

# Literary Legacy: Unconscious bias

## Noela McNamara

PhD. Postgraduate Student, Schools of Humanities & Indigenous Australian Studies, James Cook University, McGregor Road, Smithfield, Queensland. 4879, noela.mcnamara@my.jcu.edu.au

**Keywords:** Negative literary representation, Aboriginal people, ficto-historical genre, post-millennial Australian literature.

Noela McNamara completed a Masters of Indigenous Studies by research at James Cook University, Cairns and is now undertaking a PhD. Her research field is literature and its potential to impact on cross-cultural relations at the interface of Australian society. Current research focuses on revival of a colonial discourse in ficto-historical narratives and negative representation of Indigenous people. A poetic memoir *Echoes of the Past* was published in 2011, poetry and short stories appear in several Tropical Writer Anthologies, and book reviews appear in literary journals *LINQ*, and *Otherland* (Australia's Chinese Literary Journal).

**Prior to white settlement, literary representations of Australia were that of a primitive place where a *barbarous race* roamed aimlessly. Such images were the birth place of an unconscious bias foundational to the historical inequality that divides Australian society. Aboriginal women's autobiography opened an avenue of cultural awareness in the 1970s through stories of personal journeys which highlighted the consequences of forced family separation and confinement to State/Church missions as part of the Stolen Generations. Non-Indigenous writers have since produced a plethora of reconciliatory historical fiction which re-engages with the settlement era. I argue that despite claims of cultural awareness within literary discourses, an unconscious bias remains inherent in literary representation of Aboriginal characters in post-millennial historical fiction. Despite authors' claims of good intention through narratives which expose unpunished violence and notions of guilt, an unconscious bias is revived within a colonial discourse that continues to foster an indirect and covert form of *new racism* through repeated degrading and dehumanizing representations of Aboriginal people. This paper will elucidate *new racist* perspectives through a deconstructive reading of a selection of contemporary Australian novels including Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) and Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002).**

## Introduction

Literary theories and critical discourses today eschew racism in all its forms, and are indeed concerned with exposing racist discourses. Readers of contemporary Australian literature expect to find a sympathetic, empathetic or even reparative attitude in relation to the effect of events of the colonising era on Indigenous people. Australian novelists have always found historical aspects of how Europeans and Indigenous people in Australia related to each other throughout the colonial era of interest and a rich source of inspiration (Bird 2002). Post-millennial historical fiction, by virtue of its growing popularity with the reading public, and extensive inclusion in literary discourses, had an

opportunity to encourage a broader/deeper cultural awareness with potential for social change. However, this genre further conflicts the social consciousness of readers.

Literary images occur in present time and place, but continue to revive stereotypical degraded images of Aboriginal people as part of a subliminal colonial discourse which was the method of foundational beliefs, laws, and in turn, realities (Ashcroft, Griffith & Tiffin 1998). From a reader's perspective, these lasting shadows of ingrained negative perceptions, assumptions, and attitudes block the possibility of *reading without unconscious bias*. Readers who have never had contact with Aboriginal people, other than through words on a page or images on a television/movie screen, are easily temporally and spatially distanced from literary colonial images. This in turn voids any reason to relate such novels (and literature generally) to current displacement, discrimination, and injustice suffered by Aboriginal people. Without personal contact, new novels which engage with negative colonial stereotypical representations retain the potential to re-activate fear of Aboriginal people thus reinforcing unconscious bias.

The growing popularity of ficto-historical novels using a colonial discourse informs contemporary readers about the physical displacement of Aboriginal people and in consequence, I argue, creates subliminal mental displacement. Even though the narratives foreground the violence and injustice of displacement, these crimes are embedded in narratives as the settlers' fight for survival and part of a natural and inevitable step in the historical march of progress. Material prosperity, while it is the end result, is not projected as part of the motive for crimes against Aboriginal people. This narrative device acts seamlessly within texts to subliminally justify the physical displacement of Aboriginal people, and from a reader's perspective – the mental displacement.

## **Negative representation of Indigenous people**

Initial negative stereotypical representations which were embedded in literature resulted in an unconscious bias which was foundational in establishing an intricate system of human classification that condoned racist discourses. Prior to white settlement, literary representations of Australia were that of a primitive place where *savage natives* roamed aimlessly. In 1623, Carstensz the Dutch captain of the *Pera*, recorded that "The men are in general barbarous...they are indigent and miserable men" (Foss 1988, pp. 3-4). By the end of the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin's concept of evolution through natural selection, known as Social Darwinism, and his prediction that "the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world", was a key factor in a belief that Aboriginal people would simply *die out* (Kohn 1996, cited in Beresford & Omaji 1998, p. 33). Throughout the twentieth century, this doomed race theory, together with the White Australia policy (unofficial, but operative from 1901 to 1973), was pivotal in establishing a cultural unconsciousness in respect of the fate of Indigenous Australians. Watego (1988, p. 19) asserts that the White Australia policy "helped to create a senseless prejudice against us making us social outcasts in the land of our ancestors!" The extent of this *senseless prejudice* which continues today through generation, dissemination, and perpetuation of negative representation includes Indigenous people as treacherous, lazy, drunken, childish, cunning, dirty,

ignoble, noble, primitive, backward, unscrupulous, untrustworthy, and savage (Moreton-Robinson 2004, p. 76). This negativity has enabled oppression and domination to be enforced through white western systems of knowledge-based power (McGregor 1997; Tascon, in Schech and Wadham, 2004). The unconscious bias inherent in both writer and reader continues to classify the traits of literary Indigenous characters as negative, and consequently divide Australian society.

## Speaking into the silence

During the twentieth century, dedicated work by social activists, advocates and writers sought to bring awareness of the hardship and discrimination faced by Aboriginal people to the dominant white society through literature. *David Unaipon* was the first Aboriginal author to commit *Native Legends* to the written word. In 1929, he produced an incomplete collection for the purpose of "going around the country [to] awaken interest in the Aboriginal problem by selling some literature... I wrote up some legends for this purpose" (Unaipon, cited in Nelson 1988, p. 15)

Several years later in *The Foundations of Culture in Australia*, PR Stevenson (1935, cited in Barnes, 1969, pp. 205) stated that "Culture in Australia, if it ever develops indigenously, begins not from the Aboriginal, who has been suppressed and exterminated". Furthermore, Stephenson (p. 208) stated "Australia is the only continent on the earth inhabited by one race, under one government, speaking one language." His statements witness unconscious bias through the complete dismissal of Aboriginal people and demonstrate the false premise upon which cultural supremacy was established. This led to a cultural unconsciousness to the manifestation of distortions and negative stereotypical representations of Aboriginal people and culture in Australian literature.

In 1964, *Oodgeroo Noonuccal* (also known as Kath Walker) became the first Aboriginal Australian to publish a book of poetry. Her verse brought a *voice of Aboriginal Australia* to life for many white Australians for the first time. The following lines from Walker's poem "The Past" express the longevity of Aboriginal belonging and her commitment to achieving recognition and equality for Aboriginal people:

But a thousand camp fires in the forest

Are in my blood.

Let none tell me the past is wholly gone.

Now is so small a part of time, so small a part

Of all the race years that have moulded me. (Walker 1981, p.93)

Oodgeroo was awarded an MBE in 1970, but returned it in 1987 to protest Australian Bicentenary celebrations, and to make a political statement at the discrimination against Aboriginal people.

Also in the 1960s, renowned anthropologist WEH Stanner challenged the way white Australians thought about themselves, about the history of white settlement, and about the way they thought about this land and this country. Stanner's essays and lectures, notably *After the Dreaming* (1968,

in Hinkson & Beckett 2008, pp. 233), highlighted the richness of Aboriginal culture and the practice of white Australians to silence the past in a “cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale” following European settlement.

Since the 1980s, Aboriginal Women’s autobiography has revealed personal journeys of discrimination and alienation, including many from the Stolen Generations. Books like: Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987), Alice Nannup’s *When the Pelican Laughed* (1992), Ruby Langford’s *Don’t take your love to town* (1988), and Jackie Huggins’ *Auntie Rita* (1994) and *Sister Girl* (1998) opened the hearts and minds of Australian readers to many social and cultural consequences of policies of the past that continue to impact on generations of Aboriginal Australians. The cultural reckoning that occurred in consequence of this literature, together with government awareness of the need for a national move towards reconciliation, inspired a renewed interest in exploring Australian history through historical fiction that re-engages with the settlement era. These texts generally highlight ‘historical secrets’ and at the same time, as stated by authors, attempt to somehow reconcile with the past (Grenville, cited in Koval 2005, p. 4; Miller, cited in Sullivan 2006, p.13).

I argue that despite notions of achieving cultural awareness within contemporary literary discourses, post-millennial ficto-historical novels revive a subliminal unconscious bias established in the colonising era. Furthermore, revived colonial imagery fosters an indirect and covert *new racism* through repeated degrading and dehumanising negative stereotypical representations of Aboriginal characters. Although these negative perceptions are activated subliminally through literary images, nevertheless, this return of colonial discourse invites revival of a colonial consciousness with potential to impact negatively on Aboriginal people by reinforcing negative attitudes. Francis Rings (in Purcell 2002, p. 86) confirms that:

There are prejudiced people out there in this big free country of ours, it might not be plainly in your face, and sometimes it depends on the colouring of that face as to how much they show you, but it is there. It’s about attitude – what they have been taught and the ignorance and fear of something unknown.

## **Colonial ideology in contemporary fiction**

Use of colonial imagery and tropes in the ficto-historical genre demonstrates how a racist ideology of the past is still embedded in literary discourses. While perpetuation of distorted and degraded colonial imagery of Aboriginal people and culture which projects them as starkly opposed to perceived ‘norm’ of Australian society remains prominent in literature, the result will be a polarised reading at an unconscious level of white society where constructed values of society and humanity remain well established (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1998, p. 3). Regardless of redemptive intention, this genre continues to affect a displacement of Indigenous people through dominance at the discourse level of an unconscious but hegemonic white perspective. This dominant white *narrative focalisation* in purportedly *reconciliation* novels highlights the continued subordination of Aboriginal characters and demonstrates an indirect and covert form of *new racism* as the following examples reveal.

*Journey to the Stone Country* (2002) by Alex Miller is a romance which hinges on events in the settlement era. Miller's attempted reconciliation between Annabelle, a grazier's daughter, and Bo, an Aboriginal ringer raises questions about memories of the past, cultural differences, and notions of identity. Miller links collective cultural fissures by drawing together a witness of conflict and massacre of Aboriginal people and a grand-daughter of the perpetrator. The novel ends with the white female protagonist, Annabelle, planning to sell off her assets, principally bounty of her grandfather's pioneering success, to purchase property formerly owned by the family of Aboriginal protagonist, Bo. 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.

Andrew McGahan's novel *The White Earth* (2004) is set on Queensland's Darling Downs in the early 1990s at the time of the Mabo legislation and a time of growing alienation and resentment of rural white Australia, but extends back to the late 1800s. This novel explores the question of white ownership of land including unpunished murders of Aboriginal men by white land owners. John McIvor's greed and obsession for Kuran Downs destroys his family. In turn his daughter, Ruth, is determined to destroy him and return the property to its Traditional Owners – the Kuran people. Accordingly, this novel can be seen as an attempt at reconciliation. At the end, however, the white child protagonist, William, is set to become heir to Kuran Downs with bones of the murdered Kuran men, which would have proved cultural provenance in the event of a Native Title claim, having been destroyed:

Ruth could dispute William's claim, if she wanted, and inherit the property herself. And perhaps she should really do it. But the thought roused no feelings in her... She remembered the women from Cherbourg...as she talked eagerly of leases and land and rights... It was fifteen thousand acres of prime grazing country. In this world, something like that wasn't just given back... It had to be fought for... Was he [William] her responsibility now?... She glanced once more at the rain against the windows. A memory came. The smell of earth, and of wheat, and the feeling of a familiar hand upon her head, rough with calluses, and so strong... Ruth fought the tears... Then she returned to the chair, and the long vigil of the night (McGahan 2004, p. 376)

Ruth's memories enlivened through a sense of place signal her reconnection with childhood memories and with the land (McGahan 2004, p. 376). Furthermore, her return to the chair to watch over William signals her intention to fight for ownership of Kuran Downs either for herself or on William's behalf (McGahan 2004, p. 375) indicating she has discounted any accountability for continued displacement of Traditional Owners.

*The Secret River* (2005) by Kate Grenville is set during initial white settlement when the cultural frontier was raw, there was an insatiable greed for land, and Aboriginal people were believed to be violent aggressors. Related to and complicating the novel is Grenville's memoir *Searching for the Secret River* (2006) which recounts her journey of personal enlightenment while researching and writing her novel. In this, Grenville (2006, p. 12) states that inspiration for her novel came from

sharing a "pulse of connectedness" with an Aboriginal woman on her walk for reconciliation over Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000. This momentary glance led her to fictionalise her ancestor Solomon Wiseman as protagonist William Thornhill, together with fictional characterisations of the ancestors of Traditional Owners of the Hawkesbury River area.

Grenville's literary characters share a space which recounts a story of miscommunication and violence based on historical information deliberately adapted with the free hand of fiction. Grenville (in Koval, 2005) stated that she often used historical details of the era out of context in an attempt to introduce a new way of understanding history. Despite intentions of reconciliation through historical awareness, an unconscious bias can be witnessed in the enduring reflection of white progress evident in Thornhill's success and status as the most important settler on the Hawkesbury River. Thornhill was an unrepentant and convicted thief who, although he was conflicted by witnessing extreme acts of violence and injustice against Aboriginal people, refused to accept any moral accountability for his own actions. He not only took part in the massacre of Aboriginal people, but without his boat, this particular massacre could not have occurred. His crime, which went unpunished, was purely for the sake of personal gain, and driven by impure & prejudicial motives.

The increasing choice of the ficto-historical genre in post-millennial Australian literature by "novelists...increasingly preoccupied with exploring history" (Sullivan 2006, p. 12) indicates that Australian writers perceive literature as a vehicle for reconciling with the past. Grenville (cited in Koval 2005, p. 4) stated that her desire as a writer was to focus on the "fact that Australian history does have a series of secrets in it". Miller (cited in Sullivan, 2006, p. 13) suggested that history and fiction "are enriching, not conflicting ways of viewing the past". Their statements, in conjunction with historical nuances in *The Secret River* and *Journey to the Stone Country*, indicate that the texts were contemplated as reconciliation narratives. This theme is complicated and problematic, however, for both writer and reader by the evocation of a colonial subject-matter that contains embedded and unconscious ideologies. Bird (2002, p. 6) asserts that "The colonial projection of fear of the Other is located in the Aboriginal people, and added to this is the evidence of a profound and generally unacknowledged guilt. And with the guilt goes denial".

Grenville's novels, interviews and publicity contain a modicum of guilt and reconciliation. However, unconscious bias (which includes denial) is demonstrated through negative colonial representation of Aboriginal people together with an ending which promotes an overwhelming reflection of the progress and privileges of whiteness. This negativity and subordination feeds a deficit discourse in relation to Aboriginal people. 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. 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.

As can be seen, a continued focus on colonial images through the white lens of ficto-historical narrative reinforces the roots of contemporary racism and its inequitable power base. Narrative may be deeply embedded in historical processes which affect Aboriginal people in literature and in life. Eagleton (1996, p. 183) asserts that:

Discourses, sign-systems, and signifying practices of all kinds, from film and television to fiction and the languages of natural science, produce effects, shape forms of consciousness and unconsciousness, which are closely related to the maintenance and transformation of our existing systems of power.

In earlier literature, many Australian texts by non-Indigenous authors, informed by non-Indigenous historians, explorers' journals, anthropologists, and officials of Aboriginal policy, have negatively depicted acts by Aboriginal people as representations of the brutality of Aboriginal culture (Dodson 2003; Goldie 1989; Foss 1988; Adams 1962). Within the literary field, fictionalised brutal acts appear in memorable texts which appear in school and university curricula. In consequence, negative literary images of Aboriginal people and culture remain deeply entrenched in literary discourses, where they enter the sub-conscious minds of readers and, without a cultural reckoning, incubate a negative attitude towards Aboriginal people.

*A Fringe of Leaves* (1976, pp. 256-271) by Patrick White (Nobel Prize winning author for literature) portrays cannibal feasts as a ritualistic tradition of Aboriginal people of Fraser Island. However, when the white captive Eliza Fraser devours human flesh, it is portrayed as merely a desperate act of survival. Aboriginal oral stories recount how local Aborigines rescued the Frasers, but the captain died. When Eliza Fraser was eventually rescued and returned to England, however, she benefited by making a living through embellished and lurid renditions of her experiences amongst those she called *savages* (Quaill 2000). Thomas Keneally in *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1972, pp. 100-102) (Miles Franklin Award winning novel and constant inclusion on literary and film courses) portrays the brutal killing of a woman, her baby and husband by an Aboriginal man in response to what he considered injustice. Elizabeth O'Conner (Miles Franklin Award winning writer) in *The Spirit Man* (1980, p. 6) gives a gruesome account of one Aboriginal man stealing and eating another Aboriginal man's kidney fat in the belief that it would give him strength to overcome his illness.

Although fictional, these repetitive unquestioned portrayals of brutal acts performed by Aboriginal characters within literature can shape enduring connotations of Aboriginal people and cultures as barbaric and savage in the consciousness of readers and have done so for over two centuries. Richard Altick (1967, p. 11) suggests that humans are:

[I]ntimately associated with an emotional response to words and often directly responsible for it, are the images that many words inspire in our minds. The commonest type of image is the visual: that is a given word habitually calls forth a certain picture on the screen of our inner consciousness.

The picture created on the screen of white Australian consciousness was that of Aborigines as fearsome, savage and uncivilised people with spears and boomerangs. Supported by literature,

media, and tourist representations this original colonial image remains alive in the consciousness of Australian society. Larissa Behrendt (2006, pp. 1-2) points out that "images of Aboriginal people or symbols from Aboriginal art and artifacts... the incorporation of a boomerang as part of the official Olympic motif" become part of the "unconsidered appropriation of Aboriginal imagery for marketing purposes" and are reproduced constantly, especially when Australia hosts overseas visitors.

## The obscurity of negativity

On re-reading early texts with a more informed historical knowledge and awareness of cultural differences, polarisation of cultural behaviours still presents a stark difference between representations of *civilised* and *uncivilised*. Bird (2002, p. 20) claims that uninformed perceptions may "later be subverted by some adults, but generally, with the majority of unreflective readers, it can be expected to go deep into the consciousness and to perpetuate itself". Without personal engagement with Aboriginal people, there is little reason for readers to *reflect* on negative representation and, therefore, the racism inherent in literary representation is obscured. The prominence of ficto-historical texts on literary courses today without the benefit of an Aboriginal viewpoint or critique has a potential to preserve unquestioned negative images in the consciousness of contemporary readers. This possibility gives credence to the claims of Patricia Grace (cited in Smith, 2003, p. 35) that "Books are Dangerous". The unobstructed pathway of unquestioned acceptance of such biased theories is, Smith (2003, pp. 1-2) suggests, because:

the collective memory of imperialism has been perpetuated through the ways in which knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West, back to those who have been colonized.

One of the foremost ways of dissemination of this *collective memory of imperialism* in Australian academia has been the history discourses. Accordingly, because the ficto-historical genre of non-Indigenous Australian literature finds its source material in historical accounts of Australia's European history, it is intricately entwined in this process of dissemination. As Kate Grenville (2006, p. 191) states:

I was shameless in rifling through research for anything I could use, wrenching it out of its place and adapting it for my own purposes... But I was trying to be faithful to the shape of the historical record, and the meaning of all those events that historians had written about. What I was writing wasn't real, but it was as true as I could make it.

It is not surprising in view of the dominating white influence within history and literary discourses that reproduce negative stereotypical colonial images, that Indigenous people have remained little more than subaltern though feared shadows in the contemporary literary imagination.

In *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002) through the voice of his characters and the narrator, Miller recognises different ontological perspectives, but these often condemn Aboriginal world views rather than invite understanding or acceptance. Susan, for whom Annabelle agrees to work conducting a cultural survey, suggests that "The Murriss don't work to whitefella schedules" (Miller 2002, p. 15).



Dodson (2003, pp. 26-27) expresses how Aboriginal people recall penalties imposed for this cultural difference: "They said to us 'You have no work ethic so you shall work for nothing' and they indentured us and brought us back in chains when we ran away from their cruelty". In *When the Pelican Laughed*, Alice Nannup (1992, p. 24) explains how white refusal to contemplate Aboriginal world views and enforcement of white laws has resulted in mistrust over generations:

Every morning there used to be these prisoners, Aborigines from Roebourne gaol... all chained together by the neck... There would be about sixteen of them, eight on each side and they'd all be walking in a line carrying a pick, shovel and water-bag... a policeman at the front, and one at the back, and those chains around their necks... treated that way just because they'd killed a bullock or something like that... put in this gaol and fed on something they couldn't survive on, and brought out to work on a chain-gang... It was so cruel...and it's a story I've told my own kids time and time again.

Miller intentionally and dramatically contrasts the difference between Aboriginal and white lifestyles with a juxtaposition of pace. On one hand, Susan's need for speed on the road represents the fast pace of life in the white world. On the other hand, the text presents the lackadaisical approach of Aboriginal communities in extended and political negotiations for mining as incompatible with and negative to the economic realities of the modern business world: "if the Japanese are still buying coal by the time everyone's approved it, the company will get down there and dig out its little seam of black gold" (Miller 2002, p. 15)

## **Unconscious bias**

This paper has demonstrated how within post-millennial Australian literature, the transposition from a physical to a mental displacement of Indigenous people has, over time, manifested in a *cultural unconsciousness* whereby negative representation and perception of Aboriginal people continues through unconscious bias without question or contradiction. Langton (2002, p. 87) asserts that "Our fate will always be entwined with Australians who are historically and intellectually blind to difference". Furthermore, Langton (1996) earlier suggested this blindness to difference was a "national psychosis...the psychotic persecution of Aboriginal people". Behrendt (2006, p. 2) terms it a "psychological terra nullius" created by an "invisibility of the real because of a focus on the imagined". Constant expressions by Aboriginal writers, poets and critics of violence and discrimination are a timely reminder that inequality and injustice remain an active force within Australian literature and society. Lorraine McGee-Sippel (cited in Reed-Gilbert 2000, p. 35) confirms this in her short poem *Stereotype Images*:

The portrayal of Kooris

Nearly always the same

Stereotypical negative images

We shoulder the blame

The texts examined demonstrated that there is a perpetuation of negative literary representations of Aboriginal people in post-millennial reconciliation literature of the ficto-historical genre through revival of a colonial discourse. The literary consequence of white dominance of this genre is the continued displacement of Aboriginal characters. Literary mental displacement follows in order to overcome anxieties of the past. This embodies what Attwood (2005, p. 243) describes as a: "form of forgetting – a disremembering". This ability to disremember and mentally displace Aboriginal people is evidenced in the three major novels discussed through a character that represents the social conscience of the dominant culture.

In *Journey to the Stone Country* when Annabelle learns about the brutal actions of her grandfather, her comparison to that of a *battlefield* exposes her *cultural unconsciousness* and indemnifies her against white guilt. In *The White Earth*, having uncovered hidden secrets of the murder of Traditional Owners at the ruthless hands of her grandfather, Ruth's cultural unconsciousness is evidenced in her rejection of any moral accountability or notion of Aboriginal rights to possession in her decision to claim ownership of the property either for herself or her nephew instead of assisting the Kuran people with a Native Title claim. In *The Secret River*, although Sal is aware of Will's involvement in the massacre of Aboriginal people that allowed them uninterrupted prosperity, her cultural unconsciousness is visible in her ability to *dis-remember* so she could revel in the wealthy status the Thornhills enjoyed as "something of a king... and queen" of the Hawkesbury River area. (Grenville 2005, p. 314)

In the comfort and complacency of the dominant culture, many contemporary readers, like the literary characters Annabelle, Ruth and Sal, are easily able to disconnect and forget literary violence of the past and continue to bask in the illusion of terra nullius ignoring the impact of legacies of past practices and policies for Indigenous people. As Colin Tatz (2000, p. 77) noted, however, these are not merely literary representations for many, but a living reality:

For the vast majority of Aborigines and Islanders, the past is not a foreign country. What governments concede Aborigines may have endured in the past, they are still enduring – namely, wholesale imprisonments, removal of children to institutions of various kinds, gross ill-health, appalling environmental conditions, unemployability, increasing illiteracy, family breakdown, internal violence, and almost unbelievable levels of youth suicide.

At the end of each text (as in life), most white characters remain firmly entrenched either in a privileged position of ownership, or in a position to claim ownership. The literary perpetrators of past injustices received no legal punishment and accepted no moral accountability for the displacement of Aboriginal people.

## Conclusion

For many readers, negative perceptions and attitudes towards Aboriginal people have been developed through a generational failure to question the literary/artistic imagination. The gratuitous violence and negative representations throughout the texts discussed, whether historically based or

the fictional flow of a writer's pen, serve only the narrative creation of the white author and/or white audience. Alice Nannup (1992, p. 192) suggests: "if that's where it starts from, it stands to reason that's where it has to stop". Most readers, although they believe the land was *taken* from Indigenous people *in the past*, like characters in the novels, accept no moral accountability or obligation for *that past in their present*. As portrayed in poetry, however, there are worrying consequences to only serving a white centre:

The moving finger writes:

And, having writ,

Moves on: nor all your piety nor wit

Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,

Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it. (Fitzgerald n.d., p. *li*)

While it is not easy to contemplate the impact of more than two centuries of unconscious bias or *wash out words of the past*, reconciling the unresolved social anxiety that drives a burgeoning literary interest in the tragedies of the colonial past requires engagement with Indigenous people. Historical memory has become a popular theme in Indigenous literature in an attempt to overcome historical and cultural antagonism. Indigenous writers Alexis Wright in *Carpentaria* (2006) and Kim Scott in *That Deadman Dance* (2010) (both winners of the Miles Franklin Award) challenge ingrained negative assumptions and racist myths that have obscurely wound their way through the consciousness of generations of readers and hold a key to changing outdated preconceived negative attitudes towards Indigenous people. These voices intricately link settler violence and the displacement of Aboriginal people to a failure of the dominant culture to imagine possibilities outside the boundaries of a colonised white lens.

With a collective understanding and acceptance of the past within the present, respectful and culturally aware literary representation of the strengths and weaknesses of all members of Australian society would enable all readers to explore who they are and what has gone before. Moving from the past, through the present and into the future through the reading of Australian literature should be an experience we can all enjoy and one which promotes cultural respect and social cohesion. If Australian literature is to achieve a truly exemplary cross-cultural space, it is paramount that writers and readers accept and respect cultural differences – in life as well as in literature. Literature has the power to bring stories of the past to life and invite new opportunities and optimism for the future.

## References

Adams, PG 1962, *Travelers and travel liars, 1660-1800*, Univ. of California Pr., Berkeley.

Altick, RD 1967, *Preface to critical reading*, (4th ed.), Holt Rinehart and Winston, New York.

Ashcroft, B, Griffiths, G & Tiffin H 1998, *Key concepts in post-colonial studies*, Routledge, London.

- Attwood, B 2005, *Unsettling pasts: Reconciliation and history in settler Australia*, *Postcolonial Studies*, 8(3), pp. 243-259. DOI: 10.1080/13688790500231012
- Barnes, J (ed.) 1969, *The Writer in Australia: A Collection of Literary Documents 1856-1964*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Behrendt, L 2006, March, 'What lies beneath: Larissa Behrendt explores how traditional Aboriginal values, effectively harnessed to contemporary social policy-making, can help invigorate Australian urban communities', *Meanjin*, 65(1), pp. 4-12.
- Beresford, Q & Omaji, P 1998, *Our state of mind: Racial planning and the stolen generations*, Freemantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle WA.
- Bird, C 2002, *An Overview of the presence of Indigenous characters in Australian fiction*, retrieved 8 August 2006, from <http://www.carmelbird.com/indigenous.htm>
- Dodson, P 2003, 'The end in the beginning: Re(de)finding Aboriginality', in M Grattan (ed.), *Blacklines: Contemporary critical writing by Indigenous Australians*, (pp. 25-42), Melbourne University Press, Carlton.
- Eagleton, T 1996, *Literary theory: An introduction, (2nd ed.)*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.
- Fitzgerald, E (Trans.) (n.d.), *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, Gornall The Publisher, Sydney.
- Foss, M 1988, *Beyond The Black Stump: Tales of travellers to Australia 1787-1850*, Michael O'Mara Books Ltd, London.
- Goldie, T 1989, *Fear and temptation: The image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand literatures*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Kingston, Ont.
- Grenville, K 2006, *Searching for the secret river*, The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne.
- Grenville, K 2005, *The secret river*, The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne.
- Hinkson, M & Beckett, J (eds.) 2008, *An appreciation of difference : WEH Stanner and Aboriginal Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, A.C.T.
- Huggins, J (1998), *Sister Girl: the writings of Aboriginal activist and historian*. Jackie Huggins, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.
- Huggins, R & Huggins, J 1994, *Auntie Rita*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.
- Keneally, T 1972, *The chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Kossow, S 2007, 'Voicing the "great Australian silence": Kate Grenville's narrative of settlement in the secret river', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 2(2), pp. 7-18. DOI: 10.1177/0021989407078574
- Koval, R 2005, July 17, Interview with Kate Grenville. *Books and writing*, retrieved July 21, 2006, from <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwritng/stories/s1414510.htm>
- Langford, R 1988, *Don't take your love to town*, Penguin Books Ltd, Ringwood, Vic.
- Langton, M 2002, Senses of place: Fourth overland lecture, 2001, *Overland*, 166 [Autumn 2002], 75-87, retrieved 11 October 2007, from <http://search.informit.com.au.elibrary.jcu.edu.au/fullText;dn=200203826;res=APAFT>
- Langton, M 1996, *How Aboriginal religion has become an administrable subject*, retrieved 13 June 13, 2006, from <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-July-1996/langton.html>
- McGahan, A 2004, *The white earth*, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW.
- McGregor, R 2011, *Indifferent inclusion: Aboriginal people and the Australian nation*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Acton, A.C.T.

- Miller, A (n.d.). On writing *journey to the stone country*, in Allen & Unwin, *Notes for reading groups*, (pp. 2-4), retrieved 3 March 2009, from [http://www.allenandunwin.com/\\_uploads/BookPdf/ReadingGroupGuide/9781741141467.pdf](http://www.allenandunwin.com/_uploads/BookPdf/ReadingGroupGuide/9781741141467.pdf)
- Miller, A 2002, *Journey to the Stone Country*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW.
- Moreton-Robinson, A (ed.) 2004, *Whitening race: Essays in social and cultural criticism*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.
- Morgan, SJ 1987, *My place*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, WA.
- Nannup, A 1992, *When the pelican laughed*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, WA.
- Nelson, ES (ed.) 1988, *Connections: Essays on black literature*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, ACT.
- O'Conner, E 1980, *The spirit man*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Purcell, L 2002, *Black chicks talking*, Hodder Headline Australia Pty Limited, Australia.
- Quaill, A 2000, Laced flour and tin boxes: The art of Fiona Foley. In *Worlds of Dreaming*, retrieved 30 May 2005, from <http://nga.gov.au/Dreaming/Index.cfm?Refnc=Ch8>
- Reed-Gilbert, K (ed.) 2000, *The strength of us as women: Black women speak*, Ginninderra Press, Charnwood, ACT.
- Rings, F 2002, 'Voice on the wind', in L. Purcell *Black chicks talking*, (pp. 73-105), Hodder Headline Australia Pty Limited, Australia and New Zealand.
- Scott, K 2010, *That Deadman Dance*, Picador, Sydney.
- Smith, L 2003, *Decolonising methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*, (6th impression), Zed Books Ltd, London & New York.
- Sullivan, J 2006, October 21, 'Making a fiction of history', *The Age*, (pp. 12-13).
- Tascon, SM 2004, 'Uncovering race, returning to origins', in S Schech & B Wadham (eds.), *Placing race and localising whiteness*, (pp. 28-41), Flinders Press, Adelaide.
- Tatz, C 2000, The dark side of sport, in Michelle Grattan, (ed.) *Reconciliation: Essays on Australian Reconciliation*, (pp. 74-87), Black Inc, Melbourne, Vic.
- Unaipon, D 2001, *Legendary tales of the Australian aborigines*, eds. S. Muecke and A. Shoemaker, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic.
- Walker, K 1981, *My People*, (4th ed.), Jacaranda Press, Milton.
- Watego, C 1988, 'Backgrounds to Aboriginal literature', in ES Nelson (ed.) *Connections: essays on black literatures*, (pp. 11-24), Australian Studies Press, Canberra.
- White, P 1976, *A fringe of leaves*, Penguin Books, Ringwood.
- Wright, A 2006, *Carpentaria*, Giramondo Publishing Company, Western Sydney.