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Depicting the Colonial Home: Representations of the Domestic in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* and *Sarah Thornhill*

MARTIN STANIFORTH

University of Leeds

In *Searching for the Secret River*, Kate Grenville's 2006 account of writing her novel *The Secret River*, she grounds her decision to write the book in two events. The first was her participation in the 2000 'Sorry Day' Reconciliation Walk across Sydney Harbour Bridge, when an exchange of smiles with an Aboriginal woman led her to wonder about her ancestor's settling on the land and 'who might have been living on that land, and how he'd persuaded them to leave it' (13). The second was an encounter that same year with Aboriginal writer Melissa Lucashenko, who challenged her repetition of the 'family story: a formula, unquestionable' (28) that her grandfather took up, rather than simply took, land on the Hawkesbury River. The resulting novel is clearly 'positioned ... as an expression of progressive politics in relation to reconciliation and the history wars' (Nolan and Clarke 11). As such it has been described both as 'a reworking of the narrative of settlement with a contemporary sensibility' (Kossew 9) and as 'a most unpalatable and confronting depiction of whiteness as implicated in the massacre of Aboriginal people' (Kelada 2).

However, *The Secret River* has also been criticised, by the same writers among others, for reproducing what Marguerite Nolan and Robert Clarke, in a sympathetic reading, characterise as 'a conservative white cultural politics that displaces contemporary settler guilt' (10). Criticism of the novel has centred on a number of issues: Grenville's attitude to history and historians; her representation of Aborigines; her "'positionality" as a white Australian' (Kossew 17) who can be seen as 'narrating a history that isn't hers to tell' (Merli 213); and the implied moral equivalence between settler and Aboriginal acts of violence which stems from Grenville's foregrounding of the idea that 'one event came after another, no one understood what the other side was thinking, and at the end there was bad trouble. It was never a simple matter of right and wrong' (Grenville, *Searching* 132).

In the commentary to date, little attention has been paid to the novel's representation of the domestic worlds of settlers and Aborigines. In this article I explore the ways in which Grenville structures and depicts the various domestic spaces in *The Secret River* and the more recent *Sarah Thornhill*. In doing so I will argue that while Grenville's texts are intended to contribute to the process of reconciliation in Australia by interrogating white actions in the colonial past, her representation of the domestic undermines that purpose. I will also suggest that, despite her good intentions, signified by *The Secret River*'s dedication to 'the Aboriginal people of Australia: past, present and future,' Grenville's presentation of the domestic in these works contributes to a wider failure of engagement. Rather than challenging traditional views of the past, these novels:

provide a comforting view of Australia's settler past for readers at home—superficially acknowledging the violence that characterised the colonial encounter without suggesting that contemporary society needs to institute major changes in ways of thinking about that encounter. (Gallagher 242)

Gillian Whitlock has argued that in Australia ‘the carceral cell has been perceived as a defining characteristic of the national literature’ (51) and that it ‘represents the house translated into hostile space’ (54). She suggests that the all-pervasive nature of the prison contaminates domestic space in a settlement where ‘the carceral cell overwhelms all opposition’ (61). And she sees this contamination as both spatial and temporal, so that Marcus Clarke’s *His Natural Life* ‘leaves us with the disturbing possibility of a community failing to escape from the prison of its past’ (62). Her argument about the carceral nature of the Australian house resonates with Graeme Turner’s suggestion that Australia’s ‘most enduring literary and mythic image is one of imprisonment, its result death and suicide’ (74). For him, ‘imprisonment, convictism, ... provides us with a central paradigm for the depiction of the self in Australian narrative’ (60). For both Whitlock and Turner, the Australian self-image is that of the exiled victim unable to escape from an imprisoning world in which ‘the possibilities of amelioration, resolution, or alternatives are thus minimal’ (Turner 66).

Whitlock draws attention to the negative terms in which a number of houses are presented in Clarke’s foundational text: ‘Vickers’s house in Hobart Town is compared to that of a West Indian planter; the small shelter which Dawes builds, Crusoe-like, on the island is short-lived; Crosbie’s house in Melbourne is surrounded by palisades, enclosed and carceral’ (54). The idea of the house as a site of imprisonment and decay has been a recurrent trope in subsequent Australian fiction, and is a notable feature of recent novels dealing with settler/Aboriginal relations. In Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth* (2004), for example, the Kuran House, which in its heyday symbolised white domination and ownership, is a Gothic ruin in which the characters are trapped until its final incineration as John McIvor tries to destroy evidence of the killing of Aborigines on the land surrounding the house. Similarly in Gail Jones’s *Sorry* (2007), the house occupied by the Keenes, which is the site of the traumatic murder of Nicholas Keene, is a shack whose initially unpromising appearance—‘there was a combined kitchen-sitting room, ringed with faded yellow curtains, ... and a single bedroom, in which stood a sagging bed and a wardrobe, anomalously elegant, from another place and era’ (18)—worsens as it is filled by battered books and decorated by wartime newspaper cuttings. These houses are shown as being as decayed and degraded as those in Clarke’s work.

The presentation of the domestic as disordered and carceral has been a particular feature of novels of early settlement. In Thomas Keneally’s *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967), Mrs Blythe plots and schemes while physically trapped in her house, surrounded by a clutter of inappropriate furniture. In Jessica Anderson’s *The Commandant* (1975), Patrick Logan seals the house off from the external world of the settlement, allowing visits only from the approved and the trusted, and setting and enforcing a domestic equivalent of prison rules to confine the women and children within the boundaries of the house. And in Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), the Commandant’s house is seen by Ellen Roxburgh as a prison, a place of ‘bars of sunlight’ and ‘gilt grilles’ (361), while both house and garden are seen as disordered and threatening: the garden was ‘designed for revelations of evil, as was the low-built, rambling, deceptively hospitable official residence presided over by the fecund Mrs Lovell and her authoritarian spouse’ (381). The house forms part of the civilised colonial world which Ellen rejects, and is contrasted with the more natural, more Australian, ‘bark and leaf humpy’ which she shared ‘with a “miscreant”’ (357) after escaping from her Aborigine captors.

These novels share a number of defining characteristics in their presentation of the colonial house. First, they focus on the domestic world of the military rulers rather than that of the convict settlers. While historians have written about what I characterise as the ‘convict domestic,’ fiction writers have largely ignored it in favour of presenting the houses of the British elite as centres of oppression.¹ Second, they represent the imprisoning house as an alien and unnatural construct, a British import which imposes itself on the land and signals an attempt to transplant British values and standards to an Antipodean setting. Third, they show the house as a male-dominated space in which women are imprisoned and where the conventional female rule over domestic space is strictly limited and defined. The house is clearly seen as an extension of the prison with the female inhabitants playing the role of convicts. In their depiction of the domestic world of early colonial Australia, then, these novels play into the foundational Australian colonisation narratives identified by Whitlock and Turner. More fundamentally, they contribute to what Ann Curthoys characterises as a white settler ‘history of suffering, sacrifice and defiance in defeat’ (14), in which ‘the self-chosen white victim finds it extremely difficult to recognise what he or she has done to others’ (37). This raises the question of whether a different inflection of the domestic might help to destabilise and undermine these narratives.

In both *The Secret River* and *Sarah Thornhill*, Grenville has sought to reframe the stereotyped fictional representations of the early colonial home, focusing on the convict domestic and treating the house in a more nuanced and complex manner. She does not, of course, wholly abandon the traditional image of the house as a prison in which white settlers, and particularly settler women, are trapped. In *The Secret River*, soon after the Thornhill family take possession of what becomes known as Thornhill’s Point, the local Aborigines imprison them in their tent behind a wall of spears, to which the family responds first by building a hut which provides them with greater security and then by clearing the ground and fencing the area around the hut in a way that establishes it as a self-created prison. Here Sal Thornhill, whose passionate wish in the early part of the novel is to return to London, is explicitly figured as a prisoner, confined to the tent and hut while her husband, Will, farms and trades. She has a place where ‘like any other prisoner, ... she marked off each day’ of her imprisonment (155). Later, when the family build their grand house, Cobham Hall, it is explicitly figured in carceral terms, as a fortress with stone walls and drawbridge, surrounded by a hillside ‘stripped of every bush’ and intended to keep out ‘everything except what was invited in’ (329 and 332). The Thornhills are imprisoned both by the land, ‘where the cliffs waited and watched’ (345), and by fear of Aboriginal reprisals for the massacre in which Will Thornhill participated. When Will looks out from his prison home he sometimes ‘thought he saw a man there, looking down from the clifftop. ... Never took his eye off the one he was sure was a human, staring down at him in his house’ (348).

The carceral nature of this house is reinforced in *Sarah Thornhill*, where the family is imprisoned under the oversight of Will’s second wife, who performs the role of one of Anne Summers’s ‘God’s Police,’ exercising ‘a moral policing and civilizing role within family and society’ (311). By now decaying into Gothic nightmare, the building imprisons the characters, literally in the case of Will’s granddaughter who refuses to be ‘civilised’—‘every night Ma put the girl in her room, turned the key’ (Grenville, *Sarah Thornhill* 122)—and metaphorically for the rest of the family. They live their lives under the oppressive regime of the step-mother, who is intent on training them in the requirements of respectability:

She had a headful of all the things you did so no one would know you had the taint. Elbows off the table, remember Dolly, she'd say, and a well-bred person leaves a scrap on their plate. She'd be running after us with our bonnets when we went outside, did we want to look like blackfellows? Church, rain or shine, every Sunday, that fog of mothballs. (9)

However, for Grenville the settler house performs more functions than that of prisonhouse, as can be seen most clearly in her depiction of the huts of her Hawkesbury River settlers in *The Secret River*. The image of the lonely hut, at the mercy of weather, Aborigines and wildlife, haunts the Australian settler imaginary for, as Carol Merli puts it, the bark hut is 'central to the white Australian pioneering legend' (205). During the nineteenth century 'the imagery of bush, clear skies and sunshine ... was increasingly seen as the truest expression of the "real" Australia' (Richard White 116) and the bark hut with its pioneering family came to be seen as a carrier of authentic Australian values. Grenville recognises this for the over-simplification it is, and in her presentation of the huts and the land occupied by her three main white protagonists she shows a spectrum of settler attitudes and values, drawing a perhaps over-easy identification between the physical state of the house and the moral state of its owner.

At one end of the spectrum is Smasher Sullivan, whose brutality to Aborigines is matched by his brutality to the land he occupies, 'a lumpy patch of land thick with the stumps of trees, a ragged stand of corn struggling in the sandy soil' with a hut 'tilted downhill all skewed and ramshackle' (239). His rape of the Aboriginal woman he keeps prisoner is mirrored by his violation of the land he lives on. At the other extreme in Grenville's moral universe is Tom Blackwood, who lives with an Aboriginal woman and constantly repeats his motto of '*give a little, take a little, that's the only way*' (110). The land, and the 'neat slab hut with a bark roof' he occupies, form 'a place where clearing and forest lived together on the same ground,' for unlike the other settlers 'Blackwood had not cleared his place' in order to mark 'where civilisation began and ended' (213). His hut and land are figured as a form of pastoral where settler and indigene live in harmony with the country and do not seek to impose on it. They have found a way of 'belonging-in-parallel' (Read 210), recognising each other's interest in the land. Blackwood's relationship to the land and the Aborigines who camp there stems from an appreciation that, as Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs put it, 'one can never be completely in possession of place: one is always (dis)possessed, in the sense that neither possession nor dispossession is a fully realisable category' (138).

The Thornhills' land and hut form the central term in this comparison. Their hut, for all Will's work on it, is never quite satisfactory, a 'poor rough thing' with 'none of the conveniences he had hoped to give it' (166). Building it has been difficult but has created 'a new William Thornhill ... a man who could labour against wilderness until it yielded up a dwelling' (165), an archetypal pioneer. Cultivating the land has required hard physical labour, 'the chopping down of the trees, ... the thud of the pick into the earth' (165), as does maintaining it, for 'the Thornhill household was up with the sun, hacking at the weeds around the corn, lugging water, chopping away at the forest that hemmed them in' (237). The Thornhills work to develop their land and hut is contrasted with their neighbours' approaches, and is presented in ways which align them with the mythologised image of the pioneer family, self-reliant and independent, making the best of their circumstances, and seeking 'to be respectable, to achieve security and a stake in property' (Carter 278). The behaviour and attitudes of the Thornhills, both because of their

positioning at the centre, rather than the extremes, of Grenville's group of settlers, and because of their representation as typical settlers, are normalised, with implications for the later depiction of Will's part in the massacre of Aborigines.

The Thornhills' hut on the Hawkesbury is also at the centre of another set of comparisons, one which articulates the changing nature of the settlers' relationship to both their country of origin and their new country. On arrival in Sydney the Thornhills occupy huts which seem to lack any firm footing on the land, forming part of a townscape which had 'an odd unattached look ... a broken-off chip of England resting on the surface of the place' (82). Their impermanence suggests the provisional nature of settlement by the convicts, who are constantly seeking ways to return 'home' to Britain. As such they demonstrate Barbara Myers's argument that 'initially, Australian domesticity is framed as tentative and fragile' (467). She also suggests that 'British emigrants to Australia were able to preserve aspects of their national identity through the strategic transplantation of material objects and ideals associated with the domestic' (467). For Sal Thornhill, the lost home is symbolised by the roof-tile she has brought with her on the voyage and which 'was like a promise, that London was still there, on the other side of the world, and she would be there too one day' (91).

By the end of the novel the Thornhills have become part of the settler elite, wealthy and powerful, and are installed in their mansion, which provides them with their own 'version of England' (345). While Sal 'still kept the old bit of roof-tile in her workbox,' she now recognises that 'they were never going to return to that Home,' and as a result 'she had made Home here' (331). Built over the site of an Aboriginal rock drawing of a fish, the stone house suppresses any identification with the native and the land. Rather it is designed to impose on the country, to signal ownership, possession and exclusion, and to mimic the English gentleman's home. However neither house nor garden is 'quite what Thornhill had pictured. Something was wrong with the way the pieces fitted together' (329). The house does not fit into the Australian landscape any more than Will himself fits properly into his new role as gentleman. They are both poor imitations, examples of what Homi Bhabha calls 'the familiar exercise of *dependent* colonial relations through narcissistic identification' (126). Both the Sydney hut and the Hawkesbury mansion speak of England and 'home,' albeit that the yearning to return which was central to the lives of the Thornhills in Sydney has now been transmuted into an attempt to reproduce England in the alien soil of Australia.

The hut on Thornhill's Point, by contrast, is figured as the idealised pioneer Australian home, an isolated dwelling built by its inhabitants from natural materials, where 'the candle flame, the light at the window, the glow of an inviting interior' (Carter 261) are redolent of home. Grenville plays to this idealised image, investing the Thornhills' hut with positive values, and contrasting it with their previous homes. The hut is 'a loose container of yellow light', a place of safety with 'the fire leaping up the chimney and the lamp on the table' (265). It is a place where the Thornhill children 'were flourishing on the river as they had not in Sydney' (195). And it provides, for all its shortcomings and fragility, a place of reassurance for the male pioneer, so that when Will returns from Sydney, 'each time he rounded his point and saw the smoke calmly rising out of his chimney, the fowls pecking away around the yard and the children running down the slope to meet him, he felt a flush of relief' (196-97).

But the Thornhills's hut also plays an important social role, acting as a welcoming communal centre to which neighbouring settlers resort for company: 'it was astonishing how folk appeared out of this empty place like bugs out of the woodwork, when it was a matter of liquor dispensed with a generous hand' (167). As such it acts as a key node in the network of settler communications, a meeting place where the whites on the Lower Hawkesbury can gather to discuss their lives, to rehearse their disagreements (in at least one case resulting in violent confrontation between Sullivan and Blackwood), and particularly to recount the '*outrages and depredations*' (98) of the Aborigines, who have taken the place of the British as their oppressors. These stories magnify and reinforce the settlers' self-image of themselves as victims and also encourage the escalating inter-communal violence which leads to the later massacre of Aborigines. In this context, the flimsy hut in its clearing reifies settler vulnerability while also acting as a potent symbol of property to be defended against the purported aggression of the Aborigines. However, the Thornhills' hut, as both a domestic space and the container of typical pioneer values, must remain pure and uncontaminated. The plan for the massacre is hatched away from the hut and the massacre itself is not openly discussed inside it. Sal's knowledge of Will's action seeps through the bark walls but it is never fully articulated or confronted. Will suppresses the details of his involvement in the massacre, and while Sal suspects him of doing so 'she said nothing. Not then and not later' (338), leaving 'a space of silence between husband and wife' (339). As such the Thornhill domestic life typifies the wider settler 'propensity for "selective amnesia" and "solipsistic narratives"' (Veracini 272) about the past.

The Thornhills' hut is, of course, like other settler huts, built on Aboriginal land, and is a site of Aboriginal dispossession. Will occasionally recognises Aboriginal prior rights to the land, as when he first sees the carved fish and the representation of his boat and 'it came to him that this might seem 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' (160). However, once he has taken possession he is clear that this is '*my place now, ... You got all the rest*' (149). Will, like Sullivan, though less crudely, clings to the binary, to the view that land is either his or theirs, and sees any encroachment on the land he has taken as illegitimate and to be resisted. Despite Blackwood's warning that '*a man got to pay a fair price for taking. ... Matter of give a little, take a little*' (108), he is unwilling to share the land or to find a way of living with the Aborigines whom he has dispossessed. He is committed to sole enjoyment of what he claims as his property. Such an attitude leads inevitably to a spiralling conflict, which starts with a dispute over the growing of yam daisies and leads, through the burning of Will's corn, to his participation in the massacre. Grenville depicts Will as a man caught up in an intensifying cycle of violence which he has not started and is helpless to stop, so that he asks himself, when travelling to the massacre, 'how had his life funnelled down to this corner, in which he had so little choice?' (314).

Grenville presents the Thornhills' hut as an icon of settler Australia, the home of one of many pioneer families seeking to win a living from the land. It is a place that, like the country itself, needs protection from a dangerous outside world. However, this presentation contributes to what Odette Kelada calls the 'notes of dissonance' (3) in the novel, the tension between Grenville's desire to expose the brutality of Aboriginal dispossession and her commitment to an 'empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events' (Grenville *Interview*). By centring the novel on the domestic world of the Thornhills, and by figuring that world in normative terms, Grenville presents Will's participation in the massacre as a contingent act in

defence of his home and family and so lessens the degree of his culpability. His involvement represents ‘not a considered attitude to Aboriginal people, just a pragmatic response to a problem’ (Grenville, *Searching* 189). More profoundly, by depicting the Thornhills’ domestic life as embodying the attitudes and values of the typical settler family, rather than those of the thoroughly racist Sullivan, Grenville implicitly suggests that many other participants in outbreaks of settler violence are similarly responding to specific local problems. Although the massacre is clearly depicted as an horrific and shameful act of white violence, Grenville’s presentation of Will’s actions as those of an Australian Everyman, ‘a man who wasn’t altogether bad but did bad things’ (*Searching* 188), and her failure to acknowledge that such violence is ‘systemic to settler-colonization’ (Wolfe 27), all too easily slips into presenting ‘an Australia that is acceptable to white Australia—not a history but a justification’ (Gallagher 239).

If the bark hut is emblematic of pioneer values it is also ‘a construction reflecting the way that settler populations attempt to become a naturalized part of the landscape’ (Merli 207), and the Thornhills’ hut represents their attempt to establish a ‘personal relationship’ with the land (Whitlock 53). However in practice that relationship is uneasy and ambivalent. Will feels an almost sexual passion for the land he claims: ‘he could not forget the quiet ground beyond the screen of reeds and mangroves and the gentle swelling of that point, as sweet as a woman’s body’ (125). His love for Sal is displaced by his love of the land, so much so that when they quarrel ‘she did not recognise him. Some violent man was pulling at her, shouting at her, the stranger within the heart of her husband’ (303). But Sal does not share Will’s passion. When they arrive she sits in the boat ‘attached to the place she had come from’ (139), and later her domestic imprisonment gives her little opportunity to forge any relationship with the country, which remains alien and forbidding to her. Unsurprisingly it is she who seeks, unsuccessfully, to create an English garden round the mansion at the novel’s end. Furthermore, the Thornhills have no skills in living off the animal and plant life around them, ‘the forest had never revealed dinner to Thornhill’ (209). They remain alienated from the land they inhabit, in contrast to the local Aborigines who ‘strolled into the forest and came back with dinner hanging from their belts’ (209).

A number of critics, including Kelada and Jodi Gallagher, have commented on Grenville’s stereotyped representation of Aborigines in the novel, and similar arguments can be made about her depiction of the Aboriginal domestic, which is presented as a primitive version of settler life, something which is now more of historic interest than living relevance. When Sal and Will visit the deserted Aborigine camp they look at what is left there as they would at a display in a museum. The Aborigines’ humpies are like the settlers’ huts, though better made—Will notices ‘how neatly the leafy boughs were tucked in together to make a roof’ (299). Their tools are early versions of those used by the Thornhills, who see ‘a couple of wooden dishes and a digging stick, and a tidy coil of bark string. ... the grinding stone and its grinder. ... the dusty bough that served as broom’ (299). Similarly, when Sal barter with the Aboriginal women outside her hut, she views their bowls as unsophisticated versions of those she uses herself, objects which have no practical use but do have monetary value as ‘*a curio*’ for which ‘*gentry pay good money*’ (208). The Aboriginal domestic is also seen as changeless. We are told that ‘the domestic arrangements of the blacks were as they had always been’ (299), with the ambiguity of ‘always’ implying that these arrangements have obtained not only during the time of the Thornhills’ occupation of the area but over generations, and that they will continue in the same way in

future. While the Aborigines' domestic life may meet all their needs, it is seen by Will and Sal as a static lifestyle, one that has been left behind by the more dynamic modern world of the settlers and now has no living vitality.

Grenville's portrayal of the domestic in *Sarah Thornhill* is structured similarly to that in *The Secret River*. Here the Thornhill mansion, with its convict past, lies at one extreme while at the other extreme is the house belonging to the Scottish free settler Archibald Campbell. Campbell marries Sarah's elder sister Mary and they live in:

a fine stone house with a circular drive at the front, every bedroom with a fireplace and a Turkey rug and a marble washstand, plenty of maids to bring the hot water. The silver on the mahogany table was Campbell's from home, heavy in your hand, the chasing soft with wear. (163)

The luxury of the house shows up the pretensions of Cobham Hall and makes Will Thornhill feel 'ill at ease' (164). While the Thornhill mansion is a place of suppressed violence, repressed secrets and whispered conversations in closed rooms, Campbell's house is one in which there is no troubling past to be hidden, no convict stain to be eradicated by ersatz gentility. It is a house where people 'wouldn't hear, wouldn't believe' (260) the story of Will's role in killing Aborigines. But like Cobham Hall it is figured as a British house, an imported and dominating structure which does not belong in the landscape.

Compared with these two houses, that belonging to Sarah and her Irish husband John Daunt, another free settler, is more modest, 'long and low, sawn boards, shingle roof, three rooms wide' (189). It is represented as an Australian home, at ease in its setting, placed 'on a sweet piece of rising ground' (189), where 'on the other side of the creek a bush was alive with some kind of tiny round green bird with a silvery eye. Every single one hopping and twittering, a hundred cheerful creatures all talking at once' (191). Like Tom Blackwood's hut, Daunt's farm is presented as a pastoral idyll where owner and men work together, where labour is recognised and valued, and where Aborigines are described as 'good workers when they turn their hand to it, ... Worthy of their hire and agreeable with it' (202-203).

But for all its apparent moral virtue the farm is essentially the Thornhills' hut writ large, performing similar functions in terms of carrying pioneer values. The house is figured in a way which recalls the bark hut, 'no windows, just the holes for them. Sheets of bark for shutters. ... No rugs, no curtains, the walls not lined, only the boards whitewashed' (189-90). It is in an isolated spot, built near the edge of the frontier, just as 'once upon a time Thornhill's Point would have been like the country past Limit of Location, wild and empty but for the blacks wandering over it. Somewhere along the line someone took it over' (218). Daunt has participated as fully in the theft of aboriginal land as Will did when he took the land at Thornhill's Point. And the pastoral scene the farm evokes is false. Rather than the sharing of the land which characterises Blackwood's relations with the Aborigines, Daunt's house, like the Thornhills' hut, is built on violent dispossession, a dispossession which is followed by the white owners seeking to 'forge racial myths of emplacement and belonging ... which are designed to make the case for "peaceful annexation" by laying counter-claim to an emotional and spiritual possession of the land' (Huggan and Tiffin 86). Furthermore the farm is used for sheep, which are 'deeply

implicated in the displacement of indigenous people as well as in bringing about environmental change' (Beinart and Hughes 96). We can best see Daunt's house as the site of what Eleanor Collins describes as 'the myth of the worthy convict segue[ing] gracefully into the second national myth: the McCubbin-esque story of the pioneer' (39).

The pioneer legend is, of course, conventionally figured as a masculine affair, mixing conquest of the land with conquest of the female. But the domestic discourse of Grenville's novels might be expected to question and undermine the masculine perspective, not least given her previous attempts to rescue Australian history from what Thea Astley calls the 'peasant Teeth Father ... the Father of Ockers, the despiser of sheilas' (182). Certainly Sal starts off as the stronger character in *The Secret River*, both in London and in Sydney, where she takes the initiative to set up shop as an inn-keeper. However, over the course of the novel her strength and autonomy dissipate and she becomes an increasingly silent, colonised victim of male violence, her half-hearted attempts to empathise with the Aborigines easily over-ruled by the male emphasis on difference and otherness. Some of Sal's early spirit seems to have been inherited by Sarah, who tells her own story of rebellion against respectability in her passion for Jack Langland. But her independence of mind also fades. After hearing her father's confession of his part in the massacre at Blackwood's, she realises that she cannot speak of it, 'it was the shame, that I couldn't bear to hold up to the light' (260). Despite her intent not 'to let the story slip away,' Sarah fails to understand 'what it was all about' (304). Just as Grenville, in *Searching for the Secret River*, sees the violence of dispossession as stemming from misunderstandings, so Sarah sees her father's history, self-deceivingly, as a story of 'cruelties and crimes, miseries on every side' (304). While she is willing to undertake the physically dangerous journey to New Zealand to tell what she knows about the life and death of her niece, she is unwilling to undertake the moral journey required to tell her father's story either to her siblings or to the wider public. Instead, in a reworking of her father's actions, she attempts a form of private reparation by giving food to the local Aborigines. While, following her father's confession, Sarah realises that 'I'd lived in a cosy place made out of secrets and lies' (255), there is no sign that she recognises either that his story can be replicated many times over or that it points to the need for a more fundamental change in Aboriginal/settler relations which will be deeply discomforting for her and the wider settler community. For Sarah, as for Sal, silence and feigned ignorance are the best policy.

Merli argues that the bark hut 'represent[s] the unsettled state of the settler Australian' (207), with its cracked walls suggesting 'the faultlines in the stories we tell ourselves about the spaces of belonging ... the foetid manifestation of the unspeakable acts of colonisation' (208). But while the cracks in the walls of the Thornhills' hut allow news of the massacre of the Aborigines to seep into Sal's ears, all too often the walls of the hut, like the walls of today's houses, exclude stories that the inhabitants do not want to hear while remaining open to those that reassure them about their place in the world. Despite Grenville's attempts to reframe the colonial discourse, her focus on the convict domestic, far from destabilising and undermining traditional settler narratives, helps to reinforce them. Her normalising of the values displayed by the Thornhills' bark hut, with its implications for the depiction of settler violence; her representation of settler domestic spaces as essentially Australian buildings that belong to the land; her depiction of the Aboriginal domestic as a primitive but outmoded version of the settler house; and her silencing of Sal and Sarah as they retreat from their recognition of the violence on which their prosperity is

founded, all serve to reinscribe rather than rewrite the narratives of white legitimacy, and in doing so undercut Grenville's commitment to the work of reconciliation.

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¹ See for example Grace Karskens's *The Colony* and James Boyce's *Van Diemen's Land*.