrator states that she “Accuses him of trying to highjack and belittle her Aboriginality” (p.227). She tells him “don’t you understand? I’ve been trying to find out about myself for ages- with no results whatsoever” (p.227). Reinforcing this attitude he tells her, “Go on admit it. You were just hooked on the romance of it. You’re not connected with reality” (p.227).

107 “Reading Madness” p.261.
The characterisation of Mary highlights the contemporary issue of displaced identity as a consequence of colonial interventions. It also gives her a certain perspective. Mary is positioned by the novel as an insider/outsider, a perspective from which she can observe from a distance. For example, she criticises Buddy from a feminist perspective. Through Mary’s eyes he is cast as a character seeking the “ego rewards” of his activist involvement: “He hadn’t even asked about Jessie. His ego, his people and land came before anything or anyone else. While they needed him, he needed nothing else” (p.228). Mary comes to learn to trust her perceptions and to assert her position in relation to Buddy. Realising that he believed “he could walk in and out as he pleased” (p.229), Mary rejects the idea of going home with him with indignation: “And be a doormat for you. ...The moment of truth Buddy. Before I turn into a liar like you. Someone has to teach our child the truth and it won’t be you” (p.229). Mary’s feminist critique of Buddy’s masculinity specific to a context of Aboriginal activism, is a brave position for Wright to represent, for it opens her to charges of breaching Aboriginal solidarity. Through Mary’s eyes the novel creates a picture of the poor conditions in the mission where Buddy’s people live:

What a life, Mary thought. Chaos all around. The ramshackle ruins referred to as houses, assorted small tin humpies with broken glass windows. So this was the real Buddy. The true Aboriginal. Something he pushed into my face, night and day, she thought. No one could beat Buddy, understand anything the way he could. He came from an Aboriginal reserve and only people like him...really knew what it was like. – God, I’m sick of people like that, she thought. The bloody know-alls. No wonder we can’t get it together and get anywhere when all we do is argue about how much more oppressed we are than each other (pp.265-266).

In this passage Mary perceives victimhood as a rut of entrapment in which oppression becomes a status in itself. While all people both non-indigenous and Indigenous run this risk it is hard for the reader to see Aboriginal people in this way, because it is too common a stereotype. The novel challenges political correctness through representing such difficult scenarios. Is this to be understood as one of a number of stereotypes that Mary has been exposed to, having grown up away from Aboriginal people, or is the narrator making a comment? Noel Pearson, an indigenous public intellectual from Cape York, has been a prominent voice in the Aboriginal community. However, he backed the Northern Territory intervention, and this rendered him a controversial figure amongst Aboriginal people, especially those who strongly supported community-controlled Aboriginal interventions. Despite this, he does promote self-sufficiency through education, as well as insisting on transparency about the conditions impacting upon the lives of Aboriginals. In line with this he has voiced concern about the destructive effects of Aboriginal people getting stuck in the position of victim.108 In my understanding of remorse, victims benefit from acknowledgement of wrongdoing making it possible to move on from a sense of oneself as a victim. Acknowledgement fosters healing. The need for some recognition is represented by Ivy’s attempt to make herself cry at school to evoke compassion. The representation above draws attention to Mary’s outsider position. Mary feels alienated from the

people up North, too. After she meets Delainy, from St Dominic’s: “She was terribly disappointed. All the people of this region she’d met so far were mean and hard” (p.241). Mary scrutinises herself and in doing so faces her sense of superiority in relation to regional people, creating a certain tension in the novel. Her situation can also be read as the alienation resulting from her history of being brought up by a white family which has denied her deep links with her Aboriginal family lines. Trying to talk her into returning to her birthplace to do research, Johnno says, “can’t you see they’ll be happy to have you back” (p.249)? The narrator remarks: “Mary felt quite certain that would not be the case. The truth of the matter was that she felt superior to the yokels she had met there. Any feeling of empathy, which she normally had with people in their communities, was entirely lacking” (p.249). This could be understood by the reader as a form of intuition on Mary’s part about the treatment her mother received at the hands of the community. It also draws attention to an inner conflict. Like Ivy “Mary keeps her feelings to herself” about her sense of alienation (p.249). Comparing herself to Buddy and his strong sense of family she believes that her feelings should be different for her relatives. Her daughter Jessie, juxtaposed with the local children who are her cousins, and Buddy’s people, brings this gap into focus. The narrator shows that the cousins also sense the gap: “The group stare at the relatively clean-skinned Murri girl in her bright clothes. And compare them with their own from the bin at St Vinnies” (p.259). In this way the novel enact the impact of colonial interventions where people are related but cannot connect as their life paths have created a gulf of different experience and values.

Mary’s aloneness comes from a sense that her claim to Aboriginality is rejected by those around her. Nor does she connect with the people from her birthplace up north; she tells Kathy “When I reach out I never find myself in others” (p.275). Within the novel Mary’s sense of disconnection is linked to the disruption to families caused through removal of children by white authorities. Kathy tells Mary that she too does not know her mother. Mary is unable to identify with or experience a sense of belonging to either group. One thing Mary definitely shares with Ivy is her sense of aloneness and disconnection in the novel.

Strong compassion is established in the novel through the vulnerability of the child, Ivy. This engenders empathic support from the reader for the children in the novel, which reverberates with the Stolen Generation with all its many and complex consequences. This wider frame of reference is symbolised by the Poinciana tree, ironically planted by missionaries. The tree bears witness to both the period of naivety signified by a carefree childhood and that of loss: “three generations of black girls laughing in their innocence as if nothing mattered at all” juxtaposed with the grief expressed when “the girls cried out for their mothers or wept into its branches when they were lonely or hurt, enduring the frustration and cruelty of their times” (p.3).

Creating an atmosphere of coldness, Ivy is informed about her mother’s death in a chilling and matter of fact way in the presence of her unsympathetic peers. Jipp announces to Ivy, “Your mother died this morning Ivy…We are all very sorry” in his “high-pitched sermonising voice” (pp.6-7). He is without any recognition that Ivy is fretting for her mother:
She thought of her mother – that was about all she had done since being put into the dormitory a few days earlier. How her mother had screamed, and she herself had felt abandoned, alone for the first time in her life. She could hear her mother crying, following and being dragged away, still crying. She did not know what had happened to her but she had not come back to the fence that barricaded the dormitory after she was dragged away (p.6).

The compassion for Ivy is compounded by Jipp’s cruel-heartedness. He wants to hurry up the funeral in case the body is taken by the locals. He reassures himself “but she was not from around here. A loner. A real hopeless loser” which reiterates Wright’s purpose to draw attention to those who are not acknowledged by anyone.109 Compassion is cemented by the representation of the treatment of Ivy’s mother, taken from her family and placed on a station as a playmate and general servant. Ivy’s mother’s story dramatises intergenerational trauma to which, Aboriginal people, namely mothers and children, have been subjected in the real world. Predictably Ivy’s mother, the nameless representative of so many women exploited by white men, falls pregnant and is criticised for keeping her child with her the whole time. Again emphasising broken family lines, the novel explains that this is because she has nowhere else to leave her as she is “too different from her own family having grown up away from the native compound in the whitefellas’ household” and they then disown her (p.12). Ivy’s mother was disliked because she “was abusive to everyone” giving a sense of her anger at the treatment she received (p.12). Drawing attention to the impact of the Protection Act, she and Ivy were “promptly removed” to St Dominic’s after being handed over to the Protector of Aborigines when she came before a magistrate for assault. She had been protecting her child from a man who was “just trying to be nice” to Ivy, implying that she was afraid of the repetition of abuse, that this man would in fact abuse her daughter (p.12). The narrator reveals the pain and injustice: “When Ivy was taken away, her mother had nothing left. The bad Aborigine became morose. A lost number amongst the lost and condemned, ‘bad’ by the outside world’s standards for Blacks. Sentenced to rot for the rest of her days. Even her child taken from her so that the badness of black skin wouldn’t rub off” (p.13). This symbolises the critique of racism in the novel for attitudes towards Aboriginal people embodied in the injustice of child removal under the guise of protection.

Ivy is initially in a state of denial about her mother’s death. Identification with the child enables the reader to experience the disappointment that follows. The reader can intuit her disappointment as she hopes against reality that her mother will still be waiting for her:

Ivy ran to the mission house when the bell rang. Excited by the attention. And sure she would be told of a terrible mistake. It wasn’t her mother dead after all. It was someone else. She was even sure her mother would be there to tell her they were going to leave this place forever and go back home (p.16).

Reinforcing compassion and concern for the vulnerable child, left motherless, Ivy is treated with contempt by those meant to be her carers, her peers and the community. Ivy is offered no support in grief for her mother. Instead, in the chapter following the death, the missionaries

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109 As discussed in Wright’s “The Politics of Writing” p.6.
judge her through a racist perspective: “She has the devil in her, that’s for sure…Mark my words. They’re all the same these half-castes” (p.23). The narrative highlights the wider issue of the removal of children of Aboriginal and European descent, and the grief experienced by the mothers:

After Ivy’s mother’s death there were more suicides. The Chapel girls’ mother was the first. A lively woman with a strong will, you would have thought her well able to cope with life’s difficulties without much introspection. She set fire to herself.

…The third death a month later. A woman, a mother” (p.21).

However, as her mother is the first one to commit suicide Ivy is called “the crow’s Timekeeper” by the other kids because they believed she replaced the crow as the symbol of approaching death (p.22). The novel shows the extent to which this repudiation affects Ivy’s world, entering her dreams where she sees eyes watching her as in her waking hours. For example: “When a death occurred an uneasiness began mounting up inside her. She learnt quickly not to call out in the night whenever she woke in terror. Two pairs of eyes, one glaring directly in front of her, the other close behind her head. She saw evil in those eyes” (p.22).

Congruently, Ivy is characterised as an isolated child at school who is frightened to risk answers in class. The reader is again positioned to feel sorrow for Ivy on one such occasion when she is being ridiculed by the teacher who tells the class: “‘Everyone, bang on Ivy’s arm’-tell this stupid girl – who is the Saviour of the world?’”(p.52). The reader is privy to the loneliness she experiences as an outsider:

After such incidents Maudie’s place was the best cure, even if Ivy never got to see the old woman. She could still sit under the tree where her mother had died and wonder about her. She found it difficult to remember now what her mother had looked like. Yet at other times when she wasn’t even trying, her mother’s face would suddenly appear in her mind. Ivy knew that Maudie never went far. She hid behind a small rise covered by bush. Under the thin branches and foliage she sat in speckled shade with her billy of lukewarm tea. From there she had a good view of her place; she could see if Ivy was snooping around her things (p.52).

However, momentarily reversing Ivy’s victim persona, the narrative grants Ivy some agency in her environment:

Ivy cultivated a look on her face as if she was about to cry. She wanted people to feel sorry for her. Whenever the mission staff spoke she would form tears in her eyes….Exposed from the cover of isolation she cried. It was as though people were noticing the ugliest thing on earth for the first time. If she was asked a question she would look down to the ground and say nothing, and let the tears swell. She enjoyed the damp coolness …and knew that the swelling made her eyes look beautiful. It was the look of the film stars she admired so much. She held the look before allowing the largest tears to fall (p.23).
This self-fashioning invests Ivy with some agency but it also comes across as something imposed from without. It has a jarring impact in the novel as it attributes agency in an incongruent place. It communicates that the only way she feels she can gain anything resembling care is through manipulating others’ responses to her. This disrupts a stable reading position created for the reader by understanding for Ivy, creating uncertainty about who she is and destabilising the reader’s emotional investment of compassion. Overall, Ivy’s efforts fail. Victimisation of Ivy continues. The response she gets is “It must be said, this is a bad apple” (p.23). But Ivy sets out to prove them wrong until she finally gives up on this. As a reader I have a mixed response to this. I am drawn to the discord as a site of complexity which gives Ivy some agency. It shows there is more to her than has been seen. The question it raises for me, is whether or not it disturbs empathy. I think it does but in a positive way. It shows that there is a wider view and that, despite what happens, there is a way to find agency. It also conveys a message about not becoming too comfortable in a reading position.

At Sycamore Heights psychiatric centre there was some hope of healing for Ivy through Madam Sadaan; but even this possibility was swept away through the arm of government removing funding. This outcome keeps Ivy in a victim position, reinforcing loss after loss. This can be read as a comment on the state’s responsibility to consider the plight of individuals, unnoticed in the wider scheme of policies.

Creating a suggestion of healing, the novel enacts some reparation for Ivy through the character of Elliot. When Mary returns to her birth place Elliot, Delainy, Victor and Mary head off to what Victor describes as “dad’s place. His country camp. We got a bit of an outstation there” (p.287). Victor and Mary have a romantic relationship. Symbolically, as they head along a bumpy track it is contextualised as: “The road trailed into non-existence and it became a matter of slowly negotiating a path through sharp rocks that jutted out of the ground” (p.287). This gives a metaphoric sense of the trajectory taken by Mary who navigates her way through the protocols of Aboriginal communities, struggling to find a sense of connection either to the community of Aboriginal activists she moves within, or the people from her place of birth, or finally Buddy’s family.

Bringing Mary and Ivy together is significant because it goes against the elders’ directions. Elliot had made a promise not to reunite Mary with her mother. This reads as a remorseful act of reparation. Elliot has a load to carry in relation to Ivy. His eventual care of her basic needs reflects some remorse and a sense of responsibility towards her. His final act is one of offering to give something back that was taken from her and from her daughter, Mary. The novel brings out a tension between responsibility to community and that of individual matters of conscience. They also challenge him to choose “only one” to stay as “the power would be too strong with three” (p.299). There is community condemnation from Kathy who lives with Elliot’s true lover, Gloria. Kathy announces: “He did the wrong thing” by bringing Ivy and Mary together (p.297).

What is the significance of the actual meeting between Mary and Ivy? Mary suspects that there is more to this trip than meets the eye, firstly questioning the amount of food Elliot has brought. Intuitively she senses that “something drastic might have happened” as the place had an “eerie feeling’ (p.289). The uncertain domain of intuitive connection permeates this
scenario. It continues as Mary reflects upon the encounter. Ivy’s vague presence lingers while Mary sleeps outside with the group: “She woke in fright. Something had touched her face, her arms. What was it? She felt a repulsion.” As if to mark the occasion, “Lightening flashed across the sky” enabling her to locate Jessie (p.293). The reader fears that they will return without making contact when Elliot claims “No, I won’t be staying here” and the narrator adds “Strangely, his body had started to shake and his lips quivered” (p.292). It is clear that it is his decision, for Victor reminds him, “It was you who decided we should stay here tonight” (p.292). Elliot’s reaction of fear flags a place of unknowing in the novel.

At the moment when Mary does come face to face with Ivy there is still a sense of uncertainty. When they move inside away from the weather, Mary saw Ivy “cowering in one corner,” Mary thinking she was a wild animal (p.293). But Victor calls her “Auntie” and tries to calm her down for she “growled like a wild animal” (p.294). This stopped when Elliot arrived and “grabbed the old woman by one of her bony arms and pulled her to her feet” (p.294), for she is afraid of him. Mary, moved by this, “started to go to her aid, but Victor held her back” (p.294). Her intuitive response was to go to her but this is blocked by Victor. There is a feminist critique here of Victor’s suppression of Mary’s response. For example, earlier, Mary thought Victor was taking over by telling her to allow Jessie to poke a dead dog’s head with a stick, which she observed with annoyance: “It was easy to see who was in charge here” (p.290). There is a gesture of remorse made by Elliot who has a plan as if offering reparation: “Ivy, you listening to me? Elliot barked at the woman. I want you to meet Mary and little Jessie here. They are our family” (p.295). When Ivy keeps her head down Victor facilitates connection with: “Just say hello to her, Mary” although we are told he just wants to go back to sleep (p.295). Mary obliges and says: “Hello, Ivy” and is surprised to “find herself rewarded by a gentler look from the old woman, peeping over her folded arms” (p.295). Encouraged by this Mary says, “This is Jessie” but finds herself inexplicably disheartened when Ivy does not respond: “Mary felt a sudden surge of disappointment and depression which she could not explain to herself” (p.295).

Again Mary’s intuition is foregrounded for the inference is that she knows who Ivy is on a deeper, less conscious level of knowing. Mary questions Victor who gives her snippets of information about Ivy: “If you must know she was dad’s first wife. And she’s as crazy as a loop” (p.296), brushing over the truth with the trope of madness, used to block further enquiry. But it does not stop her. Mary is the voice of concern and compassion: “Then why is she out here all alone”? Mary enquires after Ivy’s wellbeing until she is brushed aside by Victor who tells Mary “she’s happy here. She’s safe here and no one has to worry about her causing any trouble around the community” (p.296). When Mary wants to know “what sort of trouble” Ivy would cause if she were to be looked after within the community, Victor replies, “Oh, nothing much” (p.296). Mary even remains uninformed as to why she has to suddenly leave St Dominic’s. She believes it is because of the way that the Coalition of Aboriginal Government has used the information she has gathered about the community. Highlighting the friction between city and country Aboriginal groups, Mary is given instructions by Buddy to leave St Dominic’s after Johnno speaks on the radio citing St Dominic’s as being “so conditioned to the white man’s mentality that it would be light years away before they were ready to join the rest of the country in claiming their rights” (p.299). The local people believe
the city dwellers to be full of rhetoric about self-government while their city counterparts are represented as rather arrogant in believing they are educating the regional people. Mary thinks she has to go because of this. Mary is locked out of knowledge.

However, Mary continues to reflect on Ivy’s wellbeing. She collects more information about her. She discovers through Jessie that “the old woman came to visit them once and gave Jessie a lolly” (p.297). She has a sense that she can never access inside information. The narrator explains that Mary learned she was “never going to be told” but “had to have been through it all in order to understand” as Kathy will not enlighten her (p.297). There is a sense generated by this that she will piece things together. Mary wonders “Who could tell if the old woman was happy? What was happy in Victor’s terms? She resigned herself to thinking that it probably wasn’t such a bad spot. It looked pleasant enough at this time of day” (p.296). On the flight out of the community she spots Ivy from the plane:

The twin-engined plane flies over Elliot’s outstation. Mary looks down and sees the old woman sitting under the shade of a tree. She is busy with something on the ground, perhaps playing with a stick. It is impossible to see. But Mary can feel her contentment. ‘Besides, she’s happy here’…She hears Victor’s kind voice (p.301). The novel leaves the possibilities open-ended and indeterminate. There is some reassurance that Ivy has at last found some peace in meeting Mary. In the reality of the novel, Ivy has been injured so severely that she is unlikely to recover. Mary, on the other hand may find the answers she seeks but she too cannot have a sense of inclusion in the way that others might. The novel does want to show that there is conflict within and between Aboriginal groups. She finds herself unable to identify with her country relatives or her city activist friends. She straddles the two groups as an outsider. This reads as a comment on the inheritance of the Stolen Generation survivors.

Shame

In the introduction I flagged shame and remorse as related moral emotions. Through Gaita, Cordner and Tudor I have suggested that there can be a reciprocal relationship. However, as represented in the Aboriginal novels, shame emerges as a transference of the perpetrator’s remorselessness, internalised and embodied in the victim. Ivy feels the shame of the forced connection with Jipp. The narrator explains her shame: “‘Thinks I like Jipp slobbering all over me’, Ivy thought bitterly. Knowing what they all thought of her she felt ashamed” (p.51). The novel represents the workings of shame as an emotion which is preoccupied with how one is seen in a public arena, drawing out the gap between subjective experience and external judgement. The novel represents a split between self-perception and external gaze.

Ivy is shocked when she comes to realise that she is seen as the embodiment of evil. This occurs after Maudie’s death when the women tell her she is from “Sickness country” (p.56). She wonders “Why should they think this? She has no power. She began to feel faint. Surely it was a bad dream. She remembered comparing herself with the Chapel girls…wasn’t she
nearly the same as them? Then she thought of Jipp and felt ugly, exposed” (p.56). In this way, shame is about Ivy realising she is not seen at all but misrepresented. It is also a symbol of Jipp’s disowned remorse as seen in the abuse scene.

At Sycamore Heights more of Ivy is seen but her treatment there as an object of the medical gaze brings more shame. In the psychiatric setting Ivy endures further harsh treatment and exploitation in the form of internal medical examinations to determine why her insides are in a mess and why, if she had given birth, there are no stretch marks. The narrator speaks: “The physical examinations were another matter. Ivy felt constant shame and was unable to look any of the staff in the face for days afterwards” (p.170). Critiquing this practice and highlighting the disempowerment and objectification when subjected to the trope of madness, the narrative states “Ivy was on show to the medical profession” (p.170). However, the novel takes a turn through the committed work of Madam Saddan, showing that there is another path towards healing where the trope of madness is subverted by loving kindness and insight. Firstly Madam Saddan assists Ivy to regain her short-term memory. It is a slow process towards healing as Ivy has learnt to hide in order to protect herself. It takes time for her to trust. The narrative reveals: “Ivy was the slowest one to gain Madam’s confidence. From complete refusal to respond she moved towards reluctance, then doing what was basically necessary. By that stage the others were more than willing to move on but Madam waited until Ivy was ready” (p.175). The moment of healing occurs when she tells them: “Now we dance. Dance for the love of ourselves” (p.177), an episode in which shame is dispelled. The narrative creates a moment of healing through dance:

Madam whirled past the light switch and turned the spotlight on high beam. The harsh illumination travelled deep into the pore of skin, into their hair, into every cavity. It beamed through the transparent costumes to drag out and burn away every sense of inhibition and shame, the prison each woman had created for herself. Madam Saddan had reclaimed from a world of inhibited humanity these four women (p.177).

This slow process of healing is foregrounded in the novel. In emphasising the continuation of damage by the removal of the funding for this program, the novel makes a point. It brings home to the reader the importance of reparation. It emphasises how easily this can be swept away by a government not committed to making a difference. The novel represents the impact of misguided discourses of racism, sexism, colonialism and psychiatry. Tomoko Itchitani remarks that it “does not simply represent the passive and fragile figure of the Indigenous woman as victim, rather it is also developed as a discursive strategy to reveal ‘another madness’ of the colonisers and show the mechanism in which women and colonised people are defined as a ‘person of non-reason’ in order for colonisers to be a person of reason.”

110 Itchitani, “Reading Madness” pp. 262-3.
At Sycamore Heights the full extent of what the loss of her mother means for Ivy is brought out in the novel. Her loss of self is firstly identified by the director, Penguin, as a “typical inmate trying to find a missing person, herself” (p.168). However, Madam Saddan puts Ivy’s loss within a critique of colonial intervention and normalises her: “I can understand that. She cannot know who she is inside a building with white walls, being organised by white people….I understand alienation well” she explained (p.168). The novel goes on to show what kind of loss this is:

Ivy’s sense of herself was contained within far-off glimpses, like remembering distant hills seen once from the window of a car moving through the landscape. She saw a small child with her mother’s arms around her. She could not make the bits in between fit with the face of the young woman she saw reflected in the window. She tried hard and often to bring back the lost memories, only to sense her mind revolving faster and faster into a black vortex, disappearing into nothing. There was nothing there to remember (p.169).

Ivy has been deprived of the memories she might have had of her mother. The glimpses are barely there. There is some intertextuality here with Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. The character, Baby Suggs, having lived life as a slave reveals, “I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody’s house into evil... My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the bottom of burnt bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that’s all I remember?” In *Plains of Promise*, separation between mother and child is shown to be widespread: “Kathy told Mary she wouldn’t know who her mother was” (p.275). Making the link between shame and removal, and flagging a gap of remorse, Kathy tells Mary “Mind you, there are others who won’t admit they had children taken from them. They too ashamed to admit it. Keep blaming themselves and think others blame them too” (p.275). The novel fictionalises the loss felt within the Aboriginal community. It resonates with the non-fictional findings of The *Bringing Them Home* report which testifies that “Most families have been affected, in one or more generations, by the forcible removal of one or more children” (p.31). The novel brings the evidence gathered in the *Bringing Them Home* inquiry to life. It does this through generating reader compassion and remorse for the vulnerable children removed from their families. Mary and Kathy represent the far end of the continuum of connection for they have no memory or even the names of their mothers. By the end of the novel Mary has something, but the reader is left with a sense that this is not enough. The remorse due to Mary and to Ivy is so much greater. There is a sense of the fictional and real worlds merging with the depiction of the colonial and mission authorities, child and family separations, the imposition of psychiatric institutionalisation and political defunding of valuable programs, as intersecting discourses. The novel evokes sorrow for the oppressive forces that combine to severely injure Aboriginal lives and disrupt family lines.

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Chapter 2 – Benang

In the previous chapter I highlighted the ways in which Wright’s novel depicts trauma and its fostering of shame in the novel’s characters. I argued that this evokes remorse in the reader especially when no one is claiming responsibility for the wrong doing, as in Jipp’s sexual abuse of Ivy, which functions as an allegory for the nation. The novel Benang is important because it is integral to a comprehensive picture of the narrative revolving around Aboriginal issues as represented in fiction.\textsuperscript{112} Benang signifies as a focal point in a conversation concerning recognition of past injustice against Aboriginal people. It offers a highly specific representation of the injustices inflicted upon Aboriginal people across four generations. With Plains of Promise it offers a central pivot with which the settler novels interrogated in the remainder of this thesis are seen to be in conversation in both implicit and explicit ways. The thesis will explore how the settler novels respond fictionally to the injustice represented by Benang and Plains of Promise symbolised by the novels’ depiction of suffering and unjust treatment. The thesis considers in what ways the settler novels can be understood as a response of remorse and reparation. Published in 1999, Benang follows the release of the Bringing Them Home Report of 1997, reflecting the theme of separation from family and culture. Benang is a joint winner of the Miles Franklin award 2000, shared with Thea Astley’s Drylands.

The novel engages with the theme of loss in the Aboriginal community via an individual’s efforts to recuperate his identity. Benang performs the vulnerable child motif within the wider narrative of a boy, deliberately cut off from his family and cultural heritage, who seeks to reclaim what has been taken, while disavowing whiteness. It dramatises the attempt to “breed out” Aboriginal culture by the act of removing children from an Aboriginal cultural environment.\textsuperscript{113} It connects to the non-fictional world through depicting the impact of a number of policies, laws and practices imposed on Indigenous Australians. The novel engages in a metamorphic way with the theme of “upliftedness,” used condescendingly by authorities towards Aboriginal people. In Benang the protagonist’s personal trauma represents the loss of the wider Aboriginal community through abusive practices. This micro/macro framing is also apparent in Sorry, Plains of Promise and The White Earth, all of which explore the ramifications of public policies as they seep down into individual lives. This is reflected in the Bringing Them Home Report as it unfolds the individual stories of loss and suffering which resonate inter-generationally within the wider Aboriginal community. The protagonist’s journey in Benang is one of healing trauma through reclaiming his Aboriginal identity, but it is also one of coming to terms with his resentment towards those who took his Aboriginal identity from him. Remorse in the novel is present in several relationships but the need for remorse is encompassed most centrally between Harley and his grandfather, an allegorical model of race relations in Australia.

\textsuperscript{112} Kim Scott, Benang, Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Press, 1999.
\textsuperscript{113} The term breeding out and variations thereof are used frequently throughout the novel.
This novel canvasses a number of important issues which go to the heart of my concern with remorse. It brings out the history of relations between settler and Aboriginal cultures in order to represent the injustices committed against Aboriginal people in a multiplicity of ways. These injustices encompass loss of life and self-autonomy, and the instilling of shame. *Benang* provides a fictional depiction of the damage to Aboriginal people in a range of situations through colonial intervention. The reader potentially feels that Aboriginal people are due recognition and reparation for this harm, both elements of remorse. As Paul Salzman asserts, the novel provides an emotional education to the reader. He refers to *Benang* as producing an “increase in the reader’s emotional response to historical knowledge.” I understand this in terms of the novel providing representations of like events that actually occurred and showing the personal and communal impacts of these upon Aboriginal lives. This potentially brings history to life in a way that Clendinnen has attempted to do in her book on colonial experiences.

The novel follows the search by the narrator, Harley, to unravel the mystery of his family heritage as a descendent of the Nyoongar people. The reader learns that Harley goes to live with his grandfather at age seven, after his grandfather convinces Harley’s father Tommy that he will be better off with him. When, many years later, Harley asks his father why, he replies, “I didn’t know… What could I do? I had a wife, four littler kids, it was hard for them. Ern had money, the time. When he talked of a private school, and promised…Everything was just too much for me” (p.432).

The novel constructs a self-reflexive narrator who addresses the reader directly, offering comments about his narrative manoeuvres, building a pact based upon ambiguity. For example, having just referred to a car accident, he addresses the reader directly with “I appreciate your concern and that you remain with this shifty, snaking narrative. I am grateful; more than you know, believe me” (p.22). Drawing attention to the metaphor of elevation in the novel he disclaims “although I intend to write a history, it is not one at such an exalted level,” signalling irony and ambiguity in this theme of elevation (p.9). In relation to the act of tapping, which frames the novel in the first chapter and appears intermittently, he comments: “I hesitate to mention it in the context of this story as it may seem so dreadfully symbolic. But what can I do it is the truth” (pp.24-5). This truth claim inadvertently challenges the claim it makes, for it invites scrutiny of its truth value. In a style characteristic of a trauma narrative, the novel employs fragmentation, shifting incessantly from present to past while juxtaposing scenes with official documents and replicas of such. This temporal uncertainty requires reader attentiveness to detail, as does the genealogy that unfolds as Harley traces his ancestry. An atmosphere of confusion regarding Harley’s ancestral line was made more

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115 Temporal disruption is identified as an element of trauma narrative. It can take a form of focusing intensely on a brief period hence creating a sense of a greater length of time. For example, in *Plains of Promise* it is a shock to realise that Ivy is only around 45 when Mary returns and meets her. In *Benang*, there is an uncertainty about what happened when, hence a constant need to check events and people. There are also many gaps and people disappearing off the page.
accessible for me by mapping it in a genogram. Aware of his fragmented style, which is emblematic of trauma narrative, he comments, “Once again I am confusing things, not allowing an appropriate sequence,” indicating a self-conscious application of this strategy (p.97). This leaves the reader muddled about the context within which events happened. The image depicted is one of piecing together sections that are presented in fragments, to imagine the lived experience of the protagonist tracing his family line. The fragments are woven with excerpts from A.O. Neville: letters, settler attitudes and a narrative of family history narrated by his uncles, lending the narrative a sense of the real historical world. The reader accompanies the protagonist while he learns of his history on a daily pilgrimage to areas traversed by ancestors from three generations.

In a complicated move of disavowal which then reclaims a position, the first person narrator, Harley, engages the reader in an act of validation. He states that he does not want to begin the narrative from a position of resentment, the residue of his grandfather’s scheming and abusive treatment. Resenting this influence he disavows the possibility of beginning the narrative with anger. Placing this in the context of the revenge he wreaks upon his grandfather, he explains:

I want to stress that I am not proud of my behaviour, but nor can I deny that I was angry. Angry with my grandfather, his rigour, his scientific method, his opportunism, his lust. And so I am reluctant to begin with my grandfather, as if all I can do is react to him and his plans as if I have nothing else (p.29).

In resisting the possibility that anger is all he has, he invites the reader to validate his position when he asks: “But even if that were true, is it such a bad thing, to begin with anger and resistance?” (p.29). Through this gesture the narrator establishes a pact with the reader that anger is justified. The scene is set to enact the degradation that he has suffered from his white grandfather in the context of what Aboriginal people have suffered at the hands of white society through control over their movements, and the sort of divisions substantiated in the novel by documentation from official archives. The novel depicts laws that separated kin, relegated them to live in poor conditions in compounds and treated them generally as fugitives. The novel represents the difficulty created for Aboriginal people by Western Australia’s Aborigines Protection Act 1905, and the Protector’s destructive role in showing little respect for people’s autonomy, integrity or family relationships. Ironically, despite the move towards integration in the “breed them out” policy rooted in eugenics, the novel dramatises the deeply ingrained ambivalence inherent in this policy. Paradoxically the policy is aimed at integration of Aboriginal people of mixed descent but excluding those who do identify as white. For example, in the novel, Harley’s Uncle Jack, who wanted to assimilate after serving in WW1, who was used to drinking alongside mates in the local pub, was refused exemption from the Protection Board. Anna Haebich reveals that the 1905 Protection Act imposed a “maximum fine for supplying liquor to Aborigines 20 pounds or one month imprisonment.” This is also an example of where the boundary between fiction and reality is blurred. This kind of thing actually happened so it is easy for the reader to absorb the novel

literally. The novel wants to represent the injustice that people actually experienced. The fact that it does so within an ambiguous climate opens up an imaginative space between the fictional and non-fictional worlds. This communicates the emotion of the experiences represented in the novel.

Despite the fact that the narrator frames the novel with a body of critique regarding the treatment of Aboriginal people under official policy, and the reader is positioned to be sympathetic to these injustices, nothing is stable. The narrator teases, “Perhaps I am not being quite truthful here. Perhaps Auber (Neville) did not use these exact words” (p.40). The endnotes specify the sources of many official sounding references, and spell these out if they are direct references, a like-document, or a summary. However, there are some formal-type inclusions that are not referenced, so we are left wondering if this is in fact a historical record. But mostly these sources are factual. Suggesting that the narrator is not being truthful works again as a disavowal that then validates his position, for the reader knows that he is largely citing or recreating a like-document in his narrative. It also reminds the reader of the unreferenced documents. In a way, the narrator appears to cover any possible doubt on the reader’s part, while also creating ambiguity. It is tempting to think that the narrator plays with the reader around the idea of reality as an unstable concept, suggesting it is fluid and susceptible to interpretation. To me it almost reads as if *Benang* is mocking a postmodern strategy of deconstruction that latches on to instability. But what matters here is that the general thrust of the oppressive and cruel Protection Act is represented accurately, highlighting that what is at stake is an understanding of the emotional history of Aboriginal people, and their historical circumstances.

*A genealogy*

The novel maps the narrator’s attempts to uncover his Aboriginal ancestry once he discovers his grandfather’s objectification of him in a study to see how many generations it takes for the “social and biological absorption of the Native Race” (p.43). For Harley this involves being distanced from his Aboriginal family members by his grandfather. Harley is described by his grandfather in his records as “the first-born-successfully-white- man-in-the-family-line” (p.11). As Paul Salzman comments “*Benang* is a forbidding novel to read (unlike the more easily absorbed *Secret River*) because the multiplying narratives and characters have to have their connections traced as a kind of historically based genealogy that must be understood by the reader.”

To trace the lineage, Harley is the son of Tommy, who is the son of Ernest Scat and Topsy. However, it is necessary to begin with Sandy One who married an Aboriginal woman, Fanny, three or four generations back from Harley. But there is an irony to his grandfather’s pursuit which emerges at the end of the novel when we learn that his ‘white’ great grandfather, Sandy One (or possibly great-great grandfather), had an Aboriginal mother. The old pastoralist, Mustle, tells the young pastoralist Star, that Sandy

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118 The novel states that Sandy One and Fanny are Harley’s great, great grandparents, yet this is not exactly clear in the genealogy.
One’s mother was “a gin, a half-caste from hereabouts” (p.483). Linking Sandy One to Fanny’s family line, he adds “You remember old man Williams, the sealer? …That was her father, that’s old Sandy Mason’s grandfather” (p.483). Ironically Sandy One is the “first white man born.”

There is some uncertainty about who Harley’s mother is although she is an Ellen, of whom there are several in the text. Sandy One and Fanny had at least three children: Sandy Two, Harriet and Dinah. While Fanny brought Topsy up there is uncertainty about the identity of her biological mother. This makes Harley’s lineage unclear. The second generation, Harriet and Dinah met twins, the non-indigenous Coolman brothers, Daniel and Patrick. Harriet and Daniel married but Patrick disappears before his marriage to Dinah, who is barely present in the narrative. As Harley’s Uncle Jack explains to him: “Dinah, my mother, she disappeared and I didn’t see her again until Mogumber” (p.226). 119 Daniel and Harriet have a son, Harley’s uncle Will and two daughters who are not named and who disown their Aboriginal family. 120 Dinah gives birth to Kathleen, Jack’s sister, who is later married off to Ernest Scat by Hall, the local Sergeant, as she becomes pregnant to him while working as a domestic for his family, unbeknown to Ernest. Yet there is some uncertainty about the identity of Jack’s father’s. There is a suggestion that it is actually Daniel Coolman not Patrick. When Ernest Scat discovers that Kathleen’s child is not his he takes on Topsy as his child bride. In western genealogy, if Fanny is Topsy’s mother (Topsy is Harley’s grandmother), Fanny would be Harley’s great grandmother, making Sandy Two his great uncle, and Uncle Will his second cousin, described as his father’s cousin. But if Dinah is Topsy’s mother, then Fanny is Harley’s great-great grandmother. However, if Topsy is neither of these, Harley is unrelated to any of the extended family, apart from Tommy. This confusion mirrors the difficulty facing Aboriginal people attempting to trace their family lineage.

The novel weaves in and out of its main story, darting back, for instance, from the funeral scene to the 1920s, framing this as a report from the Inspector for Aborigines and Fisheries who was: “After a gin who, with a bunch of very fair children, had been reported as camping and hunting along the river” (p.21). Harley reflects that “It was the nineteen twenties, long decades before I was born. It may well have been my family, generations back, out of their territory, running to escape,” being pursued by the Inspector for Aborigines and Fisheries (p.21). This juxtaposition highlights an intergenerational loss which resonates with the Stolen Generation report. Again the novel blurs the boundary between the real and fiction for there is no specific reference to this in the Acknowledgements, yet it is easily believable. The real in the form of documented racism in the text lends itself to the likely probability of the whole, sweeping the reader along with it.

Identity is foregrounded in the novel by the narrator who re-traces his journey in search of his Aboriginality. Benang represents Harley’s feelings of loss of self and family through his grandfather’s intervention. Racist concepts of white superiority also suggest colonial oppression. The novel starts with Harley’s father’s funeral after which he returns to live with

119 Haebich documents that Mogumber Methodist Mission was established in 1951 from what had been Moore River Settlement, p.519.
120 In an endnote Scott acknowledges that Will is based upon his own Uncle Will Coleman.
his grandfather, while convalescing from the car accident that kills his father in which Harley was the driver and for which he feels remorse. From this location he traces his life, unfolding the story of his separation from his father and his upbringing by his grandfather. He already has enough awareness of events to create a deeply ingrained resentment towards his grandfather, Ernest Scat.

The novel foregrounds Harley’s propensity for elevation in which he rises above the ground, hovering in the air in the opening chapter. This foreshadows themes of footsteps resounding across generations and the smell of something discarded. The metaphor of elevation subverts the mantra that accompanies the policy of assimilation to “uplift “the Aboriginal people. Scott does this through the parody of Harley’s ability to float above others. However, the origin of this behaviour is linked to a self-protective reaction to his grandfather’s sexual abuse of him, in the midst of which he fixes on the ceiling and projects himself outside of his body to escape the experience.

This theme of elevation, associated with Harley’s abuse, resonates on a number of levels. Elevation resounds with Harley’s abuse as a protective strategy of dissociation from his experience, evoking trauma theory. The use of this metaphor reverberates with what Foucault has coined “reverse discourse” (p.101). The novel subverts Neville’s racist discourse of “uplift and elevate,” transposing a destructive discourse into a positive one of healing. Elevation or upliftedness is a fluid concept that is malleable to ironic subversion as something imposed upon Aboriginal people. The narrator explains: “Raised to carry on one heritage, and ignore another, I found myself wishing to reverse that upbringing, not only for the sake of my own children, but also for my ancestors, and for their children in turn. And therefore, inevitably, most especially, for myself (p.19). Hence the foregrounded theme of elevation resonates and is thus subverted on two levels, to parody racist policy and as a protective behaviour.

The novel’s description of tapping expands the trauma theme, since tapping is a known technique in trauma therapy. The novel is framed by images of tapping linked with authenticity:

People smile at me, say:
‘You can always tell.’
‘You can’t hide who you are.’
‘You feel it, here?
And, ‘tapping their fists on my chest,
‘Speak it from the heart.’ (p.8).

This establishes a frame for delving into the trauma he carries from the past. The action of tapping figures in the novel as a signifier of trauma as it is a technique used in treatment for trauma; the sufferer taps on the meridian points as in acupuncture including the upper body, while remembering a painful experience in conjunction with simultaneous affirmations known as Emotional Freedom Technique or Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) and
Thought Field Therapy. In fact tapping on the chest forms part of a sequence of tapping on the acupuncture meridian points while the person focuses on a traumatic memory. Further on in the novel, when he returns as an adult, Harley is found tapping away at Ernest’s house as he acts out his anger towards him. This figures as a form of inversion of the technique, suggesting that before he can heal he needs to release his resentment towards his grandfather and in some way resolve this relationship. Harley states “Tap tap. I began chipping the render from the stone walls of the old house. I hesitate to mention it; in the context of this story it may seem so dreadfully symbolic. But what can I do it is the truth. Tap tap” (Scott’s italics, p.24). Uncle Will arrives to say goodbye: “‘I tap-tapped on not knowing, even then, what to say to him’” (p.24). Tapping in this context can be imagined as an attempt to self-soothe. The tapping continues:

Tap-tap. Uncle Will tapping me on the shoulder interrupting my reverie…‘I am going away’, he said, softly. I didn’t like the way he was looking at me…I watched him walk away…He was not really my uncle. He was only my father’s cousin. A hand waved from the car as he drove away…Tap tap. Fingers on the keyboard now. Long after then (pp.24-25).

The symbolism of tapping as a strategy for healing is intertwined with Harley working through his pain. Later, he is to find words. When his uncles return and rescue him from his grandfather, the action of tapping again takes on a healing form: “Uncle Jack, tapping me on the chest (as, more and more others would later do). You feel it in your heart? Say it like you feel it” (p.148).

The practice of destabilising the concept of elevation and employing the symbolism of tapping reflects the novel’s subversive play, functioning to undermine the use of the term “elevation” in dominant discourse. Tuning into this subversive play, in an article entitled “Kim Scott’s Benang: Pseudoscience and Colonial Australia,” Francesca Haig explores the non-visual use of sound and rhythm in Benang as a form of destabilisation of the colonial privileging of the visual, which predominates in the practice of classification by skin colour. Haig emphasises the novel’s capacity to exceed the very limited classification of Aboriginal people by elevating the poetics of language over the pseudoscience of eugenics. She places this colonial practice in the context of the Enlightenment drive to “categorise, control and divide,” which she points out is now discredited by postmodernist critiques of “grand narratives” (p.77). Haig comments on the ‘little critical attention’ the novel has received, especially given its status as the first Indigenous Miles Franklin Award winning novel (2000) and the Western Australian Premier’s Book Award (1999). Jane Sullivan also raises this point in her interview with Scott.

In Sullivan’s interview Scott outlines his own background in which his father was born to a Nyoongar woman who died when his father was young. She was born in Ravensthorpe,
WA, where a massacre wiped out a population of Aboriginal people. Scott’s father once told him that his Aboriginal heritage was the best part of him. Scott’s own father was cut off from his Nyoongar heritage due to a transient lifestyle but he reconnects as an adult in his traditional lands near Albany, while repairing roads. This is reflected in the novel through the character, Tommy, Harley’s father. Jack tells Harley that Tommy “got his education as a Nyoongar” working on the Main Roads Gang with him (p.442). In the interview Scott reveals that he shares Harley’s quest, stating: “I have spent my life trying to work out my historical being,” and that this is the inspiration for the novel (p.2). Sullivan comments that “Scott is not one to spell out the horrible…his complex sometimes lyrical prose avoids graphic depictions of violence.” Scott replies, describing his own narrative approach of understatement: “That’s part of not being shrill …in some ways it hurts more if you just let it seep in”, which is perhaps most evident in the way that the narrator deals with sexual abuse in the novel. Harley is represented as dissociating himself from the trauma by removing himself psychologically, rising above it by imaginatively floating up to the ceiling. Transcending or removing oneself psychically from an overwhelming situation is understood in trauma theory as a way of dissociating oneself from the horrific emotion. The protagonist in Benang finds resolution by literally rising above what is happening. This is both an adaptive protective defence against the abuse but it is also a subversive metamorphic act against an oppressive policy that would degrade him.

Anita Heiss, an Indigenous writer, describes Scott’s novel as “nothing short of brilliant”. As Heiss suggests, Benang depicts the tensions and dynamics within race relations in this country. Heiss highlights the culture of shame that emerges from this history. It is a curious phenomenon that shame is carried by Aboriginal people, rather than by white society. In Gaita’s terms, shame is the appropriate response for the nation, but in fact Benang and Plains of Promise represent shame as displaced on to those who the nation has shamed. Heiss explains: “The issue of biculturalism is highlighted in Benang, and is as prevalent today as it was at the turn of the century when children of mixed marriages ‘grew in a climate of denial and shame that made it difficult for even a strong spirit to express itself’” (p.1). She continues: “The identity crisis experienced by these children was heightened because of the white community placing so much emphasis on skin colour, an issue contemporary Australia still needs to deal with today” (p.1). In my view, the novel dramatises this identity struggle, encompassing a trauma narrative and the problem of shame while enacting the impact of this on the characters.

Scott employs subtlety because he believes this is more effective in bringing home the impact. The novel works to mystify and challenge the reader to make sense of its themes rather than work on an overtly emotional level. Despite this, it utilises the motif of the vulnerable child, with a lingering sense of the psychological disconnectedness and distress experienced by children. Salzman puts it thus: “But the end of the process is, I think, an

124 “Making a fiction of History” p.2
125 “Making a fiction of History” p.3
126 “Making a fiction of History” p.3
increase in the reader’s emotional response to historical knowledge, as opposed (if we think about history for example) simply to an intellectual apprehension of the effects of colonisation.” I believe that there is an emotional understanding gained through engagement with representations of people’s lived experience, dramatised as it is in concrete ways that impact on day to day life.

The novel interweaves fiction and the real. The play on Neville’s words “uplift and elevate these people to our own plane” provides a complex theme interwoven within the narrative’s thread of trauma and Aboriginal identity (p.11). The narrative does this firstly by creating complexity through foregrounding Harley’s present identity positively within the wider context of Aboriginal ancestral heritage. The narrator describes the scene:

I rise from the ground and, hovering in the campfire smoke, slowly turn to consider this small circle of which I am centre. We feel it then, share the silence…But no cynicism remains once I begin to sing. Sing? Perhaps that is not the right word, because it is not really singing. And it is not really me who sings, for although I touch the earth only once in my performance – leaving a single footprint in white sand and ash- through me we hear the rhythm of many feet pounding the earth, and the strong pulse of countless hearts beating (p.7).

The novel creates an interrelatedness between Harley’s gift of singing and his ability to “rise from the ground” through his performance. This symbolises reconnection with his Aboriginal identity, which is represented by only “a single footstep” that touches the ground as he hovers. This in turn resonates with “the rhythm of many feet pounding and the strong pulse of many hearts beating,” referring to a community of ancestors (p.7). Reiterating the theme of footsteps he states: “I wished to pick up a rhythm begun deeper and long before those named Fanny and Sandy One Mason” (p.32).

The affirmative place from which he speaks looks to the future embedded in the name Benang, which means tomorrow. The novel retrospectively traces his journey to this place he now inhabits. From this place of belonging he retracts his pilgrimage. But Benang also means “from the heart,” a challenge as “it is hard to speak from the heart” when you have been “sealed away” (p.357), and it is “not easy to find your way out from the heart” (p.463). This language represents the complexity of self-discovery when recovering from trauma.

Harley’s narrative of finding his way from the outside in is enacted through his journey as an individual researching his grandfather’s documents and through his ancestral journey with his uncles. However, as a retrospective narrative, Harley’s identification with a dead Aboriginal boy, by a water tank who is “left limp and lifeless and more like me than I care to admit,” also frames the novel (p.10). This is introduced in the first chapter titled from the heart. Having experienced himself as enmeshed within his grandfather’s plan to contain, observe and document the first white man born, Harley does not recognise himself when “hovering before a mirror, he sees a stranger” (p.12). In a state of flux Harley describes his

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129 None of the chapters are numbered but all have captions – I have numbered them for easier access during the analysis of this novel.
subjectivity:

The image shifted, changed shape as I have seen clouds do around granite peaks above the sea. But it was terrible to see the shapes, the selves I took. I stood motionless against a setting sun; posture perfect, brow noble, features fine. Saw myself slumped, grinning, furrow-browed, with a bottle in my hand. Was Tonto to my grandfather’s Lone Ranger. Guran to some Phantom. There appeared a footballer, boxer, country and western singer. A tiny figure, sprawled on the ground in some desert landscape, dying. And then I saw myself poised with a boomerang, saw myself throwing it out to where the sky bends, saw it arching back again but now it was my tiny cartwheeling mirror image which was returning, growing, merging with other crowding, jostling selves into one shimmering ascending me (pp.12-13).

This moment is connected to his uplifted state as he “gently nudged the ceiling” following this mirror scene, intertwining elevation with his search for identity. His mission is also to separate himself from his grandfather, described as “an inexorable process, this one of we becoming I” (p.31). There is a tension for Harley in this for he also wants to belong to a “we” (p.90).

The introduction of the concept “uplift and elevate” is linked with the sexual abuse of Harley by his grandfather. The novel is framed by elevation in the second chapter with Harley’s experience of finding himself pressed to the ceiling in a state of elevation: “eventually I realised my face was pressed hard against the ceiling” (p.11). In this predicament, whiteness is critiqued - “the truth was there was nothing to see, except – right in front of my eyes- a whiteness which was surface only, with no depth, and very little variation” (p.11). This also plants the idea of the insubstantiality of whiteness in Harley’s identity. As Slater has indicated, *Benang* “destabilises the black/white binary” by comically reducing it to a vacuous elevation, parodied by Harley’s tendency to hover above the ground in an elevated uplifted state.130

The first glimpse of sexual abuse substantiates the link between this and Harley’s propensity for elevation: “I discovered I merely had a propensity for elevation” (p.12). Observing that he must have resembled a light shade pressed so close to the ceiling, he comments ironically, “Perhaps that was what my grandfather meant when he said I was brightest and most useful in an uplifted state” (p.13). As Haig notes, the description of the abuse is ironically clothed in the language of pseudoscience. Harley reveals, “I had been very intimate with his little probings, ‘investigations’ to see the colour of my skin where the sun had not reached” (p.77). This shocks because it bursts into the reader’s consciousness, resembling a flashback. There is still a lingering uncertainty even after he informs us that “He would begin this way, clinical, but soon enough was shouting urgent with power” until finally the reader is left in no doubt (p.77). The narrator relays his grandfather’s orders:

‘Keep your eyes open. Eyes,’ he would say, one hand clamping the back of my neck, the other my shoulder. ‘Keep them open.’ At least he accepted that I could

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not look directly at him on such an occasion, and so I stared at the wall as he thrust, in his stilted way, trying to get deeper within me, and if that was not violation enough, wanting to remain there even as he shrivelled (p.78).

The image of Harley staring at the wall suggests that he is dissociating from the experience in order to cope with it. This links with the image of his face being pressed hard against the wall in the second chapter. The resonance of the sexual abuse slips in and out of the narrative in an understated mode. As Scott has said, “it hurts more if you let it seep in” (Sullivan, p.3).131 Reflecting the strategy of understating traumatic experience, *Benang* reveals a self-conscious construction of the elusiveness of trauma to representation. The narrator employs strategies of understatement and symbolic imagery, namely, hovering above his body to convey the impact of his experience.

The narrative makes explicit and concrete eugenic classification, evidence of which Harley discovers in his grandfather’s study:

I found myself hovering over sets of documents, things filed …Certificates of birth, death, marriage; newspaper clippings, police reports; letters (personal); …parish records; cemetery listings; books, photographs. Photographs. As before, I shuffled idly through them. I was careless letting them fall to the floor. Various people all classified as Aboriginal…There were portraits arranged in pairs; one a snapshot labelled *As I found them*, the other a studio photograph captioned *Identical with above child*. There were families grouped according to skin colour. And, sudden enough to startle me, my own image. A boy. Wing-nut eared and freckled, he wore a uniform, a tie, a toothy grin. He grinned like an idiot, like an innocent. Captions to the photographs; *full-blood, half-caste (first cross), quadroon, octoroon*…There was a page of various fractions, possible permutations growing more and more convoluted. Of course in the language of such mathematics it is simple; from the whole to the partial and back again. This much was clear I was reduced to a fraction (pp.25-26).

In a reversal of this fifth chapter, with caption, *success*, Harley claims “I wanted to prove myself his failure” (p.29). Harley finds himself represented at the end of a row: “Breeding Up. In the third or fourth generation no sign of native origin is apparent” (p.26).

In the next chapter entitled *ernest soloman scat* the narrative reverts to an earlier time when Ernest works in Neville’s office constructing shelves and searching files. This is when the germ of his idea begins. Ernest is represented as consolidating his links with his cousin Auber Neville, and accompanies the Travelling Inspector, James Segal on his inspections. He comes to be impressed by the latter’s opinion: “Absorption, he said, it’s possible. Assimilation” (p.46). As an allegorical figure he represents belief in eugenics that turned Aboriginal people against one another through divisions based on skin colour. Harley is reflecting on his grandfather’s history while re-writing the story in his own way using his grandfather’s documents. At this point, Dinah’s children, Kathleen and Jack, enter the narrative.

131
The reader is positioned to dislike Ernest who has no redeeming attributes and functions as an allegorical figure for a self-serving nation. He resembles the ‘man of action’ critiqued by Iris Murdoch. Ernest is “a little too late to be a pioneer…could still play a role in taming a people into submission” (Scott, p.32). Murdoch criticises a philosophy that heralds the ideal subject as a ‘man of action,’ one who sees himself as a pioneer, privileging the will over other attributes, sacrificing all to fulfil this persona. Ernest Scat is also out for himself: “Ern would leave something of himself. Of himself only. He had property already. A business” (p.115). Ernest is portrayed as callous and cruel. After he realises that Kathleen’s child is Sergeant Hall’s and not his, we are informed that “once, trying to help his wife, the child slipped from his arms and cracked her head on the stone steps” (p.114). Ernest then takes her to the hospital where he “abandoned her with a note explaining her condition and that her father was a policeman” (p.115). While the narrator appears to give Ernest some credit for attempting to adjust to the situation, ultimately the novel delivers a harsh judgement. Ernest is a self-absorbed remorseless character: “After he had disposed of the child, Ern told himself again that it was up to him to make his life the way he wanted it, and he could not include someone else’s sick child in his plans. Ern would leave a mark…” (p.115).

Reflecting on the character of his grandfather, and his plan for absorption, Harley asks: “Could Ern possibly have believed that his was a selfless task? That he did not think of himself, or if he did it was only insofar as he was helping these other people become more like himself,” critiquing the practice of defining the Other in relation to white subjectivity (p.158)? Harley minimally identifies a few strengths: “Moments when, perhaps, I almost admired him. After all, he took Kathleen as his wife, which was more than many would have done” and he had “pluck, …I could respect that, and even to a degree his opportunism” and more ironically “he was a rigorous and well organised man; consider how he shaped my life, recaptured me after my accident, and then took charge again”(p.107). However, these reflections are immediately moderated by the description of the power used over Harley: “He pushed me back to health, and gave me a plan. He moved us to this little isolated place …gave renovation instructions…said what to do with the garden” all of which show the control Ernest wants to maintain over Harley (p.107). This evokes the enormity of the pain Ernest has inflicted, resonating throughout many lives. The absolute character abhorrence of Ernest and his associations with the authorities create an allegorical weight of injustice. On the opposite page is an ironic reference to the removal of the child Topsy from Fanny. Topsy is to be left in the care of Ernest, ironically described by authorities as having a “kindly heart” that “had him take in the poor waif” at ten years of age, whom he later exploits, seduces and mistreats (p.106). At this stage Kathleen, Harriet, Topsy and Will live with Ernest, for Daniel has died and the rest of the family have been moved on from Gebalup. The town distinguishes itself from other towns where in contrast to Gebalup “The native camps at their edges always threatened to spill over their boundaries” (p.117). Ernest informs the new policeman that Topsy is his wife. When Kathleen discovers him having sex with Topsy she

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becomes distressed. This is witnessed by Jack who punches Ernest in retaliation. Dramatising the control over Aboriginal people's movements, Kathleen and Jack are removed from Gebalup but after they had “built a hut in bush just the other side of town” they were then again “moved onto a reserve” (p.136).

The reader potentially squirms when faced with the novel’s representation of the impact of colonialism upon Aboriginal lives through the characterisation of Ernest. It creates specificity, for example, through the many bleach baths Ernest gives Topsy: “Ern poured bleach into the hot water, placed his hand on the top of Topsy’s head and pushed her under” (p.158). This is juxtaposed satirically with the thinking from an archival document that enabled this practice, asserting that they “are almost white and some of them are so fair that, after a good wash would probably pass unnoticed in a band of whites” (p.365). Evoking the vulnerable child motif, through the eyes of the child, Tommy, the narrator relates: “‘Lie deeper in it, love, lie deep in it.’ She knew how it stung, and how after the bleach it was true, her skin did seem fairer” (p.372). Representing a depiction of the entrenched practices of racism, the narrative depicts layer upon layer, moving from micro to macro levels of abuse; for example, an ailing Topsy is refused entry to the doctor’s surgery because it is in a hotel and Ernest is told: “No I can’t allow her in here it is against the law” and advises Ern to take her to the hospital where there is a “section for Natives” (p.371). Here the doctor states, “Some of these people…they just give up on life after a time,” ignorant of the impact of colonisation, and the grief that causes people to lose hope (p.372). There is stark disparity here between Topsy’s experience as imagined and the perspective of the emblematic hotel owner. Ernest is advised to apply the hot and cold treatment. Through the eyes of the young child the narrative focuses on Topsy’s torment: “Tommy saw the way her body arched with the shock of it. He was pleased already because it showed life, something like passion” (p.372). The narrator reveals: “Tommy sees her, lolling, rolling about in the small waves. Her eyes one moment live things pleading, suffering, and then coloured shells as if the living thing has shrunk back within them” (p.374). The powerful emotional impact of this torment, as seen through the child’s eyes, is made more so by the sense of their enforced separation. As an observer “Tommy saw his mother being hauled from the water by her hair” from the cold sea to the hot tub “She looked at her boy, the land behind him” (p.374). This symbolises the loss of the relationship for them both, wedged apart by Ern’s brutal treatment and Topsy’s eventual death. The narrator effectively evokes strong emotion by representing the outrageous injustice of this treatment through the eyes of the child. Topsy, like Kathleen, disappears from the narrative without trace. The reader is positioned to feel shock, outrage and remorse at the treatment inflicted upon Aboriginal people through the eyes of the vulnerable child. Abandoned by his father Tommy lives with his grandmother, Harriet, for a time following his mother’s death, after which “Ern wandered away” (p.375).

However, when Harriet is moved on because “the lease had expired,” Sister Kate’s was recommended (p.382). Jack tells Harley “I’ve heard some things about Sister Kate’s” stating the name of the actual institution begun in 1933 (p.384). Again, incorporating the non-
fictional, this home is modelled on an actual home cited by Anna Haebich.\textsuperscript{134} She explains that the view of the actual Sister Kate Clutterbuck was to take in children without family. Haebich documents that the nun wrote to Neville asking for “the poorest and neglected children not those who have mothers who loved and cared for them” (p.281). As Haebich points out, that was not the purpose of the home from the authority’s viewpoint: “Sister Kate did not get the most unwanted children in the state but those with the palest skin” (p.281). She quotes a former resident who states “We went in Aboriginal and came out white” (p.280).

The novel casts a shadow over Aunty Kate’s, an institution rampant with paedophilia. Ernest was “among those who arrived at Aunty Kate’s to take the lucky children away...however, a rare thing for Ernest to take his own son- our Tommy- away with him” (p.384).\textsuperscript{135} There is sympathy generated for the vulnerable child Tommy left abandoned by his father, denied the safety of living with his grandmother and sent to a home where children are prey to sexual exploitation.

\textit{Benang} embodies themes of grief and loss amongst Aboriginal people. Recounting Jack’s story, Harley laments the loss of relatives dispersed when Fanny and family members are herded onto the train after Daniel dies, with a sign highlighting the racism “Niggers for Mogumber” (p.88). As her family is carted away Harriet, who is allowed to stay, is reassured that they are going to “a place to learn, to gather skills, to equip oneself for life” (p.88). Jack hears about it accidently from a farmer, who tells him “I hear they found a mob at Daniel Coolman’s place, they’re moving them all” (p.89). This causes him to jump on his bike to pursue the train until his bike falls from under him: “Then his hand got hold of something. The train dragged him, and his breath had been left far behind, when he saw a figure leap stiffly from the carriage, hit the ground and roll, and roll, and roll. He saw this even as the train dragged him. Fanny?” (pp.89-90). The train slows and Jack is mistaken for Fanny during a head count. Harley reflects: “Some of these are heading, inexorably, towards the first proper white man born. The others, irrespective of caste or fraction, will mostly make a different future. I fear I have lost them. I fear it is being proved once again, I am so much less than I might have been. I fear that once were we, and now there is only I” (p.90). The novel reiterates loss when it touches upon Fanny’s grief, which is typically understated in the novel: “She mumbled, and sang softly to herself, often with words that they might not know. Sometimes of the children she had lost, the father and mother that were taken. Her brother, sisters” (p.245). Written in the context of the \textit{Bringing Them Home Report} (1997) this reverberates with the rupture between mother and child, prevalent throughout the \textit{Stolen Generations}.

\textit{Benang} depicts the divisions created within individuals in families, and between families and the wider Aboriginal community as grounded in attitudes that made it unacceptable to be an Aboriginal person. There were even policies that required people to break contact with others, primarily based on the oppressive system of caste classifications. Adult Harley explains that, despite having legitimate white fathers, “their children grew in a climate of

\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Broken Circles: fragmenting Indigenous Families}, pp. 248; 280-287; 355; 520; & 545.

\textsuperscript{135} The novel interchanges Aunty Kate’s and Sister Kate’s in the novel the official place was called Sister Kate’s.
denial and shame that made it difficult for even a strong spirit to express itself” (p.97). Harley’s Uncle Jack Chatalong, writing to A.O. Neville, dated 1929, requests exemption from definition as an Aboriginal under the act. Jack writes “I Don’t Mix up with the Blacks and I work Hard and Earn a living the same as a white man would …I have now Been barred from going Into a Pub…because I have got no permit so Could you do anything in the way of granting me a certificate of exemption” (p.62). In his Acknowledgements Scott does not specifically state the source of this letter but he mentions that the letters by Neville in response to Jack, and the further appeal by Jack, are “compiled from a range of very similar letters of his” (Neville’s letters, p.498). This brings a sense of the real to the narrative, thus making it a more overtly political text. As noted previously, the novel quotes from a range of historical documents and this lends an authenticity to the narrative, grounding it in the reality of racist attitudes. Despite ticking all the boxes for employment, good character, not addicted to alcohol and is “seldom seen with other natives or half-castes, other than his mother and Half (?) –brother and sister”, and “lives quietly by himself,” Jack is denied entry on the basis that he may supply alcohol to other Aboriginal people (p.64). The reader feels indignant at Jack’s no-win predicament. This fictionalised scenario, resonating in the historical world of racist practices, invites readers to consider the ambiguity surrounding the dominant culture’s expectations on the one hand, and exclusions on the other. The desire cultivated amongst Aboriginal people to live up to white expectations of what constitutes a ‘decent’ member of society is dramatised by Jack and Will who wish to avoid the instilled shame of blackness. At the same time, the novel reminds us that the dominant culture never lets marginalised people forget their ineligibility. Hence, the gate remains closed for Jack.

The narrative symbolically represents underlying resentment, with an invitation to the reader to link this with an unresolved tension in race relations. The novel dramatises the complexity of internalised anger, revenge and even forgiveness. Harley’s elevation reaches a climax when he returns to live with his grandfather as an adult after his father tragically dies in a car accident. Harley is vulnerable from his own injuries and from his guilt as the driver of the car. Harley’s resentment towards Ernest is initially internalised. It takes the form of cutting himself, to engrave words into his body. Tapping into a discourse of self-harm and trauma, the novel reveals the extent of Harley’s pain. Alluding to the degeneration of their relationship, Harley contextualises his time alone with his grandfather as “before my uncles came to save us” when “I slashed and cut words into my own skin” (p.37). Self-harm is another sign of trauma, an anger turned against one’s self. Shame is also a sign of internalised anger towards the perpetrator. However Harley begins to externalise his anger: “But I soon turned to my grandfather’s flesh. I wanted to mark him, to show my resentment at how his words had shaped me” (p.37). Harley takes back the power to define who he is by re-writing the story in his own words from his grandfather’s material. Symbolically, he ignores his grandfather’s directions now. His grandfather gives orders to “Cut down the tree. Burn it, dig out its roots” (p.107) that threatens the house’s foundations, but these orders are subverted. Signifying integration policies he adds, “He might also have written: Displace, disperse, dismiss…My friends, you recognise the language” (pp.107-8). The reader is positioned as

\[136\] A practice of self-harm is often associated with self-blame with the victim’s misplaced internalised guilt for the act of the perpetrator.
non-racist, equating Ernest with the Protectorate. Harley taunts him by giving the impression of fulfilling his wish to cut the branches of the tree. He reveals, “I trimmed the branches which grew close to the window. I was pleased to see grandad’s grateful smile when he peered through the window frame and saw no hint of a tree. I was even more pleased to see his reaction when I carried him outside (after his stroke) and he realised I had trimmed only those branches that could be seen from the window” (p.108). As an example of the underlying anger in the text about the treatment of Aboriginal people, Harley states “It was still a tree you could hang from or hang some other from” referring to the recurrent practice of hanging Aboriginal people from trees in bags, cited on several occasions in the text. For instance, Jack recalls “you dreamt you were being punished, like the boy you’d seen put into a bag and suspended from a rope tied high in a tree. Swinging” (p.90). He discloses his temptation to hang his grandfather from it, adding “which of course, I didn’t do” (p.108). Instead, Harley turns his resentment towards the destruction of the house. He reveals: “I had picked out the mortar, the darkness crept in. Cold air moved about me. Not a fire. Not a family. I rubbed at the words I’d written so fastidiously. The pale, thin stuff felt cold and damp beneath my fingers. Mine and my grandfather’s skin, my only kin, those pieces of paper” (p.108). The use of the word “probing” functions in the economy of meanings in the novel as a re-enactment of the sexual abuse. Harley states: “The walls were strong, despite my continued picking and probing” (p.108), enacting revenge against his grandfather. Resentfully thinking of his lack of Nyoongar language and culture he thinks, “I let myself drift. I gave up, and drifted…” (p.109). He continues “As far as the joists. I hooked my toes beneath one, and stayed” (109). Having extricated himself from his grandfather he finds himself alone and isolated: “I thought I was the only one. I thought it was just me – a solitary full stop” (p.109).

Belonging is represented as a journey symbolising Harley’s recovery. Harley removes the roof of some of the rooms, enabling a view from outside. Jack and Will arrive to find Harley elevated in the beams: “They saw a dark silhouette drifting across the windows, loudly declaiming some nonsense, rising and falling. Rising.” Ernest in the meantime is “huddled and scarred in the corner” (p.109). This marks the transformative and circular journey from an entangled ‘we’ with Ernest to a solitary “I,” then in an imaginably circular motion back towards a “we” – “And so then there were four of us” to a richer sense of where and from whom he is connected (p.110). Ironically Ernest is one of the four. The uncles are represented as having a sense of his need and struggle, and it is Will who offers a gesture of remorse: “Uncle Will, looking up at me. ‘Harley’ he said, so softly, but the voice carried. We’re all sorry. But, think of us. Your people. Your kids. I’m the one was wrong” (p.110). Imaginably Uncle Will’s gesture of remorse is for disowning his people and hence abandoning Harley. This marks the beginning or next phase of Harley’s journey to understanding where he came from – to find his historical self.

Harley’s uncles enlighten him about their family history when they travel with Ernest across familiar pathways taken by their ancestors. As they trace the ancestral route, the tension in the relationship between Jack and Will rises, rooted in the divisions imposed upon their people according to skin classification, and the shame associated with being Aboriginal. Jack has harboured resentment towards Will for turning his back on his people. This comes to
the surface when Jack asks Harley what he would like to hear next of the family history. Will suggests “My father, Daniel.” Jack becomes irritated and retorts, “‘With all due respect, Will …‘you never mixed that much with blackfellas, eh? Not as a man. Your father, Uncle Daniel, he was almost the same as Ern”’ (pp.188-9).

The narrative draws out the shame caused by daily expressions of racism. Uncle Will reveals the deep-seated guilt and shame he carries while speaking of Sandy Two, described as Harley’s great-grandmother’s brother, making Fanny his great-great grandmother. Uncle Will tells them of an incident when he finally explodes after Sandy Two collapses and is taken for a drunk by a passer-by who comments “Take him to a cell to sleep it off” (p.143). Will describes the scene:

Uncle Sandy was in the main street…a long way from here…He had tried to get back to Gebalup but, well, there was always trouble there for him. It was hard enough just to get a ticket for a train, let alone get off and walk through some towns. Uncle Sandy was not someone who liked to feel shame, or to have to slink about. So he didn’t get out much when I came to live with him. He was sick, …and having made a habit of keeping his distance, he had no one to help him...And it was right in town there, the place he would’ve least liked, that Sandy Two collapsed (p.143).

Harley narrates how “Uncle Will was on his knees beside Sandy who was fast becoming a corpse, and the police were standing around, talking to passers-by. Uncle Will told them off, shouting at them even from down on his knees like that” (p.143). Speaking apologetically Will mutters: “I was just a boy, really, you know” (p.143). The narrator reveals that he is then surprised by Will’s sudden expression of self-blame: “And then surprising me he suddenly said, ‘I hate myself, know that?’ The thought seemed to come from nowhere. ‘I should have been more angry, more often’” (p.143).

The theme of shame represents to the non-indigenous reader how totally demoralising this emotion can be. The discomfort Uncle Will feels about passing as white is related to his obtaining an education while his cousins are excluded from school. This dramatises Aboriginal people’s marginalisation within their own communities through white intervention, leaving them with guilt and uneasiness. He exclaims, “Well, what could I do?” The narrator highlights Will’s discomfort by adding “no one had accused him of anything” (p.307). He continues defensively, “Yeah I went back to school. Dad was thinking of the best for me, and for Mum” (p.307). The narrator explains that “Will believed there was no place left for him in this story, and that it was Chatalong who must continue” (p.307). Harley as third person relates:

Will said he didn’t know this stuff, it wasn’t for him to say. He had just ignored whatever people said, held his head up, walked carefully, gone to school, kept on. Most of the time he lived just like anyone else in the town, really. He kept to himself, he said. They kept to themselves, just the family. They knew who they were. A little family (p.307).
This follows an episode in the novel in which it was legislated that Aboriginal children were to be sent to school. Will had been the only Aboriginal child at Gebalup School, but more were introduced after a new policeman replaced Hall. This resulted in a protest from the local community and racist comments by the white children, leading eventually to the removal of all but Uncle Will. The novel reinforces the power of racism by referring to an actual newspaper protest by the local people to the inclusion of Aboriginal children in schools. This protest set in place Will’s alienation from his own people, and his fear of repercussions. Will explains to Harley: “What happened, see, is that I have always tried to keep away from Aboriginals because I knew the people would try to bring me under the Aborigines Act. And they took your children, hunted you down, moved you on for no reason…It made me very lonely all my life” (p.145). Harley remembers Tommy telling him the extent of Will’s alienation: “how he kept right away from even his own mother” (p.145). The narrator later reveals that “He had never taken his children to see their grandmother” (p.379). Kim Scott’s acknowledgements note that Will Coolman is based upon his actual Uncle Will Coleman who he remembers reading about in his youth, adding “but I never knew him so I am sure the reality and the book converge” (p.499). The boundary between the fictional and non-fictional worlds is further dissolved. Harley experiences shame at Tommy’s funeral, where he is chained to the policeman: “I can say I felt the shame of it…When the first of the real aunties reached for me, those two men pushed and pulled me away from them” (p.21). Police figure in the novel as unjust, keen to administer oppressive protectionist policies.

Cheshire Calhoun discusses a condition of shame fuelled by systems of subordination, such as racism, sexism or hetero-sexism. These systems can evoke a sense of shame in those who may not themselves feel shame about their ethnicity or sex, and who are not conflicted by their cultural or sexual identity. However, as Calhoun reiterates, when shaming is systemically used as a tool of power to subordinate others, it can become destructive across a number of dimensions, on a political, social, cultural and personal level. Commenting on how the white sons-in-law of Daniel and Harriet cut off all association with them, the narrator laments: “My family, my people, we have done such things. Shown such shame and self-hatred. It is hard to think what I share with them, how we have conspired in our own eradication. It was my Uncle Will who taught me something of this” (pp.97-8). Benang represents the shame experienced by characters, an emotion which is not based upon anything they did but imposed instead by systemic racism.

Harley’s struggle with his resentment works as an allegory in the novel for unresolved race relations. Upon returning to live with Ernest he confides: “Of course it is difficult to forgive him; I was at his mercy, and weak, and grieving the death of my father” (p.78). Forgiveness is an emotion that can be evoked by another’s remorse but not always. Harley finds it difficult to witness his uncles’ kindness towards his grandfather. This flags healing and the beginning of forgiveness. Following the arrival of the uncles Harley sets about repairing the house he has been destroying, but he is still uncertain about trusting them. He reflects “I knew I had been uplifted. I knew I’d been ill. But what about these old men, how

137 On p. 499 The Albany Advertiser April, 1914 is referenced.
did they see themselves, how did they see me? And how could they be so, so…So kind to Ern? They knew how he was, surely. I could not bring myself to tell them” (p.145). Harley is caught between escape into elevation or confronting the task of grounding himself by attending to the past.

The wind is characterised as an accomplice in his elevation: “as I turned the corner of the house a gust of wind blew me against the wall…The cuff of my trousers caught on the guttering, and there I was uplifted and spread out to the wind, which whistled through me, and in and out of the orifices, singing some spiteful tune” (p.146). The only way of dealing with this evil, rapist wind is to contain it through writing: Finding “shelter from the wind” he tries to “get some words flowing through” his head. In a state of heightened emotion he grapples with his uncle’s narrative: “Fuck fuck fuck…I gotta gotta gotta I must must must…I will will will oh will will Uncle Will what he had said, and my father and what I had guessed, remembered imagined?” (p.147). It takes both uncles to ground him with Will commenting “I thought that had all stopped” and they suggested “You can write? That helps?” (p.147). Harley realises “I would have to return to writing. It apparently helped knot and tie me down” (p.147). Writing is cast as a grounding technique to bring him back into the present after re-experiencing traumatic emotions. Writing makes a connection between words and lives.

The novel is interspersed with references to massacres. These work as an understatement, and to this extent they resemble a trauma narrative. One of the earlier references to killing marks the silence around it. Ernest speaks to the publican about Kathleen: “The young woman’s name the publican explained was Kathleen, and she worked for Sergeant Hall who had as good as adopted her” (p.58). The publican remarks “Must’ve been a couple of the old people survived, after all” (p.58). Highlighting the silence around killing, the narrator remarks that: “Ernest did not ask for an explanation. Did not say, ‘Survived what?’ Even then it was obvious. It was not the sort of question anyone bothered to put, and very few people wanted it answered” (p.58). This silencing is echoed in the settler novels by Alex Miller and Andrew McGahan examined in this thesis.

However, on the pilgrimage with Harley’s uncles, this silence gets broken. Jack states “All that death” (p.216). Speaking of Uncle Sandy Two, he states: “I reckon no one ever told him about the killing around here, that his brothers -in -law teamed up with the killers…There are so many things it is difficult to speak of adequately” (p.216). Will states: “No one ever told me that, either, about all the killing. Until you, Jack. Harley. It’s not easy to listen to that” (p.216). The narrator reflects on Will’s sadness as he speaks, imagining that he is “Thinking of his father, and himself” (p.216).

Earlier in the novel, speaking of the Coolman brothers, Daniel and Patrick, Jack reflects:

They worked with the Mustles and Dones…and this is a very hard thing for us to understand, and forgive. A very hard thing for us to accept. No doubt about it, they were partners with the killers all right. But I dunno that they helped with the killing, that was long before they got here” (p.172).

The narrator wonders “Did those two Coolman ancestors help toss the bodies, haul the timber, burn it all? See the limbs crooked and dangling in firelight, the limbs akin to our own
but lifeless?” (p.172). With some uncertainty about who speaks this is refuted, “No of course not that was years before, at the Done’s station. Harriet was only a tiny child” (p.172). This begs the question of why raise it as a possibility if it could not have happened. This scene creates doubt, ambiguity in the mind of the reader about the Coolmans’ allegiance. It creates a symbolic representation of the allegoric Coolman brothers implicated in the violence due to their relationship to the perpetrators, recreating a contemporary scenario of responsibility through a continuous inter-generational relationship to the past wrongdoings of ancestors, all of which were endorsed by government directives. The novel recreates the horror of this violence as Jack narrates an episode at the pastoralist’s homestead after Fanny released an Aboriginal man held captive at the woodheap: “He must’ve been lying there the whole time, in the sun, among the timber, and had only now raised his head. Less than a dog, he had no bowl of water, and a chain was looped around his throat” (p.173). Jack reveals the man’s gratitude: “Fanny unchained the man, and he embraced Fanny and the child as one” (p.173). After he is released he takes to someone, presumably a past tormentor, with an axe before he makes his escape. Fanny and Sandy One also flee but looking back Fanny sees Aboriginal people: “a small group of men, women and children, running and falling before station men on horseback” (p.174). Harley tells his uncles; “They got a permit. From the police. To kill” and he adds “I had seen a reference to police permission for a revenge killing among my grandfather’s papers” (p.175). Harley continues “Eighteen, they were allowed to kill eighteen” (p.175). Harley sums up: “Well, Fanny had collected the bones, and sung there. Uncle Jack sang once again, when he took us there, and Uncle Will muttered some prayer or other” (p.176). The juxtaposition zooms in again on the different cultural orientation of Jack and Will. Yet in common, each pay recognition to their ancestors’ deaths, an act which draws attention to the nation’s failure to acknowledge any remorse or reparation. The novel slowly unfolds the hidden massacres, creating an atmosphere of denial around them so that not even Will knows of the violence against Aboriginal people. This mirrors the contemporary world in which anxiety around the truth of the historical harms and injustice against Aboriginal people still persist today. Encapsulating Simone Weil’s sense of injustice Raimond Gaita asserts: “Acknowledgement of someone as fully human is an act of justice of a different kind from those acts of justice which are rightly described as forms of fairness.” 139 In relation to murder:

Someone who is murdered…suffers the natural harm of death, and the evil of having been murdered. If his community is indifferent to this, then he also suffers the shame of it…A concern for justice in a community should be…a concern that its institutions enable and encourage us always to see, and in seeing to be responsive to the full humanity in each of our fellow human beings. That is why this kind of concern is called a concern for social justice and why it is so often connected with compassion. 140

Gaita notes that Weil perceives rights as a “mediocre concept” that cannot give expression to the depth of harm inflicted against others.

140 A Common Humanity, p.84
Benang identifies the racist thoughts of the day as justification for the killing: “Oh they are not really human. Not like us. We are superior (and here is our proof). Forget it” (p.175). Jack relates “I had the bones hidden away in there … for a time. Large ones, small ones. Skull, hand, the tiny what-name bones of a foot” (p.176). Both Fanny and Uncle Jack had sung over the bones. This provides another angle to the significance of Harley’s singing as a form of honouring the dead and in fact repetitively connecting him with “the rhythm of many feet pounding and the strong pulse of many hearts beating” (p.7). Harley again is able to verify the killings, citing his grandfather’s notes: “They crept to the natives camp deep in the night, gently raised their weapons and fired an earth shattering volley over the heads of the sleeping natives” who “screamed and fled through the bush” (p.183). The novels states “When there was a spree, stay clear away” (p.221). Jack had also found a skull as a child: “It was a skull he held in his hands” but Sandy One tells him, “Leave it, don’t muck around with them, Chat” (p.268). Addressing the reader, the narrator creates a sense of the solemn stillness they feel: “As you know, Uncle Jack, Uncle Will, with me carrying my grandfather- we went to that sorry place. …We were quiet. Where were the words for what we felt?” (p.268). This scene draws attention to words as a theme. In this case words are for hearts full of grief. This is indicative of a relative quietness by the novel around the massacres. It represents the importance of the bones to Aboriginal people in the following: “Collect them, all, and stack them, place them rest them together. Bones, white like the skin of the young ones will be, the children flowing on, becoming paler and paler and just as dead” (p.269). This refers back to Harley’s sense of deadness with which the novel opens. In reflection, towards the end of Benang, the narrator touches on the concept of genocide following Uncle Will’s death: “At so many funerals I have felt lonely, that it was I who had already been dead longest, that I represented the final killing off; the genocide thing, you know (addressing reader). Destroy memory of a culture, destroy evidence of a distinctive people, bury memory deep in shame. Having survived genocide, what was left to me but to think, to try to comprehend what had led to this oh-so-near-to-death?” (p.446). There are several links to this near death, referring earlier to an internal sense of loss of self, emptiness and more broadly the avoidance of becoming someone else. Harley also had a near death in the car accident where his genitals are damaged. He very nearly misses out on being a parent were it not for some adolescent encounters. The words “bury memory in shame” resonate with this thesis because they offer an image of how shame works to silence people (p.446). The words also represent how shame becomes internalised and absorbed by those who are hurt. It is possible to imagine that the gaping hole left in the country’s conscience for the depth of remorse created by these killings and abuses, when left unaddressed, becomes absorbed by the Other in the form of shame. The speculation is, that where remorse is appropriate but denied, it becomes the Others’ shame. Commenting on “a deep source of shame for many Australians, and for some a source of guilt” emerging from history, Gaita claims: “It amounts to the acknowledgement that we are rightly called to a communal responsiveness to those who are the victims of our wrongdoing or the wrong doing of those who preceded us.”

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141 Haig notes how repetition can work to undermine sameness when presented in different places in a statement. The repetition of feet resounding creates a vibration throughout the novel that connects through a non-visual link.

142 A Common Humanity, p.87.
There is one event that as a reader it is tempting to overlook, as it is not a theme and is initially overshadowed by the main themes of Harley’s journey and the critique of colonisation. This event is the killing of Daniel by Jack when he pulls him into the mine. It is only referred to once then it goes underground. The prompt for Jack seems to be the thought of “Daniel’s continuing rejection of him” and “What Kathleen had told him” possibly about his father’s identity (p.82). (Kathleen’s parentage is also uncertain in the novel). But even before this there is a scenario in which Sergeant Hall speaks to Daniel about needing a permit if Jack is working for him, following a change in policy. Anna Haebich confirms that one of the impacts of the 1905 Protection Act in Western Australia was that employers were required to “apply to local protectors for agreements or single or general permits for a right to employ any ‘Aboriginal native or ‘half caste’” (p.220). In a curious scene, Sergeant Hall asserts; “G’day. Who’s this then?” and then “he’s not family, is he, Daniel?” Highlighting the control over movement the narrator adds, “And it was best if he was not here on a social visit” (p.71). Visiting is discouraged so as to avoid an Aboriginal camp emerging in the town. Daniel is quick to deny any family connection, stating, “No. No, he’s not. Sandy and the old girl just vrung him up” (p.71).144 This scene is a performative enactment of denial as the narrator reveals that Hall “was just teasing, because of course he knew this fellow” (p.71). Hall then “slapped Jack Chatalong on the back” and said “Heading back to Starr’s?” (p.71). This is a curious scene as it is hard to imagine why Daniel would deny the inference when there is humour in Hall’s playacting. Obviously the enactment has an impact on Jack: “Jack was seething. Daniel had just discarded him, hadn’t he”? (p.71). We can only imagine that the question touched a sensitive spot for both Daniel and of course Jack. Later Jack, Daniel, Harriet and Kathleen make a trip to the mine. Jack goes to the bottom of the mine to retrieve “some old bones” he had hidden but decides “they would not want to see them” suggesting his anger and belief that they do not care (p.82). Jack, feeling discarded by Daniel, then replaces himself outside the group.

At the mine the inside /outside theme re-emerges in the form of Jack’s vision of “a wound bleeding light” as he comes up and approaches the top of the mine, juxtaposed with the inside darkness of the mine. Jack visualises his fingers with the backs of his hands aligned, into the opening:

It was not a deep shaft but still, coming up, he saw its entrance as a fissure in the darkness. He saw a wound bleeding light, and imagined inserting his fingers in this opening. The backs of his fingers would be together; and then, opening his arms slowly, in an arc, as if they were wings to launch him, he would thrust them down. He would pull the world inside out. It would be another world (p.82).

The lightness suggests whiteness that would be pulled into the darkness which would then enable Jack (to reverse places with Daniel) to inhabit the outside world fully. This other world is one in which Jack is free to spread his wings and where presumably he would not be “discarded” which requires a reversal of the state of things, from light into dark – inside into

143 She accidently refers to Harriet as ‘mum’ picked up upon by Ernest.
144 ‘vrung’ is Daniel speaking with a damaged mouth from cancer.
outside. The narrator reveals: “As he came up the ladder Jack Chatalong took Daniel’s outstretched hand and squeezed it hard, as men do. And leaning backwards, still holding tight, he hung all his weight on that hand. …Daniel’s body came arching over his own” (pp.82-3). Jack discovers that those at the top had not seen what happened, and are relieved to see him emerge.

In one way, it would have made more narrative sense if it had been Ernest who died, as the main oppressor of Harley. In *Sorry*, Nicholas’ death is without sorrow as the reader is positioned to accept it as justice. While Daniel is not a character who generates sympathy—“a balloon body and bloated tongue as arms legs brushed Jack’s back,” living a lie as a provider while Harriet does the foraging, it is still hard to see what narrative purpose his death serves (p.83). His death suggests an expression of resentment for all the injustice Jack has suffered and his unhappiness for the way Aboriginal people are treated; not receiving an education, and the poor conditions of the compounds. The narrative suggests such a reading but leaves it open: “Jack Chatalong and Kathleen were brother and sister. Perhaps that helps explain what Jack did. Perhaps Sergeant Hall told him of his father’s identity. Or his anger may have been more of a general kind, and never intended to achieve so final a result. Quite likely he did not think at all, but simply acted on the spur of the moment” (p.81). This jar in the text between who Jack is and what he does draws attention to both the injustice he experiences but also inadvertently the other submerged killings in the novel. It also refers to the mirror scene and his mother, Dinah’s words of warning: “careful what you do you might end up someone else otherwise” (p.100). The narrator represents Jack searching the mirror “As a young man he used to study his face, look for someone else looking back at him,” an action reminiscent of his mother’s words (p.160). This is the same mirror that Kathleen and Topsy also use.

Much later in the novel the reader learns that Jack had an affection for Daniel as a boy. Jack as a youth abided by Daniel’s expectations—“restrained himself from skipping and running in circles around the big man” as they walked to Starr’s to arrange work for Jack. The narrator adds “he had even stopped talking, and kept his tongue between his teeth because Daniel had told him to shut up” (p.358). However, Jack’s attachment changes, possibly because of Daniel’s intolerance. As if in justification of what he did, Jack reacts against Will’s intent to include Daniel in the unfolding family narrative they offer to Harley. Jack blurts out that Daniel was “almost the same as Ernest” an accusation which reads like a form of rationalisation for his killing of Daniel (p.189). Placed as it is in the context of Will’s pain this falls flat. While Daniel dies, Ernest is salvaged as a symbol of the potential for remorse and even Aboriginal forgiveness for the white perpetrator. Ironically, it is Jack who models compassion to Ernest, conceivably from remorse. From here Harley takes a step towards forgiving his grandfather. In the economy of the text a balance is created through the characters’ enactment of resentments and their movement towards forgiveness.

The possibility of forgiveness in the novel emerges in its engagement with the themes of resentment and reconciliation. Harley’s cruel treatment of his grandfather as a form of revenge for Ernest’s appropriation of his life is subdued ironically by his uncles. While on the journey of discovery with Will and Jack, Harley experiences a shift in his orientation towards
Ernest. The narrator reveals that “Grandad’s face glistened with tears which now so often came to him” and he admits that; “Uncle Jack and Uncle Will’s arrival had given him some protection from me, and I had not harmed him for months” (p.171). Harley observes Jack’s initial response, “crouching over Ernest, patting him on the shoulder as the old man wept and blubbered” being unable to speak or walk due to the stroke (p.110). Compassion is modelled by Jack: “Uncle Jack put an arm around Ern’s shoulder, squeezed him roughly. He observed me for a moment. ‘You look a bit like him’” (p.111). A change is occurring in the relation between Harley and his grandfather as the latter witnesses Harley sharing what he has done to his grandson: “Despite those words there was something like gratitude in Ern’s expression. And perhaps after the way I’d treated him, it was understandable. Now I reached over and wiped his nose” (p.111). It is imaginable that Ernest, affected by the conversation, begins to feel the weight of his deeds. Slipping in and out of third person, and first person, the narrator distances himself, explaining that “they continued to speak of Ern …our heads tilted to Ern at intervals, and he would drop his head, look up beseechingly, and drop his head again in shame” (p.111). The narrator reflects that “it was only the strength I gained after Uncle Jack Chatalong and Uncle Will Coolman came to live with us that allowed me to feel anything like sympathy for poor silly old Ernest” (p.108). Harley has shown them the photographs. Harley is characterised as having to work through his resentment towards his grandfather. In the above scene he steps outside of the conversation to imagine the impact upon Ernest. Ernest is privy to the continuous narrative revealing to Harley the family history, including Ernest’s own dishonourable behaviour. This positions Ernest as an allegorical figure of settler society who must sit and listen to the narratives of Harley and the uncles despite the discomfort this creates. In doing so he begins to feel something akin to remorse. The narrative identifies this as shame but it is not shame alone for he expresses “something like gratitude” which is a reaching beyond self to value the other’s forgiveness. Forgiveness has a relation to remorse for in remorse there is hope for forgiveness following recognition of wrongdoing. Forgiveness is more palatable in an Aboriginal-authored text because it is a response that needs to be initiated by Aboriginal people. For a settler text to represent forgiveness by an Aboriginal character to a non-Aboriginal character would have to be seen as self-serving. Ernest’s symbolic listening as he sits in discomfort evokes a parallel with the reader sitting through Scott’s narrative. The novel’s representations are also discomforting, signifying as a history that has been discarded and denied by mainstream Australia.

Smell works as a metaphor in Benang to represent the abuse of Aboriginal people. The novel is framed by a smell of something discarded: “when I began this project, I too breathed in the scent of something discarded, something cast away …it was the smell of anxiety, of anger and betrayal” but linking this to Ernest he adds “Of course, it may equally have been the rank odour of my grandfather, his puke and shit” (p.9). The stench is further associated with the abandonment and sexual abuse of Tommy and his sister, Ellen, at Aunty Kate’s home. We are told that Tommy “keeps his eyes closed” and later “when they lined up, our Tommy kept his head down…watches shoes pass, pause before him” as the men select children for the weekend (pp.386-7). After the paragraph where Tommy is “selected” by an

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145 This links inter-textually with The White Earth written five years after Benang, where William’s smell from his ear infection lingers, remaining unnoticed by neglectful adults.
older man at Kate’s who abuses him, the narrative makes the association with stench:
“Perhaps some were happy to sit in the baths of bleach. Some Ellens and Tommys wore a peg
to bed at night when they went to bed, and not because of any bad smell. But there is no
denying what we smell here, my friends, my family. It is that familiar stench” (p.387). This
reverses the negative view propagated by locals at Gebalup about the smell of Aboriginal
people. When the white parents protest about the inclusion of Aboriginal children at school,
their children feign fainting: “Please Miss. It stinks down here near the blacks” (p.293). This
racism is subverted in the novel by the gravity of the smell of child sexual abuse.

Harley’s resentment at his loss can be seen in his desire to inflict pain on the aging and
dependent Ernest. The measured punishment he does inflict represents the complexity of his
feelings and a heritage of injustice that involves the negotiation of anger and resentment. In
the novel his resentment arises from abuse and the attempts to disconnect him from his
family line. Harley’s struggle works symbolically for the unjust personal and cultural damage
that has been inflicted upon Aboriginal people over time. As it is enacted in the novel,
Aboriginal people are left to master their resentment through meaning making and retracing
identity. This resonates with Thompson’s premise that a people are entitled to a past and not
be expected to bury it. This is exemplified by Harley’s journey to reconnect with his heritage.

As we will see in Sorry, words emerge as a theme in Benang. Harley remarks on “the way
words can blur, and shift, and welcome you among them” (p.16). In the section on mirrors
Harley comments that “Yes, reading about ourselves can be just like looking in the mirror”
(p.158). In Ernest’s house he reflects: “How heavy I was with words” yet he acknowledges
the paradox, “I drifted and floated” (p.159). As Haig points out, repetition and iteration work
as a destabilising technique, most obvious when Harley writes and reads to Ernest: “You see,
some things insist. Some things persist. Your plan needed more than a few generations”
(p.159). Immediately after, the adult Harley reveals that Ern is terrified “because he
understood what it meant that he shrivelled while he remained inside” he states that “My
births took longer; not something he could discard and forget. I gave birth to all these
words….Grandfather they spew you out. Me and you both, transformed” (p.159). Yet the
grandfather’s desire remains opaque, creating a sense in the novel that all is not revealed.
However, it is not through words alone but reconnection with his people via a spiritual
transportation of song and dance linking him with what has gone before and what is left to
him now, that Harley finds something of himself. The wind features strongly in this
pilgrimage. It is active in his uplifted state and it expresses resentment and spite but it can
also be a gentler breeze.

Benang creates an intricate representation of the impact of colonisation through its
characters. Their lives enact the injustice of disconnection, loss of family and community,
loss of life and threat to dignity. Through official documents it represents how basic
entitlements to marriage, work and freedom of association were denied to Aboriginal people.
It highlights the sexual exploitation of women and children and the labour of all Indigenous
people. The novel foregrounds themes of identity, and recovery from traumatic experience. It
identifies issues of estrangement within Aboriginal groups, the result of colonial intervention
and the imposition of systems of classification. It also highlights Aboriginal resentment of
settlers for past injustice and abuse. *Benang* dramatises the harms to Aboriginal people through massacres covered over by white society, the numerous lost children unclaimed by white fathers but also lost to the Aboriginal community. It is a self-reflexive novel interspersed with comments about its fragmented narrative that picks up a story a hundred or so pages later then darts backwards and forwards weaving together its narrative of self, other, community and the reclaiming of what has been lost. It is self-consciously a journey constructed through words that are sometimes seen to be inadequate. Its underlying theme is about “speaking from the heart” which offers a challenge to itself in its commitment to authenticity. Its use of metaphor sitting alongside official documents creates an atmosphere of both harsh reality and the fantastical as Harley hovers and floats throughout the narrative. In this way the novel enters into the history wars, asserting itself as a mix of both fiction and history. The official documents ground the novel in specific attitudes and policy. Ernest Seat is forced to listen to the pained reality before him of Harley and his family. He begins to respond with both gratitude and shame. The reader is forced to listen closely in order to piece together the narrative as a process which parallels history. Through the relationships between Harley and his grandfather, as well as Jack, Will and Daniel, the novel highlights the tension inherent in the process of reconciliation, remorse and forgiveness.
Chapter 3 – *Journey to the Stone Country*


*Journey to the Stone Country* is the first of the four settler novels to follow chronologically from the Indigenous-authored texts.\(^{146}\) The representation of injustice shown in the Indigenous novels sets the scene. One theme which has emerged is the shame imposed upon and borne by Aboriginal people for their Aboriginal identities and the loss of their children. *Benang* in particular foregrounds its protagonist’s anger and resentment as integral parts of his identity. *Plains of Promise* dramatises the concern of unaddressed trauma.

*Journey to the Stone Country* is of interest to this thesis because it engages with Indigenous issues that straddle the last decade of the 20\(^{th}\) century and the first decade of the new millennium. It is also a prize-winning novel, claiming the Miles Franklin Award in 2003. The novel foregrounds issues of connection to land and place, the misuse of sacred items, and the significance of culture. However, these are overshadowed by the emergence of past atrocities, denied and unaddressed, raising further issues of trauma, inter-generational responsibility, remorse and reparation. The novel generates themes of reconciliation while picking up on Aboriginal people’s resentment towards white perpetrators, a theme evident in *Benang*. Miller’s allegorical white character faces the possibility that forgiveness may not be possible. The novel explores epistemological questions through its representation of the differences between Aboriginal and settler approaches to knowledge, and it does this principally through the two main characters.

The novel attempts to overturn stereotypes, but in embedding the main characters within a romantic bubble it constructs a binary between the intuitive Aboriginal character, Bo, and the rational and intellectual white Annabelle. There is a fine line here as the characters are appealing but they also lack substance. In attempting to subvert negative racist representations, the novel reproduces its own romantic stereotypes embedded within a binary of rationality and intuitive forms of knowing. This is tantamount to the practice of othering, critiqued in post-colonial theory, a process whereby whiteness is defined in relation to what it is not. Despite this, the novel’s whiteness is not as typically opaque as whiteness often is in representation. Rather, Annabelle’s whiteness forms part of the novel’s critique of her rationality. While Bo is other to this, both characters come together in a negotiation of their ways of being in the world. On the surface the novel offers resolution to the issues that confront the couple and threaten their relationship; in so doing, the novel symbolically represents race relations in Australia. This can be seen as problematic if it frees the reader from all responsibility and care. The novel also raises reparation as an ongoing and unresolved matter, as I will demonstrate.

The story is set in North Queensland in the early 1990s within the context of the Mabo High Court decision in 1992. The plot sees Annabelle, an academic from Melbourne, flee from a broken marriage after her partner betrays her with one of his students. She heads for Queensland to seek comfort with an old friend Susan, an archaeologist who is surveying sites

for Indigenous artefacts, a prerequisite for obtaining mining or industrial permits. Annabelle takes refuge in her deceased parents’ home. When Susan invites Annabelle to accompany her on a field trip, she is reacquainted with a figure from her childhood, Bo Rennie. The characters’ movement from place to place creates a sense of new possibilities and discoveries. The narrative focusses on the developing relationship between Bo and Annabelle who re-visit the site of a distantly shared childhood involving familiar places and people known to both.

The reader is lulled into a sense of calm by the delicate physicality of the relationship between Bo and Annabelle as it blossoms. Bo reminds Annabelle that they swam naked together as kids when his grandmother and her mother met secretly, disobeying male colonial governance, and took the children for picnics to the waterhole. Annabelle volunteers to travel with Bo. They are followed by his niece and nephew, the silent Arner, who drives his own vehicle accompanied by his sister, Trace. Annabelle sees Trace stereotypically as a sexualised black woman who embodies desire. This has a jarring effect which creates reader discomfort about how this is to be read. Given the sexual exploitation of very young Aboriginal women by white men, represented in Scott’s, Wright’s and Jones’s novels, this stereotyping is disconcerting. Firstly, along with Annabelle, the reader is positioned to gaze upon Trace as a sensual young woman: “Trace smiled at Annabelle and gave a little shrug, the soft rounding of her shoulders and breasts moulding the faded green cotton of her T-shirt” (p.120). Then, as Annabelle gazes back upon Arner and Trace in their vehicle, she views Trace as an object of male desire: “Arner at the wheel…his sister beside him, the beautiful enigmatic maiden of all men’s dreams” (p.125). It is through Annabelle’s gaze of romantic sensuality that Trace is figured as a sexual object reminiscent of the practice of sexual exploitation of many maidens of men’s dreams, misused in domestic service. This can almost be forgiven in the context of the novel’s gentle sensuality. In relation to Annabelle and Bo, Susan contextualises this trip with reference to pleasure: “You’re enjoying yourself” (p.32) she tells Annabelle. Linda Miley, in her article “White Writing Black: Issues of Authorship and Authenticity in Non-Indigenous Representations of Australian Aboriginal Fictional Characters,” argues that Bo is represented in “stock physical signifiers that recur throughout the book and depict his physicality (e.g. drawing on his cigarette, sucking on his teeth, p. 43) without any inner monologue.” 147 This is apparent in the intense focus on the physical movements of the protagonists, zooming in on their physical presence and proximity:

Bo stood behind the Pajero at the open loading door rolling a smoke, his back to the young man and girl. He cupped his hands around the match and lit the cigarette. Annabelle was up front in the passenger seat. She was bent over studying a map on her knees by the interior light. Beyond her, through the windscreen, the crowns of the lofty cabbage palms planted by the company to beautify the accommodation compound were lit by the rising sun. Bo closed the loading door and came around the side of the Pajero. He climbed into the driving

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seat beside Annabelle and started the motor. He looked across at her, ‘You all set?’ (p.33).

Just in case the reader missed the intensity between the protagonists, we read that “Annabelle was experiencing the enjoyable guilt of avoiding her reality, setting out on this youthful adventure with Bo Rennie, Melbourne and Steven and the university unreachable” (pp.33-34). Later “she breathed freely again” after he “delicately took the stone from her hand…She would like to have told him, if it had been possible to speak of something so intimate in a simple way, at the quiet joy she felt of being in the bush with him” (p.48). This romantic atmosphere creates a balm for some of the less palatable aspects of the novel’s plot as well as the heaviness of the underlying theme. The romance lulls the reader into a sense of wellbeing which is then shaken by the revelation at the end. The novel effectively positions the reader to experience this shock, an abrupt awakening from the perfect romance. This reverberates with Gaita’s concept of shocked awakening to the reality of harm to another: “Remorse is a recognition of the reality of another through the shock of wronging her, just as grief is a recognition of the reality of another through the shock of losing her.”

The general outline of Bo’s character is that he is intuitive, a character trait which draws attention to epistemological questions as to how knowledge is acquired. Annabelle asks how he knew she would return to the country of her childhood. Bo explains to Annabelle his way of thinking: “There’s some things you know without knowing why you know them …and it don’t help to try explaining them” (p.52). Speaking of this way of knowing, Bo refers to Grandma Rennie of the Jangga people, whose example and teachings form the basis of his ontology. Bo waits for knowledge, trusting that understanding will emerge without a need to know everything ahead of time. Along with this approach to life goes a dislike of questions. With a strong sense of Bo’s hostility to questions, Annabelle restrains herself: “There was a stillness in the bush, a peacefulness between them that she was reluctant to disturb with her questions, so she held back” (p.41). Bo reflects a model of living in the present without anxiety about the future, drawn from Grandmother Rennie’s teaching. Bo tells Annabelle, “‘If we was wondering about where we was going then we wouldn’t be taking a lot of notice of where we was’” (p.46). He tells her Grandma Rennie’s philosophy: “‘You’ll know where you’re going, she’ll tell us when we get there.’ He turned and went on ahead of her up the track. ‘The old people didn’t like questions’” (p.46). This orientation is about holding knowledge and knowing when to impart it, as Grandma Rennie does with Bo. Philip Morrissey’s description of Dadirri, inherent in Indigenous cultural understanding as a “still awareness” in which “we do not try to hurry up things, we let them follow their natural course,” resonates with Bo’s representation of their way. Further on, when Bo explains the dying out of the aristocratic Bigges as a form of justice, he states that it was “their way of dealing with not being easy about holding the country” (p.233). He is challenged by John Hearn with “You surely don’t mean to suggest they died out on purpose?” Bo replies: “I

148 There is a hint of what is coming on p. 123 with Dougald’s comment, “They reckon old grandpa Beck got rid of a few.”
149 Good and Evil, p.52
don’t know what I mean! …You don’t have to know what you mean to mean something” (p.233). Later when Annabelle wonders how Bo feels upon returning to his homeland, she felt a conviction then that he would never attempt to explain himself or to share his innermost thoughts with her. No doubt he was like his grandmother had been, trusting to the steady increment of signs and silence rather than to the hazards of explanation (p.293).

In contrast “Explanation was a habit with her” (p. 293). In recognition of their differences, she reflects: “To have asked him directly, however, would have been to ignore Bo’s unspoken rule … She waited for the story to unfold … ” (p.297). There are two models operating here: sitting quietly with the unknown and the uncertainty this brings, juxtaposed with an obsessive need to know what’s coming next, indicative of a fear of the unknown.

The narrator establishes a binary between the two. Annabelle comes from an environment where seeking explanation is encouraged. She reflects that Bo’s silence and distance is “something she would have to accustom herself to. But she wondered if, on those terms she would ever feel herself to be a part of his inner life” (p.293). The third person narrator represents her as accustomed to explanatory dialogue: “There was a reassurance in it and she wondered if she could ever learn to do without it” (p.293). The narrative then calls her position into question by critiquing academia. Annabelle thinks of Steven “and the layered rationalisations of his letter. She had not finished reading it. It would change nothing for her. Its explanations explained nothing” (p.293). Prior to this Annabelle reflects that Steven’s “haughty reasoning had no bearing on the real world. Steven had never been able to distinguish the real world from the world of his intellect” (p.242). The empty explanations coming from her unfaithful husband fare badly compared to the enigmatic, sensual presence of Bo. Hence, the novel underlines ways of knowing through juxtaposing epistemological questions about the different ways of coming to understanding, expression and enquiry. While this differentiation can be seen as an attempt to recognise diversity, it also risks creating caricatures of both, as the two main characters play out their differences in acquiring knowledge and understanding, and dealing with conflict. Commenting on Miller’s view that Aboriginal people up North are not as interested in reconciliation as acknowledging difference, Lucy Clarke notes that one of the differences examined in the novel is “the way European culture is based on this right to know everything.” She sees this dramatised through the conflict Annabelle faces. She asks “will Annabelle Beck give up the European right to know everything” (p.6). This resonates with my argument that the novel models oppositional epistemological approaches. The character Annabelle reaches a precipice where she cannot seek to know everything she desires about Bo without intruding into his private world. The colonial intent to know the Other as an object of the white gaze is here critiqued. Hence different ways of knowing, and levels of comfort with not knowing, are explored in the novel. While western rationalism is challenged it leads to an idealised Aboriginal character in Bo. Somewhat stereotypically he symbolises non-rational, intuitive knowing. At its extreme this reads as recreating a nature /culture binary. For example, Bo is represented as

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being animalistic when he asserts that there is “nothing like a good fight” (p.226). He is the intuitive other of rationally acquired knowledge represented by the white, middle-class academic, Annabelle. Paradoxically, the novel does self-consciously draw attention to the issue of stereotypes through Annabelle who scrutinises her reflections on Bo’s nephew, Arner. She wonders “if she is in danger of misreading him…as Dryden’s noble savage” in his distanced, silent mode of absorbing others (p.184). In this way the novel draws attention to its own stereotyping.

While this binary can be read as stereotypical, it is not straightforwardly so, partly because it contains elements of a romantic Aboriginal representation of Dadirri, embodying a language of silent signs and gestures which goes beyond verbal discourse. The fact that the author claims to have based this novel on an Aboriginal friend complicates the reading position. This extra information has the effect of validating the text to some extent. It is a way of claiming authenticity and permission to represent Aboriginality. In fairness to the novel it offers different forms of Aboriginality, through a varied cast of Aboriginal characters. However, the theme of acquiescing to signs, silence and an intuitive inner reflection forms a strong feature in all of the Aboriginal characters.

The tension between the two models of epistemology represents the complexity of the intersection of two cultures: one is based on more subtle forms of communication while the other emphasises explanation, specified in the novel as symbolic of a ‘rational’ discursive society. Miley comments on the absence of any internal soliloquy in Bo. She expresses the view that the characters in the novel are overladen with the burden of political correctness. She points to the context of “an increasingly aware cultural climate” within which the book was written (p.14). Working within a framework of whiteness that objectifies the other in asserting a white subjectivity, she references works by Fanon and bell hooks on the topic of black subjectivity. Miley’s critique of the novel’s stereotypes reflects something of my own view that they are problematic. She claims of the characters that they remain somewhat two dimensional and seem to be mouthpieces for a range of views about race relations. Miller’s narrative bends under the weight of its well-intentioned polemic as it tries to cover wide-ranging issues on the social/political agenda in terms of Indigenous and non-Indigenous history and culture. Often Indigenous characters are reduced to familiar stereotypes in these debates (p.14).

Andrew Riemer echoes this view, in his article “Hope in a type of Hell,” a review for The Age in which he critiques the characters of Annabelle and Bo as “ciphers, abstractions even, without the ‘rightness’ that distinguishes fully fledged characters.” Katherine England acknowledges this too while celebrating the text as a “brave and well considered novel, redolent with a deeply-felt and beautifully conveyed sense of place. Save perhaps for Bo and the enigmatic Arner, Miller has eschewed both sentimentality and easy answers: his

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152 This fracture also occurs in Benang when Harley searches for words, written words, to contain his elevation, represented as a protective behaviour following the abuse by his grandfather.

characters and conflicts ring vibrantly true, his conclusions remain challengingly open.”

However, I believe the novel’s sentimentality creates superficial characters who fail to engage the reader. This is true of Bo’s character especially. Bo is represented as having an alluring ease with himself that is disturbed but ultimately unshaken by the harsh reality of the past. Arner’s silence on the other hand has a disturbing depth. Peter Pierce in Australian Book Review remarks on the silent observing presence of Arner “as if pondering whether there might be some part for him to play in the novel.” This insight draws attention to the role of Arner in the novel which I argue becomes more resolute towards the end. Pierce draws attention to the fact that Miller is the first non-Aboriginal writer since Keneally to take on the characterisation of an Aboriginal. In his review titled “Elusive Beauties” he suggests that Miller “does so without condescension or a sense of trespass” (p.10).

There is something about Miller’s play on the idea of stereotypes and his nonchalant construction of these which makes for a more complex reading than a straightforward binary. However, the dichotomous portrayal of Bo, constructed in opposition to Annabelle, has some problematic implications. As a part of her argument that Aboriginal people are continually represented in opposition to the ‘norm’ of society, Noela McNamara offers a reading of the novel that perceives it in terms of white privilege. Her perception of privilege is based on the material power and perceived acts of agency of the non-Aboriginal character, Annabelle. McNamara locates this novel, along with The White Earth and The Secret River, as examples of the “new racism” despite her acknowledgement of its redemptive intentions. She argues that racism manifests itself through the potential of these novels to reinforce negative unconscious images of Aboriginal people, born of colonialism (p.190). This rings true to my own critique of the novel’s representation of Indigenous people who fight out their anger instead of politely containing it. Polite containment is how whites are portrayed in a simple binary which could be read as provocative with its implications of ‘civilised’ and ‘animalistic’ representations. Annabelle remarks, “My dad used to tell us you people fought like wild dogs over there at Verbena” (p.226). Speaking back to this racist stereotype Bo replies:

Wild dogs? Well we fought when we needed to fight, that’s what we did. We had some real good fights out in front of that old tamarind tree of Grandma’s. I don’t recall your old feller ever getting himself mixed up in one, but he might have, he was always over our way and there’s plenty of things happened there I never knew about. We’d belt each with sticks till we drew blood………….There’s nothing like a good fight’ (pp.226-7).

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156 Noela McNamara, “Literary Legacy: Unconscious Bias.” PhD. Postgraduate Student, Schools of Humanities & Indigenous Australian Studies, James Cook University, McGregor Road, Smithfield, Queensland. noela.mcnamara@my.jcu.edu.au

157 For a discussion on the symbolism of dogs in Miller’s and Coetzee’s work Disgrace see “‘This is dog country’: Reading of Coetzee in Alex Miller’s Journey to the Stone Country,” Julie Mullaney, Postcolonial Text, Vol 4, No 3, 2008: pp.1-18.
The possibility that Annabelle’s father may have been involved in the fighting is left open, flagging the underlying truth. This dialogue emerges in the context of a visit to the Hearn family in the Ranna district, near where the aristocratic Bigges property has fallen into decay. The Hearns are in conflict over Mathew Hearn falling in love with Trace, Bo’s niece, and his announcement that he plans to find work and leave home. In relation to the subdued conflict that evokes this dialogue, and building the binary, Bo adds:

They’re angry about something but they’re acting polite. What’s that supposed to mean? They can’t come right out and say nothing! That’s the trouble with these people. It’s got to be all tippy toeing around with them…What’s he mean it’s not what she’s been dreaming of for her boy? Mathew’s a good boy alright, but this is not what Dougald’s been dreaming of for Trace either. They don’t know how to ease up these people… ‘They’re just too bloody white’ (pp.227-228).

This comment creates an idea of a continuum of whiteness with repression of emotion at the far end and volatility at the other. Ironically it suggests Bo is more direct whereas he is largely represented as withholding his feelings.

Rather than being laden with political correctness it is as though the narrator likes to test the boundaries of what is acceptable. For example, referring to Ruth Hearn, Bo begins the dialogue with “He needs to give that woman a bloody good hiding,” creating another moment of discomfort because of its suggestion of domestic violence. Typically, Bo quickly qualifies his provocative statement with “Every family needs a good fight once in a while to clear the air. And I reckon now’s a good time for these Hearns to have one” (p.226). The character Annabelle softens Bo’s misogynistic comment even more by sharing his sentiment: “I bags Mrs Anderson! I’d love to give that woman a thump” (p.226). Interestingly, though, it is a woman who is the object of their anger. The reader is also positioned with Annabelle as Mrs Anderson controls and represses the children – “Ellen did I hear your mother ask you to do something” and we are told that “Mrs Anderson rose and took the children’s hands and when Ellen would have hung back she pulled her roughly to her side” (pp. 223, 225). She is not a likeable character, especially as she has no respect for individual freedom. This is established through Bo who represents respect for individual agency while Mrs Anderson is an agent of control. Of Mathew and Trace he says: “Maybe we ought to leave them two to get this thing done their own way. I don’t believe they need us to do it for them” (p.229).

Conflict emerges between Bo and Annabelle at the Bigges’ homestead when she wants to take photos as evidence of the place’s historical significance. This distresses Bo who perceives the Bigges as a minuscule speck in his own people’s age-old occupation of Australia. He is glad they are gone and welcomes the disappearance of all vestiges of them. Agnes Vogler, in an article entitled, “Forging heritage for the tourist gaze: Australian history and contemporary representations reviewed” views this scene as a conflict between different narratives of history. 158 Within her critique the dominant discourse of history is one that legitimises national myths – in this case, the supremacy of colonial occupation. Voicing a

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postmodern critique of history typical of the History Wars, Vogler suggests that Miller’s novel highlights the difficulty of representing both historical narratives: “A significant problem, as Miller goes on to discuss, is that colonial history depends for its dominant status, to an extent, both on the erasure of a prior Indigenous presence and on a silence regarding some aspects of how early settlers acquired their land” (p.102). Marc Delrez, in an article entitled “Fearful Symmetries: Trauma and Settler Envy”, critiques the novel for appropriating a position of colonial victim. Delrez’s critique reinforces my own appraisal of the novel, showing in the process the precarious path travelled by a post-colonial novel. Delrez refers to the Bigges’ scenario in relation to the character, Annabelle, who he argues is positioned to claim a comparable right to her history. This touches upon settler envy of belonging. He asserts:

Miller’s ambiguity is then that he finds an opportunity to (evoke) the History Wars, with their call to explore the darker dimensions of Australia’s past, in order to urge a reconsideration of settler experience too, which is placed on a par with suppressed knowledge about the sufferings endured by the Aborigines — down to the reference to the ‘pioneering’ pastoralists as a “vanishing race” (p.61).

This is dramatised at the Ranna homestead when Bo and Annabelle face their first cultural conflict. By entering the house Annabelle feels “like a thief, and a little that her entry into the house might in some subtle manner betray her allegiance with Bo” (p.170). She remembers “a vanished race Bo had said” (p.71). When she discusses her desire to record what she finds there as a “site of national importance,” Bo replies “I don’t think the old Bigges place is what Susan had in mind” (p.175). The narrator informs us that Bo is “learning something about her he had not understood before” (p.175). Challenging Bo with the assertion that the Bigges homestead is equal to the stone playgrounds creates an uneasy feeling between them. However, the novels puts this in perspective when Bo tells her:

That stone ground isn’t the past. Them stones are there for the future too. They don’t mean no less to me and Dougal than they meant to Grandma in her day, and to her grandma before that. Them stones don’t mean no less to the Jangga people today than they meant the day they was out there (p.176).

Annabelle cannot let it go. From a western perspective she asks “And when was that...In its way this is no different to the playgrounds” to which he replies, “It is different and you know it’s different” (p.177). Bo’s position has more momentum for the reader as it evokes remorse for the loss experienced by Aboriginal people, reducing the Bigges’ homestead to a remnant and symbol of this harm.

Identifying settler envy in this cultural tension Delrez suggests: “In this context, it may not be innocent of Miller that he should represent settler history as equally in need of an archaeological excavation of its own” (p.61). As Delrez argues, the settler position is represented through Annabelle who asserts her connection to culture as history: “If you lost

too many of them, surely you lost your sense of who you were” (p.179). Of Bo’s people’s playgrounds she thinks “could she believe in them emotionally for herself” (p.179). Linking her position with Bo’s intuitive approach, the novel informs the reader: “her defence of Ranna was based on a gut feeling. It was a conviction she couldn’t deny through reasoned argument” (p.179). This reads as an additional appropriation of Bo’s intuitive outlook to establish a right to her past. Her character becomes even more complicated when she shows awareness of what she does while defending her position to herself that:

In doing this she recognised uneasily that she was also defending the cultural significance of the Ranna homestead as being equal to the significance of the playgrounds of the old Murri people. It disquieted her to find herself adopting such a position, as she was not convinced of its rightness (p.179).

Despite this uneasiness, she goes on to think about her emotional connection to place, knowing “it would trouble her to turn her back on this place” (p.180). Highlighting the question of difference in a way that symbolises an equal playing field, she wonders “What might there be… in Bo’s mind that would be just as foreign to her, just as prejudicial to her understanding, as her piece of Thomas Carlyle trivia would be to him” (p.180). The novel appears to be attempting to create balance in this dilemma but Bo then puts it in the perspective of Aboriginal injustice: “I wouldn’t go feeling sorry for them Bigges...They enjoyed it while they had it. My Grandma knew them when she was a girl, sitting up there on that verandah by the French windows in their cane chairs” (p.232). Bo puts the Bigges’ lot in the wider perspective of the loss that Aboriginal people endured:

No one keeps a thing forever. It’s yours one day then someone else’s tomorrow. People you never knew and never will know are gonna have their turn with what you once had in your hand. There’s no news in knowing that. The Bigges didn’t do too bad when you think what the old people who had it before them got shifted to. He fell silent his feelings of injustice aroused, smoking a cigarette and squinting down at the brindle bitch, as if his appeal was to her powers of reasoning and her sense of injustice (pp.232-3).

Bo’s description does at one point minimise Aboriginal loss of land, casting the loss as seemingly inevitable by passing on what is held in the present. This sits uneasily with his description of the land as a relationship shared with ancestors. Ultimately, later events serve to reduce Annabelle’s concern with the Bigges remnants to minuscule significance by the magnitude of what she comes to bear.

An underlying theme in the novel is that of returning what is rightfully owned to Aboriginal people. This is enacted through Annabelle’s finding of a stone which she holds onto with growing unease, eventually deciding to return it to where it belongs. This acknowledgement of taking what was not hers has wider symbolic implications. It creates an association of guilt through the reader’s identification with her character in the following paragraph:

The Burranbah stone lay on a circular table at the centre of the room where she had put it before going to bed. She stepped across and picked it up, hefting its
weightiness, considering it and remembering Dougald Gnapun’s unease. The enormous weight of his silence. A counterweight to the abiding silence of the stone. Her question as to its use marked by him, never to be answered. Maybe they all hate us, she thought. Deep down, for what we’ve stolen from them. For what we’ve done to them. It was the first time she had considered such a possibility and she was a little shocked by the implications of it. To be hated, after all. It was unthinkable. ……Not to be forgiven by the people one lived among (p.94).

There is a tokenistic element to this reflection, a flippancy almost for she has never thought before that Aboriginal people may feel resentment towards her and her people; this recognition comes out of nowhere. The theme of silence emerges again in the context of the silence of the stone, echoed by Dougald’s silence about it. The stone opens up the possibility that to respond fully and make reparation does not necessarily mean forgiveness. This may be an uncomfortable reality but it is nonetheless one that is present when people have wounds that make it impossible to forgive. But this does not mean that there cannot be resolution. For as Thompson’s explains, whereby forgiveness is not always possible, the aim is for respectful relations based on trust and acknowledgement. Dougald does not answer because he does not know the stone’s significance. The stone is a metaphor for things beyond knowing. It symbolises getting back and giving back what belongs elsewhere, echoing Bo’s desire to regain his grandmother’s property.

The political and legal background with which this text engages is the handing down of the Mabo decision in 1992 and the Native Title Act legislation passed by parliament in 1993. As the title of the novel suggests, the land – particularly the stone country – is a theme throughout the text. This is highlighted with the journey into historically shared country, and Bo’s desire to take back his ancestral land. He confides:

There’s something I haven’t done yet that I’m planning to do. I’m going to get Grandma’s old place back. There was a tightness in his voice suddenly, as if speaking of this matter he were moved by an apprehension or an emotion that he had not anticipated. ‘The time’s never been right to have a go at it before this’ (p. 190).

Grandma Rennie, revered as a teacher of Aboriginal knowledge and custom, married a Scotsman, Iain Rennie, who was meant for one of the Bigges’ girls, who ironically remained single and the family died out. Although the property was bequeathed to her after her husband’s death, his Grandma was tricked out of it through relatives and a local estate agent. Drawing attention to a racist framework, Bo tells Annabelle that Grandma Rennie was told by a solicitor that she was lucky to get anything given the Protection Act of the time, rendering her marriage to a white man unlawful. This event touches the non-fictional historical world. As Haebich notes, the Western Australian Act was based on the Queensland 1897 Act whereby “Aboriginal women had to have the permission of the Chief Protector of Aborigines to marry non-Aboriginal men” (p.187).

Annabelle’s struggle with her conscience first emerges around possession of the stone. This is juxtaposed with Bo’s invitation to the stone playground. It appears that there is a plan
at some stage to place it there, yet this appears to have been decided outside the reader’s vision. The reader is positioned to stay with the uncertainty for although we enter into Annabelle’s thinking we are left wondering about the consequences to which she refers which heralds the hidden narrative: “She carried the stone to the end of the room and stood at the screen looking into the front verandah, wondering where to put it. She knew she should have the courage to accept Bo’s invitation and go to the playgrounds of the old people….She should face the consequences of knowing such things. Go to his heartland with him. For there surely would be consequences” (p. 95). While there is no hint as to what these consequences are, in retrospect it is a forewarning of what is to come. Symbolically “She put the stone down beside her grandfather” – his photograph (p. 96). Highlighting individual responsibility, the novel has left the decision to Annabelle. There is no direct input from Aboriginal people as to what to do with the stone for they no longer know its meaning. There are subtle expressions of discomfort but Annabelle has missed the seriousness of these signs, reminiscent of Cordner’s description of being “troubled and restless” at the onset of remorse.  

The next layer of the plot is experienced as a shock as it jolts into the characters’ and reader consciousness, in a parallel experience. This reflects the experience of remorse, whereby one is shocked into a sudden awareness of the impact of one’s actions upon another. Gaita characterises remorse as the “shock of wronging” but it is also “a disciplined remembrance of the moral significance of what we did.” The model of remorse that emerges is one of a trajectory with vague feelings of discomfort and shock, followed by a recognition of the impact upon our moral consciousness. This does not mean that there is a rigid sequence of experience for, as Cordner explains, remorse can become stuck in an embryonic form.

The novel takes a more serious turn when Annabelle and Bo make the journey to Verbena with plans to visit Grandma Rennie’s old property and the stone playground. After visiting the endearing Elsie (Les Marra’s sister, Les being instrumental in promoting the controversial damming of the Bowen River in the Ranna region) and Tiger, her Indian husband, shunned by the Land Council, Bo is urged to visit old Panya, an Aboriginal elder who grew up with Bo’s grandmother. This visit brings an unexpected heaviness to the novel. It is the silent, self-contained Arner, represented in the novel as awaiting “the inheritance of his kingdom,” who now moves more obviously into a position of solidity in the novel (p.29). He is variously represented as “withdrawn and aloof” (p.119) “stately” (p.183) and with “a gift” (p.272) that Bo believes he doesn’t know how to use and who barely acknowledges others’ existence (p.136). From the start Panya expresses favouritism by motioning Arner to sit by her side: “‘Come over here, Arner! Let Auntie Panya touch you’” (p.335). One element of surprise is the way she treats the usually steady, confident Bo, who is “silent, shifting uneasily” (p.336). While he stands with Annabelle at a distance, Panya attacks Bo indirectly in the third person: “‘He don’t even know his own grandmother’s name!’ she confided, lifting Arner’s hand to her lips and kissing it… ‘What else don’t he know?’” (p.336). Then directly, “‘They tell me you give up the drink, Bo Rennie’” (p.336). The narrator remarks

161 Good and Evil, pp.52 & 59.
It seemed as if Panya had forgotten Bo and would not address him again, her preoccupation (was) with passing some occult knowledge to her companion on the settee. Then suddenly she said, ‘You goin up there to the playground of the old people.’ Her voice accused him (p.337).

The reader is invited to feel repelled by Panya, creating a distance from this scene to avoid seeing an Aboriginal elder represented in such a way. The narrator creates a representation of distaste: “She brought up more loose phlegm and swallowed it” as she accuses Bo indirectly to Arner, “‘he’s taking that Beck woman to the playground of the old people, that’s what he’s doin. I know him. That woman already got things don’t belong to her. But she wants everything’ (p.337). The reader is positioned to feel repelled by Panya’s environment: “The big flies droning around, dipping in and out of the bucket” that she uses for the toilet (p.336). The reader could understandably conclude that the novel does not endorse her perspective. Old Panya builds up to the climactic moment when the secret she holds comes forth: “‘He’s gonna show her the heart of the old people.’ She groaned and coughed and drew on a cigarette, reaching for what she had to say. ‘That grandfather of hers hunted us in the moonlight. Louis Beck and his mate, George Bigges’” (p.338). Panya dismisses Bo, telling him:

You don’t know nothing’ about the stone people (p.338). When we was little children together me and her seen the killings. That woman there! Her grandad was huntin our families through them scrubs. Your grandmother’s old lady hid us two kids with her in the hollow carcass of a old scrubber bull…all curled up inside…looking out through the old bull’s skullholes watching them men murderin people…I don’t forget that sight’ she said and was suddenly overcome by her emotions (p.339).

Reliving the trauma, Panya “sat weeping noisily and unable to speak, her hands clinging to Arner’s big hand, her fingers kneading his flesh as if she found a resource in his great size and in the perfect equanimity of his unbroken silence” (p.339). Expressing her indignation over Annabelle’s presence, Panya asks “‘You bring that Beck woman here to apologise to me?’” (p.341). Arner’s previously shadowy presence moves to the foreground here; as a silent source of support he bears witness to Panya’s trauma narrative. If the repellent aspect of Panya’s representation is realised, then the pain embedded within her narrative might be missed. But like Plains of Promise the novel reveals how grief, with no acknowledgement of harm done by a perpetrator, has a detrimental impact upon a person’s wellbeing. As Panya says:

No one never come here and asked me to forgive em. I never heard nothing from any of em. They knew where I was livin all these years, but not one of them Becks or Bigges ever come by and asked me to forgive em. All they wanna do is forget. They want us to believe the bad times is over and we all gotta be friends now. Only they got everything for themselves, and they not giving it back (p.344).

The heaviness of Panya’s exposure flattens the energy between Bo and Annabelle. As an allegory for race relations, Bo and Annabelle’s relationship is marred by the past deeds of her
ancestors. Consistent with character, Bo goes off alone without speaking to Annabelle. Annabelle observes “Bo no longer looked like the confident Queensland ringer she had seen that day at Burranbah…She sat looking at him, wondering if they would ever be able to reclaim their innocence with each other” (p.347). Symbolically this represents the state of race relations in Australia, mirroring the Christian narrative of origin, of lost innocence.

Katherine England sees European culture’s shame dramatised in the character of Annabelle: “in a shattering confrontation with the bitter local guardian of Aboriginal history, she learns that it is riddled with more than white ants, that its heritage – and hers – is shame.” 162 This reflects Gaita’s position that shame is the response of a nation to the injustice endured by Aboriginal people. However, Annabelle also undergoes a deeper response than shame as her own stable, untroubled sense of belonging is shaken by her discovery of her heritage.

I disagree with Noela McNamara’s reading of Annabelle’s response to Panya’s disclosure, as reducing it to an equal playing field of war. Speaking of the novel’s “deficient discourse” in relation to Aboriginal people, McNamara claims:

Similarly, Miller’s text highlights injustices of the present and past, particularly in a powerful accusatory speech made by Panya, the Jangga Elder, to Annabelle, the white protagonist. When Annabelle learns about the violent actions of her grandfather, however, she measures them in the context of a battlefield where soldiers of equal strength met, as opposed to a massacre of innocent women and children (p.192).

On the contrary, the overwhelming sense of Annabelle’s response is one of remorse. The novel’s attempt to create an equal playing field is more obvious through the character of Bo who reflects an attitude of this kind with his comment “The old people done their share of killings too” (p.360). It is arguable that this is balanced in the text’s economy of meaning by Annabelle’s remorse and her decision not to go to the stone country. Arner’s reserve also leaves room for a different interpretation.

Clearly Annabelle feels the weight of her family’s history as she wrestles with her own guilt. This mirrors the example of Eichmann’s son who feels contaminated by his father’s actions. Raimond Gaita differentiates between guilt, shame and pollution in relation to Eichmann’s son. He explains “The oppressive and ineradicable gloom of that condition was neither shame nor guilt, but more like the condition the ancient Greeks described in their tragedies as ‘pollution.’” 163 In relation to the holocaust Bernard Schlink argues “Even after an era is past, it casts a shadow over the present, infecting later generations with a sense of guilt, responsibility and self-questioning.”164 Annabelle too is unable to extricate herself from the past nor does she try, making her a model of humility and responsibility. The novel was

163 A Common Humanity, p.94.
written at a time in Australia when government was unable to take this step of acknowledging past injury. Annabelle thinks:

Surely there would have to be an atonement in blood for such horrors. Could there ever be an end to the offence? What amends could there ever be for murder? Annabelle knew that the truth of Panya’s indictment lay behind the decades of her own family’s silence (p.347).

She imagines her grandfather carrying out the act described by Panya. “She felt she must surely be haunted for the rest of her days by Panya’s story” as indeed Panya is herself (p.347). Panya’s story reveals

Louis Beck ride down my little brother across that clearing and bust his skull wide open with his iron stirrup... I see that little boy running for shelter...every day of my life...and weep for that little boy every day of my life (p.340).

This sorrow brings the motif of the vulnerable child to a novel where it is otherwise missing, here representing the worst of colonial violence.

The narrator represents Annabelle as deeply affected by what she hears. As she watches Bo walk away in a broken state: “She felt sick in the stomach. She was afraid and ashamed and angry all at once. She felt accused as if she had committed the murder herself and must answer to Panya’s charge” (p.346). Re-imagining Panya’s story of what happened, almost like a flashback as if she too has been caught in a form of secondary trauma: “She could see her fierce grandfather’s bronze stirrup catch the cold glint of moonlight as he swung it over the head of the terrified boy running for the shelter of the scrub” (p.347). Then incongruently in her mind’s eye Annabelle remembers the photo of her grandfather where she symbolically placed the stone: “a figure shrunken without dignity in his crumpled three-piece suit and narrow brimmed hat, grinning senselessly at the world” (p.348). While this appears to produce two rather incongruent images, the powerlessness of the figure is undermined by the absence of dignity. Exhibiting the language of both remorse and trauma theory, Annabelle considers, “His life and his deeds brought to a ruin by the haunting of his past” (p.348). Marc Delrez could be forgiven for concluding that Annabelle appropriates a position of victim in this instance, for it becomes about her pain, while Bo’s is less pronounced and under-disclosed. Delrez expresses concern that novels which seek to find comparable experiences to Aboriginal trauma are acquiring more recognition than warranted, claiming

The novel by Alex Miller… constitutes a revealing case in point, as it obviously seeks to provide a fictional exploration of the traumatic events which happened on the colonial frontier in Australia, but it does so in a way which ultimately likens the perpetrators to the victims (p.62).

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165 This novel was first published in 2002 when Australian government leaders were still distancing themselves from past deeds. The Rudd Government did not apologise to the Aboriginal people of Australia until 2008.
166 Secondary trauma occurs when a witness listens to a victim relive their trauma with the transfer of traumatic emotion absorbed by the listener.
167 “Fearful Symmetries: Trauma and Settler Envy” p.8.
While I recognise Delrez’s characterisation of the white protagonist, Annabelle, as victim, ultimately it is Panya, the Aboriginal elder, for whom the reader feels remorse. It is she who bears the wound.

The novel raises the practice of forgetting discussed by Fiona Probyn-Rapsey in an article entitled “White Closets, Jangling Nerves and the Biopolitics of the Public Secret” in which she contextualises her reading of the novel with reference to silence in Australian society embodying various forms of denial. Probyn-Rapsey argues that forgetting in the Journey to the Stone Country emerges through Annabelle who has known in a half-knowing kind of way that Panya’s narrative is true. For example, Annabelle wonders, “Had her father known the truth? That gentle, loving man? Had her father secretly known himself to be the son of a murderer and his beloved land the plunder of crime?” (p.348). A different frame of reality takes shape as she considers the absence of the Murris in the town museums, where she was told “Why, Miss, didn’t you know there were no Murris in this part of the country” (p.348). Annabelle reflects “For it was either tell her that or tell her the celebrated pioneering forebears of the district had been murderers and thieves. And that is what they had been…The truth was simple enough, but nearly impossible to deal with” (p.349). Through Annabelle the novel makes a clear moral assertion about the crime against the first peoples of this country. As Probyn-Rapsey points out, Annabelle’s soliloquy reveals that she had a glimpse of something not altogether visible which rises to the surface:

Panya’s story of the massacre of her family by members of Annabelle’s own family is significant for its portrayal of complicity, and for showing that Annabelle may well have known this story, in some way, without acknowledging the full horror, for her whole life: Annabelle knew that the truth of Panya’s indictment lay behind the decades of her own family’s silence (p.68).

But significantly she adds: “Annabelle herself never asks until the moment when she is forced to consider how it was that her family came to own the vast tract of land that she is ‘from’” (p.68). Probyn-Rapsey uses the notion of ‘sublime haunting’ to indicate matters left unacknowledged by society, suggesting Annabelle’s sense that she will be forever haunted by Panya’s narrative. In remorse the victim haunts the remorseful individual’s world.

Grandma Rennie keeps the narrative from Bo, as Probyn-Rapsey points out: “her strategy therefore included ‘not telling’, keeping those family secrets” (p.70). The novel represents the impact of Panya’s revelation upon Bo for as he approached Annabelle he “did not look at her. There was a stillness between them that shocked her” (p.349). Echoing Delrez’s critique, the text represents Annabelle as the victim dispossessed who tells herself that the relationship is over and that Bo will drop her at Zamia Street and never return for her:

Her throat was dry and she felt empty. Panya was right. This country was broken and forlorn. That war was over. The old pioneering families gone long ago. There was no place in it for her. ..Panya was right, the Murris would persist and would

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still be here in a thousand years when the days of cattle and mines would be little more than a distant memory, a brief interruption to the life of the stone people. She felt fatalistic, anguished and strangely detached all at the same time. She felt that her fate was not something she could manage to determine herself but that it would be determined for her by the vast impersonal forces of culture and history (p.349).

Again representing colonial displacement and sense of unbelonging, Annabelle faces the “silence and absence” that she feared as a child would greet her when she returned from boarding school, confronting her now in Bo’s distance from her (p.353). Making it about Annabelle’s loss the text reveals a weight of sadness in her heart, their journey becoming the dream she had dreamed again and again at boarding school…her nightmare of returning home to find her family gone and only silence and absence…the country forbidding and desolate (p.353).

This sense of desolation juxtaposes the different relationship to country, where country is central to Aboriginal philosophy and wellbeing. Without her family the land is empty for Annabelle whereas the land is everything to Bo, because it includes the ancestral presence of his people.

Almost as an act of reverence, slowly and sensitively the novel offers a respectful distance and length of silence between Bo and Annabelle. They begin to exchange a few perfunctory words about the places they drive through while the narrator represents a glimpse of Bo’s interiority, “wrestling the wheel as if terrified of missing a rendezvous…and leave him stranded on the wrong side of history” (p.352). This statement represents his internal struggle between his cultural inheritance and his feelings for Annabelle.

While I agree with Miley about the impoverishment of Bo’s soliloquy, there is a further glimpse of his subjectivity after Panya has threatened to curse him if he takes Annabelle to the stone playground. However, it is not yet a direct statement by the character but rather exposes more of his internal struggle when he faces being shamed by the old people. While Bo outwardly informs Annabelle, “Mount Bulgonunna”…That’s the only place you can see from along this road,” the narrator reveals his internal struggle: “To be cursed by the old people, the most terrible outcome of life” (p.354). Still withholding as they drive up to Verbena, Bo informs her “Grandma’s tamarind tree” (p.355). Finally, several pages on, Bo speaks his mind but it is in the form of resolution:

He looked at her, hesitating, then he reached and took her hand in his, something of apology in his gesture and of sorrow in his voice. ‘Old Panya’s just filled with hatred.’ He said. ‘She can’t help herself. You don’t want to blame her too much. She never had what Grandma had (pp.359-60).

He continues in what seems like an attempt to paper over the cracks that have opened up in their relationship by the shock of Panya’s truth telling:

169 Philip Morrissey spoke of this in his lecture 8/10/14.
The old people done their share of killings too. Them days is over. If we don’t live together now we gonna do it all again in years to come. The way my Grandma seen it, brothers and sisters don’t kill each other. And that’s the way she lived. There was white kids from them strays come with us to the playgrounds that time. She didn’t care who you was. She might have sung them fellers with Panya that time when she was still a young woman, but that wasn’t the way she lived her life. I seen the way Grandma lived her life (p.360).

This is an example of the novel’s creation of an equal playing field, dramatising a form of reconciliation through forgiveness. However, paradoxically, Arner sits silently while Bo speaks; he does not endorse this sentiment. Bo addresses him with “you don’t want to go listening to that hatred stuff, Arner” (pp.360-1). Characteristically non-communicative “Arner was as still as stone” (p.361). Bo implores him to speak, challenging him with: “You not planning on going against me and Annabelle are you?” (p.361). While this is going on Annabelle wants to reach out to Arner and reassure him and Bo, too. Echoing Miley’s critique as a “somewhat stereotyped rendition of a sympathetic and well-intentioned white female” Annabelle is cast here as an almost perfect character apart from her heritage, as if she is made to make amends, suggesting a fair degree of political correctness (p.15). Arner finally replies with a sentiment that stuns Bo and sends him off again for silent reflection: “I wouldn’t go against you Uncle Bo” (p.362).

The novel marks a shift in Bo which can be read as a turning point, symbolically a form of meeting Annabelle half way. Bo has his limits as regards silence in this instance, moving closer to Annabelle’s direct expression. When Arner leaves with no further word, Bo differentiates himself from Arner telling Annabelle: “That boy’s no different from his dad” and “That’s what old Dougald would have done. Just get up and leave without sayin nothing. Him and old fella was the same. I used to wish I was just like them but I’m not” (p.362). While Bo is in fact represented as very like them, there is a movement here towards explanation, disturbing the caricature of Aboriginality portrayed through Bo, then replicated through Arner and Dougald. As Peter Pierce suggests, Arner seems to be waiting on the sidelines for his part to play in the novel.170 It would appear that Arner’s position is the ultimate word on the grief and unresolvable state of not only this scenario but the wider reverberations and implications of unacknowledged grief. Bo’s solution of reconciling himself to Annabelle through resort to his Grandma’s benevolence will not work for all concerned. Not for the Arners nor for the Dougalds. Annabelle accommodates the pain of injustice in her final reckoning of her proximity to the tragic events. She resolves: “She would wait until the morning to tell him that she had decided not to go with him to the playgrounds of the old people. It was not necessary to know everything…She would give the cylindrical stone to Arner to take back for her to the stone people” (p.363).

Representing reconciliation, Bo moves towards Annabelle’s model of communication through explanation, and she in turn shifts closer to Bo’s epistemological world view that requires sitting with uncertainty. Arner emerges here as the almost silent reminder of how things really are and the attention they require. Bo describes Arner’s spiritual connection:

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170 “Elusive Beauties,” p.6
“There’s some direct thing from the old people in him. You can feel it. He’s not with us fellers” (p.115). Annabelle responds to this respectfully, equal to the remorse she feels for the atrocity committed by her grandfather. The novel suggests that Annabelle will go further in her reparation as she wonders how much it will cost to buy back Verbena. She also takes stock of the assets she has in her half of the Carlton and the Zamia Street houses. McNamara perceives this as reinstating power: “Finally, Annabelle’s proposed purchase of Verbena Station for Bo as the ending to this romantic tale gives her dominant status and promotes an enduring and overwhelming reflection of the privileges of whiteness which can hardly be seen as any form of reconciliation, redemption or reparation for Indigenous people” (p.192). I agree there is some discomfort with Annabelle’s jump to this response; but despite this, within my reading this can also be seen as a gesture of the extent of her remorse. After all, material reparation for Indigenous people is usually the last item on colonialist agendas.

While there is some reference to the moral consciousness of the novel in McNamara’s critique she primarily interprets this act as self-redemptive: “Annabelle’s intentions, however, while they may be interpreted as reconciling former family misdeeds, only serve to ease her guilt while magnifying Bo’s dispossession and subordination” (p.191). Ultimately what appears to register as a reconciliation text for McNamara is the material outcome for Aboriginal people. This view distracts from an examination of the novel’s moral seriousness.

The novel is amenable to oppositional readings regarding its post-colonial weight. McLaren sees the novel’s reckoning this way: “Yet, in giving herself to the rebuilding of this vision, Annabelle acknowledges that she cannot accompany Bo to the stone country of the Jangga people, for it belongs to them alone” (p.159). McLaren proposes that “This ending allows the Aboriginal people their full humanity, neither inferior nor superior to whites” (p.159).

I believe that, in complex ways, the novel grapples with the different positionalities it generates. While positioning Annabelle as victim she also dramatises remorse. Annabelle’s decision, rather than ease her guilt, can be seen as an outcome of her recognition of what is at stake. Her decision is an expression of her guilt which is connected to her acknowledgement of the gravity of her family’s crime. The character, Bo, appears to shift his position from silence and withdrawal to move towards Annabelle with his explanation of both the immediate situation and race relations more generally. Annabelle in turn moves closer to Bo’s intuitive way of knowing. He models reconciliation while his nephew and his brother represent withdrawal. Annabelle takes account of both, and in so doing reflects a remorseful response. Despite this there is a persistent incongruence that concerns the lightness of the characterisation. It is as if the grief is out of place, added as an afterthought to balance its lightness. While there are a number of ways in which this can be re-read, such as a critique of a society that lightly turns its back on the pain embedded in its history, the reading experience remains unsatisfying. The characters remain shallow despite their symbolic gestures of forgiveness and remorse.

Bo’s Aboriginality is foregrounded through his attachment to his Aboriginal grandmother over his European heritage, represented by his Scottish grandfather. Verbena represents Bo’s relationship to the homeland of his people, the Jangga, with his desire to get back his
Grandmother’s place. The intertwining of his grandmother’s legacy of showing him the stone country and her ownership of Verbena means that Bo’s motivation is a complex intersection of desire grounded in both his Aboriginal and European identity. Symbolically, an Aboriginal character getting something back is associated with land rights but the novel presents us with a different type of situation. It signifies a complex mix of European privilege, for without Iain Rennie, Grandma Rennie would not have inherited Verbena. It also represents the promise and denial of full citizenship to Aboriginal people, for this is what was taken from his grandmother. Bo intends to carry on the legacy of black and white reconciliation through his grandparents. However, ultimately he is doing it the white way, through private ownership and not native title. Also, he is assisted by a white woman whose money is ironically gained from her murderous grandfather. Ultimately, in terms of reparation it is appropriate that the grandfather should pay.

The reviews for this novel are mixed, with some critics perceiving the novel as free of stereotypes while others find the characterisation sentimental and lacking in depth. Others give the novel credit for its critiques of settler belonging and its critique of the pervasiveness of western reason as a form of dominant epistemology. Some even perceive the novel as gesturing towards a healing of race relations. Riemer sees the novel as “a quest for some kind of reconciliation,” a view shared by Stretton and Partlon.\(^\text{171}\) Similarly, linking the novel with *Plains of Promise*, Gelder and Salzman suggest “Miller’s *Journey to the Stone Country* offers a more optimistic view (and no doubt white and postcolonial) sense of potential reconciliation, as Annabelle and Bo move towards a union that offers some hope after the massacre carried out by Annabelle’s grandfather” (p.90). Andrea Stretton in her review “Slabs of butter, layers of history” in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, suggests that the novel raises the question of “How to move forward together, with love, respect and hope in acknowledgement if not full understanding of a painful history.”\(^\text{172}\)

The novel offers a gesture of remorse and reparation through Annabelle. However, this gesture is paradoxically embedded within an unlikely romance narrative. It strives to find a balance which leaves it open to charges of reassuring non-indigenous readers. Symbolically Bo offers a balanced perspective on race relations in Australia while Annabelle acknowledges that there are some lines she should not cross due to the weight she has inherited from the past. Arner represents a different reality again. Meg Sorensen, in the *Courier Mail*, echoes a sense of this weight with her comment that “the language is sparse, at times almost painfully tentative, even banal, as if it is afraid of disturbing a deeper harmony.”\(^\text{173}\) This describes the paradoxical sense of lightness in the novel, accompanied by an underlying weight. The novel represents the complexity of the path ahead to true reconciliation.


Chapter 4 – The White Earth

In this thesis I aim to develop an understanding of the meaning and potential impact of fictional work which engages with Indigenous justice and wellbeing. I explore how the novels dramatise shame, guilt and remorse. In the last chapter the complexity of the novel in terms of its interpretive possibilities was established through salvaging some moments of remorse. The paradox lay in the novel’s jarring lightness and weight, and the superficiality of its characters. This chapter establishes how depth of character contributes to the seriousness of the novel, enhancing reader engagement. Despite the fact that it has no Aboriginal characters, or perhaps due to this, the novel’s message of injustice is more poignant. As in Journey to the Stone Country, its representation of massacre is embedded underground, but comes as no surprise.

In this chapter I argue that the novel The White Earth forges its way through a mire of misconceptions about native title to assert justice for Aboriginal people.174 I show how it does this through the device of childhood vulnerability as a vehicle for engaging with injustice. The effectiveness of the novel is measured in its depth of characterisation, and in particular its depiction of how psychological bias obstructs a sense of remorse. I argue that the novel offers a remorseful response to the Aboriginal people of Australia on different levels of injustice including dispossession, brutality, deceit, self-absorbedness, ignorance and neglect. The White Earth links itself to political discourse, which according to Gelder and Salzman, is not common for Australian novels. McGahan followed The White Earth with his novel Underground (2006) which has been described by Gelder as “an extrapolation of the kind of white settler panic” that he had drawn upon in The White Earth (p.247). In relation to The White Earth, McGahan commented “I was thinking about the dangers of paranoia in Australian society, whether it be regarding boat people or terrorists or, in this case, Aboriginal issues.”175 Gelder claims that the novel “captures a moment when non-Aboriginal settlement in Australia—white settlement—began to panic: when the assumptions non-Aboriginal people, pastoralists in particular, held about their rights to ownership seemed no longer to be water tight” (p. 24). In this way the novel offers a critique of settler desire for belonging that appropriates Aboriginal spirituality. However, like all the non-indigenous novels examined in this thesis, it is ambiguous about the meanings it generates. Within a complex genre, and even with the inevitability of some colonial residue, the novel is a powerful one. In terms of this thesis it reads as a serious gesture of remorse.

The 2005 Miles Franklin award winner, The White Earth, engages with the injustice of dispossession via a contemporary legal acknowledgement of the fiction of terra nullius. The novel foregrounds a white protagonist’s desire to possess the land his father hankered after, land which was taken originally from the Kuran tribe. In gothic fashion the narrative reveals the hidden crime underlying white possession of the Kuran people’s land. With psychological insight and precision, McGahan creates a character in John McIvor who is determined to deny

the harm done to the Aboriginal people of the area. This denial stems from an obsessive, driven connection with land, inherited from his father, which he then tries to transfer to his nephew, William. McIvor reads as a symbol of a community in denial. He appropriates Aboriginal spirituality, an action which the novel undermines through irony. As Gelder explains: “The Mabo and Wik decisions certainly produce their share of white panic. But they also produce their share of white mimicry” both of which are represented in the character, McIvor.176 The text is framed by the quest to be ‘really looking’ below the surface of this denial. The narrator reveals “But then he was really looking, and the truth sank in” about his uncle’s run-down home (p.16). In this way, The White Earth could be seen as urging a shift in the Australian community’s preparedness to look honestly at the reality of past injustice. The text also represents the tension in a divided community between a position of denial, identified by Noel Pearson in his article entitled “White Guilt, Victimhood and the Quest for a Radical Centre,” as one of the three positions taken up by non-Indigenous Australians towards the past, and secondly, one of openness to seeing, with the acknowledgment of past injustice.177 Raimond Gaita draws attention to contemporary expressions of denial, conceding that there is cause for guilt and remorse through current calls to listen and respond that have been ignored, for later generations “ may rightly feel guilty for not responding, in ways appropriate to them, to the fact that their ancestors did wrong, because they have not offered reparation, for example.”178 My reading is that this novel addresses those readers with a willingness to hear while also presenting a challenge to the deniers. Jann a Thompson handles this call to respond in terms of a plea for recognition of the actual felt experience of having been harmed.179 She argues that we must listen to people’s stories of their history, as their felt injustice is a starting point for dialogue and negotiation. Injustice is embedded in people’s histories and is carried and transferred through narratives within which people locate their identity as a member of their community. She claims:

A sense of identity shaped by their nation’s history is not simply something that many individuals happen to have – something that might become less of a hindrance to good relations or even dispensed with altogether if only people could be persuaded to think more positively about their present and future. A sense of history is something that members are morally required to cultivate (p.68).

Listening to people’s stories presupposes an orientation of openness to another’s or to the Others’ reality. One must be prepared to be shocked by the harm done and by the wrongdoing, and to be prepared to understand one’s place in the narrative. According to Thompson, by virtue of the continuity of trans-generational lines of commitment, non-Indigenous people are a part of the story of injustice, a story which is still being told. Hence, imaginably, when we are open to being shocked by the reality of harm done to Indigenous Australians, non-

176 In Gelder and Salzman each of the chapters are written individually. This comment comes from Chapter One, Belonging, written by Ken Gelder, p.25.
indigenous people can and do feel remorseful through recognising the injustice committed by our ancestors committed as members of a nation. As discussed earlier, one passage of responsiveness lies in a receptivity to remorse through which a reader can imagine what they would feel if they had inflicted such injustices, and if they had experienced such harm. More than this though, as Gaita puts it, it is about the fact that harm was done, left unrecognized. A person may protest “so it be true that, at least someone cared that wrong was done to people.”180 This thesis has explored the forms taken by unresolved moral matters permeating the wider community, identifying this as a form of pollution mingled with a sense of woe haunting the people. My hypothesis is that the wave of community woe finds expression in the fiction examined in this thesis, but there is a circular dynamic to this. Shifting to the level of a collective political sense, Thompson maintains that the onus is on the state to listen and respond through its trans-generational responsibility: “The policies towards Aborigines adopted by Australian Government changed over time but they all had one thing in common that Aborigines were racially and culturally inferior” (p.82).

Media reviews acclaim McGahan’s achievement in terms of his masterly skill and his engagement with contentious issues. James Leys, in an article entitled “false histories,” states that “the glue that holds it all together is McGahan’s tremendous narrative skill…it is a lean, intelligent and incisive novel.”181 Picking up on the “crushing central irony” of the novel, he comments on the “artful way” that McGahan “deepens and contextualises” McIvor’s “skewed perspective” to land ownership (p.5). I agree with Ley’s appraisal for my own perception is that the creation of the subjectivities of both McIvor and William’s speaks of an emotional intelligence that understands psychological formations, defenses and conditions. This is exemplified in Christopher Cordner’s model of remorse. He identifies psychological obstacles that “arrest remorse from issuing into confession, or apology or seeking forgiveness, or undertaking reparation.” 182 On a macro level Cordner comments on structural obstacles: “In a society that is racist or sexist…psychologically entrenched and socially institutionalized grids of response can systematically obstruct people’s experience of remorse” (p.244).

McGahan places the psychological obstacles of his characters within a wider ethical and cultural framework representing injustice to Aboriginal people. He produces an engaging novel in which the characters come alive creating intrigue while evoking indignation and concern for the main character William, who symbolises a budding awakening to the wider issues. Reflecting this, Katherine England in a review article entitled “The Lie of the land,” comments that “The characters are convincingly complex” and that “Andrew McGahan establishes himself as a real master of genres.”183 Interestingly, England comments on the novel’s intertextuality: “as if McGahan’s novel sets up a dialogue with Miller’s Journey to the Stone Country, filling out with similar empathy and attention to detail the other side of the story” (p.7). While I agree there are some parallels, the depth of McGahan’s characterisation,

180 A Common Humanity, p.93.
182 Christopher Cordner, Remorse and Moral Identity, (a) Melbourne: Routledge, 2007, p. 244.
and the intensity of the psychological and moral passage forged by the characters, accentuates the comparative lightness of Miller’s novel.

There is recognition amongst reviewers that the novel engages with the complexity of the issues it represents. Aviva Tuffield, writing in *The Age*, in an article entitled “Tilling a land of buried secrets,” describes the novel as both a “gothic thriller” and a “national allegory” (p.4). She claims “it’s a national allegory with its portent that past wrongs will come back to haunt future generations – that those who dispossess will in turn be possessed” (p.4). As Leys highlights, “The entire narrative is tainted by the absence of the land’s local inhabitants” (p.5). Tuffield appraises the high standard of the novel, tipping it for the Miles Franklin Award. She argues that “it’s not a didactic novel and McGahan doesn’t offer resort to platitudes. Nor does it offer tidy resolutions” (p.4). Identifying the complexity of the novel’s technique of delving below the surface, James Bradley, in an article entitled “Archetypal landscape,” comments that the themes of belonging and possession “take on new and worrying shapes, probing the slippery and dangerous ambiguities that lie beneath possession and belonging, and the human costs of power that springs from them.”

Similarly, Mic Looby, in “Dusty journey into the core of our earth,” comments “This is an eerie, unsettling and brave long stare at Australia, at the country’s history, at its rural heartland, at the concept of ownership, and ultimately at ourselves.” Reiterating acclaim for McGahan’s novel, Lucy Clark writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, with an article entitled “Australian tale of our times,” comments: “McGahan deals with issues such as terra nullius, sacred sites, the ‘dispersion’ of Aboriginal tribes, dispossession and white anger, masterfully weaving the seemingly hopeless complexity of it all into his narrative in a most accessible way.”

Clark identifies the structure of the novel: “McGahan’s divides his epic into two narratives: one told in the year leading up to Mabo, the other set back half a century and slowly leading up to meet with the modern day” (p.8). There is a power in the novel’s parallel stories which juxtapose the vulnerability of John as a child, and William, both prey to adult fixations. This juxtaposition offers the reader a longitudinal view of McIvor’s psychological and moral journey. However, even though it is possible to see what formed him, unlike *The Secret River*’s Thornhill, this novel does not elicit pity for the perpetrator.

*The White Earth*, written in the third person, is structured through a past and present narrative that parallels John McIvor’s life with that of William, his great nephew. It alternates chapters about each character beginning when William and his mother come to live with John

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188 I argue with others that *The Secret River* elicits pity for Thornhill.
following the tragic death of William’s father in an apocalyptic moment when his tractor catches fire. It traces John’s childhood experience of growing up at Kuran Station, where his father, Daniel McIvor, was the manager who advised the owner, Edward White, through to the present time. Through John’s father’s misguided plans for him to marry Edward’s granddaughter, John grew up believing the property would be his one day. Hence, the narrative sets up a premise that childhood experiences are formative; showing that even those who exploit others were once vulnerable children. In this way, it reflects a psychological understanding informed by a psychoanalytic knowledge of the conditions of the moral passage of childhood (also employed by The Secret River) to reveal a more insightful picture of the human struggle to maintain moral integrity.

The strategic use of a child's perception says something about the meanings attached to a child's capacity to see things in a fair and just way, unshackled from narcissistic ruthlessness. However, in The White Earth, this does not apply to all children, only those with 'eyes to see,' for John McIvor as a child was vulnerable to the manipulations of adults while William and his counterpart in The Secret River, Dick, (Thornhill’s son) while still vulnerable, are able to withstand the manipulation.

Within the text, the hidden truth has horrible manifestations which potentially raise moral uneasiness in the reader. Symbolically, William (along with the non-indigenous reader) inherits the moral dilemma through the awareness of the Reconciliation Era represented by Ruth. It is because he has “the eyes to see” that Will stumbles across a sacred place where “something invisible had made the air too potent to breathe” (p.326). This also signifies the scene where a crime was committed against the Kuran people who kept returning to their ancestral land. Although he has the openness to see, Will travels through a trajectory of gradual awakening to ‘the reality’ of the harm that has been done, communally and through his own family lineage. His uncle, representing a community in denial, is blind to the harm done to the local Indigenous people, blocked by his own deeply psychological defensiveness. Conversely, William, having been coerced by his uncle to crawl into the cave to retrieve the remains of the victims, feels the moral weight of this act. The narrator reflects “He felt he was one of them now, that his own ghost would eternally haunt this place, bearing its burden back and forth amidst the shadows” (p. 365). This raises some questions about degrees of involvement in wrongdoing. As an individual, William is indirectly implicated in his uncle’s action, but in a way that nobody would hold him responsible for, given he’s a minor who has been coerced into participation. At this stage, though he comes upon the full reality of what it is he is participating in and, despite the fact that he is being coerced into compliance, his sense of entanglement in the act rises to the fore. This representation opens up a space for identification with varying levels of implication because Will cannot be held responsible but he feels himself to be involved by virtue of his presence and ambiguous complicity in his uncle’s scheme.

It is possible to see that Raimond Gaita’s model of the actual impact of one’s actions, irrespective of intention, is dramatised through William’s situation. William, as a

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representative of the Australian community, accepts responsibility due to his developing awareness of the issues and his implication in the nation’s history of dispossession. His sense of involvement is not in terms of culpability because he cannot be accused or blamed for his participation, but emerges through his own sense of the moral significance of his actions. William’s sense of the harm done to the Kuran people and his implication in this is the source of his moral uneasiness. It is intelligible within Gaita’s understanding that he feels remorse because in reality he is involved in his uncle’s efforts to conceal the truth of the massacre carried out by John’s own father, Daniel. How can we best understand this position? Will is more than ‘polluted;’ he is impacted by the weight of his involvement. Symbolically, representative of a process of awakening, this occurs along a trajectory of sometimes unknowing, then emerging partial awareness, then the full heavy knowledge of what he does.

The text employs a range of themes such as Native Title, dispossession, denial, Indigenous invisibility and harm done to Aboriginal communities in its representation of the issues arising in the Reconciliation discourse of the last two decades. Many of its particular themes, relevant to the structurally tight and cohesive economy of meaning, are also generated within culture as text. The public themes run parallel with the specificities of the novel’s plot. The text appears to have a self-conscious perception of itself as making a difference by provoking thought and generating further understanding around social justice issues. It does this through a subterranean theme of the neglected and vulnerable child, William, a theme which is linked to ignorance and indifference to justice for Aboriginal people. The morality of the text is embedded within the moral condition of John McIvor in relation to his failing of the people in his life but extends outwardly to his failure in relation to justice for the local Kuran people. This intense convergence of the specificities of his individual life with public responsibility highlights a continuity between the personal and the public self. This view is in opposition to one which holds that people can commit atrocities yet be capable of human warmth in other areas of their lives. For instance, the idea that some members of the Gestapo were loving family men jars for many people. There is a continuum along which one could be placed as regards 'loving.' However, this view is in tension with a theory of remorse as something that is transformative, spreading holistically throughout lives. This has the capacity to transform one’s whole outlook upon others as more than the sum of one’s designs or their social determinations. Christopher Cordner describes remorse as having a capacity to holistically transform social relations “in the light of what is thus realised in remorse.”

The novel symbolises an affinity with this perspective. The text engages with the morality of the protagonists at a deep level of responsibility to immediate others. For example, Gaita, speaking of moral significance, states that: “In judging their significance we should not give undue weight to the fact that she is not to be blamed for what she did. People can do morally terrible things yet not be blameable for them, or not at any rate, in a way commensurate with their terribleness. In that sense they are not accountable for what they did.” The novel delves deeply into an accountability to others that is based upon concern and responsibility.

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Like several novels in this genre, it projects a trajectory of experience through the open eyes of a vulnerable child, one who can see through barriers of adult defensiveness.

The novel’s textual strategies include exploring the preconceptions that characters have formed about the meaning of Native Title. In challenging incorrect attitudes towards Native Title the narrator represents two competing points of view. He enacts these by allowing the protagonist, William, to accidentally stumble upon the reality, which sets up a conflict in his mind. Teasing it out in the way that it does, the novel airs the different anxieties about it, creating a space for the reader to respond through the characters. This interaction reflects the community division around the issue brought to a head in the WIK amendments of 1997, against the backdrop of pastoralist anxiety about loss of access to land.\(^{192}\)

In juxtaposing oppositional conceptions, the novel reveals how biased reactions are not based upon the actual realities of what is possible under the legislation but rather what people fear might happen. For example, McGahan reveals the irrationality of the denialists’ position, showing how it is based upon a reactionary emotive, territorial response illuminating the underlying psychological makeup of these characters. For example Henry, one of John’s group, asserts, “Fuck the cities….If I had my way, the bush would just cut the cities loose and declare independence.”  Shit, if the blacks can have their own countries up North, why can’t we? If worst comes to worst, we can set up our own state out west somewhere” (p.187). This is even too radical for John McIvor who responds with “we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves…..” (p.187). McGahan has acknowledged that he was “thinking about the dangers of paranoia in Australian society” when writing the novel (p.2). Characterizing a contradictory position, John is at pains to point out to his nephew that he is not racist regardless of what William overhears from John’s associates. His conception of racism is not to express negativity overtly whereas the text holistically figures racism as denial of Aboriginal claims to country, in addition to the refusal to look with open eyes at the history of injustice.

The narrative opens up a space to tease out the actual historical reality surrounding the issue of dispossession. Will asks his uncle:

But what is Native Title?’ His uncle replies, ‘A disaster …the truth is, at this stage, no one has a clue what Native Title is. That’s the problem (p.135).

And this is about the only word of truth that John McIvor speaks – that no-one or a lot of people did not know at that stage. However, despite this, he goes on to assume

all indications are that it will be terrible for people like us…one of the things it means is that someone like me won’t have a say any more about what happens on my own property  (p.135).

But Will stumbles across a competing view of Native Title via a television program:

\(^{192}\) The Wik court decision in relation to the Wik people ruled that Native Title could co-exist with pastoral leases. In response, the Howard Government brought in the 10-point plan, which further restricted Native Title applications.
The man was answering a question, and the topic, it seemed, was Native Title.…..so let me tell you about terra nullius. Part of the theory is that the Aboriginals didn’t work the land; they just left it as they found it, and therefore they had no rights of ownership. But that isn’t quite true. …then the High Court led the way with the Mabo judgment. It recognised finally that terra nullius was a lie, and now the government is responding to historical reality with the Native Title legislation. …For a century and a half Aboriginal people have been herded into missions or deserts or urban ghettos and forgotten……but Native Title is at least the first step in righting the wrong….((pp.174-5).

The text is drawing attention not only to the legal facts of the matter but it also lessens the divide between fictional representation and an historical and moral reality.

The program goes on to explain that the reality of a successful Native Title claim leads to a co-existence of shared access and consultation over sacred areas of the land. William is taken aback: “Strange and puzzling. It didn’t sound like the same law that made his uncle so angry” (p.175). This confrontation with a different perspective also leads a potentially unaware reader through a process of discovery. The novel is engaging with the dispute around Native Title. Panic was increased in 1996 with the outcome of the successful Wik claim. This precipitated a protest from pastoralists in response to which the Howard government amended the Native Title Act with a 10-point plan, making the already difficult registration test even more rigorous. This process was originally structured to be a simple matter of the likelihood of a claim, to qualify at the registration stage.

The concept of a different relationship to land is now part of the general community’s knowledge about Indigenous culture. There is a common perception of the cultural significance invested in place for Aboriginal people, who traditionally have a spiritual connection to land. The novel highlights this feature by exploring different types of relationship to land. It represents the dualism of greedy land acquisition exemplified by westerners, and the spiritual connection to land by Aboriginal people. These two different approaches come together in the character of John McIvor, who appropriates some conceptions of Indigenous connectedness for himself. William ponders his uncle’s statement:

We can have connections with the land too, our own kind of magic. This land talks to me. It doesn’t care what colour I am, all that matters is that I’m here. And I understand what it says, just as well as anyone before me, black or white. I found this ring, didn’t I? So I deserve respect too (p.181).

In an article entitled, “Twisted Ghosts”, Marc Delrez sees the settler desire to retain “a properly constituted national selfhood” as integrally linked to the notion of trauma envy. Revelations of Aboriginal suffering become intertwined with a sense of authentic belonging, highlighting the settler’s own lack of belonging and fostering a desire for victimhood.

193 See Lois O’Donahue, “Proposed Amendments to the Native Title Act,” 1996.
194 See Gloria Prentice, “The Effects upon Indigenous people of the Native Title Process” for an evaluation of the Native Title process, essay, 1997.
However, Delrez argues that *The White Earth* manages to avoid being subsumed by this particular brand of colonial discourse. Nonetheless he raises the question as to whether a book “that remains tied to settler history” can ever “enter into any stable postcolonial condition” (p.195). In the end the article argues that the novel does achieve postcolonial status through “showing up the resentment which informs so much of contemporary Australian cultural and political discourse” (p.200). Delrez cites the example I have used above of appropriation of Aboriginal spirituality as the clearest example of this ‘showing up’ of resentment. He argues that the novel “offers a condemnation of this sort of whipped-up spirituality by associating it with the rabid politics of William’s uncle” but also through William himself who, it is claimed, refuses to “step into the shoes of his uncle when the latter claims that the land speaks to him” (p.101). In my view, William has taken his uncle at face value and tries to make sense of what he hears, all the while in a continual state of reflection. Figuring John as lacking in inter-personal ability, William notices with surprise that he shows a warmth towards the land that he shows to no person. Though John’s connection to the land is driven by a concept of possession which amounts to keeping others out. Will’s state of trying to make sense of the world through a form of truth-seeking or reality-seeking, is a condition of childhood, a developmental stage. The ability to perceive incongruities and the misrepresentation of reality is arguably part of obtaining moral sensibility towards others. For example, Iris Murdoch, in her book *The Sovereignty of Good*, characterises attention this way: “I can only choose within the world I can see, which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort.” In Will’s case it involves making sense of those around him including their judgments of others. As Delrez suggests, William resists his uncle’s desire to possess him. Instead he struggles to understand the world for himself.

John McIvor’s relationship to the land is his own fiction, represented as a defensive response to the Indigenous demand for guardianship of their sacred places. He attempts to create an ‘equal playing field’ or rather a superior perspective through a self-perception of being more sensitive to place. Ironically, John tells Will that he has a sense of unexplored pockets on the land, claiming “there are still places where I don’t think a foot has ever set down apart from my own. Places where nothing has changed. But you need the eyes for it. You have to be able to see. Not everyone can” (p.60). The irony is that within the textual economy of meaning, John does not have the eyes to see as he is mistaken about the location of the sacred Aboriginal site. Through irony, the novel critiques settler desire for belonging. Later John is shown to have missed the actual sacred place to which the Kuran people kept returning but nevertheless prides himself on his connectedness to spiritual dimensions of land.

After taking William to the bora rings which he thinks he has identified as a sacred Aboriginal place, John tells him:

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196 Iris Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, London: Routledge, 1991 (first published 1970), p. 37. Cordner (*Remorse and Moral Identity*) cites Murdoch when describing a form of attending that is inherently dependent upon a recognition of the other’s irreducibility to our complete knowledge of them, but nonetheless seeking to know.
The Aborigines may not have made this place but they recognized it, and it’s partly out of respect for them that I chose it for the rally... But the ironic thing is that because of laws like Native Title, I have to keep this place secret... Exactly like the waterhole... If the government or some Aboriginal land council knew it was here, they’d be swarming up this hill in no time. They’d say these stones were proof that the blacks were here, that they used this land for their rituals, and that therefore I should give it back to them (p.180).

While he does not see himself as against the Aborigines, and is less contemptuous of them than his fellow campaigners, John is critiqued by his daughter Ruth for cultivating this image of being non-racist. Noel Pearson’s accusation of ‘moral vanity’ resounds through the character Ruth because even she is not safe from this charge. Her criticism of her father stems from desire for revenge against her father for sacrificing her wellbeing as a child in pursuit of his overriding goal of securing Kuran station. William also realises that this confrontation is more about father and daughter when they become involved in a confrontation about the likelihood of a successful Native Title claim upon the property. He realises that there is no safe ground between them.

No ‘safe ground’ is a metaphor for unstable relations where any comment can ignite and release the rage simmering below the surface. This metaphor could be extended to the public arena where at times it appears there is no safe ground as the tension around relationship to land permeates race relations.

The text represents a strong political and ethical position through the character of Ruth. This is illuminated by Pearson’s model and critique, for, despite her mixed motivation, she has access to contemporary thinking about justice, having come a long way to a reckoning of past injustice to Aboriginal people through her own particular lineage. She reflects Kate Grenville’s aim in The Secret River to reconcile her ancestral contribution to the oppression of Aboriginal people in the Hawkesbury River area. Consequently, the theme of entitlement to land is asserted forcefully by Ruth to challenge both William and her father. She confronts William in the process and reveals the shortcomings of Native Title:

‘This land belonged to the Kuran people. No one knows how many of them there were either – but after a few decades of settlement, they numbered less than twenty. The survivors used to live right here around the house, and if they were lucky they got blankets and flour. But by 1911, time was up. They were shipped off with all the others. And that’s why, to this day, you’ll barely see a black face in this part of the world.’ She eyed him knowingly. ‘And my father is lucky it happened that way, otherwise he might have a Native Title claim to worry about’ (p.283).

Ruth represents the voice of conscience and testimony to the entitlement of the now invisible Kuran people.

The issue of justice is teased out through the characters of William and Ruth. In the process a certain confusion and defensiveness emerges. As Will is still aligned with his uncle, if uncertainly, and does not want to hear any of what Ruth has to say, he tries to defend his
uncle’s position by regurgitating that the rally “was about stopping a bad law…It’s unfair” but Ruth retorts “Unfair? To who?” (p.283). The narrator confides that “William felt the importance of the question. She was challenging him and his uncle too, so he strove to be defiant. People will lose their farms” (pp.283-4). Ruth enlightens Will and the reader by spelling out the reality “but at most, it’s only about sharing access. And only if tribes can prove that they’ve had continuous connection with the land in question, which is going to be a big problem” (p.284). Signifying the dawning conscience of the nation, Will is affected by this challenge and begins to question the basis of his own position. He lets slip to Ruth that the land is a ‘perpetual lease’ not freehold, and he is then alarmed by her interest in this fact. Feverish from his ear infection and anxiety-ridden in case he has betrayed his uncle, he reflects: “Nothing was solid, not the land, and even less so its history. He had been told so many stories- but which ones was he to believe? He had seen none of these events with his own eyes, walked none of the world with his own feet” (p.286). The profile of an ignorant awakening embodied by this character, who has never met an Aboriginal person, mirrors many Australians who remain unaware of anything Aboriginal. The narrative reveals his thinking: “Aborigines? He thought of deserts, and dark-skinned figures with spears, but he had never met a black person…….Then he remembered what the men in the national park had said about marks on the bunya pines and about the clearings on the hilltops. But that was a long time ago, surely” (p.136). This character is one which represents an open mind that can admit challenge to his preconceived ideas. This representation and characterisation critiques political indifference to issues of importance, for the narrative tells us that even William in his confusion realises that Ruth’s query of “Unfair? To who?” is an important one (p. 283). William’s ethical sense is awakened through the concept of fairness. He also has an allegiance to his uncle, fearful that he has betrayed him. John reinforces this dilemma in Will, whose discomfort emerges from a sense of guilt instilled in him by his uncle for doing anything other than achieving a complete embodiment of his uncle's desires.

Because government policies of segregation have forced Aboriginal people from sight and country, William is ignorant of the major issues until he runs headlong into them. Through attending to dispossession, the novel raises the ethical issues of justice and reparation for Aboriginal people as regards this most basic harm – the deprivation of their physical and spiritual sustenance through European occupation. As Ruth tells Will, in the context of a discussion about a memorial to an explorer supposed to be buried under the house: “There are probably lots of bones around here but they’d be black, not white. And you don’t see any memorials to them” (p.282). All the positions that Noel Pearson identifies – the left-wing ‘morally vain’ supporters of progressive policies; the right-wing denialists; and acknowledgment of wrongs committed – emerge through these conversations. As noted earlier, no character escapes narrative scrutiny. Even Ruth, who supports Native Title and seeks justice for Aboriginal people, has an underlying selfish motive for her concern, namely defeating her father’s obsessive goal to own Kuran posthumously through William.

Although it is incongruous to think of Ruth as a morally vain, politically correct character, the novel reveals the complexity of her motivation, including her desire to punish her father for his lack of integrity in handling her abuse by a family friend, Dudley. Ruth exceeds Pearson’s representation of someone who is self-righteously invested in looking politically
correct. The representation of Ruth’s sense of injustice is embedded within her own experience of injustice as a child. As suggested in my prologue, experience of injustice as a vulnerable child potentially enhances one’s sensitivity to injustices. However, while this sensitivity may maximize the reading experience, Raimond Gaita has stated that he believes that the novels I have selected speak to some readers more than to others; namely those with a connection to country.  

The theme of decay is intermingled with William’s capacity for seeing reality. From the start, just after his arrival the text frames the fictional journey with the following: “But then he was really looking, and the truth sank in. It was the roof he noticed first- the line of it sagged towards the middle, and the dozens of tiles were cracked or sliding out of place” (p.16). The theme of decay continues while he is out walking. He asks himself: “Would everything on his uncle’s property be the same, defaced and decayed and torn apart by the slow creep of branches and roots? If so what was the point of exploring any of it?” (p.67). The novel’s truth seeking focuses here upon the disintegration of his uncle’s homestead. The decline Will notices symbolises the old ways of clinging to nostalgic longings when a new tide of thinking and responding is on its way. Interestingly, the theme of decay and decline is inter-generational as William’s experience repeats John’s as a young adult when he returns to the property after twelve years. Seeing that, “The great homestead had become a shabby hulk,” he vows to restore it. (p.144).

Decay as a metaphor reflects the state of settler society's crumbling duplicity around events in the past leading up to deceptions in the present. This decay can be seen as eating at the moral fibre of the country just as John's deception has driven him to obsessiveness and ruthless lack of concern for others.

This quest of the novel in truth seeking and “really looking” reflects the focus that Iris Murdoch urges: “The task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are ‘looking,’ making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results” (p.43). Denial is posited in the text as blindness, not having the eyes to see. Seeing involves having the openness to see the reality of another. The two main proponents of blindness in the text are William’s mother Veronica and Uncle John. Lesser offenders are the housekeeper, Mrs. Griffiths, and Dr. Moffat. All are self-absorbed characters unable to allow the reality of William’s struggle into their consciousness. This is imprinted most indelibly in the reader’s mind by the continuous, concurrent theme of neglect for William’s wellbeing, especially seen in the characters’ blindness to his very painful ear infection. But it is more than that too, for he does not exist for them as a character in his own right. He is a means to an end, so he is denied his full subjective identity. The text represents neglect by the adults who remain unaware of what William is experiencing: “Over the next four days it grew steadily worse, until a furnace seemed to burn in his head, and his surroundings shrank away, pale and detached. And with every breath he took, the evil smell that clung to him became more sweet and more sickening . . . . Yet no one took any notice of him” (p.289). They do not do so because they are self-absorbed and unable to see beyond

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197 See Appendix 1. Meeting with Raimond Gaita, 9/2/15.
self. William too is dissociated even from his own body. This can be understood as the impact of trauma and neglect by others to the point where he has learnt to ignore his own body.

This blindness speaks to the moral condition of the protagonists. They are unable to see beyond their own struggles and obsessions to the reality of William’s life, especially his vulnerability as a child. His mother, who suffers from depression, described powerfully at its worst as a “deep blackness that descended upon her at times, a dark river that swept her mind away and left her body behind,” puts pressure on William to do as his uncle wishes in order to secure them a home as they are destitute after his father dies (p.273). In their interaction over this William is situated as a means to his mother’s end. He must surrender himself to his uncle’s obsessions and become a vehicle for his plans. He feels a “terrible weight of responsibility” from the pressure to “do what your uncle asks” and “You can’t be a little boy about this” (pp.112-3). John’s objectification of William is most pronounced after he signs the new will leaving the station to his nephew. John tells Ruth: “‘Take the station from me now,’ he gloated … ‘I dare you. Only you won’t be taking it from me. It’s all Will’s now. … So go ahead and help your friends with their claim. It won’t be me you’re hurting’ ” (p.357).

In contrast to Veronica, Ruth defends the child William: “He’s only a boy.” John reveals his objectification of William when he replies; “But he’s mine, not yours” (p. 357). She accuses him, “You can’t put it all upon him…You’re the one who has to pay for this, and in the end, you’re the one who will pay” (p.357). Ruth’s agenda is emerging here for she is also talking about her own childhood abuse by Dudley, Harriet and John’s friend. John treated Ruth as a means to his end when he sent her to boarding school rather than risk alienating Dudley who planned to leave his property to John, building upon his chances of claiming Kuran station. The idea of someone ‘having to pay’ emerges as an undercurrent within the novel, John has to pay through sacrificing his relationships in order to possess Kuran Station. He must also confront Ruth’s challenge to him to pay for the heritage of the wrongs done to the Kuran people. Veronica pays for her blindness and for the neglect of her son and even William pays for his part in his uncle’s plan. Reparation for past injustice runs thematically throughout all the novels, be it the pain and suffering of the Stolen Generations or loss of connection to homeland, family and ancestral history.

The unnoticed worsening of Will’s ear infection and the neglect of Ruth after her abuse by Dudley, represent the moral failings of the adult characters. Micro concerns like these map onto neglect to the macro concerns in the novel. For instance the rally against Native Title intersects with the beginning of William’s awareness of a smell coming from his ear. The convergence of personal neglect and the national paranoia reflect the allegorical nature of both characters and themes in this novel.

A key episode of child neglect occurs when William is left out overnight after being encouraged by his uncle to experience the land – to let it speak to him so that he can authentically inherit his uncle’s drive and passion (or obsession). In exchange John promises to get his mother to pick him up, but deceitfully he tells her to collect him the next day. His mother does not dare question the uncle so she leaves him there. William, sick and exhausted, listens and hopes: “Time and time again his legs stopped, and he would gaze back along the
road, waiting for the car that had to be coming for him” (p.309). Reminiscent of Weil’s depiction of injustice, in his innocence William cannot believe that he would be let down by his mother. Even the rag and bone man, the second ghost he meets, tells him “she won’t come” (p.311). It is finally Ruth who comes for him just as it is she who finally smells the rottenness from William’s ear. As the only other character with a moral conscience, she represents the novel’s concern with both care for others and justice for Aboriginal people melding the two into one holistic position. However, upon return, his mother also acknowledges her lapse, temporarily responding to his need. Veronica experiences some remorse with the realization, “It should have been me that found you. I can’t explain it. I’m sorry. I just didn’t know what to do” (p.324). Will responds “It’s ok” but his mother insists: “’No, it’s not. I was wrong’” (p.324). The text uses the personal as a reflection of the second narrative running in the story, that of the unjust treatment of Aboriginal people. And with an awareness of the importance of acknowledging the harm done, the narrative adds that: “It was the shameful truth for once, stripped of all its pretenses” (p.324). Despite her acknowledgement, Veronica’s moral stamina is weak, revealed when William hopes that she will be able to hear his concern. The narrative reveals: “For a moment, William dared to hope. ’Mum, my ear hurts. All the time.’…And there’s a smell’” (p.324). The narrator reveals “She seemed bewildered. ‘Your ear? But you took your antibiotics.’ Will replies ‘They didn’t work’” (p.324). Building on reader empathy with the vulnerable child, the narrator reveals: “He considered her sadly” and asks “‘Dr Moffat – is he a good doctor?’” (p.324). His mother replies “‘No I don’t suppose he is.’” (p.325). Will asks “‘Can I go to a real doctor?’” and as she hesitates, the narrator reveals Will’s subjective experience “William hated the indecision he could see in her… ‘Right now?…It’s just that….well, maybe if you don’t feel any better in a day or two……We had better clean you up a bit first. Otherwise a doctor might wonder why you’re all battered and bruised…Do you see?’” (p.325). At this point Will is disheartened by what he does see: “Will saw. And the last remnant of faith he had in her died. He nodded, but it was only to himself, a confirmation that his mother was incapable of helping him” (p.325). The novel brings home its theme of seeing beyond deception through its vulnerable child motif.

It is an embryonic remorse that Veronica begins to experience, one which cannot move her to comprehend the whole of her neglect. As an incident it could potentially transform her moral orientation but her anxieties about material wellbeing and the world’s judgment of her block her transformation. Christopher Cordner’s model of a trajectory of remorse describes the embryonic state represented in Veronica’s hesitation, where someone can remain “troubled and restless in his remorse, resisting- perhaps stubbornly, perhaps in rage or bewilderment- its claims upon him.” 198 William’s struggle with his ear works as a provocative underlying theme running throughout the narrative. It provokes an affective reaction of grief, despair and a sense of urgency. The reader is positioned to want someone to notice William and attend to him. The reader is emotionally engaged in the injustice William undergoes, and this works as a smaller individual scenario within the wider one of injustice to

198 Remorse and Moral Identity p.243.
the Kuran people. It is through the engagement with the intimate and personal in this novel that the reader is carried to a lively conviction of injustice to the Kuran people.

William is confronted most poignantly by the reality of past injustice against the Kuran people. It is through the reader’s immediate engagement with the personal suffering of William that the affective realm is connected to the narrative of wider injustice. Furthermore William’s entanglement with the deeper moral issue of hiding the evidence carries the reader along with him to a place of imaginative moral involvement. As he exists in a space of ambiguity, the reader is able to place herself in the position of implication without the overhanging threat of judgment. Gaita does not see a place for blame, accusation and chastisement within moral reckoning. There are two points here. One is the reader’s affective engagement with the character of William as he discovers the truth of injustice. The second is the reader’s sense of responsibility for events outside the fictional world. These are both orchestrated through the character of William’s whose struggle intersects with injustice to the Kuran people.

The visual image of the infected ear is one of seeping blood and pus. This figures as an eruption growing under the surface, neglected and worsening. This representation merges with the metaphor of the waterhole, embodying the underlying dreadful, hidden truth of what happened to the Kuran people. Hence, both of these work as a metaphor of hidden harm, one which will be revealed when William digs for the remains of the Kuran people’s bones.

Similarly, the dead smell works as a metaphor in the novel for the buried secret, foul from repression and lack of exposure to the freshness of acknowledgment, remorse and apology. William tries to tell his uncle about the smell but he is too blinded by his McIvor obsession, driven by the desire to pass on ownership with conditions intact. The text reveals that:

William whispered his deepest truth. ‘I smell something dead.’ The old man’s gaze locked onto him, intent suddenly. ‘Yes.’ His body shuddered, and a hand crept across the sheets to clutch William’s arm. ‘Yes, I smell it too.’ ‘You do?’ ‘Something rotten. Something rotten and burned.’ ‘What is it?’ William pleaded.

But in place of acknowledgement:

Madness ignited in the old man’s eyes. ‘A sign, boy, it’s a sign. It’s my death you can smell.’ ‘No…” William moaned, trying to tug his hand away. His uncle wouldn’t let go. ‘We’re blood you and I. I can feel it in you. You’re an open door. The world talks to you. You see things.’ ‘No I don’t.’ ‘You mustn’t say that…It’s why I chose you.’ ‘Chose me?’ ‘When I die Will, all this will be yours’ (pp.294-5).

William rejects this “You’re not dying.” But his crazed uncle urges, “It’s the only way. You can’t own this House until I am dead.” William then surprises him with an assertion of his own will: “I don’t even want it” (p.295). Shocked by this sudden declaration, John asks: “What are you talking about?” (p.295). William’s confused but awakening state of mind is caught in the reply: “I don’t know…I thought I did …but everyone keeps telling me different things” (p.295).
William’s awakening comes in fragments as he fluctuates between withdrawal and connection with his uncle. From his earliest encounters with his uncle, William is subjected to the pressure of his scrutiny. Uncertain of what his uncle’s wider plan is: “William searched for an answer. He was failing the examination, whatever it was” (p.61). His uncle’s scrutiny is a recurring theme: “It was that searching, testing look that William had felt before. But there was something expectant in it too, something hopeful” (p.109). Finally he begins to grasp his uncle’s intention for him to take over the property upon certain conditions:

Again, William felt that his uncle could see right through to the centre of him, probing his heart for some vital quality. And although William had no idea what it was, or if it was inside him, he finally grasped what his uncle was offering, if it could be found (p.110).

He tells Will he needs someone to take over but it is conditional upon proving himself. He tells Will that he has to have “what this place needs” and that when he returns “if you are ready, I’ll show you what my real work is all about” (p.110). However, from the outset William has had doubts due to the decaying state of his uncle’s estate. After he visits the derelict church and graveyard he felt he “hated Kuran Station, every inch of it” (p.70). He wonders if “everything on his uncle’s property will be the same, defaced and decayed and torn apart from the slow creep of branches and roots?” (p.70). He begins to question the value of his uncle’s life but such is his hold that William feels guilty in his uncle’s presence. His ambivalence begins to increase. He remains ambivalent in his interactions with his uncle, fluctuating in his responses for the most part, even up to the point when his uncle sends him on a pilgrimage in his desire for William to share his passion for the land, mimicking indigeneity as spiritual connection to the land.199 On this occasion he is driven by his uncle’s will: “the old man’s certainty blazed within him, and he knew exactly where he was going” (p.297). This allegiance shifts again on his pilgrimage: “Some understanding was supposed to come to him out here, some voice supposed to speak – his uncle had made all sorts of promises” (p.299). He despairs - “two days of walking and pain and thirst – and what had he discovered. There was no great secret out here waiting to be told. The station had an empty heart. What would his uncle think of that?” (p.314).

William’s ambivalent transitional state of awareness shifts between letting in other realities and his uncle’s perspective. This ambivalence functions as a strategy for bringing an undecided reader along with him. For example, this is evident in his alternating response to Ruth. Before he undertakes the pilgrimage into the hills he becomes caught up in defending his uncle with whom he is still trying hard to align himself, against Ruth. She speaks frankly, telling William that the gift of the property will come at a price- “so be careful of what he tells you to do” (p.288). Ruth issues a warning to Will about her father’s lack of moral integrity. She represents the risk of unethical involvement through unawareness. William resists her influence as his uncle has warned him about her but he is also still confused because he is affected by the fact that she was the one who noticed his illness. She “had smelled the rotten thing, when no one else had” (p.287). Her symbolic recognition affirms his

subjective reality and signifies concern for others. Ruth shows some further understanding of his dilemma when she says, “I’m sorry I upset you before. I know it can’t be any fun, caught between two old people like me and my father.’ And her concern only confused William more” (p.287). Another reality is seeping into William’s consciousness – he is seeing Ruth outside of his uncle’s sketch of her as the enemy. She has transcended this through responding as a caring human being. Despite any personal agendas she may harbour, unlike John and Veronica she can move beyond self to respond to another. Will’s awakening to those who express some care and recognition of him corresponds to his deeper inner sense and awakening to what is fair and just.

The burning man metaphor

The metaphor of the burning man represents conscience. It first emerges in John’s life, before William’s birth. It reappears in a different context when William’s father dies. This seems to be an aberration because it is not directly associated with John’s guilt but even this can be linked to his disregard for everyone and everything but his obsession. He speaks callously, telling Will his parents’ farm was a dud piece of land. Struck by this “William thought of his father’s gentle, smiling face, and the way he had been so happy with his property, and so baffled at its failure” (p.108). William feels the shame of this and challenges his uncle; “Why didn’t you tell him?” He replies insensitively, “By the time I heard about it, it was all signed and sealed. They were doomed on that farm, your parents, fire or no fire. Some people are just doomed, period. Your dad without a clue, and your mother…well, you know your own mother” (p.108). William is jolted into anger by this reference to his mother. The narrative reveals: “the shame in him turned to anger. How could his uncle talk this way? ‘Is your farm making money?’ he demanded, seeking to wound back” (p.109). This strategy by his uncle of attacking and undermining William’s heritage ‘as doomed for failure’ is designed to build up to a promise of something better and more important than money. John tells him he could have made money but it was never about that but about belonging. He then discloses his plans for William. The novel deliberately undermines settler search for belonging by representing the mimicry as false.

The novel enacts a scrutiny of John’s moral condition, one which has accumulated guilt from different sources. One of these is his uncertain part in his then future father-in-law’s death. John McIvor bears guilt from a moment’s hesitation in watching his then future father-in-law, Oliver Fisher, burn. The man had threatened to stand in the way of John’s future with his daughter Harriet. That morning he wakes to the smell of burning. After a frantic scramble by the men in Fisher’s timber cutting gang, John beholds Oliver: “Turning on his heel, he looked back and beheld a terrible thing. The entire mountainside was aflame, but worse, in the gully below, lost amid the smoke and raining debris, a single figure staggered” (p.169). John had earlier questioned his underlying motive for wanting Harriet when his proposal of marriage was rebuked by Oliver. With a scrutiny unlike the character that he has become he asks “Could it actually be true? Had he been assuming, all along, that the wealth from the sawmill business would be his to collect one day, through Harriet?” (p.170). Despite this
slight sign of conscience, the narrative creates ambiguity around his part in Oliver’s death. We note John’s realistic caution as he watches Oliver burn:

John gauged the progress of the fire. Were there ten seconds before it swallowed them, were there thirty? Was there time to get down to Oliver, to drag him back up the slope? Could he even manage to do it with his bad leg, and Oliver disoriented and perhaps unconscious by then? The hesitation seemed to last forever. And then John saw a monster step out of the smoke……John stayed stricken for one last second, long enough to see his employer rear up, a flailing, burning shape of arms and legs (p.170).

However, the fact remains that he did not try to rescue him. He hesitated through a realistic appraisal of the reality. Nevertheless, he questions his inaction. While John cannot be held accountable he remains uneasy. Consequently, while an externalized set of principles cannot reveal the moral significance of John’s predicament or the guilt he bears, remorse can. He slips through any culpability radar. Yet he remains “troubled and restless” in his unconscious realm, dreaming of the burning man. This suggests the embryonic remorse characterised by Cordner.200

But his moral responsiveness is short lived. After Oliver’s death he puts off scrutinizing himself further. The narrative reveals:

His own behaviour in that crucial moment, the hesitation between action and inaction, was something that John long refused to examine. It was only later that he would wonder if, underneath his horror of the fire, he had felt a surge of exultation when he’d seen Oliver trapped in that gully – and excited certainty that Oliver would die, and that with him every obstacle between himself and Harriet and her money would disappear  (p.171).

The potential for questioning his own moral condition is something that John leaves behind as the obsession takes hold. Psychological obsession is the motivation for all his future actions. He is set on a rigid path in which others only figure as vehicles to his own ends. He tells himself that Oliver’s death was given to him by the hills of his beloved country. After all, the fire started in the eastern region of Kuran station. This fiction that Oliver’s death was given to him by his cherished Kuran hills signifies a turning point in his potential for moral amelioration. The novel shows an awareness of the depth of psychological denial that locks him in a state of mind where fantasy refuses any reality that threatens the status quo. It absolves him from his guilt and rigidifies his childhood desire to live out his father’s dream for him:

And so John would return to the memory –the rushing flames, and a frenzied, burning figure-and savour it as a gift both precious and awesome. For his secret belief was that, in his hour of greatest need, the hills of his station had ignited by themselves that night, and so devoured his enemy” (p.171).

200 Remorse and Moral Identity, p.243
This characterisation of John represents the intra-psychic relationship between psychological blocks and that of moral feebleness. John’s delusion about the hill’s complicity in Oliver’s death might give him some respite from his guilt but as the novel shows it only goes underground, re-surfacing in his nightmares. In Klein’s theory of ambivalence, conflicting feelings co-exist; this is the basis of the formation of guilt, the love and the hate. John later reflects on the town’s rejection of his family, only then realising why his father was disliked. John has been denying this. John’s inability to deal with his ambivalence in relation to Oliver pushes him further into fantasy. However, the novel uncovers a deeper source of shame and remorse than John’s guilt, one which reaches even further into the recesses of his unconscious to a crime that has nothing to do with him other than by his childhood presence at the scene. He has been polluted by being present in the massacre of Aboriginal people committed by his own father.

The burning man metaphor first emerges for William at the ill-fated rally, called to resist Native Title, significantly located on the hill near the waterhole. By this time William is feverish from infection, and in this state has an encounter with the image of the burning man. Symbolically, he is open-eyed to a presence:

*It was coming.* A moment, a thing – he was suddenly alert to its approach. His limbs ached and the pain in his ear was piercing, but he found that he could see everything around him with chill clarity. Every tree, each individual leaf, was a crystal-edged shadow” (p.213).

His visual alertness is associated here with his capacity to encounter the evil of his uncle’s past as represented in the image:

He stood up, ready to flee, but in the same moment, off through the trees, the flame passed in its progress. William hesitated holding his breath. It was aware of him. Whoever or whatever carried the flame, it had seen him now. William hung motionless in the darkness, staring. And the flame shifted slightly, and resolved into a shape, and finally, irrevocably, he saw it. It was a man on fire. And yet the figure didn’t scream or struggle, but stood perfectly still. William could discern arms and legs wrapped in flame, a torso that streamed silent fire. And a head tilted calmly to one side, as if to ask a question (p.215).

Strategically the narrative flags an intersection of individual guilt and conscience with that of social injustice and racism. These are merged by the symbol of fire and the coincidence of the rally and the burning man. William confides in his uncle about the image of the burning man but this is significantly interrupted by another flame appearing, for the mob has run riot in a demonstration of overt racism. The narrative reveals that

It came up the brow of the hill. He shrank back, transfixed by the sight of a great burning cross towering into the night. It flared hungrily in the wind, and the men who held it aloft were all robed in white, their heads covered with hoods, black holes of emptiness cut out for their eyes. ‘No,’ pleaded a voice... ‘Not this. This isn’t the Australian way. This is from somewhere else...’ yells John McIvor from the microphone (p.216).
Again the novel reveals that John has not sunk irredeemably to the same low level of moral disintegration as that of his cronies. The novel highlights an intersection of the unresolved and unexamined personal guilt of John McIvor in relation to his father-in-law, and the way this spills over into his social milieu where there is a continuum of ill intent. The novel collapses the boundaries here between the unresolved personal issue of guilt and collective injustice.

However, despite some sense of wrongdoing, John’s disregard for and use of others is foregrounded in the text by his selfish pursuit of William upon whom he can transfer his load. He urges the boy out into the wilderness, playing on his connection with the hills

‘Will, you feel this country calling. I know you do’ to which William replies, ‘I feel sick, that’s all’ but his uncle characteristically ignoring his plea pressures him further, ‘You’re fighting it, that’s why. But it’s out there, William. Out there in the hills. That’s where it happened to me. And the waterhole. That’s where you have to go’ (p.296). Feverish, the idea of water draws him into his uncle’s scheme: “It was as if his uncle’s mind had become one with his own, a whirl of fear and hatred and flame, and William saw that the old man was right about everything. The decision passed between them in the beat of a heart, and the old man’s face lit with triumph (p.297).

The successful transfer of John’s burden of guilt is evident when William has visions of the burning man and John is free of these haunting nightmares. This contamination suggests pollution, but as an active passing on of guilt from one generation to another. It signifies as inter-generational guilt, with the novel asserting that we cannot escape responsibility for what has happened in the past. It may bring temporary relief for John but he is doomed by his determination to have others take responsibility. In Gaita’s understanding, this would constitute a corrupt form of guilt: “Corrupt forms of remorse are a form of self-absorption. Then the ‘I’ of self-absorption becomes a false semblance of the radically singular ‘I’ who is discovered in genuine remorse.”201 Hence genuine remorse is a solitary state with no external relief from sharing the load, but despite this John manages to shift his burden to William. John reflects

Most crucially of all there had been no nightmares. Not one glimpse of that familiar figure standing patiently while it burned. Perhaps it was Oliver Fisher, perhaps it wasn’t – John had stopped pondering the question years ago. But ever since the day of Oliver’s death, John had known that there was a price he must pay to achieve his ends. Friends, family, wife and daughter – he had surrendered them all. And that, he had come to believe, was what the nightmares really signified. The burning man was his reminder of things lost, and his accuser of things done (p.341).

John himself is callously aware of how he has used William:

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201 Good and Evil, 2004, p.49.
But now it had vanished, and John knew why. It had moved on to William. All unknowing, the boy had assumed the burden, and John was free of it at last. He dreamt of nothing now, as if he was a man without history or memories” (p.342).

But the outcome, though it brings relief, is an abandonment to the moral abyss: “There was only an empty, silent place in his sleep, where his mind hung in soothing darkness” (p.342). This emptiness is reminiscent of an embryonic remorse that has no avenue for reparation.

During the pilgrimage on which his uncle sends him William gains knowledge about the Kuran people’s sacred site in the bush. He comes to a place where the “heaviness” of it made it “hard to breathe” and where there was something “unspeakable” (p.315). In this spot, despite nothing visibly striking about it, he experiences some kind of significance about the place: “And yet there was a weight upon him, a deep vibration in the air of this spot that rang with foreboding” (p.315). He stumbles backwards, compelled to move out of this atmosphere and wondering where the boundary lies: “More steps, slow. And still there was no visible sign, no boundary he had crossed, only the sense that he was withdrawing from somewhere he was not supposed to be. He turned, ready to flee” (p.315). It is here that he also experiences the third ghostly presence that tells him “black men dreamt me, long ago” (p.316) William has a sense of the ghost standing guard, but wonders why he feels this as there is nothing especially visible. The creature retorts; “Dead stones on a hill, and little fires. The old man is blind” (p.317). William realises that his uncle is misguided and that this is the real place: “Understanding shook William. The hilltop at the campground was not a meeting place, and the stones there had no meaning. This was the only place, and his uncle had never found it” (p.319). Another moment of disillusionment comes when he reaches the waterhole and finds it dry: “But his uncle had promised” (p.319). Exhausted, dehydrated and disillusioned; “He was at his end, he could walk no more, think no more, believe no more” (p.319). Here the irony of the novel emerges within William’s consciousness: he can no longer trust his uncle’s claims.

The textual representation of the historical events surrounding white settlement give brush strokes to the injustices endured by Aboriginal people throughout Australia. Ruth slowly gathers knowledge of the circumstances relating to Daniel McIvor’s background, informing William that he was a member of the Queensland Native Police prior to taking up the post as Edward White’s manager. She tells him their purpose was “dispersal,” a method for dealing with any trouble for the settlers all over Queensland but especially in the far north (p.335). Practices were not recorded but eventually dispersal was disbanded due to public protest at the rumours that dispersal was a euphemism for killing. The troops were made up of Aboriginal trackers and Daniel McIvor was one of the white captains. Ruth tells William that the hat he wears bears the emblem of the Native Police. She relates the history of Daniel McIvor’s arrival at Kuran:

‘He kept hold of his gun, though. He used to carry it with him, when he worked here. And obviously he kept that hat. I know you don’t really understand, Will, but my father’s had you dressed up in the Australian equivalent of an SS uniform.’ William studied the cap. No he didn’t understand her, but it seemed darker now, and heavier (p.336).
And he remembers the comment by the awesome presence in the hills:

‘You bear the mark, boy.’ Yes he had borne that hat like a beacon the whole time he was in the hills. The murderous shepherd had recognised it, and drawn away. The explorer had saluted its authority. And the bunyip had regarded it with ancient hostility. But why? The Native Police had never been on the station (p.336).

However, Ruth saves the best till last to confront her father, and in William’s presence.

The novel confirms and highlights the exploitation of William by his uncle, through Ruth who accuses her father of “almost killing” William by sending him out into the hills. The old man denies it; “She doesn’t know half of what she thinks she knows. You’re the one that’s been out there, Will. You and me both” (p.344). John’s power over William is drawn out by the following; “And again, William felt the ardent touch of his uncle’s mind, the madness in it, and he knew how easy it would be for his own control to slip loose, teetering as it already was” (p.344).

Seeking justice, Ruth has unearthed the circumstances leading up to the massacre. When Daniel McIvor arrived at Kuran he was against the local Indigenous people’s presence at the station, being in support of moving the Kuran people on to Cherbourg mission. Two years later the men folk returned and again in 1915 when he caught and handed them into the police. In 1917 they came back again. This incident is remembered by John as a three year old, frightened by the ‘naked black men’ near the waterhole. The particulars had been recorded in Malcolm White’s journal, the brother of Elizabeth White. Ruth reveals, “It wasn’t just Malcolm. Word got around, quietly. Elizabeth remembers the rumours herself. People suspected, and a lot of them were appalled. It was harmless old men and boys he’d killed. Boys” (p.349). John’s head shaking stops suddenly. Something of the truth gets through his defenses. Signifying trauma, the reader is informed that time stopped for him:

An outcast? The denial died on his lips. John found he couldn’t speak. For with that one word, the great enigma of his father was suddenly laid bare. A man always so reviled, so distrusted, so dogged by whispers and frowns. And now at last, John had a reason. Could his daughter’s story really be true? It must be true. What else explained so much? An atrocity had taken place, and as the dark rumour of it spread, the people of Powell had turned from Daniel McIvor in disgust. And from his son (p.349).

This moment for reflection takes John into memories of “every slight and setback” preordained by his father’s action (p.349). The fabric of John’s life stretches to expand the reader’s knowledge of his position, revealing the social and familial forces that formed his psychological obsession and subsequent isolation. Delving further into the abyss of his repressed memories, John remembers being an infant in arms:

He was smelling the smoke and crying and he was only a little boy, clutched tight in his mother’s arms, so tight he was almost suffocating, and she was crying as well, her breast heaving against his face, as somewhere men yelled and laughed and flames crackled (p.350).  

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Drawing her father back into the present Ruth asserts “The question is why do you think those men and boys kept coming back here? But whatever it was, they died for it” (p.350). The text repeats the refrain in the next chapter: “Why do you think…?” (p.352). Ruth answers her own rhetorical question “‘A Sacred site they needed to visit’… ‘Lies,’ William heard his uncle whisper” (p.352). William remembers the place by the waterhole and tries to tell his uncle it’s not lies: “that he knew why the Aborigines kept returning, and why they were so close to the creek on the day of the picnic. It was because of that place. Their place” (p.353). But Uncle John is not listening. It is William now who carries the knowledge of the local Kuran people’s place. It is he who understands the significance of place to Aboriginal people. “Show me their bones” John demands of his daughter (p.356).

The full reality opens out before William who remembers the whiteness he saw in the periphery of his vision and alerts his uncle to the existence of the bones at the bottom of the dried up waterhole’s cave. He relives the experience telling his uncle:

‘There was a cave. I thought there might be water in it...There wasn’t any water. But I saw…’ He hesitated, abandoned to the memory again. He understood now how it must have happened. They had burned the bodies, Ruth said, but they hadn’t burned them completely. Then they had thrown the remains in the creek...but that part of the story was wrong. The water was too shallow in the creek, or maybe there was no water at all. And this was a crime, it had to be kept secret. So instead they’d hidden the remains where they would never be seen again, where there was always deep, deep water. ‘I thought they were sticks,’ he said... ‘But they were white’ (pp.358-359).

John’s own mind drifts back to when he had also “glimpsed a whiteness” (p.359). Then he is alert to what he has heard; “bones? You saw them, right down at the bottom’” (p.359). William confirms the knowledge he absorbed, “I thought they were sticks and rocks. They weren’t they were bones. The bones of those people. They were thrown in the waterhole’” (p.359). William has learnt more than his uncle had imagined when he sent him out into the hills. His uncle exclaims “You can’t know that. You can’t”… (p.359). But William asserts his knowledge, “They told me... The things out in the hills. They said I’d find it.” (p.359). William’s knowledge is constructed as a spiritual and intuitive form of knowing that extends beyond any of the adults around him, even Ruth.

The waterhole figures throughout the text in various ways. It is sought by the PhD student and the rangers as evidence of Indigenous presence, and kept hidden by John and, by implication, William. Symbolically, it is the place where John in a renewed desire to regain Kuran Station also experiences himself as ‘possessing’ Harriet, motivating him to have sex with her to keep her from his rival, Dudley. It is also the site of William’s moment of awakening to his uncle’s deceit when he told him it never dried up; most profoundly, it is the moment when he is forced to go down against his will to retrieve the bones of the Kuran people.
Christopher Cordner identifies an initial uneasiness at the onset of remorse, in an act of wrongdoing. On his way to the cave William has an uneasy sense of what he is about to do. As a metaphor for social unrest William re-encounters two of the European ghosts on his way to the cave, seeing them as witnesses: “All of them coming to bear witness to this final indignity” (p.362). The novel merges the theme of the rotting decay of William’s ear with that of the brutal violence against the Kuran people in this scene where William enters the cave at the bottom of the waterhole to retrieve the evidence of Aboriginal remains for his uncle. As he enters the cave he finds “The rank smell of rotting had returned, as if the cave was filled with it, even though he knew that the bones were as dry as the dust” (p.363). Entering the cave merges this rank smell with the evil that has occurred, the evidence of which William is helping to destroy. This convergence of the smell of neglect, murder and denial works as a stark metaphor of rankness for what was done to the Kuran people. The narrative constructs an intersection of the evil of brutal murder and racism with the neglect of William, and ultimately the denial of wrong doing or harm. Yet William almost paradoxically sees the “immeasurable misery” in his uncle’s face as he compels Will towards secrecy. He demands “They must never have the proof they need. They must never take this land from me” (p.363). The text is not prepared to sacrifice further understanding of the complexity of moral fallibility, but it avoids excess reader empathy for John. In this moment William’s humanity is awakened but also distanced to cope with the horror of what he is doing.

The text wants to show that to be involved in any sense with what happened, and the later cover up of the evidence, compromises existence as a compassionate human being; it risks becoming disconnected from one’s capacity to respond from a sense of common humanity. This is illustrated in the way William becomes dissociated from what his body is doing, as if in a protective trance to deal with the trauma:

He watched as his hands picked at the bones. ………He did not allow himself to recognise them as human, not even the white domes with holes that gazed darkly, not even the rows of pebble-like teeth. He refused to count, to ever know or remember how many bones there were, or how many people they represented. The shovel scraped and bit at the earth and he was hardly aware that he himself moved it. Then there were more bones and more shards of bone, and the dream went on, darker and deeper and without end (p.364).

William has dissociated to escape the reality of what he is doing. Yet he is still left with a lingering sense of contamination: “There were cold pinpricks on his face. He almost laughed. The rain had come too late. Too late to refill the pool and hide its secret, too late to wash him clean. He would never be clean” (p.365). He feels he has become spiritually rooted to this act and this place, joining the ghosts here so that his own spirit “would eternally haunt this place, bearing its burden back and forth amidst the shadows” (p.365). His burden consists in not just the knowledge of what had happened but his role in it as witness and perpetrator. William’s

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202 See Remorse and Moral Identity, pp. 243-244 on the trajectory of remorse.
sense of the moral significance of which he partakes is deep, as Gaita illustrates with the example of the Dutch woman.\textsuperscript{203}

The ghosts remind us that history will not be disremembered or disappear. They also merge Williams’s sense of remorse with the timelessness of moral unrest on a wider scale. Injustice does not die but lingers in collective memory through individuals, symbolised by the spiritual realm of ghosts where harm matters, lying in wait for reparation. Through the symbol of the earth as justice, growing over the ruins and then taking back what is hers, there is restoration in the natural order. If no one else is prepared to acknowledge harm done, ultimately the spiritual, natural world remembers.

The underlying theme of the harm done to William by those responsible for his wellbeing intersects with the novel’s concern with justice for Aboriginal people. This carries the reader emotionally through a felt injustice that then intersects schematically with the harm done to Aboriginal people. This strategy climaxes in the waterhole scene when William confronts the full impact of his complicity. The text’s cohesive linking of symbols within its economy creates an impression of a puzzle with missing pieces slowly joined together to show the whole terrain, signifying the act of looking intently. Significantly the novel is framed by a picture mounted in the office of Kuran station that William sights upon arrival: “Black men, looking on from the shadows, their expressions impossible to read. Hostile? Fearful?” (p.335). William is drawn back to this painting towards the end of the narrative when Ruth informs him about the history of territorial conflict even prior to the time of the White’s settlement which began in 1860. Symbolically, the second gaze upon the image brings forth a closer reading. William wonders about the painting; “where the dark faces huddled. Were they lying in wait for the white men, he had always wondered, or were they hiding in fear. And now that he looked more attentively - were there rifles in the riders’ hands?” (p.335). Again the focus is on looking more attentively, just as Iris Murdoch urges people to do to further grasp what has escaped the eye. Symbolically, the text is inviting the reader to read more closely. The character who thematically carries this intent is Ruth. It is she who acknowledges the harm done to the Kuran people, and who looks closely into the history and discovers more of the reality. Signifying continuity of care, Ruth represents compassion on a micro level of concern for those around her who are in need, as well as on the macro level of peoples and histories. It is Ruth who finally smells the rottenness from William’s ear. However, it is William who, after a journey of fragmented glimpses arrives with the perception of the full reality of what really happened to the Kuran people. He confronts this through his own body which has embodied the evil symbolically within his ear.

The novel unfolds layer upon layer of skewed motivation, dramatising the burden of guilt carried inter-generationally through family lines. Its critical depiction of unexamined greed passed from one generation to the next results in a refusal of responsibility by the characters for past wrongs and the continuation of injustice. The novel stretches from disremembered trauma, deeply embedded within the perpetrator’s psyche that fortifies the denial of justice; to the social reality of greed and brutal dispossession.

\textsuperscript{203} See Introduction, p.20
Chapter 5 – The Secret River

The previous chapter analysed the dramatisation of remorse through a vulnerable child protagonist. I argued that the characterisation of the child figure carries the reader to a comprehensive understanding of injustice against Aboriginal people. Establishing the site of fiction as an enactment of community discomfort through its micro/macro connections, the novel lends weight to the merging of fictionalised representations with that of political realities, and it is this characteristic blend of the novels examined in this thesis. The novel represents trauma, complicity, denial and awakening consciousness as the character unravels the context and the implication of the injustice in which he partakes. Andrew McGahan critiques settler belonging in The White Earth, representing it as driven by psychological complexity. Kate Grenville’s novel approaches the problem from a different angle, for while McGahan’s perpetrator’s viewpoint is marginalised, hers is centralised.204 This chapter develops my argument about the ways remorse is dramatised in fiction, especially as this dramatisation highlights a problematic reader positioning.

In this chapter I examine The Secret River and the moral and ethical questions that arise from its narrative. I explore the significance of the novel in my survey of fiction engaging with shame, guilt and remorse in relation to Indigenous issues in Australia. The framework of remorse I bring to this novel provides a means of looking into the moral struggle of the protagonists, and what this means for the reader and the wider community. I will argue that William Thornhill, the main protagonist, represents a character struggling with his conscience, stuck in a trajectory of remorse in what Christopher Cordner would describe as embryonic.205 Thornhill’s character functions as an allegory for the conflicted state of the nation. For example, his embodiment of ambivalence resonates with the way in which the nation is divided in its response to justice for Indigenous Australians. While the fallibility of humanness in the character of Thornhill engages reader sympathy, as Odette Kelada argues this is problematic in a text about first contact.206 Since it makes the outcome comprehensible on different levels, this sympathy inadvertently risks justifying the wrongdoing towards the first peoples. In setting out to record her own genealogical history, Grenville’s representation of Indigenous reality was inevitably destined to be problematic. This draws our attention to the risks for any non-indigenous writer representing Indigenous issues, especially without a sense of the weightiness this involves.

The Secret River is historical fiction depicting the settlement of Australia as a colony of Britain. What is the significance of the literary engagement with this period of history in this point in time? Kelada claims that narratives written during reconciliation represent ‘key stakes’ that are embedded within certain perspectives of Australia’s violent past as an ongoing discourse of colonialism. She asks, “for instance, how is sameness and difference represented and navigated?”(p.5). This theme emerges within the text in the context of

Thornhill expressing humanity when he realises that the Aboriginals are the same as him. Does this novel prompt us to take a closer look at what our shared history has actually involved and to seek to know the ‘reality’ of the colony’s beginnings? As Eleanor Collins, an Australia-based literary scholar, argues in her article entitled “Poison in the Flour,” the novel is structured chronologically as a realist text with the writer making truth claims about a large portion of history. From a social justice perspective, knowing the reality is a part of the process of reconciliation. This involves a desire to know what has been excluded, a point made by Janna Thompson who argues for “trans-generational commitment making.” Collins notes that several renowned Australian writers have returned to the site of first contact and reflects: “Perhaps there is a sense that the moment of origin holds an explanatory key to all that has come afterwards, that a return to origin might clarify the present, resolving its guilts and conflicts” (p.40). This raises the question of how first contact is represented and the ramifications that follow from this.

One means of representation that engages with historical events in an interrogative and subversive way is the genre of ‘contemporary historical fiction.’ This fiction re-imagines an historical period or event, from a contemporary perspective. It reflects a move towards a re-vision that takes up unacknowledged narratives. It challenges grand narratives of history that exclude others’ stories. Mainstream history is shown to be just one of the multiple stories which make up the past. However, Collins’ critique that The Secret River does not have the author’s typical play with form and ambiguity suggests that Grenville’s novel does not fit into this genre because of its lack of challenge to the main protagonist’s subjectivity. An example of contemporary historical fiction that revisits an event in order to reconceptualise it with representations of the hidden and missing narratives is the novel Beloved. This reimagines an untold black female slave narrative in order to reconstruct the past. Beloved does more than critique the grand narrative of American racism, it represents the trembling of a people faced with freedom as a first-time reality. Memory is figured in Beloved as a fluctuating and unpredictable force capable of disrupting continuous narrative.

Fictional representation of history has been an area of contention for historians, epitomized in the dialogue between novelist Kate Grenville and historian Inga Clendinnen following the release of The Secret River. Clendinnen is the author of Dancing with Strangers, a creative reenactment of the first days of settler and Aboriginal interaction. The text is controversial in its approach because it is seen by some as an apology for colonial

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209 Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction, London: Routledge, 1988. Historiographic metafiction is set apart by Hutcheon, who conceives the new genre as a postmodern response to historical fiction. The self-perception of postmodernism as self-reflexive, renders it able to parody itself for having any epistemological claims, to even know whether it is self-reflexive. So to be safe it undercuts any discourse.
invasion. In this context of the history wars, the fictional contribution is seen as a part of the pursuit to uncover the full story. Adam Gale, commenting on the debate between Clendinnen and Grenville in his article entitled “Taking /Taking Up: Recognition and the Frontier in Grenville’s Secret River,” perceives both The Secret River and Dancing with Strangers as settler-colonial cultural texts. He argues that the “central questions here are how and in what form the frontier persists in contemporary Australian cultural texts such as Grenville’s.”

Gale draws attention to the unconscious element that runs through Grenville’s text, reflected in Collin’s comment above, about the absence of the self-reflexive narrator and authorial voice challenging the narrative position. He rejects Grenville’s claimed experience of “direct communication of the story within the place itself” as testimony to a spiritual connection to the land (p.96). This refers to Grenville’s trip to the Hawkesbury to her ancestor, Wiseman’s, original house. In Searching for the Secret River, she writes: “At this moment I was absolutely certain – as sure as I’d seen it with my own eyes – that there’d been trouble here on this quiet bend of the river.” Gale suggests that such “recognising without understanding” has the effect of producing a “kind of ‘knowing’ settler belonging” (p.96). This echoes McGahan’s The White Earth except that settler belonging is brought under scrutiny there within a context of exploitation, denial and a drive to possess Aboriginal land. Gale questions the trust the author invests in her experiential engagement with the story claiming it has “overtones of Romanticism” equating Aboriginal people with nature (p.96).

The point to be made here is that Grenville’s trust without attention to the subtle ways that discourse can reproduce itself, without authorial intention, leaves the text vulnerable to controversy. I agree with Gale that Dancing with Strangers “has some parallels with Grenville’s novel” (p.98). He claims “Clendinnen does not address the continuing ethical and political effects of the past on the present, or the effects of the present on the past” (p.98).

Gale argues that the differences are flattened between settlers and Aboriginal people in Clendinnen’s book, making both remote to the historian. While I agree with Clendinnen and Gale that Grenville’s “Applied Empathy” is problematic, Clendinnen’s disavowal draws attention to her own shaky attempt to enter the subjectivity of Aboriginal people. While her objection is to what she perceives as “empathic time-leaps” in Grenville’s representation of the early colonists, her own familiarity with the settlers in her book, invites the reader into an intimacy that is disturbing at times: “It is easy to become over-ingenious in interpreting the intentions lurking in other minds, but I also want to consider the nature of the spear which passed through Governor Phillip’s body.” Creating a picture of Aboriginal people being captured, their hair cropped and washed, she claims “We can’t know what the victims

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thought about any of this, only that they were terrified.” 218 Again, despite the impossibility of knowing, the narrator presumes to know. Reflecting upon the irony of Phillip’s imperialist vision of superiority in the context of their dependence on shipped provisions while the Indigenous people were self-sufficient that escaped him, she claims “I doubt it escaped the Australians.” 219 The settler narratives and their struggles are foregrounded in both texts, and the reader aligned therein. However, within the history wars debate, Clendinnen does acknowledge “A powerful story might elicit remorse in a dominant group, and even stimulate the desire to recompense injury.” 220

The controversy surrounding The Secret River mirrors the moral dilemma faced by the nation. Thus the warm reception of the novel by the media reviews and the less than enthusiastic and more cautious literary reviews. This tension raises questions about the symbolic value of the novel. It draws attention to Indigenous absence and the fraught terrain that non-Indigenous writers enter when engaging with representation of injustice.

Nevertheless, in this context of controversy, the novel has been the catalyst for the production of a play by Andrew Bovell.221 Trevor Jamieson, an Indigenous actor in the play, has been generous in his commentary: “The Secret River is a work that has the potential to challenge perceptions: about written text, history and the multiple narrators, and how within the realm of theatre these stories can be heard in new ways that interrogate our default expectations.”222 Jamieson’s comments suggest the novel serves as a starting point from which to expand and develop a dialogue. For example, he said of the play; “Having not just the perspective of Thornhill as narrator but also a female Indigenous voice (Ursula Yovich) has helped us take the text to a different level of engagement” (Jamieson, 2013). However, in doing so the play exposes the gap in Grenville’s novel.

The play version The Secret River engages in reimagining Indigenous presence. It amplifies the Indigenous people’s reactions to colonial presence.223 The use of Dharug language creates a vibrant sense of presence while accentuating the difficulties of communication. One significant aspect of the play is its attention to the gap of Aboriginal subjectivity by amplifying the characters responses to the settlers disrupting their food supply, for example. It does this through language, Aboriginal names, and dialogue. The use of Aboriginal names reinstates identity. The defining difference between the play and the novel is that it consults with Aboriginal people including speakers of Dharug. It also includes their reactions to loss of place and sustenance. It parallels the shared experience of both, waiting for the other to move on. In the novel, Blackwood advises Thornhill to “Give a little, take a little” (p.169). In the play he implores “You don’t see it do you? …That they’re thinking the same thing” (p.19). In the play, this is brought out when Yalamundi tells Ngalamalum, “We just wait. They’ll move on. You’ll see” (p.31). Significantly the play

218 Dancing, p.28.
219 Dancing, p.31.
220 The History Question, p.65.
leaves out the earlier part of Grenville’s novel which covers Thornhill’s childhood in London, the contentious source of reader sympathy for his struggle.

This thesis questions the role of fiction in the moral process of grappling with the past and present consequences of harm. Kelada’s understanding of The Secret River, as easing the guilt of its white readers and even absolving an otherwise smeared national identity, argues that this is a self-serving novel. Any discussion of The Secret River’s value as enabling a morally imaginative form of response with the issue of dispossession needs to take account of Kelada’s critique. Her argument interrogates a text which she sees as fundamentally neutralising the issues of dispossession and killing through its underlying narrative impulse to serve the nation’s recovery from shame. Kelada views the novel as a self-absorbed preoccupation with settler unrest, with white guilt and emptiness eclipsing the suffering of the Indigenous peoples. Kelada is disturbed by what she perceives as a continuation of colonial discourse. She offers an astute and persuasive reading that consistently traces the metaphoric language of the novel to underpin her argument. For example, she links the act of acknowledging shame as a part of the process of regaining national pride. Kelada argues that this very fumbling ambivalence renders the ultimate violence more palatable for its readers. She asks “Does such a version of events ease the guilt of a white readership?” (p.11). I agree with Kelada that the ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding the protagonist, Thornhill, reflects the state of the nation, as one of fluctuating uncertainty about how to respond to the moral necessity, for it can be both easing yet disturbing. She also problematises the question Grenville asks “What might I have done in that situation?” She identifies this as creating an “everyman type who is not too good, not too evil” (p.11). Kelada draws attention to a process whereby a nation’s shame can work as a site of national recovery when “loaded with white investments” (p.13). I understand this to refer to the reader’s identification with Thornhill as fallible through his fluctuating moral position. She argues that “the white nation, while presented with shame, is not, I feel, ultimately threatened,” characterising shame as a temporary ground (p.12). In the Introduction, my discussion of shame argues that it is always about self, saving face from one’s discomfort under the gaze of another. On its own it is a shallow response. I will argue that as a character Thornhill reflects Christopher Cordner’s model of an embryonic remorse, stunted in its trajectory, and that this represents shallow shame and thus ambivalence about our history.

Sue Kossew highlights the ambiguity arising from a “dual sense of admiration for the settlers’ survival skills and simultaneous criticism for the relative ease with which even enlightened men like Thornhill are persuaded to join in a massacre of local Aborigines.”

Kossew’s position supports my thesis focus as she draws attention to the “moral ambiguity inherent in settler identity” and the allegorical nature of this representation as a mirror of the state of the nation (p.9). In her article she analyses how this ambiguity is constructed. In tension with this analysis, several of the reviews reinforce in a positive light that the novel is about Thornhill’s character; his ordinary humanness and his redemptive qualities, hence affirming the view that it is more about settler struggle for identity and belonging than

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healing relations between Aboriginal people and settlers. For example, Peter Craven, writing for *The Age* comments that the character, Thornhill, has “naturally decent impulses” and is a “gentle man.”  

Susan Wyndham, writing for the *Sydney Morning Herald* highlights Grenville’s position through quotes that identify her motivation: “I wanted to know what circumstances would make it possible for ordinary people to be able to go out and shoot other human beings.” Grenville’s comment reveals a focus on finding a rationale to explain the phenomena of “ordinary people” which she does through Thornhill by normalizing him in a 20th century reader’s imagination. She has managed to turn him into a ‘gentle man’ who is ‘decent’ in his impulses. This is problematic for a novel about first contact where there is no resolution of racial strife. Readers can be forgiven for thinking it is more about redemption of the early settlers.

At a discursive level *The Secret River* operates to ease conscience while also offering a representation of the moral complexity of the intersection of the emancipated convict with our first peoples. This latter level sheds some light on the complexity of our current relationship to history. Its popular acclaim can be read differently as a novel which eases responsibility or as a provocative catalyst for further discourse and debate about how to engage with the justice issues. Collins laments that Grenville’s previous practice in which she challenges the narrative voice is absent from this novel: “There is no confessed doubt about the possibility of authentic narration, and little exposure of the hazy line between objective facts and the subjective reproduction of facts” (p.41). Collins highlights the ambiguity that she as a reader experiences as a result of narrative alignment with the protagonist. This creates an unbalanced empathy for his subjective experiences: “Other potential plot directions and other voices for the story emerge at the periphery but are not taken up. We stick with Thornhill, his family, his choices…” (p.41). As Andrew Bovell suggests: “Once Grenville has placed us so surely in Thornhill’s shoes she leads us into moral peril, for we find ourselves identifying with the decisions he makes. We may not agree with them but we understand them.” Here Bovell touches on one of the difficulties of the novel (xvii).

*The Secret River* foregrounds a sympathetic understanding of the background to the main protagonist’s journey. The text engenders reader sympathy for Thornhill through the portrayal of his unfortunate and impoverished life in a working-class family in England. He embodies a thirst to move beyond his past, signified by his drive towards attaining access to the comforts that have been traditionally and systematically available only to the upper classes in England. In the colony this drive takes the form of the land he desires on the Hawkesbury River. The novel wants the reader to have a sketch of the psychology and life events of those who were transported to Australia. In the end the narrative locates the characters within two camps, those with sensitivity to and appreciation of the Indigenous population and those who are intolerant and racist. William Thornhill straddles the two. He is caught between his overwhelming need to reinvent himself in the colony and his sense of compassion and moral responsibility for other human beings. The portrayal provides a source of psychological material from which to reflect upon the challenges to the protagonist’s

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moral responsiveness. Collins suggests that the novel places the reader in an uncomfortable position described as “disturbingly ambiguous” (p.44).

Several critics find the character of Will Thornhill problematic. Throughout the narrative, the reader witnesses Thornhill’s struggle when faced with the horrors committed by Smasher against an Aboriginal woman he holds captive. In fact, Thornhill’s swaying, when faced with a scenario of moral significance, can be read as representing something of the nation’s morally unresolved and sometimes divided position in regard to the Indigenous people of this country. Iris Murdoch, in The Sovereignty of Good, depicts the subject of modernity as a progressive, self-knowable and sure footed agent, who is the “hero of almost every contemporary novel.” 227 This subject is associated with the free-thinking citizen emerging from the enlightenment. The figure of Thornhill dramatises a tension between this and an antipathy of modernity, rendering him an anti-hero. The most jarring ambiguity lies in Thornhill’s fluctuating state of mind surrounding the massacre. While he finds himself carried by the others he also paradoxically finds a certainty in himself in the moment of acquiescence to the massacre. In this way Thornhill embodies a problematic relationship to the ‘man of action’ who he becomes in this moment of self-assurance. Ironically Thornhill finds himself to be most certain at the intersection of good and evil. His sense of certainty rises to the surface, ignoring his conscience as he moves towards complicity in the massacre of the local Aboriginal people. This contradiction underscores the ambivalent condition of embryonic remorse.

Exploring the trope of the settler subject’s melancholia to a sense of alienation from this country in The Secret River, Sarah Pinot in an article entitled, “Emotional histories and historical emotions: looking at the past in historical novels,” argues for a reading within an emotional frame of melancholy which she maintains is more about settler belonging and identity than Indigenous suffering.228 She suggests that there is a disturbing focus on the white subject’s loss in this novel, when in the current conditions it is actually Indigenous Australians who are marginalised and disadvantaged. However, she is not suggesting that it is historical fiction that is an inappropriate genre but rather the trope of melancholia. Pinot comments that this is most present in the female subject Sal, who pines for her homeland. Entering into the history wars debate, Pinot urges historians to take note that historical fiction is about emotion. Historical fiction tells the story of a nation’s emotional history. Collins questions the compatibility of national myths of ‘innocent convict’ and ‘pioneer’ with that of ‘first contact’ in the novel. Whereas the former two build identity, she asserts that the latter brings division and conflict.

How do the frameworks put forward by Pinot and Collins – those of understanding the text through its emotion/ or as a genre of tragedy, influence my reading of Thornhill’s moral trajectory. Collins maintains that, in tragedy, the character is not judged in the way of a classic realist text. The novel asks the reader to have an understanding of the struggle within

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Thornhill’s conscience but also leaves him open to condemnation, for it evokes a response of how could a man of conscience act as he did?

Located within the wider narrative of the history of race relations within the colony, I argue that the text as allegory highlights the challenge to acknowledge in full the harm done and the urgent need for remorse.

**Moral trajectory**

In this section I will reflect upon Thornhill’s moral orientation, examining in particular his trajectory once he has committed the act that will haunt him forever. Even though he is represented as not grasping the full reality of what he has done, this is in fact what remorse awakens one to; the shock of realising what one has done, through recognition of the harm to another. The theme of the vulnerable child works to exonerate the protagonist through creating a sympathy and identification with his struggle. Through focusing on Thornhill’s earlier life, the text implies that in order to understand how it is that he came to act as he did, we need to understand the psychological context out of which he has developed. His psychological development interacts with his moral sensibility to block his capacity for responsiveness to others. The reader is led to understand how the realities of Thornhill’s life as a vulnerable child have contributed to his desire to move beyond the limited life that was available to him. The psychological impact of his early life is depicted as robbing him of a sense of self-worth. His impoverished family life leaves him ashamed of the hunger that was a constant reality of his childhood. The narrator evokes a sense of sympathy for the young protagonist: “He was always hungry. That was a fact of life: the gnawing feeling in his belly, the flat taste in his mouth, the rage that there was never enough” (p.11). He also has the disadvantage of being rejected by his mother, who, herself racked by a cough that “ripped through her body,” chastises him for his neediness: “Greedy little bugger you was, she whispered at last, and he went away ashamed hearing his empty belly rumbling even then, and something in him going stony from the dislike in her voice” (p.12). This sketch of his early life explains the hardening up of his affective responsiveness. It opens a space for the reader to engage with the nation’s convict past, and perhaps even fulfil a yearning for some connection with this past. However, despite this, young Will has the drive to make good his relationship with his mother, showing himself to be a man of goodwill. After his mother’s death he avenges the restraint placed upon her by her father by thrusting mud at the lions placed on each side of the church lions that she had been prevented from touching by her father despite intending them no harm. Dramatising inter-generational deprivation, entrenched within a narrative of struggle from poverty, the text depicts the unfairness of harsh treatment, establishing an inevitability to Thornhill’s plight. Thornhill has taken on his mother’s fight. This redeems him as someone who cares enough to bother about a mother who was so unkind to him. Symbolically, he attempts to resolve this through externalising the mud throwing instead of internalising it as self-loathing. His gesture of standing up to the harsh authority of his grandfather by defacing the mascots at the church’s entrance symbolises a religion that supports the congregation’s redemption through attendance when their treatment of others is highly questionable. In the end, Thornhill rejects his past life in
England, with its sentence of transportation. Thornhill is represented as a worthy character who stands up and fights, who has had to learn to fight despite the odds stacked against him and his ancestry. As a character worthy of reward and respect he is problematic, as Kelada and others have noted in the context of a first contact narrative. His characterisation provides material for understanding what he has become, and this works a fine line between justification for the early colonists and seeking to understand the complexity and diversity of their backgrounds. This part of the novel generates sympathy for Thornhill’s plight through showing the emotional distress of his childhood. Perhaps it is impossible to evoke sympathy for convict psychology in fiction and not soften the responsibility for violence in a novel focussed on first contact. The play addresses this dilemma by beginning at the time of settlement, bypassing Thornhill’s early life, thus removing excess sympathy. By including the absent Indigenous voices, the play highlights the problematics of a non-indigenous author taking on a first contact narrative. It does this through an Indigenous narrator and characters speaking Dharug language. In the foreword to the transcript, Henry Reynolds claims that the audience “intuitively appreciate the way the Dharug experienced the tension and misunderstanding inherent in the situation” (ix). The play creates a more balanced field for generating reader sympathy.

In stark contrast to his wife, Sal Middleton, who was the only child of a family who could both provide for and cherish her, Will’s life is pitiable. Not only does he suffer from hunger, cold and poverty but his family do not value him. In contrast, Sal is precious to her family – on her birthday she is “indulged with every delicacy she could desire” that the household could afford but Will “Whose birthday was not even remarked – looked on wondering” (p.17). In Sal’s company, away from his own neighbourhood, he “felt himself become a different kind of boy” (p.18). The positive influence of this relationship offers him a very different reality that “warmed him from the inside” (p.19). This connection delivers him from poverty when he becomes her father’s apprentice waterman. It also provides the emotional fulfilment necessary for him to trust others. The relationship has the potential to open him up to other ways of being that might potentially challenge what later becomes his obsession with owning land. For “he knew no one else like her, who could not bear to watch the head cut off a hen” (p.17). According to psychoanalytic and psychological theory generally, this transformation is unlikely for people are damaged by their histories and tend to enact negative feelings about themselves by choosing partners who reject them. Typically, people repeat the patterns by choosing partners with issues that interlock with those they need to address themselves. In the light of Donald Winnicott’s attachment theory, good mothering is a precursor to the capacity to foster intimacy later in life. If there is an ambivalent attachment, as in the case of Thornhill, then this is likely to be acted out, for example, in his choice of partner, where the pattern of ambivalence is re-enacted, until resolved.229

Misfortune befalls Thornhill when he is imprisoned. After his father-in-law dies suddenly he is once again vulnerable to poverty. He loses the boat given to him as he has no proof of

this transaction. Eventually he succumbs to crime as a means of survival. In Newgate he hardens further: “He tried not to think of their happy days. In Newgate that soft hopeful part of him was hardening over, becoming lifeless like stone or shell. It was a kind of mercy” (pp.59-60). This invites reader pity but is also extravagant in the emotional space it extends to Thornhill. Transformed to the colony, he becomes a victim deserving of pity. There is a sense of misfortune after misfortune which is reminiscent of the innocent convict myth. The reader regrets that Thornhill is hardened through the injustices of the penal system in eighteenth-century Britain.

Prison experience triggers a further shift in his emotional life, and this lays a foundation for understanding the damage done to his capacity for compassion. The text wants to generate understanding by representing the social circumstances that shape his actions as an innocent, honest man who was never comfortable with stealing: “But Thornhill could imagine it, was familiar with the choking feeling of thievery and knew it to be no joke” (p.50). This state of conflict or ambivalence is present throughout the narrative as a theme highlighting his moral uncertainty as a background out of which he seems compelled to act against his compassion and sense of wrongdoing. In a sense the textual characterisation can be read as a justification for this wrongdoing but equally it is an attempt to portray something of the reality for many transported to Australia. This portrayal also draws attention to the text’s need to represent Thornhill’s innocence in relation to his criminal activity, a well-used motif for prisoners transported to Australia. There is a fine line between making this comprehensible and generating reader sympathy. This would not be problematic in a narrative of an emancipist’s story but becomes so in a narrative of first contact.

Paradoxically Thornhill is a character who has a potential moral sensibility, yet, and perhaps this is the point, it is not fully realised in the narrative. This can be read as an allegory for the state of the nation. For example, being aware but remaining silent is a form of complicity. Thornhill stands at an intersection where he is confronted with the chillingly cruel deeds of inhumanity committed by others against Aboriginal people. He is inevitably contaminated by this himself. The significant moral moments in the text challenge Thornhill to assert a sense of humanity. After he witnesses Smasher’s barbaric treatment of the Aboriginal woman he holds captive, chained by the ankles to sexually abuse her, and hears graphic sadistic details of the offences inflicted upon her, there is a space for a moral response. Thornhill is revolted, more so because in one moment he was tempted. However, he instantly rejects this. He refuses to buy the dogs he came for – finding some relief in this. The narrator relates:

- Imagining the moment of telling Sal about what he had seen – even thinking the words in his own mind - filled him with shame. It was bad enough to carry the picture in his memory. Thinking the thought, saying the words, would make him the same as Smasher, as if Smasher’s mind had got into his when he saw the woman in the hut and felt that instant of temptation. He had done nothing to help her. Now the evil was part of him (p.253).

This reveals the contagion of guilt from knowledge of another’s ill deeds but remaining silent. Raimond Gaita reflects that people today who have knowledge of injustice but have
not acted may feel remorse. While generally believing shame is the response of a nation, he also acknowledges that shame alone is inadequate: “Would anyone seriously say that shame is of itself an adequate response to the terrible plight suffered by most Aborigines, or that shame amounts to anything when it is separated from a serious concern with reparation?”

This leaves a space for an in-between responsiveness that is experienced collectively through individuals engaging with fictional characters who symbolise remorse. Remembering that shame is about self, in a nation’s terms, shame is about the identity of a nation. National pride is the flipside of shame and often obscures the latter. For example, the markings and celebrations related to the European settlement of 1788 are a matter of pride for the majority but a target for protest by the marginalised. However, remorse reflects the sorrow of harm done. It is a more deeply felt sense of sorrow and an expression of regret for bringing devastation upon another people. Shame alone is an inadequate response to the pain of not being treated as fully human, demonstrated in the removal of children, incarceration, killings and neglect. Thornhill feels shame when facing Sal after being with Smasher and witnessing his abuse of an Aboriginal woman: “Imagining the moment of telling Sal about what he had seen – even thinking the words in his own mind – filled him with shame” (p.253). His shame is about his own desire but it is inadequate alone to carry him beyond the evil through which he becomes polluted and later contaminated. The narrator reveals he had failed to offer help. This is as Gaita acknowledges a call for remorse, but in this instance Thornhill’s shame blocks a remorseful trajectory.

At least two further issues are connected with the scenario of Smasher’s abuse of the woman. Thornhill feels contaminated by Smasher but he is also aware of his own failure to act on the woman’s behalf: “He had done nothing to help her. Now the evil was part of him” (p.253). There are several other elements operating here. Thornhill’s behaviour highlights the gap between an idea and a deed, his failure to protect the woman and his silence about the harm done to her, all of which bring a sense of contamination from Smasher. For example, Gaita’s theory includes thoughts against another, such that “thinking something may be a concrete act against someone just as saying something may be.” Thornhill experiences shame for his involuntary thought and reacts to it as if polluted, thinking he has Smasher inside his head: “Smasher’s mind had got into his when he saw the woman in the hut and felt that instant of temptation” (p.253). But he does not outwardly dissociate from Smasher by externalising his experience to others. As Bernard Schlink, a scholar of law and writer of German culture explains: “guilt reaches those who do not actively separate themselves from the perpetrators and participants through dissociation, judgement, or repudiation.” Instead Thornhill “had tried to put the picture of the woman and the red jewels of blood on her skin away in some part of his memory where he did not have to see it” (p.255).

The gap between ideas and acts also enters into the psychological realm which gives some texture to the background out of which a moral imagination emerges through the idea of original guilt. For instance, in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud, while largely

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230 Common Humanity, p.100
231 Good and Evil, p.92.
focusing on guilt as an origin that arises from thoughts against another, differentiates between this and the guilt that is associated with actual deeds and for which he attributes a response of remorse.233 Melanie Klein’s work is also helpful here.234 In her book Love, Guilt and Reparation, Klein makes sense of original guilt in terms of the inner ambivalence felt by the child in its dual responses of love and hate towards loved ones; hence the development of a movement towards reparation in the child to restore loving feelings and to restore the damage to the loved one in the child’s imagination, as in slinging mud against the lion mascots. In her framework, this source of original guilt is what drives the movement towards reparation. In an Australian novelistic and national context, making a momentary leap from micro to macro, Thornhill stands at the site of the original act in which the nation’s guilt is rooted. This builds on Collins’s query about the practice of returning to the origin of harm done, with the belief that this will somehow provide resolution. Collin’s queries the motivation by Australian writers to return to this site of first contact, fraught as it is with complexity.

The introduction of the idea of a form of contamination whereby Thornhill experiences that “Smasher’s mind had got into his,” resonates with the concept of ‘pollution’ (p.253). Yet he is more implicated than the example given by Gaita, of Eichmann’s son. Within Thornhill’s soliloquy the text touches upon this idea of pollution. Gaita’s characterisation implies innocence in the sense that there was nothing Eichmann’s son could have done to prevent his father’s evil deeds, but he feels affected nevertheless due to the proximity of his relationship to the evildoer. In Gaita’s example his sense of pollution is through immediate association although he may leave room for further possibilities. Schlink’s thought includes a form of guilt that spills over to those in the community who were associated, before there was a clear sense of individual responsibility formalised in law and religion. In words which relate directly to Thornhill’s situation, he claims, “It is not the idea of responsibility for someone else’s crime, but of responsibility for one’s own solidarity with the criminal” (p.12). This reveals Thornhill’s anxiety: “Now the evil of it was part of him” (p.253). This is a consequence of Thornhill’s inability to repudiate Smasher publically. However, it is possible to consider forms of pollution or contamination at varying levels. Thornhill becomes more implicated though than mere association when he knows and bears witness to the ongoing crime.235

Thornhill feels himself to be polluted but remains silent, an act which in Schlink’s terms confirms solidarity with Smasher. His silence reflects his complicity in Smasher’s treatment of the woman. One may be innocent when the pollution is first experienced but fail to sufficiently repudiate the wrongdoing. Hence there arises a link from one person to another through complicity in another’s acts. In this context, Thornhill’s thoughts of wrongdoing are inextricably bound up with the harm that is being done which implicates him in the continued maltreatment of the woman by Smasher. Additionally, Thornhill also fails to protect the woman in the moment of which he is himself aware. Later, Thornhill cannot tell Sal about the boy he witnesses dying from poison: “He knew he would never share with Sal the picture of

235 I am conceiving here of contamination as having a stronger impact than pollution, where one’s behaviour becomes more aligned with the wrongdoing.
the boy. That was another thing he was going to lock away in the closed room of his memory, where he could pretend it did not exist” (p.278). This denial locks Thornhill into complicity with these evil deeds. This idea of silence reinforcing solidarity with the perpetrator has implications for understanding the collective dynamics within Australia in relation to past injustices. In Australia there is a repudiation of past harm inflicted but also a justification of the harm by reference to best intentions, such as the removal of children. By refusing what happened in all its disgrace, we continue solidarity with the wrongdoers and with the harm inflicted. Yet, there has been resistance to acknowledging this possibly because as Schlink notes, “Collective guilt becomes even more difficult to understand and defend once the concept of individual and subjective guilt, or simply the guilt principle as the foundation of liability, becomes dominant” (p.8).

Here Schlink refers to the way in which we reject complicity by asserting individual innocence, typically encapsulated in the question; ‘what's it got to do with me?’ Thornhill experiences shame for his involuntary thought and reacts to it through distancing himself internally but not by public repudiation. The individualisation of responsibility falls away when speaking of the injustices of a wider community where responsibility lingers in a form of sorrow or woe, mingled within a remorseful context. As Schlink asserts, once individualism solidified, the concept of “collective responsibility, liability, and atonement” was diminished and “collective responsibility for an act is rarely included under the notion of guilt” (p.9).

Negotiating sameness and difference and moral philosophy

*The Secret River* seems to construct its narrative as subversive when Thornhill is challenged to confront the sameness between himself and the Other. It is worth reiterating Kelada’s comment that: “Narratives born in the reconciliatory moment(s) can exemplify key stakes intrinsic to contemporary perspectives on past violent formations of a nation - for instance, how is sameness and difference represented and navigated? What sense of nation emerges when colonisation creates such ongoing powerful legacies?” (p.5). It is tempting to agree with Kelada that there is an attempt at national redemption in the novel when it opens up an opportunity for the settler reader to be reassured that our ancestors had not only compassion but respect, even if flawed by their own miserable histories.

Thornhill’s encounter with an Aboriginal boy after he comes upon a camp where all the inhabitants have been poisoned with damper, is an example of the narrator’s attempt to reassure readers that he has some humanity. Thornhill notices something different because there is no smoke rising from Darkey Creek. He is represented as an intuitive man: “an impulse made him push the tiller over” (p.275). He finds a boy still alive, in pain, trying to vomit up the poisonous damper. Initially Thornhill says, “Ain’t nothing I can do for you, lad,” while the narrator reveals that he wants to “turn his back, leave all this” (p.277). However, his sense of compassion wins out at this moment: “somehow he could not. He would give the boy water. He could at least offer that gesture. Then he could leave” (p.277).
At this point the reader hopes that he will do something for the child. While his inability to leave can be placed within a concept of moral responsiveness that locates compassion and remorse as a primary response, it is a gesture that is a token of compassion (p.277). In writing of a sense of moral necessity expressed by the terms “I had to do it,” Gaita characterises a reciprocity of moral necessity and compassion. He writes, “Instead of contrasting compassion and a sense of moral necessity, we might judge that only a compassion conditioned by such a sense is properly responsive to the reality of human beings’ suffering – where the emphasis is not just on suffering but on the fact that it is the suffering-of-a-human-being.” The element that highlights the sense of moral necessity is there in the statement “he could not” leave even though he wants to take flight from this moment. As he kneels beside the boy giving him a drink, he is confronted by the boy’s humanness. Thornhill is a man capable of compassion and remorse but not equal to their full demands on him.

Thornhill is figured as “surprised at the softness of that black hair. Under it he felt the shape of his skull, the same as his own” (p.277). The symbolism of the skull links to eugenic thinking that compared skulls to prove theories of superiority. Skulls also appear in *Benang*, where they are sacred to the Aboriginal characters but disrespected by the colonists. Symbolically Thornhill’s humanity is embedded in his discovery of his sameness with the boy, and this in turn links his capacity to give to the boy with his recognition of himself in the Other. As a reader, this comes across as being overly constructed. It sits rather absurdly. It infantilises Thornhill as if he is an infant making his first discovery of otherness. In effect, it fails to reassure, because Thornhill is not equal to the call of compassion. Writing in the *Independent* in 2006 Sean O’Brien refers to Grenville’s “moral nudging,” lamenting a lack of trust in the reader’s wit, in what is otherwise a very encouraging review. He does not expand, leaving the reader to ponder what he means. The above serves as an example of an overly constructed nudge to reveal Thornhill’s humanity. Tracing themes in Australian fiction Paul Salzman comments “sympathetic treatment of Thornhill combines with the reader’s hindsight to allow him or her to feel thoroughly insulated from the horrifying racism of characters like Smasher, while at the same time gaining satisfaction from Thornhill’s occasional moral insights that anticipate modern liberal truisms.” Salzman’s comments here add to the critique of Thornhill’s problematic show of humanity. Returning to Kelada’s point about what sense of nation is constructed here, it would appear to be one that embodies an internal justification that asks to be understood as human in its flawed morality. What work does the representation of sameness, through the shape of the boy’s skull, enact in the novel? It appears to want to reverse the view of the time. Aboriginal people were not viewed by Europeans as fully human. In exhibiting some humanity, through Thornhill, the novel returns to the story of first contact, to restore justice. It is as if Grenville is on a mission to redeem her convict ancestor, but the narrator intuits that, to be believable, he must also be flawed by all that has happened to him.

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236 *Good and Evil*, p.76.
However, the incident with the poisoned boy also reveals the transsocial element of humanity present in Cordner’s model of a trajectory of remorse. This model is not about empathy, for he and Gaita insist on the irreducibility of the individuality of the other. This they term ‘radical singularity’ which resists reduction to sameness. The risk with empathy is that it becomes about our own experiences not those of others. Using Steven Tudor’s definition, from his book titled *Compassion and Remorse; Acknowledging the Suffering Other*, empathy is stepping into the Other, bringing one’s own feelings and experience whereas compassion is allowing the Other’s experience to step into us. Tudor differentiates between this self-absorbed empathy and “returned empathy” whereby one returns to one’s own position in recollection of the differences between self and others, enabling a greater sense of the others’ reality. (p.89). Gaita’s understanding of compassion is premised upon a sense of sameness which acknowledges the Other as fully human, but not reducible to oneself. He claims “compassion cannot take us to a sense of a common humanity with others for it depends on it.” In other words compassion cannot exist without a sense of common humanity. But is compassion what Thornhill experiences?

*The Secret River* may want to see itself as subverting a dominant racist premise that Indigenous people are less than Europeans. I believe it represents itself as doing so but its overly constructed scenarios, designed to reverse racism, are jarring and sit uneasily with Thornhill’s desire to deny the realities around him and his ultimate act of murder. Gaita identifies racism as being a failure to acknowledge that the Other is human in the ways that a member of a group perceives him or herself as being human. It is as if the text wants to be seen as subverting this racist practice of withholding an attribution of full humanity through the construction of Thornhill’s awakening to a sense of the boy’s sameness with himself. When he feels the nape of the poisoned boy’s neck, he is portrayed as coming to a sense of the Other’s humanness. This gesture of compassion is tokenistic of what Cordner has termed a ‘trans-social’ encounter that carries one beyond the specificities of ethnicity. For one moment the elements of responsiveness are there but they fail to resound authentically when considered in the light of his subsequent actions. They also fail to prevent his active involvement in the massacre.

Thornhill’s responsiveness deteriorates into a form of self-absorption. It feels imposed and inauthentic, as if it is bad acting that does not quite gel with the actor, imposed from without rather than coming from within. The text represents a merging with the Other, which resonates with a concept of self-absorbed empathy. Thornhill experiences an overwhelming response when the boy vomits the water back up again. Thornhill shouts in fright and is described as feeling that “everything in his own body had stopped. If he moved or took a breath he would feel the poison burning away at his own guts” (p.278). Tudor explains that in returned empathy “I return to myself so as to act toward the Other who suffers” (p.91). Mirroring Thornhill’s experience Tudor explains: “In contrast, passive, unreturned projection, would be a matter here of crying out in pain oneself…upon coming across a crying orphan,

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240 Good and Evil, p.339.
would begin herself to cry for her mother...feeling qualitatively exactly the same as the Other achieves nothing of moral value...It is essential that we return to our ‘outsideness’ to the Other, and see her pain as her pain” (p. 91).

Through the device of the uneducated man, a figure common in Australian literature and drama, the reader’s sympathy is evoked for Thornhill because the text accentuates his own struggle for existence. Although he is granted enough of what the contemporary community recognises as humanity, this is thwarted in its realisation. A closer reading reveals his fluctuation between a capacity for human compassion and recognition of the other, and desire to take the land owned by the local people. He is driven by his desire to move beyond his lower-class English heritage. Hence, despite his intermittent show of self-absorbed empathy he is unable to fully respond or to integrate this experience in any significant manner. Regardless of his responsiveness towards the boy, he does not act further by staying with him or attempting to take him back home but instead decides he will tell no-one. He realises that some know already, namely Sagitty, as he has spoken of the ‘green powder,’ but in particular he will not tell Sal his wife. His denial is highlighted by the text: “That was another thing he would lock away in the closed room in his memory, where he could pretend it did not exist” (p.278). Thornhill characteristically remains silent about the massacre to Sal out of his own desire for her to stay. He shields her from the evil that is going on around them as he knows she will be appalled and will want to leave. His motivation is always informed by his desire to remain on the land. Sal’s part in this is in protecting Will from the reality of who he is becoming. There is an almost unconscious pact of silence and denial operating between them. The novel purports to break the silence by revealing silence as integral to the story of national origin, but Thornhill himself models silence.

Thornhill's moral state is analogous to a pendulum swinging back and forth, towards and away from recognition of the Aboriginal people's full humanity. The narrator juxtaposes the portrayal of his capacity for contemporary sensitivity and reflection with his harsh “survival of the fittest” attitude towards the local people.

The day after he encounters the poisoned camp, Thornhill becomes physically violent when their corn patch is robbed by the locals. During the incident in which he actually thumps a woman and raises blood, he is again confronted with the humanness of an Aboriginal person. He exclaims with unbelievable naivety “It is like mine, he surprised himself thinking. Just the same colour as my own” (p.280). However, while I find this jarring from the overly constructed intention to represent Thornhill as receptive, it also makes the point that in fact the early settlers had not seen Indigenous people as fully human. Within theories of whiteness, having white skin equals humanness with gradations along a continuum. This superimposed awareness of the local people as human is part of a glimpse Thornhill has of the reality of their lives.

Thornhill has a subjectivity akin to Romanticism in his elevation of the Indigenous lifestyle for its simple, egalitarian form, close to nature. This too is superimposed upon an unlikely candidate. Comparing the lifestyles they each have, he recognises that the English do not have time to play with their children as the locals do. And then, “On the point of sleep the thought came to him: the blacks were farmers no less than the white men were” (p.280). He
then goes on to think that there are no gentry. He identifies a form of egalitarian society: “The difference was that in their universe there was no call for another class of folk who stood waiting up to their thighs in river-water for them to finish their chat so they could be taken to their play or their lady friend” (p.230). And despite his cockiness towards his Indigenous neighbours through arrogantly acting as if he owns the place – “This mine now. Thornhill’s place. …..You got the whole blessed rest of it, mate, and welcome to it,” Thornhill is also suitably awed by their non-hierarchical arrangements (Grenville’s italics, p.196). The narrative reveals that “In London William Thornhill counted as a big man but these men made him feel small” (p.195). And even earlier, after discovering an etching of the ship Hope on a rock above his place, he reflects: “It came to him that this place might look an empty place, but a man who had walked the length of that fish, seen the tiller and sail of the Hope laid down in stone, had to recognise otherwise. This place was no more empty than a parlour in London….“ (p.155). While these glimpses construct a character that has some awakening to the Other in a necessary step towards a sense of guilt, shame and remorse for dispossession, they also remind the reader of his pitiable background. He is wavering in tension between compunction and his drive to deny the local people’s occupation of their place, so as to assert his own claim to it. The narrative attempts to make reparation through acknowledging the prior occupation of Australia, but justifying this through the portrayal of a morally complex character. Or, as Kelada argues, it works as a form of absolution for what Thornhill becomes.

Providing a generous reading of the moral character of Thornhill does not resonate with his actions. The narrator seems to want to make him aware; more palatable. It is as if he has a multiple personality switching from some compassionate insight into a fiendish determination to keep the land he has taken as his own.

In line with this split, Thornhill enacts a denial of the violence that Smasher and the others are perpetrating. After the latter visits, spreading his tales of violence and creating and “a silence in which his violent stories echoed,” Thornhill downplays this to Sal, “My word he can spin a yarn! (p.159). She replies “Just skiting, you reckon?” The narrator reveals that “He could hear the doubt in her voice, and the hope” (p.159). But Thornhill continues, “Gammon if ever I heard any, take it from me, pet. But he could not forget the hands that Smasher had twitched at him, or the black bag that had once been a human, hanging from a tree” (p.159). Thornhill is haunted by this but does not repudiate the act. He believes that he must remain silent to stay on the land. Again the text continues to highlight silence as a fundamental premise upon which the killing is based. Unlike John McIvor, Thornhill’s desire for belonging is validated through the novel’s privileging of his subjectivity.

By the time Thornhill reaches the intersection where a major life and death decision is required of him, his continuing refusal to speak out or to act against the surge of evil building up around him, makes him vulnerable. In the lead up to the massacre he allows himself to be a part of the “mood in the room that was becoming wicked” amongst the men (p.298). The narrator attributes a moral awareness to him that again seems incongruous. Given the portrayal of Will Thornhill in this light, it is difficult to imagine that he would act the way he does given the sensibility attributed to him. Hence his participation in the massacre is
ambivalent and disturbed for he is in a state of paralysis for most of it. Kelada explains that paralysis is a common feature of texts elevating whiteness. Additionally, as she also notes, his ambivalence makes it potentially easier for the reader to digest his participation in the massacre. What is equally disturbing is that there is an expectation of something better from him at this point, but it does not come. The worst possible outcome emerges.

His swaying motion does, however, make him an intelligible character within a moral philosophy model endorsed by Gaita and Cordner. This locates Thornhill as unable to move towards remorse, stuck in an embryonic state. In the lead up to the massacre and afterwards, it is possible to trace Thornhill’s trajectory according to Cordner’s model of remorse stunted in its progress. When Smasher first mentions the idea of attacking the camp at Blackwood’s, the narrator reveals that “Thornhill felt something in him slow down” (p.297). In this moment something in him perceives a need to take his time, to move carefully and slow down, to take heed of what is happening around him. The atmosphere generated is constructed as one of an overpowering kind, such as that which a group can have upon an individual: “The men closed in around him and there was a sound of agreement from many throats. It was not the voice of any one man but the voice of the group, faceless and powerful” (p.297). All are responsible which means no-one is ultimately responsible. This resonates with Gaita’s model of corrupt forms of remorse: “Remorse, too sticks with us, although corrupt forms of it merge readily enough into a sense of common guilt, where all are guilty and so no one is.”241 This form of collective emotion has an element of contagion to it that has shifted from the earlier sense of pollution experienced by Thornhill. Now it spreads to those who have placed themselves in this situation. Hence, Thornhill, within this frame, remains in solidarity with those leading the massacre. It reads on the one hand as a form of explanation for Thornhill’s involvement being carried along by contagion, but on the other as an admission of a failing – perhaps even an apology.

The text reveals a trajectory of moral sensitivity along which Thornhill slides on the brink of action. This works uncomfortably as a form of explanation. The text continues to describe the momentum in which Thornhill, with alcohol in his blood, becomes inert. The mood is charged with a sense of ill intent and Thornhill in a state of silence and uncertainty seems to be struggling with his conscience. At the outset, when the question is put to him about the use of his boat, the Hope, to carry the men to the Aboriginal camp, he hesitates. The narrator merges with the protagonist in the following observation: “The mood in the room was wicked. He felt it tugging at him the way a pannikin of liquor might, to get his mouth around it and feel it warm in his chest. There was a dull ache across his forehead and he wanted to be gone, but the thought of getting Dan and Ned into the boat was too difficult” (p.298). Drawing again on Cordner’s trajectory of remorse, Thornhill is experiencing the vague discomfort and ‘strangeness’ at the outset. Even though the killing has not yet been committed other deeds have taken place with which he is complicit through his silence. These form the basis from which he can slide into complaisance. In this way the text highlights silence as a risky position to inhabit.

241 Good and Evil, p.47.
The choices confronting Thornhill are reduced to either killing or losing the chance for a new life. The character, Loveday, contextualises the moment of decision in terms of the proposal to get “rid of the blacks” or “return to our former lives” (p.298). The significant moral moment for Thornhill is when Dan echoes Thornhill’s dilemma: “Get rid of the blacks and she will stay. Will ....Ain’t no other way to hold her...” (p.298). At this juncture Thornhill’s moral sensibility subsides, is overtaken by his self-absorbed need to be free of his former life and claim what he has come to think of as his place. He thinks “how could he choose between his wife and his place? Making things so that she would stay was worth any price” (p.299). The text suggests that he is not himself; it is not he, the real Thornhill, who is complicit in what is taking place but some other carried by circumstance and exempt from responsibility. At the moment of decision he becomes a stranger to himself – “His voice sounded like another man’s…more sure of itself than his own could be” (p.299). The fact that the narrative makes this comment is curious, linking confidence with his worse self. It flags the force behind his drive to retain the land as enmeshed with his fluctuating sense of self-worth. Possession of the land has developed a heavily symbolic meaning for him whereby he displaces his earlier desire for validation as a worthy human onto the land. Paradoxically the narrative displaces his usual uncertainty including ambivalence around moral matters, with certainty, more aligned to the subject of modernity, “more sure of itself” than he actually feels. So the subject of modernity is prepared to conquer for the sake of taking possession of self and nation. There is narrative confusion here though. The narrative outcome suggests there is more moral stability in his uncertainty, because at least then he can choose to act either way. Yet, we also know as readers that it is his uncertainty related to emotional damage that has left him vulnerable to forces other than his own conscience. The narrative presents alcohol as one of the external forces working to seal his decision. Paradoxically, he is surer of himself when he decides to commit murder. Given the association here between surety and an evil deed, this makes surety and ego-driven absolutism unstable, and in this way can be read as a critique of modern subjectivity. The opaqueness surrounding Thornhill’s fluctuation masks this association, rendering it more inadvertent than a statement by the narrator.

Thornhill’s confidence does not completely eclipse his uncertainty about the massacre. Despite being carried along with the men, by the men – he remains morally undecided and ambivalent. He continues to engage in a form of reflection; again the narrative merges with the protagonist’s thinking so that the reader is prompted to consider who is speaking. This creates a disparity between what the narrator would like to have been the case and what the character as represented is capable of in terms of reflection. The narrative claims that “By and large he had never considered them to be bad men. And yet their lives, like his, had somehow brought them to this: waiting for the tide to turn, so they could go and do what only the worst of men would do” (p.300). The narrator creates an escape for even the worst of men to be thought better of by the comment that their lives, like his, had somehow brought them to this. This kind of narrative slippage is remarked upon by Kelada in her critique whereby the authoritative thrust of the third person narrator adds validation. At this point Thornhill experiences shame from what he has become by association with these men. His conscience is ill at ease; he cannot let what is happening occur, nor can he resolve the matter. He is unequal to the moral demands of the situation. His own stirrings of conscience are not
supported by the colonial context for the authorities offer immunity to the settlers through a proclamation by the Governor that if the Indigenous peoples “persist in remaining thereon, they are then to be driven away by force of arms by the settlers themselves,” to the disbelief of Mrs Herring and Dick (p.266). However, while the narrative draws attention to this, the key moral responsibility which rests with the authorities is shunted onto the working class antihero who is positioned as a scapegoat in the novel. As such, the narrative reveals that, “He could not stop gnawing away at the thing” but nonetheless does resist his conscience’s urge to reflect further (p.301). He concludes that there was “no point trying to tease it out” (p.301). Similarly, as a parallel, young Will learns to ignore his gnawing hunger as a child – he has to learn to ignore, to harden to himself as a pattern of survival– and repeats this behaviour later in his life. This parallel scenario reflects a morally significant moment which highlights the way that the novel constructs a developmental model for Thornhill’s life’s journey, in the process revealing that unresolved psychological matters can block a compassionate response and lead to moral paralysis. The narrator links Thornhill’s deprivation as a child with his hunger for the land now. The novel creates a softening of Thornhill’s accountability by linking his unmet psychological needs, manifested in his desire for validation, to a hardening of his affective ability in prison.

In this state of paralysis Thornhill cannot shoot initially, standing inert amidst gun shots and spears flying around him. He sees ‘Whisker Harry,’ the elder Aboriginal man, the name given by Thornhill to him, about to spear Smasher but he does not act. The narrator portrays the scene:

Then Whisker Harry, wily and fragile, calmly stepped out from them. Thornhill could see his arm trembling as he fitted the spear into the thrower and got it up to his shoulder. His face contorted with effort as he leaned his body back to launch the spear. The gun was still up at Thornhill’s shoulder, his finger was against the trigger, but he could not move, a man in a dream. He was aware of issuing orders to his fingers to pull back on the trigger, but nothing happened (pp.306-7).

As readers there is satisfaction in him allowing Harry to spear Smasher; it is the least he can do. The reader is invited to join Thornhill in his passivity. He cannot bring himself to participate in the evil around him. The moral apprehension that he has felt all along now surfaces and he is paralysed just at the moment when his commitment to the group is weaker than the something within him that cannot kill Harry. Instead, “He watched as the spear left the black man’s hand” (p.307). After Smasher is speared he comes close to Thornhill as if he is in a sense pleading with him to retaliate: “Smasher was rasping as if the wood in his chest had got his voice: Jesus Christ Almighty, Jesus Christ Almighty” (p.307). Thornhill looks to Whisker Harry, who appears to him to be outside the happenings around him, represented in the shadow of the ‘noble savage’ icon Marcia Langton identifies in her critique of

242 In this way the novel stands as a form of class critique. It reveals the way in which Thornhill lords it over the men who work for him and is pulled back a bit by his own observation of this. They in turn are keen to have power over the local people. Sal, locked into an arrangement she is not free in, is also impacted upon by the power over her.
representations of Indigenous Australians.\textsuperscript{243} The narrator reveals “And there was the old man looking at his spear in Smasher’s chest. He made no move to throw another or to take cover. He simply stood watching, his face stern” (p.307). Thornhill has hedged himself into a predicament where his prior alignments make it almost impossible for him to do other than what he ends up doing. It is almost as if it happens without him: he sways in the other direction possibly out of some form of loyalty to the speared man. The impression given by the narrative voice is that it happens in spite of him, in the passive voice: “The gun went off with a puff of blue smoke and a pop that sounded puny in all this air. He thought he must have missed, for Whisker Harry was still standing there with that look on his face, as if nothing could touch him” (p.307). The transcendental integrity characterising ‘Whisker Harry’ works as a part of the textual assertion against the displacement of a culture imbued with an authority of thousands of years of presence. In the end Thornhill is forced to choose: his prior silences and omissions have made him part of the murdering collective. Paradoxically, it has almost become a moral concern to at least support Smasher, because whether or not he shoots Harry makes no difference to Smasher’s life. The text has a leaning towards absolving Thornhill in degrees so that he is never really fully responsible for his part. He did not actively fire the gun but rather ‘it went off’. This loophole, that allows Thornhill to slip away from taking responsibility, mirrors refusals in the public arena to accept responsibility for past injustices.

As Kelada has argued, the text has constructed characters such as Smasher who are unambiguously evil in order to place Thornhill on a continuum where he is not as bad as others. Thornhill’s condition after he shoots Harry is reflected in the trajectory of remorse offered by Cordner’s model, in which his humanity is compromised. However, the narration urges the opposite, that it is his human fallibility that has made this possible. According to Cordner, after a shocking event, and following the shame and discomfort of an initial recognition, there is a sense of the awfulness of having committed a horrible crime. As Thornhill watches Harry fall to his knees and imagines himself trying to become “other than human” in an attempt to transcend all that is happening, he comes up against the enormity of what he has done (p.308): “Like the old man on his knees he felt he might become something other than a human, something that did not do things in this sticky clearing that could never be undone” (p.308). There is an interesting dualism here about what it means to be human. The narrator associates Thornhill’s wrongdoing with actually being human. There is a lament for what human beings are capable of doing to each other, which is an underlying premise of the text, and this in effect absolves him. A humanistic angle, embedded within the theories of remorse outlined in this thesis, concludes that what he has done actually dissociates him from his humanness. It does this through the breach it creates between his capacity for responsiveness as a human being to the suffering of another and his disavowal of this. The narrator notes that “a great shocked silence hung over everything” (p.309). This highlights what Gaita refers to in his characterisation of remorse as the shocked realisation of another’s pain. Cordner characterises this kind of shock in terms of a breach of the bond between human beings discovered in the rupture. In this frame, through remorse, the bond is

\textsuperscript{243} Marcia Langton, \textit{Well, I Heard It on the Radio and Saw It on the Television} Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993.
arrived at negatively. The narrator asserts that it is being human that has enabled this, whereas the reader feels Thornhill’s very humanness is compromised.

This shock also reverberates through another area of Thornhill’s life when he realises that his participation in the massacre has damaged his relationship with his son, Dick, who afterwards dissociates himself from his father. Dick goes to live with Blackwood soon after the massacre, and will not even look at his father. Dick is actively creating distance between himself and his father, imaginably through a sense of grief for his murdered friends which signifies as a sense of pollution. The text reveals Thornhill’s pain: “Newcomers did not know that he was William Thornhill’s son. Once he even heard them talk of him as Dick Blackwood. It gave him a shocked feeling, like the cut from a razor” (p.326). In this way Thornhill re-lives the shock of what he has done. His son’s absence is a signifier of his wrongdoing. Dick’s repudiation of his father is emblematic of the wider division in the community of people they move amongst. Dick refuses solidarity with his father, aligning himself instead with Blackwood who represents compassionate responsiveness through a ‘give and take’ attitude towards the local Aboriginal people. As in the texts The White Earth, and Sorry, discussed in the next chapter of this thesis, it is through the eyes of a child that the harm done to Aboriginal people is acknowledged. Like Eichmann’s son, Dick feels polluted by his father’s ill deeds. In the end Dick is the vulnerable child forced to dissociate from his family due to the untenable moral dilemma his father has created.

Blackwood, Mrs Herring and Dick Thornhill represent a deeper engagement with Indigenous people. They have an attitude of openness and cooperativeness and disassociate themselves from the Thornhills. Sal predictably aligns with Will and ceases contact with the others: “Mrs Herring stopped visiting and Sal rarely spoke of her” (p.324). However, Sal clearly feels implicated in her husband’s act of murder. After the massacre Thornhill reassures her: “They gone for good and all this time…” ‘No need for us to go anywhere just yet a while” (p.323). Sal is unsure, “I hope you ain’t done nothing on account of me pushing at you” (p.323). Sal is so entrenched in silence and denial as a way of responding to the difficulties they face that she “would not look into his face” (p.323). Instead she becomes obsessive about him washing his hands. As he washes his hands, “he felt her watching them as if they were her own,” her silence signifying complicity. (p.323). The silence that surrounds the massacre is described as affecting their relationship: “Whatever the shadow was that lived with them, it did not just belong to him, but to her as well: it was a space they both inhabited. But it seemed there was no way to speak into that silent place. Their lives had slowly grown around it, the way roots of a river-fig grew around a rock” (p.325). They carry an unspoken burden that comes between them in the end.

Within the trajectory of remorse, following recognition of harm done by a perpetrator, Cordner identifies the seeking of forgiveness from the victim as a movement towards reparation. Both Thornhill and Sal do this through attention to ‘Long Jack’ who ends up surviving despite Smasher’s shot. He refuses their offerings of food and clothing. Thornhill himself is aware of Sal seeking forgiveness and offering reparation:

Sal had taken him on as something of a project. A penance, it had occurred to Thornhill. She gave him clothes: an old pair of stockings and an old pair of
britches that had once been her husband’s, and a jacket that had plenty of warmth left in it. She even knitted him a pair of stockings and a woollen hat. At her urging, Thornhill set aside a patch of ground for him, fenced it nicely, and gave him some tools and a bag of seed (p.327).

As a symbol of resistance, “he never put on the britches or the jacket. In cold weather he wrapped himself in his old possum skin” (p.328). Ironically, the offerings reflect only what matters to westerners. As the play reinforces, the Aboriginal people did not want what the Europeans had to offer.

When Thornhill’s gestures towards reparation are rejected by Long Jack, he seems unable to really grasp the reality of Jack’s brokenness. The narrator reveals that, “Thornhill was exasperated at the way Jack sat like a stone. When he had been hungry, no one had ever offered him the good things he knew waited for this bundle of bones in his kitchen” (p.329). Again, his tendency to experience others through his own experience proves an obstacle to his understanding. When Thornhill touches Jack he says, “No” …Jack slapped his hand on the ground so hard a puff of dust flew up and wafted away. Throwing Thornhill’s words back at him he continues “This me, he said. My place. He smoothed the dirt with his palm so it left a patch like the scar on his head. Sit down hereabout. His face closed down and he stared into the fire” (Grenville’s italics, p.329). At this point Thornhill realises something, though it is about his own self again, and in this he seems still unable to fully acknowledge Jack’s suffering reality; he does not have an awakened sense of the reality of his victim. His acknowledgement of Jack’s deeper connection to the land is placed in the context of his own struggle:

Thornhill felt a pang. No man had worked harder than he had done, and he had been rewarded for his labour. He had about him near a thousand pounds in cash, he had three hundred acres………..He would have said he had everything a man could want. But there was emptiness as he watched Jack’s hand caressing the dirt. This was something he did not have: a place that was part of his flesh and spirit. There was no part of the world he would keep coming back to, the way that Jack did, just to feel it under him (p.329).

Settler envy and desire for belonging is represented in this soliloquy while the narrative highlights the different and deeper connection to land that Aboriginal people have. But typically, even though Thornhill is moved, it does not enhance his insight into Jack’s grief. He says, “Bugger you then, Jack, you can bleeding well starve and good luck to you” (pp.329-330). His envy of Jack’s connection to the land is illuminating if understood as bound up with his discomfort at not being able to ease the burden of the harm he and his people have inflicted upon Jack. Settler envy obscures guilt. His emptiness reflects his guilt that resurfaces further in this context. As Sarah Pinot argues, melancholy in *The Secret River* is linked to the violent white coloniser: “In this instance, the historical mobilisation of melancholy displaces the recognition of non-indigenous appropriation and dispossession. Its melancholic history of the Australian nation’s formative moments tells not of Indigenous loss, but of the impact of that loss upon Australia’s non-indigenous peoples and nation,
lamenting the resulting possibility of non-indigenous belonging” (p.199). As Tudor describes it Thornhill is unable to acknowledge that it is Jack’s pain not his that is the focal point.

Thornhill’s defensiveness is evoked through Jack’s refusal to allay his guilt and the accompanying sense of emptiness. His experience of emptiness is most pronounced in relation to a desire to reverse the wrongdoing etched on his guilty conscience. In denial about the absence of the local Aboriginal people, he wants to reverse the situation. Thornhill watches daily from his verandah:

He scanned the line of the forest, back and forth…There could still be a few of them living up there…Sometimes he thought he saw a man there, looking down from the cliff top. He would get to his feet and go eagerly to the edge of the verandah, would lean out squinting to see the man among so many confusing verticals…Never took his eye off……Told himself that was a man, a man as dark as the scorched trunk of a stringy bark (p.333).

He would linger to the last minute, unable to let go of the hope that there is some possibility of presence – to make amends perhaps. However, at the end of each day it is the same: “Finally he had to recognise that it was no human, just another tree, the size and posture of a man. Each time it was a new emptiness” (p.333). In the light of Gaita’s concept of a wrongdoer being haunted by his victim, Thornhill is haunted through the continued absence of not only his individual victim but others affected by the greater sweep of devastation in which he has been involved. The individual harm he caused his victim is intrinsically linked to the damage to the collective. The intensely symbolic invisibility of the local Indigenous people echoes through the centuries. Haunting – as a theme – links to trauma theory. As Pinot argues Thornhill’s emptiness also signifies his own loss of belonging, magnified by the absence of those to whom the country actually belongs.

Thornhill’s lack of understanding of his own responses makes sense within both a moral philosophy framework and within the limitations of the novel’s historical scope. The moral struggle is constructed as a timeless element that transcends historical location but in the end it cannot do this. Even after all that has happened Thornhill cannot read his own grief and remorse. The narrative reinforces this with an irony: “This bench, here, where he could overlook all his wealth and take his ease, should have been the reward. He could not understand why it did not feel like triumph” (p.334). Thornhill is perplexed as he does not have the language needed to understand what it is he is experiencing. In the narrative logic of the text this is incongruent and surprising given that he was able to identify Sal’s act of reparation and also that he presumes she knows what he is looking for daily as he watches and waits for signs of the land’s former inhabitants. Yet in another way his perplexity represents his vacillation between self and Other in what is constructed as a timeless morally transcendent self. Thornhill is unable to grasp the significance of his action. He has become a murderer because he has not been able to fully apprehend the reality of the Other despite the penetration of barriers and his fleeting sense of the Other as human. Dimly he recognises what is at issue. At the end of each day he also puts down his telescope with a sense that it is “Too late, too late” (p.334) which resonates with Sorry when the character Perdita utters these words. Thornhill is granted some awareness but the narrative does not fully exploit this.
The narrative finishes on his lack of moral insight: “He could not say why he had to go on sitting here. Only knew that one thing that brought him a measure of peace was to peer through the telescope” (p.334). Symbolically, and ironically, “watching in the dark” beyond the possibility of being able to see anything at all, keeps his hope for redemption alive. The hopelessness of absence lingers. The melancholy of loss is perpetuated into the timelessness of the future up until the present moment. Thornhill has no insight into his son, Dick’s plight. The trauma and vulnerability of the child Dick is also overlooked within the novel. He symbolises another perspective that is underdeveloped but brought out more in the play.

In the foreword to the play, Henry Reynolds suggests that an underlying theme is the possibility of a different outcome: “But it all begs the question of whether a more peaceful outcome was ever possible” (p. xi). This is present in the novel but snuffled out by the sense of the inevitability of Thornhill’s action, while the play accentuates this possibility through a number of angles. In Act 2, Scene 7; “The Thornhill’s Camp” Sal is making damper when she notices with a fright that she is being watched by two Aboriginal women. One of these is Buryia, a female elder, and a younger woman, Gilyagan. Buryia says to Gilyagan, “Say something to her” and she replies “What shall I say?” This foregrounds the awkwardness of a first encounter (p.56). They exchange berries for sugar, clothes for a bark dish to which Sal takes a fancy. Even Thornhill exchanges sugar for roo meat. Most significantly, the play creates dialogue between Thornhill’s second son, Dick and his Dharug friends, Garraway and Narrabi, which gives a stronger sense of that other possible outcome, left unexplored in the novel. As Collins notes, potentially subversive characters, such as Dick, are marginalised in the novel. Dick condemns his father for his partaking in the killing of his friends. While highlighting the survival issues at stake. Yalamundi tells Thornhill, “You know that place. You make big mess of that place. Destroy all the yams. Leave nothing for us. Go dig closer to your camp but leave the place for yams alone. Do you understand what I am saying, whitefella?” (p.30). But Ngalamalum says to Yalamundi, “Talk if you want, old man, but this one only knows the meaning of a spear” (p. 30). Similarly Braniyamala tells Smasher, “You eat what you need. Leave the rest for us. I’m not asking. I’m telling you now” (p.35).

Andrew Bovell draws a conclusion that reinforces Grenville’s objective, and reinforces the ‘decent block’ persona the novel creates: “And so we come to understand that the violence of the past was not undertaken by evil men, by strangers to us, but by men and women not unlike ourselves. That’s the shock of it…Above all I wanted to retain that sense of shock” (xvii). Shock is inherent in remorse, but complexly, identifying with the colonisers’ human fallibility both blankets the differences in historical time and risks serving as an apology. Where is the balance between venerating and not demonising the early settlers?

In conclusion, how can we understand the cultural meaning and contribution of this novel? One aspect of the text that reverberates with the main concerns of this thesis is its representation of a protagonist who reads as an allegory for Australia’s moral dilemma, the nation’s incapacity to respond fully with compassion and remorse to the plight of Indigenous people. The character of Thornhill reflects an incomplete or even stunted, embryonic remorse that gets stuck in its trajectory. Thornhill has a limited sense of the reality of the Other despite the intermittent remorse and grief he undergoes after shooting Harry. His inability to respond fully with compassion and remorse reflects the way that unexamined psychological needs
block moral responsiveness. This is analogous with the national psyche of denial of the full reality of the Other.

The question arises as to the contribution this text makes in terms of an enhanced understanding of the issues at stake. At this junction, it is possible to say that the novel has been provocative enough to evoke debate over its value. Even a play has been written in response. The question remains, does the novel evoke a sense of remorse for injustice perpetrated by whites? Who is responsible for crimes of the early colonizers? Is anyone responsible or is it just that the narrative of first contact becomes understandable? Does the novel evoke reader curiosity about the reality of race relations? The novel highlights the issues of silence and denial and lays bare settler unbelonging. Does it heal race relations to build a bridge over the gap that exists between Indigenous and non-indigenous communities? Or does the novel reinforce stereotypical icons in dialogue with its own representations, almost in an act of solipsism that excludes the inter-subjectivity described by Langton: “The most dense relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors” (p.33). There is certainly an element of this in Grenville’s book, as well as justification for the actions or inactions of the protagonists. Complexly, the novel is ambiguous in its impact just as its main character is morally ambivalent. The text reflects the national conscience in a state of partial awareness, sometimes sensitive to the realities of Aboriginal people’s stories. It reveals division, denial and hidden truths embedded within deceptive means to retain power and possession. Its representation of Thornhill’s moral struggle dramatises elements of remorse, albeit incomplete and thwarted in its conflict between self-fulfilment and extension of self to the Other.

The fact that there are several ways of reading this controversial text makes it a site for projections of possibilities; of unresolved issues; symbolic of dilemma and conflict and dialogically available for further exploration. The scholarly critiques raise the question as to what extent Grenville’s recuperatory moves, generating understanding for Thornhill, position the reader to understand his plight. Does this amount to ongoing colonisation? Grenville’s own sense of the incompleteness of her story is evidenced in her writing of two further novels.

Nonetheless the novel provides the occasion for a play which embraces an Indigenous perspective. The play The Secret River fills a gap left by the novel. It reduces Thornhill’s narrative and moves closer to some equilibrium. It bears witness to the dialogic impact of the novel, as well as its shortcomings.
Chapter 6 – *Sorry*

Rather than engaging with trauma as a theme *The Secret River* represents the traumatic life of the perpetrator through the vulnerable child motif. The novel represents protagonist’s struggle with his own remorse. As an allegorical figure he signifies an ambivalent but also divided community.

*Sorry* reads as a self-conscious trauma narrative focused around memory loss following traumatic events. It represents the tension between the two models of trauma theory. One is mimetic where trauma memory is integrated in the unconscious world, surfacing in symbolic form, and the other is the non-mimetic neuroscience model which holds that the memory is quarantined in a separate memory. It is inaccessible and non-integratable to the conscious mind. It is present only in gaps. The neuroscience model implies a subject of agency, uncontaminated by trauma whereas the mimetic subject is one of uncertainty and fluctuation. *Sorry* reflects both models in its protagonist who forgets but also remembers through therapy and enacts a symbolic silence. *Sorry* dramatises the issue of unspoken words of remorse. This leaves the reader with a sense of matters unfinished. Remorse comes too late. This novel works as an allegory for a nation which forgets its history resulting in Aboriginal people unjustly bearing responsibility. The novel underlines a gap where reparation might be enacted. Its theme of disconnection between mothers and daughters is persistent throughout. The novel exemplifies the difficulty of this genre in reaching an outcome that is unproblematic.

My argument is that the novel reads as a gesture of remorse in itself but loses the reader due to its overly constructed form and strategic ambiguity that generates confusion and instability of any premise it offers. However, its value lies in its ability to represent injustice and to leave the reader with a sense that more is due to the Aboriginal protagonist. The focus of this chapter is on the representation of the Aboriginal character as emblematic of a Murdochian attention to others’ realities—a certain selflessness that culminates in a form of sacrifice, which I argue is problematic in this novel.244

Iris Murdoch’s philosophy identifies the in-between gestures of attending to the reality of others, which can be seen in juxtaposition to Gaita’s model of the awakened sense of the reality of another through remorse. Murdoch’s model of attention avoids imposing inattentive judgements. Her ideas illuminate many of the novel’s themes and ideas. In particular, the novel’s indeterminate world with its connection to words and books as a means of finding meaning amongst the chaos, mirrors Murdoch’s observation that life is chancy. Murdoch explains that “any story we can tell ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern on something that is otherwise chancy and incomplete” (p.87). Murdoch’s work is also reflected in Gaita’s philosophy in terms of being open to the reality of another, which she believes occurs through the discipline of seeing the other as he/she is by clearing away self-absorbed blocks. For example, when discussing corrupt forms of remorse, Gaita asserts: “There are, to be sure, almost infinitely many corruptions of remorse, and some may be, as Iris Murdoch says, the subtlest and most seductive of

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moral corruptions but they are corruptions." He further claims “there is much sense in drawing attention to, not to, not as spiritual push-ups, but as Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch have done, to the importance of what we attend to.” Murdoch’s emphasis on perceiving beyond notions of self is infused with a humility that is courageous enough to acknowledge our limitations and to accept mistaken perceptions of others. This attentiveness towards others can be seen in the self-sacrifice of the Aboriginal character Mary, which is problematic in the text. Murdoch maintains that proper attention cuts out choice. There is a form of moral imperative operating here whereby the subjective experience is that “I had to do it” when one feels compelled to respond to another. Murdoch’s philosophy also illuminates Jones’ critique of the masculine hero and I believe speaks to the form the novel constructs. In contrast to the will-driven agent, Murdoch contemplates ‘the good’ or goodness in her philosophy. Her emphasis on really looking in those ‘peering moments’ is also reflected in the novel The White Earth, by James McGahan, whose child protagonist has the “eyes to see” through the falsity surrounding him. Through the motif of the vulnerable child, Jones’ child protagonist struggles to see throughout the novel.

The narrative of Sorry is set in the time span from the 1920s through to the 1940s with WW11 in the background. It alternates between a first and third person narration that tells the story of an emotionally dysfunctional family, who migrate to Australia from England. It is told from the first person adult perspective of Perdita, the child born after arrival and from a third person narrator who speaks for Perdita, the child. The name Perdita evokes the lost child. It alludes to the Shakespearian play, The Winter’s Tale, in which Perdita is born in prison after the King of Sicilia, Leonetes, banishes his wife, believing she has betrayed him and that Perdita is not his daughter. Symbolically, Perdita is disowned emotionally in the novel, paralleling the abandonment in the play. Shakespeare’s Perdita, brought up by a shepherd, is eventually reunited, but Jones’ Perdita signifies the fragmentation of childhood. Sorry addresses itself to past injustice to Aboriginal people. It frames its narrative through reference to a concern with what has happened to Aboriginal people, especially females removed from their families and placed in domestic service. It also offers an overall critique as seen in its critical representation of the Protector of Aborigines who “owned in a sense an entire people” (p.15). Aboriginal people are visible from the outset in the text. The narrator attempts to describe this presence in a matter of fact way without idealisation. In Broome, “small groups of Aboriginal people sat talking in peaceful clusters, or lounged in doorways, or on narrow verandas” (p.15). The fact that Perdita’s father, Nicholas, is an anthropologist sets the scene for an historic objectification of Aboriginal people. This critique is established before he enters the country when Nicholas encounters the ship captain’s attitude towards Aborigines; the captain claims “like all primitive peoples, had a tendency to expire on contact with a superior race” (p.11). Nicholas took the captain’s further comments about the duty of civilised peoples to “raise or erase” Aborigines, as affirmation of his own self-constructed

246 Good and Evil, An Absolute Conception, p.236.
heroism. The narrator notes that for Nicholas, “He confirmed that knowledge of how the black buggers thought would be useful in their management and control” (p.12).

Nicholas mirrors Iris Murdoch’s portrayal of the man of action who is motivated by egotism and self-absorption. Sorry constructs him as such: “Nicholas watched the captain extract a thread of tobacco from the tip of his tongue and flick it away. He admired this man, a man of action. The world, Nicholas thought, was built by men like Captain Smith” (p.11). There are many textual references to this type of person. For example, reflecting Murdoch’s critique of romantic subjectivity concerned only with self-elevation, Nicholas is drawn to anthropology because of its “odd grandeur, somehow, of an uncompleted discipline and the challenging allure of frontier encounters” (Jones, p.7). There is an inter-textual resonance here with the character, Ernest, in Benang, who is the grandfather of the main protagonist, Harley. He is a believer in biological absorption and esteems eugenic scientists. Like Nicholas, he strives for recognition amongst them. Nicholas’ wife, Stella, in contrast is steeped in Shakespeare but in a similarly obsessive and all-consuming way. The text constructs the self-absorbed chauvinistic nature of Nicholas who is confident that in Australia, “His wife would settle down. She would be well behaved. He would find again the young man he was when his brothers were alive, full of potential, confident, sure of each step he took towards the future” (Jones, p.13). Murdoch’s critique of the Enlightenment’s ideal rational man resonates here, she states he is “the hero of almost every contemporary novel” (Murdoch, p.7). Murdoch describes the prescription that attends him as follows: “We ought to know what we are doing. We should aim at total knowledge of our situation and a clear conceptualisation of all our possibilities” (p.7). Murdoch parodies analytical philosophy’s privileging of the will, which, she claims, is represented as leaping into action presumably out of no inner work: “What I am is a foot loose, solitary, substanceless will. Personality dwindles to a point of pure will” (Murdoch, p.16). The daughter narrator as first person adult protagonist reinforces this critique of the hero and self-elevation: “I believe that in Australia, my father, Nicholas, felt once again heroic” (Jones, p.14). The novel relentlessly parodies Nicholas, whose letters to his father were “composed entirely of fictions, suggesting he was on the verge of a scholarly breakthrough” (p. 40).

The central relationship within the text is between Perdita and Mary, an Aboriginal girl of 16 who is brought in to care for Perdita after her mother Stella suffers her first emotional breakdown. The name Mary reflects the idealised representation of the character as sacrificial, motherly and spiritual. The relationship between Mary and Perdita embodies the primary source of remorse and goodness in the novel. Referring to Weil and Murdoch, Gaita comments on the element of moral necessity present in goodness: “Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch emphasise that deepened moral understanding is a movement towards necessity, of the world becoming as Murdoch puts it ‘compulsively present to the will.’” 247 Perdita first meets Mary at the convent, where the latter has been living. She accompanies her father there to find domestic help. Instantly they form a connection through which Perdita begins to receive some of the care and attention she craves. The nun who receives them takes it upon herself to bathe Perdita’s obviously neglected eye. During this unexpected action Perdita is

247 Good and Evil, p.234.
afraid and cries. The narrator explains, “At some point in the procedure Mary took her hand and stayed close, instantly affectionate, in an implicit companionship. It was a fond, easy handclasp. Perdita felt the lacing of their fingers. This was the moment, the very moment that Perdita began to love Mary” (p.48). On the way back to their remote shack with Mary, the latter reveals an orientation towards attentive affection of which Perdita has been deprived. For example, after the truck has broken down and they are eating bread on the side of the road, the reader is privy to this moment:

At some point Mary leaned towards Perdita and with her little finger wiped a trail of honey from the side of her mouth, then licked her own finger clean, winked and smiled. ‘Sisters, eh?’ Mary said. Perdita felt – what was it? – claimed, rescued. She smiled with her own mouth full of sticky bread and felt her small, unnoticed life reconfiguring around her (p.49).

However, this description reads as an overly constructed closeness that means too much too soon. The emphasis on rescue could be read as a reversal of the white myth about rescuing Aboriginal children, for it is Mary who rescues Perdita. Here Mary represents a Murdochian form of attentiveness to others, including towards Stella, that is the fabric from which she ultimately makes a sacrifice of her freedom. Murdoch notes: “In particular situations ‘reality’ as that which is revealed to the patient eye of love is an idea entirely comprehensible to the ordinary person” (p.40). When Stella returns home after being in hospital it is Mary who is attentive to her needs. “Mary stepped forward and simply took Stella’s hand. ‘Come,’ said Mary. She led Stella to the table, sat her down, and gave her a cup of tea. ‘Drink,’ she instructed. ‘Be careful. Hot’” (p.74).

Sorry subversively reverses a negative stereotype of Aboriginal people being unable to care for their children, often the justification for their removal during the Stolen Generation period. The narrative represents Aboriginal people in general and women in particular as nurturers, able to offer the care that Perdita needs. Initially, the first person narrative tells us that, “If it had not been for the Aboriginal women who raised me, I would never have known what it is like to lie against a breast, to sense skin as a gift, to feel the throb of a low pulse at the base of the neck, to listen, in intimate and sweet propinquity, to air entering and leaving a body” (p.4). It is Sal and Daff, ironically unable to remember their own mothers, who are summoned to breast feed and care for Perdita, when her mother sinks into a form of post-partum depression, exacerbated by her prior mental and emotional instability. The reader is told that “The baby meanwhile flourished in black arms, which found and embraced her” (p.26). This theme is reinforced throughout the book. For example, it is a caring black woman, Sis, who symbolically offers Perdita kindness through a cup of tea when she accompanies her father to Broome to take her mother to hospital. Almost as reparation for the harm done to the representation of Aboriginal people as unable to care for their children generally, this novel represents Aboriginal women (and men) as nurturing and attentive, which is epitomized in the character of Mary.

In a scholarly article entitled “The Australian apology and postcolonial defamiliarization: Gail Jones’s Sorry,” Dolores Herrero foregrounds an analysis of the novel in the frame of
She describes the novel as an “allegory of trauma” highlighting the irony of its representation of Perdita as a victim of trauma. She comments “Significantly, though, it is only Perdita’s, and to a lesser extent Stella’s, to which the novel testifies….Here lies its bitter irony. The Aboriginal girl is the true victim of the story…as she takes the blame for Perdita confessing to the crime” (p.285). Informed by Caruth’s theory of trauma, Herrero argues “it is the unassimilated nature of trauma, the fact that the event was neither acknowledged or experienced fully at the time, that later returns to haunt the survivor” (p.285). This model of trauma reflects an anti-mimetic theory based in neuroscience, which holds that trauma memory is stored in a different part of the brain from that of narrative memory, in a place that is not accessible except through inadvertent means that mark the gap or unsayable nature of trauma. However, the trauma is finally accessible to Perdita, which extends it beyond the definition of anti-mimetic theory. Radstone and Leys highlight the tensions in trauma theory, identifying a conflation of the two streams of mimetic and anti-mimetic theory. Mimetic theory subscribes to the idea that the traumatic experience is repressed within the schema of the unconscious, where meaning is negotiated, and there may be identification with the perpetrator. The subject is more passive in the mimetic than in the anti-mimetic model, which according to Leys, constructs the theory around a subject of agency defining the external event as quite separate and intact. Whereby the trauma is more accessible in the mimetic model through a therapeutic alliance, in the anti-mimetic model it remains elusive only to be approached at a distance, representing a stable subject. The novel reflects a merging of the two ideas. The agent of the anti-mimetic model is reflected in Murdoch’s critique of the subject driven by pure will.

Roseanne Kennedy also contextualises her reading of the novel by reference to trauma theory in an article entitled “Australian Trials of Trauma: The Stolen Generations in Human Rights, Law and Literature”, where she examines trauma theory as discourse in multidisciplinary texts including the novel Sorry. Kennedy highlights three different representations of the trope of speechlessness in Jones’ text. Contrary to Herrero, Kennedy concludes that the novel’s explicitness breaks loyalty with trauma narrative which is more elusive and unknowable hence also alluding to an anti-mimetic model (p.350). She adds that the novel appeals to the reader’s intellect rather than emotions. This is evident through Jones’s use of trauma theory and her play on ideas about textual representation so that it is possible to say that she does not write a trauma narrative but rather a narrative about trauma.

While there may be disagreement within trauma theory about what constitutes a trauma narrative, how are we to understand the trauma represented in the novel through its impact on the reader? Jones’ novel figures the trauma that Perdita experiences as unfathomable. It is reminiscent of trauma as a form that is displaced on to other objects through the association of death and suffering such as the bombing of the Dutch and the hugeness of the war, both of

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which indicate a Freudian model of mimetic trauma whereby the unconscious is brought into play.

Kennedy defines the novel as an allegory of white complicity in its refusal to bear witness to the abuse of Aboriginal people (p.348). Along with Herrero, she claims that Perdita takes up the position of traumatised victim, in a narrative where Mary is in fact the true victim. Herrero believes that Nicholas’ death becomes the trauma, whereas it is arguable that the original trauma for Perdita is her witnessing of the rape of Mary. Perdita’s trauma is to be as witness to Mary’s trauma. However, her ‘forgetting’ reflects both the trauma of killing her father and his rape of Mary.

Kennedy reinforces the position put forward in this thesis about the significance of the vulnerable child. For example, she states

In revisionist Australian fictions, including those only tangentially related to the Stolen Generations, the figure of the child is prominent. In Sorry, for instance, the child is a significant vehicle for conveying the ways in which traumatic violence ruptures both the innocence of childhood and cognitive frames of understanding (p. 336).

Empathy and a sense of injustice is created in the vulnerable child which not only protects her from blame, but highlights her vulnerability to the unjust and neglectful adults around them. My argument about the vulnerable child motif is that once blame is lifted, it is easier for a reader to grasp the concept of blamelessness, embedded in remorse. Remorse is not about external condemnation but an inner sense of involvement in another’s harm.

Julie McGonegal analyses both The Secret River and Sorry in terms of the unsayable as a trope of the secret, the secret being the violence of settler societies through colonisation. McGonegal reads the character of Perdita, the lost one, as an allegory for the settler community, lost in its estrangement and exile from the mother country. McGonegal suggests that the reason why Perdita is not blameworthy is due to her borrowed indigeneity from Mary who connects her to the land. Consequently, McGonegal understands the nurturance found by Perdita in the Aboriginal women in her life as a form of settler solace against this state of exile. This alludes to the theory among many that settler fiction is concerned with settler belonging. Certainly in Sorry Aboriginal people provide comfort for the neglected child, a powerful rejection of damaging stereotypes.

While representing knowledge as indeterminate and fragmentary through its main protagonist, Perdita is portrayed as a child who is searching for answers to the big questions. Raimond Gaita, writing of an obligation to truthfulness, comments: “Iris Murdoch has observed that this kind of effort to see things as they are is an effort of love, justice and pity.” Perdita’s mother has told her that Shakespeare has all the answers. However, it is

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Mary who is portrayed as a model teacher, in contrast to Stella’s deranged view of the world as a fantasy one.

Later Perdita would learn with fretful misery how useless was her knowledge. Her mother’s history and geography were wild surmises, her politics eccentric to the point of crude error; even her Shakespeare was a nonsense….This maternal inheritance, more than anything would serve to humiliate her. But Mary’s gentle teaching- all that drifted to her in the darkness when they were lying close together, all that was told on a walkabout, with Billy and Horatio accompanying, benignly, happily, both of them running ahead, all the unfortunate saints, and the bush knowledge, and the shared stories of mothers- these things remained securely lodged, and vouched safe. (p.65).

According to Megan Laverty, in her book Iris Murdoch’s Ethics, Murdoch understands learning as a sublime experience. She claims, “Learning, as Murdoch defines it, occurs when an individual comes up against a limit to her conceptual understanding.”253 In the novel Perdita is confronted with the limit of her own determination of the world through her relationship with Mary, through her new realisation of the world. This is further represented in the following:

There was an entire universe, she was discovering, of the visible and the invisible, the unconcealed and the concealed, some fundamental hinge to all this hotch-potch, disorderly life, this swooning confusion. For Mary there was authority in signs Perdita had never before seen; there were pronouncements in tiny sounds and revelations in glimpses...The stars were there all the time Mary said, outstretching her arms; we just couldn’t see them all the time. This seemed to Perdita an amazing notion. She thought of stars adjusting, each night, their luminous arrangements, then effacing, disappearing, hiding behind day. Why has she never known things like this before? (p.60).

Perdita’s mind is also opened to new concepts when she comes up against the limits of her own determination of the world, through her ability to take a humble position towards her own determination of knowledge: a Murdochian orientation towards transcendence of self-absorption. This is evident when she is out hunting for food with Mary’s community of Aboriginal women. “She saw the figures around her, moving outlined against the indigo sky, squatting or bent over, or shifting with gentle tread, and felt herself tiny, and insignificant, and unequal to this place” (p.69). Within Murdoch’s framework attention to nature is yielding to reality, not as a form of “self-elevation” in Romantic fashion but rather, as the narrator of Sorry explains, to “give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care” (Jones, p.84). However, for Mary, absolute knowledge lies within the grasp of Aboriginal elders. She claims “They knew everything …everything about the world, every big important thing, and every single little thing” (p.59).

Murdoch perceives humility as intrinsic to moral effort, which, according to Laverty, she understands as a more appropriate response to the sublime than the self-elevation of Romanticism. Mary’s humility is reflected in her gesture of sharing the glory for the red-bellied black snake she has caught with Perdita. The narrator reveals that “Mary allowed Perdita to carry the tail end of the snake. They walked back with the limp creature swinging in a bow between them. It looked, Perdita thought, as if she had caught it too, as if Mary were proclaiming a truly shared glory. When they arrived back at the camp, at sunset, the men had returned and hailed Mary and Perdita together” (p.70). In this instance, Mary embodies Murdochian descriptions of the qualities which exist in the in-between moments which create a fabric of a certain orientation away from self-aggrandisement towards awareness of the reality of the other, in an act of humility. It is from this fabric of humility that her future acts emerge. Murdoch claims that what matters is “what goes on inwardly in between moments of overt movement” (p.9). This act could be seen as an overt act emerging from Mary’s attentive concern. It can also be thought of as the quality out of which her future ultimate sacrifice for Perdita emerges. Gaita explains that Murdoch’s characterisation of love, justice and pity are “forms of understanding…and that what is there to be understood cannot be characterised independently of the fact” rather than causal elements that promote understanding.254

Sorry can be juxtaposed with a Murdochian critique of Romantic subjectivity through the character of Stella. The text fashions itself through the language of philosophy and Murdoch’s in particular. For example, when the recitation of Shakespeare offers “no consolation,” Stella, after an unpleasant encounter with her husband, writes a letter to her sister in England. In Murdoch’s view the quest for consolation is a form of self-absorption in the Romantic tradition, which returns the focus to self rather than really looking beyond consolations of pity and fantasy. Murdoch maintains:

The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really looking. The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair. The refusal to attend may even induce a fictitious sense of freedom (p.91).

Stella emerges as just this type of character who is unable to grasp the ‘reality’ of her daughter’s experience of life. Stella’s unresponsiveness to her daughter when she comes to visit her in hospital is described as her “impossible egoism” by the narrator and then in more graphic language, by the character, Flora as “smug as a cannibal. As if she’d just swallowed her own daughter” through being oblivious to her presence (p.162). Alasdair MacIntyre, in article entitled “Good for Nothing” comments on the understanding of consolation within Murdoch’s and Weil’s philosophy as a compensation for the reality of the ‘purposelessness of Good,’ – that is to be ‘good for nothing.’ 255 He claims, “What this search for consolation engenders in us is untruthfulness and distractedness” (p.15). Stella reflects both of these in

254 A Common Humanity, p.249.
her obsession with Shakespeare, her denial of how her husband died and her inattentiveness to her daughter. MacIntyre further claims, “Selfless attention is also necessary to deliver us from distractedness, on the one hand, and obsession, on the other” (p.15).

The novel is concerned with the disconnection between mothers and daughters. Despite Stella’s distracted state there are momentary experiences of connection for Perdita with her mother. This comes about through Perdita’s efforts at care. The antidote to counteract the empty search for consolation is, as MacIntyre highlights, according to Weil and Murdoch about “learning how things are, by learning to see what is really there” (p.15). Perdita mirrors this when she observes her mother’s breakdown with an openess that allows her to “really look” and perceive her mother’s predicament, “What her mother experienced must be truly dreadful. Perdita looked at her turning a teacup, again and again, by its comma-shaped handle. She felt a sudden wave of love and concern, a feeling rare enough, but for which she was grateful. What linked them persisted in the emotional residues of what had been taught, the tales they mentally engaged with, the flights of fancy” (Jones, p.42). These flights are unsubstantial in Murdoch’s terms, as they are not based on attentiveness to the reality of another. Attentively, she worries that she had not said goodbye when her mother goes to hospital while in juxtaposition her own father negligently gets drunk and forgets Perdita is even there. The narrator characterises Perdita as the knowing child in the midst of a significant experience – “and the sense, some intuited, anxious and desperate sense, of the injustice of her (mother’s) disposal, and of its necessity” (p.43). Again, much later, when her mother, distracted, walks into a door, the narrator reveals that “She suffered for her mother. She touched her wrist, just her wrist, and was overwhelmed by feelings of pity” (p.155). In contrast to her mother and father, Perdita is a character who moves towards or is able to perceive her mother’s vulnerability in the light of Murdoch’s characterisation of goodness. Perdita is able to experience pity and love for Stella as well as insight into her condition, despite the inability of the latter to notice her. In Broome, the narrator tells us that “If she had not pitied her mother and known her to be wretched, she might have been afraid of her” (p.118). The town’s perspective penetrates her reality; Perdita overhears “‘Crazy Mrs Keene’ and knows it to be true” (p.118). Perdita as the vulnerable child reflects an openness to ‘reality’ in a way that the adults do not.

The vulnerable child motif is pronounced in Sorry, evoking reader sympathy for the injustice of Perdita’s treatment by thoughtless adults. As a child, Perdita’s life is constrained by her environment, with the text consistently reminding us that childhood is a vulnerable stage and that there are gaps in adults’ understanding of the child’s experience. For example, “There are forms of loneliness children endure that adults have no inkling of: stern seclusions, lives of quiet desperation” (p.111). And again, reflecting its commitment to a construction of knowledge as incomplete, the first person narrator explains that, “Adults like to imagine that childhood has a wholesome and charming contiguity, but children know, or at least now and then intuit, the dreadful fractures that craze any thoughtful life.” Later, when Perdita again meets the nun who bathed her eye, and who characteristically again takes liberties, the narrator states that; “The nun released Perdita’s face. Adults had such presumption, took such liberties. Perdita hated the way a hand could reach forward and claim the face; ………How they claimed to possess all the big questions” (p.109). Perdita, who
feels ‘subtracted’ by her parents, is vulnerable to their influence (p.69). She is limited by her child status in being susceptible to the conditions under which she is being formed. For example, Nicholas had been collecting newspaper cuttings of the war, which lined the walls. Books sat in piles in their shack. In third person, the text creates a sense of the extreme and bizarre through Billy’s fear of Perdita’s shack. For example,

One day Billy put his face in the doorway and his eyes grew big. Perdita saw at once how unusual their little dwelling had become, all books, all symbolic strife, the missing mother, the remote father. Billy would not enter the room but simply stood there, staring, his eyes scanning the Blitz photographs as they trembled in the breeze, his expression baffled (p. 63).

It is at this moment that Perdita becomes aware of the reality that her parents are “locked in their obsessive devotions,” making the reader privy to a bizarre mix of violence and tragedy as a background out of which Perdita is forming (p. 63). Later, when her father dies, the policeman makes the comment, “What idiot would pin war images where a little girl is sleeping?” (p.91). It is as if the narrator wants to suggest that obsession with killing and death, coupled with her mother’s obsession with tragedy, have primed Perdita to commit the crime she does. At the very least it represents an unhealthy environment that testifies to the thoughtless state of oblivion her parents inhabited, mindless of her subjectivity. It resounds with The White Earth’s environment of self-absorbed adults neglectful of the vulnerable child protagonist.

There is a moment in which Perdita is moved to a sublime realisation by a newspaper photo. This occurrence reinforces a Murdochian model of both a “darker, less fully conscious, less steadily rational” subject who is also “making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results” (p.43). Perdita’s determined reality of things is fragmented by the sudden unexpected interjection of ‘reality’ in the form of the war going on:

It was April and Perdita will remember all her life the moment she understood this rupture in the texture of life. She was 10 years old. She glanced up, pleased with two Aces and the possibility of a third, and saw in a newspaper cut-out the vague grey shape of a soldier, stooping, beaten, slumped around his rifle. His face was obscured in shadow but his posture was eloquently distressed. The image was already by then a little tattered ………………….but it seemed suddenly to address her. This was a man whose job it was to kill, and somewhere, behind the image, were the corpses he had made, post mortally transforming to grotesque blue jellies, and those too, perhaps, of some of his comrades, indistinctive in the banal democracy of death. And the day after the photograph he will again kill or be killed……………………………She thought to herself ‘I am ten years old, there is a war going on, I am playing cards.’ And there the moment stopped (pp. 82-83).
The sense of this reality of death and killing penetrating her world, usually remote, affects her sublimely because it challenges the ‘reality’ of card playing, ultimately depriving her of a sense of trust and patterned regularity of experience in the world. In juxtaposition, immediately after this moment, her father falls from his horse and has to spend some time away in hospital. The reader is informed that there is “silent celebration” amongst the others and that “Perdita knew then her second revelation: tyranny, and release from tyranny, occur everywhere, and in every scale” (p.83). Here the novel highlights a connection between the macro and micro level of violence. This context dovetails with Perdita’s act to protect Mary.

The narrator offers a critique of unifying narratives. In doing so the novel exhibits a self-reflexive awareness of itself as text, and as such it potentially constructs these narratives too. In the process of portraying her parents, the adult narrator reflects upon the contiguous element in the words that might “truly report them” (p.14) Again a Murdochian model of the incompleteness of consciousness in representation emerges as the narrator claims, “Parents are recessed within us, in memory, in feeling, in ways we sometimes know best at faltering, precarious moments. A confident description is no guard against the discrepancies they hold for us” (Jones, p.14). Although this is not overtly in relation to a moral matter, the representation of another as truly as possible is, and the faltering, precarious moments reflect Murdoch’s model of life. She claims “Any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which might otherwise seem chancy and incomplete. However, human life is chancy and incomplete” (Murdoch, p.87). The narrator again reflects an awareness of this process of imposing order when Perdita remembers the shared act of reading with Mary: “its continuous thought, its completed world, its parallel universe-will comfort and reassure her. Of what? Of established order, at least. Of pattern and of meaning, even if notional” (p.206). As in Benang, words create meaning that grounds Harley; they bring shape to the incompleteness he experiences, which then in turn, through his narrative, bring order through a reciprocal circle of containing what might otherwise take flight into the unfathomable territory of trauma. In Wright’s novel, Ivy is wordless, with the reader and Elliot the only witnesses. In this way Ivy represents an antimimetic trauma victim but she also reflects an overlap between the models through her passive subjectivity.

The idea of the indeterminacy of ‘reality’ is fundamental to the novel’s moral pivot around the death of Perdita’s father. In Murdoch, there is an ongoing focus in terms of the indeterminacy of our grasp of ‘reality’ which is always mediated through consciousness and that requires ‘moral effort’ to move beyond this human limitation. Representing a shift to a mimetic model of trauma, the narrative moves towards the unfolding, forgotten reality of Perdita’s father’s death. It is a gradual movement that involves dreams, imaginings, displacement, retelling, reflection and confrontation with her unknowing state. In the first person narration, quite early in the narrative, we find she dreams of her father:

I used to dream that I bent over my father’s face and tried to prise open his stiffened eyelids…. Then Mary would appear, and she would take me by the hand…..or I dreamed I opened the door to the shack, and there he was, a flash of light from his old horn-rimmed spectacles….hitting his hat to shake away the
It is possible to perceive a parallel mirroring dynamic whereby Murdoch’s philosophical repertoire takes form in the ideas engaged by the novel. The question arises as to whether or not the text’s self-perception is as philosophy, or an ironical comment on such. Nonetheless, the text’s engagement with these ideas works towards the narrative purpose of creating a sense of uncertainty.

Perdita’s fragmented and incomplete memory of her father’s death signifies a deeper denial of how he actually died. This manifests in an acquired stutter that suggests her inability to grapple with an action that she has ‘forgotten’ along with her ability to speak fluently. After his death Mary is carted away to a reformatory. When Stella lies and tells Perdita’s foster mother that Nicholas died in the war, Perdita dry retches. Through speech therapy Perdita remembers that it was she, not Mary or her mother, who had killed her father. She comes upon him in the act of raping Mary. This had happened before; she had witnessed it in the darkness but had forced it from her memory. The text narrates:

She did not then decide to kill her father; there was no deliberation and no resolve. She simply took up the carving knife lying on the table and walked steadily towards him, enclosed by muddle, alarm, perhaps a dull impulse of revenge, seized by the circulation of her own blood pressuring in her head, causing her to act, so that she gripped the knife and was gripped, so that she saw only a target and fixed her intention. Mary caught her gaze and vigorously shook her head, and Perdita noticed that her eyes were glistening with fear (p.193).

It is Mary who implores Perdita: “‘don’t tell them.’ Mary said. That was all. ‘Don’t tell them.’ They held each other and began to weep” (p.194). By this stage the scene had deteriorated severely, for what had seemed to Perdita as “so pure at the time, so basic and decisive” now seemed an “indelible, awful vision”(pp.193-4). It was the sight of Mary that triggered her shock. The narrator informs us that:

This was the indelible, awful vision: Mary rubbing her chest, frantic and besmirched, as if she could remove the foul taint of all that had happened. Nearby Billy was flapping his hands. He had thrown down the knife (which he’d removed) which lay gleaming beside the body.” ….And then all at once they heard it: Stella reciting Macbeth. It was such an emphatic speech of triumph that Perdita was seized with horror. Stella was gloating it seemed. She was ruthless, cruel (p.194).

However, Perdita is not as much moved by her father’s death, despite his look of “dumb surprise” and his “silent pleading” at his daughter, as she is by Mary’s “distress” (p.194). Yet the callousness of her mother’s glee brings home something of the actual horror and shock of what has happened. In fact the narrator does not give the reader much opportunity to factor in the loss of Nicholas but rather, in a brief moment, describes his death as almost incidental: “Then he grimaced and reached falteringly to touch the knife” (p.193). The “silent pleading” moves closer to a sense of Nicholas’ vulnerability as a human being: “Nicholas gasping his
last breaths, reddened with dying and silently pleading. When she looked down Perdita saw
her father’s upturned eye begin to darken and lose sight” (p.194). Nevertheless, Nicholas is
certainly not the focal point of either the protagonist or the narrator.

Gaita’s characterisation of saintliness sees it as the act of responding as equals with
compassion to people who others may consider so wretched and afflicted that their lives are
not worth living. Gaita says that in the light of a saintly gesture people are shown to be fellow
human beings. He maintains it is not the deed of the saintly person that is illuminated but
what it shines light upon, another human being whose life is worthy of respect, irrespective of
any external determinacies. Identifying a premise of his book, Gaita remarks:

Were I pressed to state the central concern of A Common Humanity I would say
that it is with the ways human beings are sometimes invisible, or only partially
visible, to one another, and how that effects and is effected by an understanding
of morality. No one, of course, means that poor people are literally invisible to
wealthy people or black people to white people (p.xx).

I would add, or children to adults. As the narrator reveals, Mary shines light on Perdita’s
hidden life: “that only Mary, finally, could be relied upon to notice her, her own small life,
there in the background, her own small, unfinished life, with all its huge, aching questions”
(p.63). Symbolically, Mary introduces Perdita to the life of the saints, and while the narrator
complicatedly critiques the absurdity and tragedy of sacrificial and violent saintly sacrifice,
Mary also signifies as a character with a saintly orientation, in the Gaitaian meaning of
saintly acts. This attentive orientation towards another represents a Murdochian type of
attentiveness that ultimately culminates in the sacrifice of her freedom. It is not the final act
alone that marks Mary’s goodness but her ongoing attentiveness to Perdita. Problematically,
this characterisation of Mary reinstates a stereotype of Aboriginal people who are obliged to
bear the cost of colonisation. While the sacrifice Mary makes is done in the knowledge that
Perdita killed her father to protect her, there is a sense in which her saintly behaviour creates
a debt for which she is never repaid by the white community.

Within the economy of the text, Nicholas’ death is neither represented nor experienced as
a tragedy by the reader. This is because he alone in the text exemplifies almost a total
abandonment to the forces of wrongdoing against others. He embodies harm against
Aboriginal women as well as expressing a disregard for his wife and a lack of attention to his
daughter. He brutally abuses the Aboriginal girl next door at the Trevor’s residence, where
Billy lives. The narrator reveals that “Nicholas discovered that he could force the cook
Martha, and that she would not tell” (p.28). His malicious pleasure in inflicting pain is what
alienates the reader: “Nicholas liked to pull her head back by its tangled hair and feel that he
penetrated so that he hurt her” (p.29). Martha had been an asset to the Trevor’s; “sixteen years
old and a wonderful cook, good as any, the Trevor’s claimed, in a civilised household” (p.29).
However, soon “it was discovered that Martha was pregnant, she was sent away, down south,
with few questions asked” (p.29). Here Aboriginal women as domestics constitute a
replaceable commodity. Hence, the narrative makes the point with a play on the name: “The
new cook, called Sheila, arrived almost immediately to replace her” (p.29). There is no
redemption for the character of Nicholas within the narrative for he in fact shows no remorse,
only concern for self. As the narrator makes clear, “If there was any hesitation in Nicholas, moral or otherwise, it was generated by the disquieting presence of Billy” who bears silent witness: “he would just stand there, and stare and unequivocally hum” (p.29). Even in this moment of possibility Nicholas shows his evil intent and self-absorbedness. Nicholas “sensed his persistent witness and censor; and he felt a kind of violence towards Billy that he could imagine giving into. He would throttle the boy if he could, seize him by the neck, fiercely crush the pink cord of his little-boy breath, and close everlastingly those insolent, staring grey eyes” (p.29). He then discovers Billy cannot talk and dismisses him as “more creature than boy,” as less than fully human. The only redeeming suggestion for Nicholas is that their dog, Horatio, misses him. Symbolically, through some unconscious gesture of remorse, Perdita sleeps with Horatio, the night she kills her father.

Perdita’s journey towards regaining her memory and her fluent speech is less concerned with her father’s death than with her relationship with Mary. As Perdita is a minor, her culpability is to some extent erased. This has the effect of placing the dilemma back in the lap of the reader, who must consider her response to Nicholas’ death. The reader is invited to repel what Nicholas stands for – as an allegorical figure of dominant culture. There is reader complicity in condoning Nicholas’ death. The evil he perpetrates against others makes it a relief that he is gone. His connection with the Anthropology of that time, his abuse of Aboriginal women, and in particular, Mary, who represents goodness in the text, means that he must be punished. The fact that he has no significant relationship with his daughter Perdita results in acknowledgement, in her dream, that she does not miss him. Yet she does come to feel sorrow for his death in her general remorse for everyone affected by it. Following her slow and painful discovery with the insightful and patient Doctor Oblov, she breaks down into sobbing for all involved in the horror:

She sobbed uncontrollably for what she believed was her heartless forgetting. She sobbed for her mother’s deception and her own self-delusion, and she saw how Stella had not disabused her of her mistake, but in some way supported it. She sobbed too for Mary’s extraordinary sacrifice, and for Billy Trevor’s mute and lonely witness. Then she sobbed for her father, who died degrading and degraded, gashed on impulse in a thoughtless, arbitrary moment (p.195).

However, he still comes last in the list. Her remorse for killing him is very much filtered through her sorrow for Mary.

While feeling remorse Perdita nevertheless faces the ugly nature of his death, degrading and degraded. Yet the persistent force which haunts her is that of Mary. Consistent with her character Stella refuses to make a statement about what actually happened after Perdita regains her memory. She will not help Mary get out of prison. Mary herself is resigned, too. After visiting Mary long before the return of her memory, she can now ask her: “Why did you protect me, Mary?” (p.203). Mary replies:

“Maybe I was foolish, eh? Back in those days I wanted to be a saint…But I also knew that I was much stronger than you, Deeta. And Stella, too. I was stronger
Perdita resists this claim, saying that she and her mother were never close. Mary doesn’t accept this; “It’s true…Mothers and daughters, they need each other” (p.203). This moment echoes the sadness Mary, who is usually so collected and calm, shares with Perdita in the beginning of the text. Her own mother was Dootharra, a Walmajarri woman from the desert, near Fitzroy Crossing, who died of grief after Mary was removed at 6 years of age (p.55). The reader intuits that Mary’s desire to protect Perdita and Stella’s maternal relationship is motivated by the loss of her mother. Mary’s grief surfaces a long time before Nicholas’ death when she: “slumped to the ground, as if unbuckled, and began to cry” to which Billy and Perdita respond by offering “the comfort of hot bodies in a clumsy child’s embrace” (p.56).

As witness, it is Perdita who speaks in the third person of Mary’s story, not Mary. Mary’s act towards Perdita is one of self-sacrifice which sits uneasily in the text due to the unjust outcome for herself. We regret Mary’s situation, and this regret generates moral responsiveness about the plight of Indigenous people. Herrero links the namesake Mary with the same in Plains of Promise, noting the similar “sacrificial overtones” (p.286). There is also an intertextual link between these novels through the grieving mothers’ death by fire.

There is a paradox created in the novel circulating around choice and sacrifice. Clearly the text is ambivalent about Mary’s extraordinary self-sacrifice because sainthood is no panacea for violence against women. We read: “Perdita listened in horror to the stories Mary retold. She had never imagined – even in the theatrical surplus of a Shakespearian tragedy, glutted with sensation – that women could be treated in this way, torn apart and made holy by tremendous injustice and error” (p.58). The text leaves the question open but at the same time Mary represents what Aboriginal women have suffered through enforced adoption and the almost inevitable sexual exploitation of domestic service. Finally, Mary concludes the above conversation “Deeta, I chose, I chose to help you, eh? And now I have no choice. No one will believe the word of a bush blackfella. Unless, she added, ‘they’re confessing a crime’” (p.203). This further complicates matters by problematising her choice. Initially her desire is to help Perdita, but it is a benevolence which ultimately leaves her with no choice but to give up her freedom for her friend. Iris Murdoch remarks: “If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at” (p.40). This position is problematic in the context of Indigenous and settler relations for an absence of choice characterises these relations. Humorously, for Perdita’s sake, Mary makes light of the tragic truth that no one would believe her. The final word is against a racist authority that is unwilling to see Mary’s actual credibility. In the economy of meaning in the text, the fact that Mary loses out in the end speaks volumes, calling to mind Herrero’s description of the novel as ‘disquieting’ in its displacement of the settler narrative.256 For example, if she were to be released from prison then the reader might feel easier. The ambiguity in the text draws attention to this controversial area of feminised self-sacrifice, especially evident in Mary’s attachment to the saints. The goodness that denies self is deeply problematic in acts of martyrdom. In its depiction of sainthood as sacrifice, the novel reads as a critique of Christian missionaries in

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256 It is also important to note that there is proportionately a higher number of Aboriginal women in Melbourne’s prisons.
their ideal of offering up one’s sufferings up in exchange for holiness. The character of the victim Mary satirises Catholicism in particular, reflecting negatively on the church’s influence over the lives of Aboriginal people. The reader is left wondering about the meaning of Mary’s sacrifice within the novel. How does the novel intend it to be interpreted? I believe that Mary’s self-sacrifice underlines the instability and complexity of this concept, encompassing as it does a wide religious framework intersecting with a particular political and historical context.

Symbolically, it is to Mary that Perdita finally says “sorry.” But it is too late for Mary to hear this because she has died of appendicitis. It is not too late for Perdita to have made the journey in remorse towards a moral understanding. But this understanding is accompanied by a sense of resignation rather than resolution. Not unlike Thornhill in The Secret River the narrative reveals of Perdita that, despite her establishment of a life, “there was also loneliness and a dwindling faith in what meanings might be found” (p.209). Her struggle reaches a climax when she receives a “humble parcel,” the book of saints, and unwraps it with trembling hands. It is then that she fully acknowledges her debt to Mary.

And only then, turning the pages, peering at what Mary had read, did she begin to open and grieve. There was a flood of hot tears, and a sudden heart breaking. I should have said sorry to my sister, Mary. Sorry, my sister, oh my sister, sorry” (p.211).

The gift of the book of saints is indicative of an ongoing relation of these women to words, books and reading. Reading figures as a medium for relationship. The narrator comments that for those who do not read and who are “booklessly broke, word deprived,” it will seem odd that two young girls should spend so much time reading together. The non-reader will be unable to grasp the value of the “Proxy lives, new imaginings, precious understandings” that Perdita and Mary quietly share (p.66). Mary in fact tells Perdita that reading the same words constitutes a bond. In the end Perdita’s remorse is mediated through the written word. As the title suggests, the novel is a gesture of remorse mediated by words.

Resonating with trauma theory, Perdita’s trajectory towards realising the reality of her father’s death and her own remorse is played out in fragmentary experiences on the path to self-knowledge. Shortly after her father’s death, Perdita experiences a sense of things turning to stone in which there was “a weight pressing down,” but this is in the context of Mary’s absence for she claims that “Without Mary there was less of a world to divine” (p.111). There is also a gap in the novel, signifying trauma, that marks the absence of Mary’s subjective experience of trauma, reflected in Herrero’s comment that Mary is the true victim. Gaita identifies the element of radical singularity in remorse: “Those who, in remorse, suffer in guilty recognition of what they have become are radically singular, and for that reason remorse is a kind of dying to the world.” 257 This state is represented by the narrator when she describes Perdita’s experience of childhood after killing her father as “a spoiled thing, compounded by an inefficient tongue and garbled speech Perdita enters the dreary territory of being truly alone” (p.111). The reality of what has happened adversely affects her but she still

257 Good and Evil, p.48
has not yet made the connection that she did the harm, which is the vital link in Gaita’s argument. The impact of recognising what has been done, in remorse, stems from admitting I have done it. However, despite loss of memory the ghost of her action haunts her, suggestive of trauma. After her father’s death, and after leaving the family’s remote shack to move to Perth, Perdita comes across her father’s suitcase: “Perdita saw the initials as an obscure accusation. She could not look at ‘NK.’ She could not bear it somehow. She could not contemplate what was left from what had been a living person” (p.116).

The narrative toys with the idea of haunting. Taking a last glimpse at the family’s shack the adult Perdita reflects: “I wanted a ‘last glimpse’ memory so that I could seal the shack, and the death, and my life with Mary, into an immured and sequestered past. To guard against what? To guard against haunting” (p.117). In both models of trauma theory haunting is a central concept. When we suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome, the trauma resurfaces in flashbacks, dreams and panic reactions to stimuli. In remorse the victim haunts the wrongdoer, who finds no relief in community consolation. The wrongdoer has to face the one harmed and attend to the demands of remorse, including reparation. The novel self-consciously represents itself as a trauma narrative.

Despite her resolve to leave the trauma behind, Perdita is still haunted, not by the shack but by other memories of death which might be understood as displaced hauntings. She is haunted by the memory of the Dutch people who were bombed before her eyes in Broome when she and Stella were waiting for a ship to Perth. Perdita had gone for an early morning walk to find pearl shells for Mary, when she witnesses this: “Of my complicated childhood, this event haunts me still: the slaughter, that day, of the Dutch refugees” (p.135). Then, just after this, Perdita feels guilt about still being alive. After she returns home from the walk her mother actually shows distress at her absence. Perdita claims: “I know now that I was selfish and opportunistic. To have my mother embrace me as if she loved me, bawling, as if she really loved me; it was like a reward in the midst of other people’s devastation” (p.136). She has nightmares about the Dutch. This event, with its own haunting character, does seem to fill the gap left by her father’s and Mary’s faces. The narrative at this point embodies a psychoanalytic interpretation of misplaced guilt. In fact this episode can be viewed as misplaced survivor guilt in relation to Mary. Again when Perdita comes across her father’s initials, in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, she felt “a vague sense of the unthinkable… mindful of Mary’s superstitious opinion that mysterious and unwonted communions occur between readers” (p.144). The most immediate sense of her father’s physical presence is mediated by this book: “There was a thumbprint visible on page 46 of Heart of Darkness, the faintest of whorls, a delicate stamp of identity. It jolted Perdita as a sign that Nicholas had been indisputably here” (p.145). A sense of shock begins to penetrate her consciousness. Again it is mediated through words in books. The narrator of Conrad’s novel comments: “It would be interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals on the spot,” a comment which resonates with the novel’s exploration of trauma.258

In speech therapy with Dr Oblov, the repression of Perdita’s memory is experienced in this way – “something unbearable and abstruse in all her disclosures…. a gap, a shapelessness to her own lost history (p.166). Still unaware of what has happened, Perdita thought of “her own ambiguous presence, somewhere, untold, in a scenario of fuzzy and incomplete details” (p.168). The narrative explains that she was unable to communicate what she had seen and felt to Mary about the film Rebecca. Instead, Perdita identifies a task of learning: “how to reassociate words with feelings” as speechlessness is part of her forgetting (p.178). This problematises the mediation of remorse and connectedness through reading and books, a question posed throughout the narrative. Hence, when the revelation does come it is not satisfying. Perdita’s remorse seeps out in the small movements marking her slow discovery of what really happened. At this moment the narrator confides “Perdita looked at the flower dome resting in her hands. She felt ill with the magnitude of all she had mistaken. The engrossing waste of it all, the wreckage of lives. In unstuttering words she told Doctor Oblov the tale of her discovery” (p.195). While there are elements of Gaita’s model of remorse here that reflect “an awakened sense of the reality of another, ” the language “the magnitude of all she had mistaken” sounds overly constructed (p.195). It represents a blockage between emotion and words. Hence it jars with the kind of language that might signal remorse. Transported back to the real world of Doctor Oblov’s office, the reader begins to have more of a sense of her remorse through the disappearance of her stutter: “The knotted stutter had almost gone…Something had opened, released” (p.195). And then

Perdita’s body ceased its anguished ratchet heaving, and she felt the intensity of her recollection, so fierce, so tough, mitigated by the quiet room in which she found herself, by kind Dr Oblov, murmuring words of reassurance … A sense of the materiality of things re-established. The honesty of objects. The irreproachable real (pp.195-196).

The novel self-consciously re-enacts the return of her memory in which the protagonist, reaching the end of her trajectory, approaches the real in confronting the truth about her father’s death. The scene also parodies psychotherapy and philosophy in its overly constructed headiness.

The text raises the question of the remorse due to a human being and its conditioning by a particular relationship to the deceased. The other factor here is of course Perdita’s child status. In this text there is a powerful absence of remorse for her father. The jolt she experiences is the closest that the narrator comes to representing a response in the range of feelings evoked by remorse. Like William in McGahan’s novel, who would hold Perdita culpable? Nicholas Keene was a man propagating evil upon vulnerable people. Perdita’s lack of emotional response is conditioned by this and by his negligence and tyrannical behaviour. He injured the person who gave her the most attentive care she had ever experienced and whom she loved so utterly. Yet paradoxically, she does not or cannot act to save Mary. Possibly because of her guilt she denies herself Mary. Her guilt could be reflected in the fact that on the night of the murder she sleeps outside with Horatio, the only creature who missed Nicholas, as if this was some recognition of her father as a loveable human being. Otherwise, it seems that the enormity of killing another human being is bypassed by the novel. The
The text wants to focus on Mary as the primary victim but neither she nor Nicholas receive justice. Perhaps this is the point after all. In the economy of the text, if Perdita felt deep remorse for her father, this would exacerbate the injustice of Mary’s imprisonment. Nicholas, the perpetrator of evil against Aboriginal women, cannot receive justice until things have been put right for Mary. There is a warning here that it might just be too late. Problematically Perdita’s ‘sorry’ is distanced from her feelings because it is only through reading Mary’s symbolic book of sacrifice that she can fully respond with her apology. The question that Perdita asks while reading Heart of Darkness: “How does life in-words fit with all these other lives?” raises the issue of the relationship between her symbolic remorse and the fictional representation of real lives. It asks of the value of performative apology. (p.146). The novel’s creation of a contrived sense of remorse, evoked through reading about the saints, signifies the limit of reparation in text (p.146).

The fight or flight response to trauma is a well-known conditioned response which can also include freezing. When her father turns to face her, Perdita is “strengthened by panic” suggesting an upsurge of epinephrine (adrenaline). The narrator of Sorry describes her stutter: “Called psychogenic, it is the consequence of shock, or upset, or circumstantial disaster” (p.151). The trauma for Perdita becomes doubled through the trauma of killing her father, which then becomes inaccessible to her memory. The representation of Perdita’s healing from trauma symbolises the overlap between the two models. The trauma of killing her father is not stored in a separate compartment of the brain permanently but is able to be integrated into narrative memory, figured as repressed in the unconscious, psychoanalytic model. Both models are evident when memory of her trauma also resurfaces intact as a literal memory, reflecting a neuroscience model. There is also mimetic identification with the perpetrator. This is an example of the psyche’s processing of the experience in the unconscious world of meaning. In a twist, while Perdita complies with Mary’s request to remain silent, through her ‘forgetting’ Perdita becomes the perpetrator responsible for Mary’s suffering.

Iris Murdoch’s text The Sovereignty of Good is present in Sorry through the characterisation of the good and through the concepts that emerge from Murdoch’s model of ‘moral effort.’ I have also attempted to show how her model illuminates the moral trajectory made by Perdita. I would also like to consider what work Murdoch’s concepts actually achieve in the novel. What meaning can the reader derive from connecting Sorry to Murdoch’s philosophy? Perdita’s imaginative engagement beyond her own limited remembering of her father’s death, is, in effect, an encounter with reality. This is made complicated by the fact that she murders her father. She retraces her action in an effort to understand it. Yet Perdita reaches the end of the novel and still there is nothing but emptiness. There is the representation of her good life whereby she has applied herself attentively to her job as a librarian and to the role of god mother to Billy and Pearl’s twin daughters. She maintains a relationship with Flora, her foster mother, who represents uncomplicated goodwill in the story. Even before Mary dies there are rumblings of nothingness: “She roamed among her books, went to the cinema with Flora, cared for her mother and wrote to Mary. It felt like an empty life” (p.210). In the end the novel echoes Murdoch’s admission that life might be a matter of being ‘good for nothing’ for there are no certainties. She explains “The only genuine way to be good is to be good for nothing in the midst of a scene
where every ‘natural’ thing, including one’s own mind, is subject to chance, that is, to necessity. That ‘for nothing’ is indeed the experienced correlate of the invisibility or non-representable blankness of the idea of Good itself” (p.71). Murdoch challenges the idea that there is certainty in goodness. Murdoch’s philosophy resonates with Jones’ commitment to representing uncertainty in her character’s pursuit of goodness that is not driven by reward. Perdita is good for goodness sake alone. Mary is in the pursuit of goodness symbolised in her attachment to the saints’ narratives. She generates some goodness to help Perdita who in the end lives a life empty of the meaning Mary’s presence gave her. Hence, the strong suggestion of parody and irony in the text, dramatises being ‘good for nothing’ to the extreme. For after all, none of the goodness will do Mary any good.

The novel raises the question of the capacity of a child to fully apprehend her actions in the shocked, remorseful way that Gaita describes. Even though she commits a crime, she is a minor, and it is her general orientation to goodness which enables her to facilitate the self-scrutiny necessary to understand further what her moral position in relation to her father’s death amounts to in the reality of the event. Her response is muffled and mediated by her father’s cruelty and also by her youth. As argued, the motif of the vulnerable child removes blame, exemplified in Gaita’s theory: “The tendency to connect moral responsibility too tightly to culpability has led to a moralistic distortion in much contemporary discussion of moral responsibility.”^{259} However, the novel raises the factor of one’s problematic relationship to the victim, which moral theory does not explicitly accommodate. In Gaita’s theory remorse is cast as “the recognition of the reality of another through the shock of wronging her” but what if that other is in fact a perpetrator against her, as in Perdita’s case – against herself and Mary?^{260}

The generosity of the Aboriginal characters in Sorry generates warmth, like a gift. The novel reads as a form of reparation in words, as an attempt at apology. In the afterward there is a note on sorry. It comments specifically on the suffering in relation to the injustice done to Aboriginal children removed from their families. Underlying the note is a sense of the harm done and the importance of acknowledging this harm. Poor Mary never gets out of prison. Perhaps this is the ‘reality’ the reader must contemplate. There have been many Marys who have suffered unjustly and we are asked to think about our complicity in this.

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^{259} Good and Evil, p.44.
^{260} Good and Evil, p.52.
Conclusion

My examination of the four settler novels, written in the period from 1999 to 2007, began with the hypothesis that they constitute a site of community negotiation with matters of conscience when it comes to our history with Aboriginal people. My aim was to discover if the space of fiction offered an explorative enactment of remorse. I then introduced two Indigenous novels to expand the horizon of my research. There have been some surprises in the pages of these two novels. Firstly I was surprised that there could be forgiveness for the white perpetrator in *Benang*, and secondly that some of the pain inflicted upon the protagonist in *Plains of Promise* came from the Indigenous community. Further, the remorse in the novel is also offered by an Aboriginal man. Another premise was that only remorse could reflect a depth of response from the community equal to the injustice suffered by Aboriginal people in the denial of their full humanity. My perspective has shifted slightly following a conversation with Raimond Gaita. He agrees that shame is not enough, leaving open the question as to what it is that constitutes the community’s sense of moral unrest. Acknowledging that this is ungraspable, Gaita suggests that a sense of woe gives some meaning to the way in which sorrow about past injustice to Aboriginal people weaves in and out of the community. Here it mingles with shame but is more than this. While this is related to the concept of pollution, where people are affected by the lingering sense of unaddressed harm I agree with Gaita, that this is not quite it. I suspect that pollution alone does not generate the compassionate sorrow that is reflected in many pockets of our community, although this sorrow has the capacity to spread amongst people. From my perspective, a community in woe does not fully capture the remorseful sense that injustice occurred which in turn precipitates a move towards reparation. Given the complexity of the sorrow that pours into support for issues such as the recent protest against the Federal government proposal to close down remote communities, there is more at play than woe. I believe remorse is internal to the community’s responsiveness and conditions our sense of injustice. Hence, when the community reaches out from a sense that further wrong is being done, it is expressing shades of remorseful feelings. My argument is that this surfaces in fiction. For the purpose of this conclusion I will refer to the community in woe or sorrow as an expression reflective of remorseful feelings.

Written within the Reconciliation era, which began in 1991 and extended to 2000 when the ongoing *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation* was set up, the novels represent an awareness of unrest in race relations. Remorse is evident in the novels in different manifestations, to the extent that each can be seen in some way as a gesture of remorse. The effectiveness of this for the reader varies, raising a question about what can realistically be expected from novelists. Another question is, how responsible are these writers for their representations? Are the writers aware of what it is they create and its potential impact? Or is a writer merely expressing something of the community’s underlying emotion? Hence is it that they dramatise what Sarah Pinot refers to as the emotional history of a country? Some of

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261 Meeting with Raimond Gaita at Melbourne University on 9/2/15. See Appendix 1.
the novels appear more self-conscious than others about what it is they do. For example, *Benang* and *Sorry* directly involve the reader in their soliloquy of self-reflection.

My conclusion is that the Indigenous novels draw our attention to a gap where remorse could be offered for injustice left unaddressed and acknowledged. *Benang* and *Plains of Promise* engage the reader’s imagination in their representations of the kinds of experiences, feelings and struggles that Aboriginal people have undergone. The controversy over separation of children from their families has been prevalent in the community’s consciousness since the release of the *Bringing Them Home Report*, with some people refuting its validity. Curiously *Stolen Generation* issues are bypassed in all but one of the settler texts. Most of the settler novels keep their distance from this contentious and painful issue, dealing largely with historical representations of dispossession and entitlement, massacre and disrespect for the sacredness of Aboriginal spirituality. In the frame of the thesis this absent referent indicates some community anxiety and division. Alone amongst the settler novels, *Sorry* engages with the practices of separation between mothers and daughters covered by the Indigenous novels. Another absence in addition to that of disruption to family lines, is the practice of using Aboriginal women as domestics, rendering them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence. While Jones addresses this topic, she does not attempt to represent Mary’s subjectivity in depth. The reason why is too apparent. Earlier representations of Aboriginality by non-indigenous writers have presumed an entitlement to know the Other and thus imposed stereotypes. It is a complex and fraught terrain. Peter Pierce may commend Miller for attempting this, but I have attempted to show that his main Aboriginal character is too much of a stereotype.

While it is difficult to perceive an overt conversation between the settler novels and the Indigenous texts, there is a common thread in so far as they all offer a gesture of remorse in some form or another. The generic theme is that of injustice which is at core a denial of a people’s full humanity. The novels dramatise remorse in different ways. Some characters experience an emptiness symbolic of an embryonic remorse, with a limited option for reparation. For example, in *The Secret River* Thornhill sits and stares into the distance looking for movement, hoping for a return of the Aboriginal people. In *Sorry*, Perdita wishes she had said “sorry” to Mary before she died. *The White Earth* creates the child William’s awakening sense of remorse. Through dramatizing his encounter with a raw sense of being ‘haunted,’ a feeling of emptiness is averted. *The Journey to the Stone Country* represents remorse through the character’s shocked awareness of the slaughter of the Jangga people by her grandfather. The non-Aboriginal protagonist Annabelle asks, what atonement can there be for a brutal massacre by her ancestors? Her remorse finds expression in her refusal to accompany Bo to the sacred site, thus respecting the wish of Panya. As a reader, remorse is felt for Panya and her brother. This novel creates a space for reparation. In *Benang*, Harley’s white grandfather is forced into a situation where he is confronted with the harm he has inflicted upon his grandson and his son, a harm which has spread to extended family members. The injustice he perpetuates is made immediate to the reader through the lived experience of the protagonists. Ernest, although ill and self-pitying in shame, makes a small gesture of gratitude for any forgiveness offered him by Harley. Will offers remorse to Harley for being absent in his life. The reader is prompted to feel sorry for the impact upon the
characters’ lives. We engage emotionally with Uncle Will’s story of fearing shame as a child, and with Jack’s abandonment by Daniel. Within *Plains of Promise* it is the Aboriginal Elliot who feels remorse towards Ivy for his mistreatment of her. He offers reparation towards her and Mary. The reader is left to bear the shame and remorse for the sexual abuse of Ivy. Remorse also arises from the unsatisfying reconnection between mother and daughters. The reader is positioned to experience this discomfort which reflects the real word of broken familial lines. In this way, through the motif of the vulnerable child, the novel makes an immediate impact.

Both of the Aboriginal novels engage with the issues of damage to family connections, causing a rupture to the characters’ sense of identity. *Benang* represents the daily lived experience of its Aboriginal characters as they are subjected to racist policies, such as restrictions on their movements and their freedom to associate with family. *Plains of Promise* represents the experience of its protagonist living on the margins of both settler and Indigenous communities as a consequence of colonial interventions, leading to displacement from family and country. Wright’s novel reads as a dramatisation and direct response to the *Stolen Generation* report, even though it was written before the report was released. The loss of country parallels loss of family. *Sorry* alone responds to this injustice. Engaging with the issue of inter-generational loss and grief, Jones also joins Wright and Scott to represent and critique the practice of sexual exploitation of Aboriginal domestic servants. As is the case with *Benang*, Aboriginal domestics in *Sorry* are moved on once they become pregnant.

With the exception of Miller and Jones, the remaining settler novels engage with less personalised Indigenous issues which do not impact so directly on the bodies and emotions of Aboriginal characters. Cased in a light romance Miller focuses on regaining lost land, but as it unfolds the casing falls away to expose the awful hidden secret of the murder of Bo’s ancestral tribe and the vulnerable younger brother of the elder Aboriginal woman, Panya. The vulnerable child is not characterised but his trauma is witnessed by Panya whose brief appearance reads as a symbol of loss and grief. Panya carries the trauma within her. She invokes absence of remorse, asking why nobody has ever come to say sorry to her or asked for forgiveness. This has a piercing effect on reader consciousness. While the reader’s experience of the characters’ subjectivity is primarily through Annabelle, remorse is felt most powerfully through Panya. *The White Earth* steers clear of immediately topical issues such as separation, identity or sexual exploitation, instead evoking a deep sense of injustice through its motif of the vulnerable child. As the one settler novel with no Aboriginal characters, could it be that, removed from the stress of how to represent these, McGahan is freer to develop his characters’ subjectivity? The reference to the past existence of the Kuran people and their descendants marks injustice in the novel. The non-Aboriginal child William signifies both as a victim and a witness of the injustice, inflicted by racist attitudes towards Indigenous people. My argument is that the reader’s compassion for William carries a strong message about injustice to Aboriginal people. The vulnerable child in Grenville’s novel is later the protagonist perpetrator, Thornhill, whose representation evokes understanding for his story in problematic ways.
The *Secret River* stands alone as a narrative of early contact that resonates with current issues. There is a problematic reader positioning within this novel because it argues for redemption for its convict protagonist. Despite this, Thornhill can be understood within moral theory as experiencing remorse in an embryonic state. This reads as an allegory for the nation’s divided state over recognition of Aboriginal entitlement accompanied by acknowledgement of past injustice. Hence its protagonist represents a divided and ambivalent community in his moral instability. Paradoxically the novel has precipitated intense debate and dialogue in the community, reflecting Wayne Booth’s model of the re-performance of fiction through the transformation of ideas in the community. The novel has even been the catalyst for a play of the same name which addresses some of the gaps of Aboriginal subjectivity left by the novel. A film *The Secret River* is on the verge of release. Here we see a reciprocal process of dialogue, evaluation and transformation, with fiction forming a bridge into heightened community awareness.

Since the release of the *Bringing Them Home Report* there has been awareness in the community of inter-generational trauma through child removals and lost connections. Trauma emerges as a common theme throughout the novels. I have argued that it intersects with the motif of the vulnerable child to foster reader engagement and remorse. This motif works in each of the novels and across them as a theme. It is prevalent in *Plains of Promise* where the Aboriginal girl, Ivy, is subjected to multiple traumas beginning with the separation from her mother in the mission followed by her mother’s tragic suicide. Ivy goes mad after years of abuse from the traumatic experience of sexual abuse and the loss of her child, and her story reads as a critique of psychiatric practice and discourse. The reader witnesses what happens to Ivy when remorse is missing. Ivy is the antithesis of the stable subject of an antimimetic theory of trauma and Enlightenment agency, instead representing an almost passive subjectivity. I say “almost” for Wright grants her a spasmodic capacity to fight back. However, there is also the suggestion that her traumatic memories are swallowed up in her madness. The persecution of Ivy is relentless, and while the novel received mixed reviews, Ivy’s suffering lingers in the literary imaginative community. There is no resolution because there is no clear pathway of healing for Ivy and her daughter. The unresolvedness of this represents the complex path of healing. It also resonates in the real world when we see the difficulty of trusting government commitment to support proven successful programs in policies and funding strategies. Scott’s narrative of Harley’s journey to unravel the seeds of his traumatic past creates a sense of the loss of identity generated by eugenic and colonist ideologies. Trauma is prevalent as a theme representing the immediate lived experience of daily life, including sexual abuse of Aboriginal children by white paedophiles. Trauma signifies in Harley’s flashbacks of his abuse by his grandfather which arise abruptly to stun the reader. This re-enacts the shock of trauma to the psyche, or in Weil’s language, as a laceration to the soul. Harley has conscious memory of his trauma which becomes symbolised in a self-protective dissociation from his body, in conflict with both models of trauma theory but especially the antimimetic. The narrator cleverly uses parody to emphasise trauma through elevation but also to reverse this by rising above the abuse to discover who he is in relation to his Aboriginal lineage. As Gelder and Salzman suggest, the novel fosters an emotional understanding of its representation of Aboriginal history rather than affective
engagement with the characters. In *Sorry*, the traumatised protagonist forgets that she murdered her father until she enters therapy. This also signifies more as a mimetic model of trauma, for her memories are accessible to consciousness. In *The Secret River*, trauma is associated with Thornhill’s childhood, but it is also marginalised in Thornhill’s son, Dick, who removes himself from his family after his Aboriginal friends are murdered. This theme of the vulnerable child is foregrounded in *The White Earth* where I have argued that the motif functions as a vehicle to engage the reader’s sense of justice. This is cleverly constructed in the novel where the focus on William’s suffering through neglect, intersects with the injustice to Aboriginal people. Other neglectful adults add to the intensity of the injustice. The novels mostly transgress an antimimetic model of no access to memory, with the exception of Perdita in *Sorry* who signifies as a merging of the two models of trauma, because Perdita forgets and also remembers. Ivy on the hand, seems to be frozen in a state of trauma and forgetting.

One element of the vulnerable child motif is the state of blamelessness, which functions as an aspect of remorse in Gaita’s theory. This motif enables a separation from blame and accusation, for one hesitates to hold a child accountable in the same way as an adult, but it still allows for a sense of being complicit in another’s harm. This motif enables the reader to experience the child’s complicity without harsh judgement. This works well in *The White Earth* where William is clearly involved when he removes evidence of his ancestor’s murder of the local Kuran people, perpetuating the injustice through denial and deception. However, he acknowledges the harm he has perpetuated. Blame is lifted as he cannot be condemned as a child, who is also coerced. Similarly in *Sorry*, the child protagonist represents wrong against the Aboriginal character. But Perdita is not blameable due to both her child status and her own state of trauma. In this novel the motif does not work as well for it takes too long for Perdita to reach awareness before Mary’s death and when she does it is stilted and unconvincing. Nevertheless, the absence of any sense of remorse in the self-absorbed adults generates reader sympathy for both Perdita and Mary. Perdita’s remorse becomes visible in the way she lives her life for others with that lingering emptiness. Perdita is claimed in remorse but it has nowhere to go. Similarly, Grenville’s protagonist is claimed in remorse but in an inverted way which obstructs any movement forward. Instead he sits in his unresolved guilt, in what Cordner refers to as embryonic remorse. There is no place left for Thornhill to express reparation, for this is refused by the lone survivor, Jack.

Reparation is an inherent element of remorse. Thompson’s point about the past not going away and the assertion that people have an entitlement to remember their past, is reflected in *The White Earth* through the ghosts of the gully continuing to bear witness to the place where the atrocity occurred. The novels, both settler and Aboriginal, reflect this underlying premise, that the past will remain restless without some form of reparation. For example, in *The Secret River*, Thornhill seeks to make reparation, in an ineffectual way, through feeding and clothing the remaining Aboriginal man. In *The White Earth*, reparation emerges as a theme through Ruth’s acknowledgement of dispossession and contact with the women at Cherbourg. The novel also symbolically purges the land of the White family mansion, established at the cost
of Aboriginal lives. In tension with this, reparation remains uncertain once Ruth has the care of William to consider. There is, at the end, uncertainty about the return of the land to its remaining Aboriginal custodians. In her emotional and physical state of exhaustion, Ruth moves closer to accepting responsibility for parentless William. She reflects that the Cherbourg people will need to put in their claim along with others, on the cusp of the successful Native Title legislation. This renders William’s position as a vehicle for Aboriginal justice more ambiguous, but it is conceivable that he would be open to the co-existence of custodianship and pastoral leases, given his deeply felt remorse. In *Benang*, there are a number of gestures of remorse, including that of the white perpetrator, Ernest, albeit it is a rather feeble gesture of shame when he is forced to witness Harley’s narrative. Despite this his emerging gratitude signifies as something more than shame, evoked through the others’ forgiveness of him. Still, there is little reparation in the novel. The exception is a jarring twist when Jack offers some misplaced reparation to the undeserving Ernest by encouraging Harley’s forgiveness of his grandfather. This might be read as remorse for killing Will’s father, Daniel, who he describes as the same as Ern. Reparation is left with the reader who has witnessed in the novel the injury to Aboriginal lives. In *Plains of Promise* the remorse also comes from another Aboriginal character, Elliot, who attempts to make reparation through bringing together Mary and her mother, Ivy. In Miller’s book reparation comes through the white female whose landowner grandfather committed crimes against Aboriginal people. She offers reparation through giving money to support Aboriginal Bo regain his grandparents’ property. However, this can be seen as easing white guilt, thus revealing the fraught territory engaged by the novel genre. Jones’s book offers a symbolic apology, with its title “Sorry” which in itself is an offering of textual reparation. The question arising is how this then resonates within the real world?

Gaita has named shame as the response of a nation, with the qualification that shame alone, without a spirit of reparation is inadequate. I have suggested that the representations of shame shown by the Aboriginal protagonists in the Indigenous novels read as misplaced shame. In both *Plains of Promise* and *Benang*, shame is represented as the lived experience of being Aboriginal in a racist society. Harley’s Uncle Will felt the shame of Aboriginality as a child and as an adult, hence his disowning of his people. Although we are barely privy to Ivy’s soliloquy, the narrator creates a sense of the shame from sexual abuse in *Plains of Promise*, extenuated when Ivy realises that she is perceived as desiring of Jipp by her immediate community. In this novel the characters also experience shame for the loss of their children, removed by authorities. These representations draw attention to the displacement of shame which rightly belongs with the perpetrators. There is a stringent critique here of practices of shaming by dominant cultures. This displacement also underlines and draws attention to a space for remorse.

The novels are suspended in a space between the fictional world of representations and that of the political and historical world of events. They raise the question of the relationship between the fictional work and the non-fictional world. At times these merge to create a blur due to the novels’ representations of injustice being close to the real world, to practices that have been debated in the community, such as removal of children, country and land rights, and intergenerational grief and loss. The political nature of the novels links them to the real.
For instance, *Benang* in particular cites numerous official documents and other media which work to validate the narrator’s truth claims. The narrator also plays with the reader around these truth claims. This is done in a goading manner which creates uncertainty but also fictional license to represent what is already known in the Aboriginal community. As Wright said, the *Bringing Them Home Report* only made official the daily reality of Aboriginal people. Scott plays with fiction and reality in his representation of practices and consequences experienced by Aboriginal people. The Indigenous novels unearth practices which have been hidden in the non-fictional world, distorted by authorities over the last two centuries. The Indigenous novel reads as a subversion and challenge to truth claims. *Sorry* makes explicit the question of the relationship between words, performance of remorse and real lives.

In this thesis I have touched upon the idea of fiction as a site of negotiation between the world of characters and real people. I have wondered about the relationship between the fictional characters and scenarios and the pathway to the real world of people experiencing hardship and suffering. I have also pondered the place of the reader as signifying a bridge to the real world through absorbing these representations and issues. Jones specifically names this as a query in her novel. We might ask, as her character, Perdita, does, how we understand this world of words in relation to actual people. The thesis has pursued this through an examination of novels engaging with justice issues for Aboriginal people. I have done this through a frame of remorse to relate the novels to readers’ affective experience of the injustice at stake. In relation to the Indigenous novels in particular there is a space to think of them as opening up possible interchanges between an Indigenous writer and non-Indigenous reader, as a dialogue reflecting Langton’s model of dialogical exchange. Controversy around *The Secret River* is another example of a reciprocal process whereby the community’s response has fostered a re-creation of the narrative. To expand upon the potential, the genre’s wider introduction into educational settings is desirable. Ambiguity is a tool of fiction to challenge and subvert set beliefs. *Sorry* and *Benang* read as self-consciously constructed, addressing the reader directly, with assertions or refutations. For example, in *Benang*, characterising Auber Neville’s dialogue, the narrator states “Perhaps I am not being quite truthful here. Perhaps Auber did not use these exact words” and then validating his characterisation, “I take the language from the file of the man the department’s representatives went to visit; my Uncle Sandy (Two) Mason” (pp.40-41).263 This both makes the connection with the non-fictional world and blurs it simultaneously. It renders the non-fictional world of lesser significance by privileging the essence of Auber’s rejection of Sandy’s application for inclusion in the ANZAC club. Ambiguity in Miller’s novel creates uncertainty about how it is to be read. For example, the novel walks a fine line between toying with stereotypes and enacting provocative representations of domestic violence and the sexual objectification of adolescent Aboriginal females. *Sorry* creates instability through its theme of indeterminacy. For example, the ambiguous depiction of Mary’s relationship to

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263 In Acknowledgements Scott comments that the story of his Uncle Will Coleman is adapted for his representation of Will Coolman.
the saints draws attention to her lack of choice when making her sacrifice for Perdita, given her gendered, racialized, historical position in the world. Sorry reads as if talking back to Benang. It is set within a similar time period and location, similar themes such as exploitation of Aboriginal female domestic servants as sexual slaves, loss of family connections and restrictions upon life opportunities. Nicholas, resembles Ernest in Benang. Both are new-age men of action, ruthlessly self-absorbed, a character type depicted in Murdoch’s critique of the will-driven agent of existentialist philosophy. Both these novels speak directly to the reader, create ambiguity, and blur the boundaries between fiction and the real.

Research highlights how potentially problematic it is for non-Indigenous writers to engage with Aboriginal issues. There is always a risk speaking from a post-colonial viewpoint. Critique of ‘post-colonial’ fiction includes the charge that it functions as a self-serving strategy to ease moral discomfort. Hence, the default view that settler novels potentially ease white anxiety about unbelonging. There is the risk that the novel reinscribes dominant cultural power over race relations. The re-inscription of racist discourse has reduced Aboriginal people. It has misrepresented the diversity inherent in Aboriginal communities through its European-centric representations of mono-Aboriginality. Often these misrepresentations re-inscribe stereotypes of ‘the victim’ or an idealised Aboriginality.

In conclusion, all of the settler novels examined in this thesis have problematic outcomes or representations. The Indigenous novels are challenging in their own way, inviting the non-Indigenous reader to remain with uncertainty. Benang is difficult to navigate and Wright’s novel is painful to witness. However, they are vital to the conversation. One point that stands out in this study of the settler novels is that, with the exception of McGahan’s novel, they do not appear to reflect the novelists’ best achievements. Characterisation in particular is seen to lack depth and psychological insight. As Collins observes, Grenville’s novel does not include her usual subversive approach of exploring periphery viewpoints. Rather, she allows Thornhill’s view to prevail. This may reflect the tentative approach taken, given the perceived risks. And to be fair, McGahan does not attempt characterisation of Indigenous characters. Perhaps this in itself is instructive. It suggests that there is something in the complexity of race relations which stilt the creative process when attempting representation of the Other. Whether this is arising from a colonial investment of some kind or from political correctness, is uncertain. Imaginably it creates hesitation in representation through fear of presuming too much about an Aboriginal character and offending Aboriginal readers with assertions of Aboriginality. Further, there is the risk of producing negative representations, evident in the character of Panya, or too idealised a character, in the case of Bo Rennie. The overt avoidance of in-depth characterisation when it comes to the character of Mary in Sorry, renders the novel less powerful in its message of remorse. In the end, all of the novels represent the absence of remorse in the gravity of the injustice enacted by the characters. In doing so they identify a space where remorse is warranted and invite further re-enactment and dialogue.
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Appendix 1

Meeting with Raimond Gaita 9/2/15 at Melbourne University Campus

This meeting helped me to clarify my position in relation to remorse, in particular whether or not a community could be said to experience this emotion.

At the meeting Gaita differentiated between harm and being wronged. He emphasised that it is through our capacity for remorse that we can have a sense of the preciousness of individuals.

Gaita spoke about forgiveness as something that we cannot give on behalf of someone else. They would be right to say you cannot forgive me as I did not wrong you.

Gaita stated that Bernard Schlink does not believe we can have shame as a nation or as an individual member of a country. He added that Schlink does not believe in pollution. I can see this now as he believes it is through family lines or as a community with which one is associated. This prompted a re-thinking of this part of my thesis. Gaita acknowledged that there is something beyond shame or remorse; there is something else that affects people’s sense of wrongdoing and this something permeates our community.

Gaita also encouraged me to be specific about the type of reader affected by the books under consideration. Were they readers connected to country in some special way? He advised some examples to get closer to what it is that permeates the community.
Author/s:
PRENTICE, GLORIA

Title:
Mapping the moral terrain: Australian novels written during and following the Reconciliation period and their representation of race relations through the enactment of remorse, trauma and shame

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