

Reconciling Aboriginal and White Australians by Negotiating Spatial Boundaries in *The Secret River*: A Postmemory Study

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ABSTRACT

The dichotomic concept of space between white and Aboriginal Australians has been widely used in the colonial discourse. Through *The Secret River*, Grenville dismantles the binary oppositions that serves as the main strategy for colonization and represents the complex relation between the Aboriginal and white people in current Australia. We argue that space as a medium of negotiation is used as her strategy to involve in the national reconciliation movement. Postmemory is employed to explain the strategy of choosing spatial locations that links with Grenville's intergenerational memories. The analysis reveals that the boundaries created by the settlers upon the disputed land cannot successfully cover the chaotic and heterogenous nature of the Aboriginal Dharug land. Instead, the previous characteristics of the land keep appearing as a form of resistance. During the attempt, the settlers slowly recognize the similar nature of the Dharug's living space to theirs. The process represents the ongoing understanding between the two parties which signifies the spirit of the national reconciliation movement.

Keywords: Aboriginal; postmemory; space; reconciliation; resistance; postcolonial.

INTRODUCTION

When the former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered an official apology on 13 February 2008, the stories of Stolen Generations were officially acknowledged for the first time (Leigh, 2020). The apology expressed the regret of the Australian government for the past policies which resulted in the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities. The issue of forcible removal is a part of the long history of colonization experienced by the two groups of Indigenous Australians whose trauma is still carried on until now by their descendants, both victims and perpetrators (Herrero, 2014). The apology is marked significant to initiate reconciliation between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to work towards more equal and respectful future.

Reconciliation is important because Australia has been limiting the penetration and acceptance of Indigenous stories in the formation of the national history and identity (O'Dowd, 2011). The history of Australia that begins with the annexation of Indigenous lands by white settlers is omitted in the national curricula (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013). Denying the fact means that the Indigenous people are not represented properly. Their identity as Indigenous people is oftentimes contested

with the identity of white Australians with their British ancestral origins (De Bono, 2018). The contestation has placed the Indigenous Australians in the peripheral space which eventually makes them not being involved in the construction of national identity. The Australian national identity has, therefore, been shaped solely by the colonial power as the identity of white settlers and the reproduction of it by their descendants (Metcalf, 2013) and has left the identity of the Indigenous communities out of the discussion.

In reconciliation, the first step that needs to be taken is to acknowledge the social injustice and human rights violation against the Indigenous people. The acknowledgment is important to start and to work towards life based on social justice and equality. The commitment should be a national agenda whose implementation is not only accountable to the government and non-governmental human rights organizations, but also to other fields, including the Australian literary arena.

Literature plays an important part in the process of reconciliation because Australian national literature has been accused of promoting literary works that support the interests of the Anglo-Australians (Hall, 2015). Due to its limited points of view of the Indigenous communities, it is important to pursue alternative literature, including literary works written by

Indigenous writers and white authors who support the reconciliation movement. The existence of alternative literature will give honest and complete representation of multicultural Australia. It gives rooms for negotiations among authors with various perspectives which will be able to present the 'real and current Australia' that is not merely dominated by the legacy of the colonial interests. To represent this negotiation, Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* is important to mention. The novel has addressed the construction of national myths (Kossew, 2007) which specifically problematizes contestation between the issue of settlement and Indigenous ancestral land.

The Secret River by Kate Grenville was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the novel category in 2006. The narrative is about the life of an early white settler in Australia, which is also Grenville's personal interpretation of her traumatic memory as the descendant of settlers who once colonized the Indigenous lands and the people in current Sydney. Her great-great-great-grandfather, Solomon Wisemen, came to Australia in the early 19th century as a prisoner with his small family. It is through stories passed down through generations that Grenville recalled her great grandfather (Wood, 2018). She particularly got the story from her mother. She then used the information as the main foundation to build her narrative with a main character that she named William Thornhill.

Grenville's narrative has received attention from several Australian historians such as Inga Clendinnen and Mark McKenna (Lang, 2014) who criticized the historical authenticity in *The Secret River*. However, as a form of interpretation on intergenerational stories in her family, her narrative is more appropriate to be positioned as a work of struggle with her traumatic memories as the descendant of white settlers, instead of a form of interpretation on historical data. The process of writing the novel is her long journey to redeem the shame and guilt of the past. She realized that there is a part of her identity as an Australian that was shaped by suppressing the identity of Indigenous Australians (Koval, 2005). The choice to explore land dispute becomes her way to cope with the violent historical memories that are passed down for generations but whose truth is never revealed in her family.

In the discussion of colonized land, the different concepts of land as a living space for Indigenous Australians and white settlers have been accepted as a natural thing. Indigenous Australians position land as a spiritual being that connects them with their ancestors (Grievess, 2008) while white settlers consider it as property that needs ownership and clear boundaries (Bhandar, 2018). Grenville's narrative refutes the

dichotomic concepts, including the concept of *terra nullius*, a Latin term used to refer to Australia as a no man's land which has been made as a doctrine by the colonial government to legitimize land dispossession (Banner, 2005). In *The Secret River*, the discourse on the contested land, including claims upon it, has been built on continuous negotiation between the two parties, whether it is through an amicable, neutral, or violent approach. The negotiation between the two opposing entities represents the current process of reconciliation to forge a relationship based on respect and mutual understanding.

This study aims to discuss space as a strategy used by Grenville in her narrative to engage in the reconciliation movement. We argue that the use of space as a medium of negotiation is employed by Grenville as a strategy and approach to be involved in the national reconciliation movement. In *The Secret River*, when it comes to the discussion of space, both the Dharug people and settlers are not placed entirely in the opposite directions. Their relations are intersected by spatial negotiations portrayed in various occasions in the narrative. Instead of being placed as the center of power and ideological polarization as what is strategically utilized by colonial discourse in general, space in *The Secret River* is the center of negotiation which tears down the contestation between the two parties. As an Australian contemporary writer, Grenville offers various possible perspectives in her narrative that may be understood as a representation of the complex relationships between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians both in the past and current time.

POSTMEMORY APPROACH

Postmemory is an interpretive approach belonging to a branch of cultural studies that is introduced by Marianne Hirsh. Hirsch demonstrates the use of postmemory to study historical violence in relation to the transmission of memories between generations. The main idea is that trauma caused by deprivation of rights, violence, war, or ethnic cleansing can be passed on to the next generations even though they did not experience it in the first place (Hirsch, 2012). Referring to the theoretical assumption, Grenville's narrative that is built upon her interpretation of the intergenerational stories can be categorized as a postmemory text. Therefore, using a postmemory approach, the research will employ both collective and personal memory archives to investigate Grenville's reconciliation strategy by scrutinizing spatial narratives found in the text.

The process of passing down the trauma is carried out by memory transmission. In postmemory, there is an

intersection between aspects of collective history and personal history, as well as between direct experiences and experiences that exist due to memory transmission (Turina, 2019). It cannot be denied that there is still a distance between each of them. The distance makes it seem as if they are not related and as the consequence, makes the discussion on historical violence so far is still dominated by the grand narratives of the tragedy. Personal experiences are still considered merely as a sub-branch of collective historical experience so that the discussion of them does not get as much attention as the discourse of historical events which has a larger scope. The same treatment goes to direct and transmitted memories.

Hirsch (2012) argues that the stories of individuals who are the descendants of survivors and perpetrators deserve to be discussed because they can still feel the implications of historical violence as the result of trauma transmission from the previous generations. The transmission creates a different form of trauma generated from each individual's dealing with personal and collective memories. Personal memories can be passed down through stories from generation to generation or even through silence that is preserved for generations (Hirsch, 2012). Both have traumatic implications for the descendants. As a response, they negotiate the traumatically collective and personal information through the creation of imaginative and creative interpretations of the tragedy. The interpretations of the descendants upon the tragedy function as a defense mechanism against the influence of past narratives that so far have dominated and influenced their consciousness as individuals with their embedded status as the descendants of the survivors and perpetrators. If the past narratives are left to dominate, the descendants are at risk to have their own life stories displaced, or even evacuated, by their ancestors (Hirsch, 2012).

Positioning postmemory as an approach, the term must be distinguished from memory. If memory is an attempt to remember, postmemory actively performs a constructive interpretation that is done through constant identifications and responses. This is what makes postmemory is identified with an "imaginative" process because it is full of creative endeavor (Hirsch, 2012). Instead of "calling out" traumatic memories, individuals with traumatic memories give meanings to the memories by creating new texts.

SPATIAL CLASH AS A MEANS TO RECONCILE

The Secret River has invited widespread criticism, particularly from historians. The most famous ones

were probably from Inga Clendinnan and John Hirst who expressed concerns over how the novel promoted partial, inaccurate, and emotionally-motivated historical narrative (Boulanger-Mashberg, 2009). They argue that liberal reimagining of colonial history that is influenced by personal and familial history will result in inaccurate historical narratives. Partial interpretation of a historical event should not have penetrated the domain of critical history in the public sphere. Grenville was criticized for doing appropriation of the Australian historical facts by blending and composing facts and fictional narratives based on her collective and personal memories. However, from the perspective of postmemory, the personal memories and trauma resulted from the past tragedy should be counted as the knowledge that so far has been absent from the historical archives or probably neglected by traditional historians (Taylor in Hirsch, 2008).

Colonization creates an imposed frame that kills alternatives and memories of the colonized nations and people (Upstone, 2009). The name Australia suggested by Matthew Flinders (Jalata, 2013), for instance, is an initial step to annex the region by giving a name that disassociates the land from the Indigenous people and their descendants as the rightful owners. They are being deprived of their ownership and memory of their ancestral land through various political and social regulations imposed by the colonial power, such as through the building of white settlements and the removal of Indigenous children from their families. Therefore, some Indigenous writers produce literary works with themes that recall the memories of the lands. They reintroduce the concept of ancestral lands to the new generation of Indigenous communities whose connection with the ancestral lands has been slowly faded due to the lingering effect of colonialism.

The descendants of the perpetrators who committed the act in the past also need to deal with remorse. The feeling is a form of traumatic experience resulted from the intergenerational stories of the violent past. It creates distance that hamper them from reaching mutual understanding with the descendants of the victims. Therefore, it is important to treat the past as the stepping stone to strengthen the relationships by interpreting and giving meaning to the memories left by the ancestors. Any attempt to recall memories, thus, is a form of resistance to the colonial power whose lingering effect has been separating them.

Had the goal been made to create more general and homogenous sources of history (with a big H), the personal memories and trauma might have been made as a secondary source. However, scholars and writers have begun to realize that negotiations between

individual and communal memories are important contribution to maintain the relevance of history in order to shed light in urgent contemporary disclosure (Oksman, 2020). In Australia, it can be represented by the spirit of reconciliation between the white and Indigenous Australians. Several literary writers involve in the reconciliation by referring to their personal trauma and memory (Birns, 2015), either as the descendants of perpetrators or victims, to disclose the veil of one-version history that has been widely regarded by public in general and has contributed to the formation of Anglo-centric Australian identity.

In *The Secret River*, Grenville transmits the oral intergenerational stories in her family to written narratives. When she did research in the Hawkesbury River, she experienced gripping fear recalling the past (Koval, 2005). The transmission of intergenerational stories cannot exclude the transmission of the trauma. As the descendant of the perpetrator, Grenville becomes the next guardian of the stories. Growing up with the stories, the traumatic fragments of the past that represent colonial misdeeds are possible to be activated or recalled by her memory, such is what she experienced in the Hawkesbury River.

Transmitting the stories in the form of written narratives is an effort to deal with the trauma as the descendant of the perpetrator as well as to reinterpret the relationship between the Indigenous and white Australians in her current time. Some positive reaction has been shown to her effort. Daele (2019) in his research, for instance, describes how Grenville has succeeded in showing her involvement and empathy upon the past tragedy by externalizing the historical burden that has been carried by the descendants of perpetrators through her historical fiction. Schwab (2004) also states how both victims and perpetrators are suffering from the pervasively psychic deformations of violent histories even though they came in different ways and create different responsibilities. However, studies on Grenville's works in relation to the reconciliation movement have not specifically addressed space as a strategy.

Mitchell (2010) mentions space in the study of *The Secret River*, but not as a form of strategy. Space is presented as a testament to Grenville's failure to develop empathy for her protagonist, William Thornhill. Mitchell argues that Thornhill should show empathy to the Aboriginal people in several important interactions. The failure creates space, which in this case is translated as distance for the readers that represents distance between contemporary Australian history and colonial history. Even though in general, according to Mitchell, Grenville has succeeded her

memory-based narrative to give new interpretation to Aboriginal history in the realm of contemporary historical fiction, the distance that she creates can make the readers place the past tragedy uncorrelated with its effects in the present days. Attempting to fill in the gap that has not been noted, this research specifically intends to address space as a strategy for Grenville to participate in the reconciliation movement from the perspective of postmemory. The analysis would be later used to answer three main questions of this research, namely what types of space which are discussed in the process of negotiation, how the negotiation of spatial boundaries is constructed in the narrative, and what is the contribution of the negotiation to the national reconciliation movement between the Aboriginal people and white people in Australia.

Property Rights and Sacred Sites

In an interview at the Melbourne Writers Festival 2011, Grenville stated that, referring to the process of writing *The Secret River* and *Sarah Thornhill*, the story cannot be separated from the place where it happened (Australia Writer's Centre, 2011). The term place in this research will be referred as space since they are not only geographical locations in the conventional sense. According to Upstone (2009), space has quality that can encapsulate not only physical location, but also abstract conceptual space. Through space, a political system executes and implements its power. Space that is dominated and annexed begins even before colonization by the existence of stereotypes (Said in Upstone, 2009). Such a space then is manifested physically by the established colonial government with an aim to dominate not only the physical territory but also everything within it.

The colonization that happened in Australia is an example on how the colonial administration executed its agenda of annexation by taking up some space of the Indigenous people, both physically and spiritually. The concept of land ownership in the new settlement that is closely linked with privatization and business ventures for the colonial is the exact opposite of how land is valued by the Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal people did not privatize but use it communally and respectfully as a sacred space (Petitt, 2015). The dichotomy of land concepts between the two entities has become a major discussion in this research. Positioning the space as not merely a communal, but also an individual space, Grenville reveals how seeing from a spatial point of view, both entities actually share concepts of land both as economic property and center of sacredness.

Since the first sentence of the novel, Grenville has brought the readers to share William's difficult experience that deals with limited domestic space. His house in Tanner's Lane is crammed with her parents and siblings. It is impossible to move the elbow without "*hitting the wall or the table or a sister or a brother*" (Grenville, 2005, p. 9). There is nearly no personal space for him. His boyhood memory from the London period in the beginning of the book is full of his inability to find comfort in her inner circle so that he needs to thrust his movement outside the domestic circle that later will help him navigate his dream to own vast land in the new settlement.

William's friendship with Sal leads him to encounter her house in number 31, Swan Lake. The house practically has everything William has dreamt of: a building with "*number 31*", "*generous slab of bread*", and "*the rooms*" (Grenville, 2005, p. 17). Those are aspects of the physical quality that he favors. However, a home is more than just everything that can be felt by the senses. It is also quality that contributes to inner feeling of a human being. For William, Sal's house, even though it is physically perfect but is "*a sad house, filled with the tiny souls of those departed babies*" (Grenville, 2005, p. 16). Will understands that Sal's stillborn siblings contribute to her father's constantly sullen behavior and the gloominess of the house. Although physically the house has fulfilled its main function, but spiritually it has not.

He is able to sense that having a home is not merely owning it physically but must have the "*feeling of having a place*" (Grenville, 2005, p. 17). It is more on a spiritual level in the sense that the feeling is not on the worldly area. Considering that William is a non-religious person, the feeling he referred to when mentioning home is the closest association to spirituality that he can form. Home from William's perspective is a spatial location where sacredness is possible to form. When he insists to stay in the settlement and builds his own empire, he tries to project his spirituality into them. However, he fails to do so for he feels "*a new emptiness*" (Grenville, 2005, p. 333). He never forgets "*the narrow bench in the passage at the Watermen's Hall*" (Grenville, 2005, p. 333). The spiritual feeling that latches him with the land of his ancestors is identical with the connection felt by the Dharug people to their ancestral land.

The concept of land for the Aboriginal people has been long understood merely as a sacred place because the settlers' main concern with the land is known only for economic resource (Grieves, 2008). The concept attached to one party is strengthened by the opposite quality of the other. Here, a binary opposition is

employed as a strategy by the colonial to create hegemonic power for the settlers and to place the Indigenous with their sacredness in the submissive position which will justify their action to annex the land.

In her narrative, Grenville invites the readers to understand what is missing when seeing the relations between the two groups from the dichotomic sphere. The settlers fail to understand that the close connection of the Aboriginal people to their ancestors, which in this case is manifested in the way they place their territory as a sacred being, is only one part of their spatial system. The Dharug also have their own system of farming, that is different from that of the settlers. William begins to realize that "*the blacks were farmers no less than the white men were. But they did not bother to build a fence to keep the animals from getting out*" (Grenville, 2005, p. 229). Although the systems are different, the goal is the same: to provide food for consumption. There is clearly a process of production and consumption that represents an economic cycle. The colonial will hardly consider this as a form of an economic process since there is no development and management of material wealth that is found in the Dharug people's belongings. However, this is how the Indigenous economic system works. They produce and consume things based on their needs and do not leave any excesses. On the other hand, the system shows how effective it works.

It was true the blacks made no fields or fences, and built no houses worth the name, roaming around with no thought for the morrow... On the other hand, they did not seem to have to work to come by the little they needed. They spent time every day filling their dishes and catching the creatures that hung from their belts. But afterwards they seemed to have plenty of time left for sitting by their fires talking and laughing and stroking the chubby limbs of their babies. By contrast, the Thornhill household... Certainly no one seemed to have energy to spare for making a baby laugh. (Grenville, 2005, p. 229)

The quotation aims to show how each community has a certain quality that is not owned by the other. The settlers are busy working the whole day to make sure that they have better future in the new land, so they have little time for families and fun. On the other hand, the Dharug people live leisurely and have plenty of time to spend time with their babies. The narrative implies the possibility of the distinct lifestyles to complement each other for each of them has a lack of quality that can only be fulfilled by the other. The orientation to accumulate capital that is associated with the colonial interest is not the ultimate purpose of the

settlers. Grenville shows how balance between the physical and spiritual fulfillment of life is the ultimate goal of both groups. Mutual cooperation is possible to build between the two entities. However, the lack of approach and willingness to understand each other creates bigger distance which grows worse as time goes on. Grenville believes that misunderstanding is the core of the tragedy and she frequently mentions it in various interviews.

The overpowering ignorance of the settlers to understand the meaning of land for the Dharug people makes it justifiable for William to drive away the Dharug people who pick corns in his field, *"Thornhill realized he had been waiting for this ... His rage swelled, sweet and simple. It was a clean feeling, like a length of the sea massing into a wave."* (Grenville, 2005, p. 28). His anger is explained as naturally built up. To some extent, in fact he does wait for the moment to come, as if to look for a strong cause to behave forcefully and hurt them so that they stop to trespass the boundary and to enter his property. What is ironic is just before he shoots and drives the Dharug people from his corn field, the other day he has helped a Dharug boy who suffered from poison. Even though the poison murders were committed by his acquaintance to clear the land from their presence, the sight of a dying Dharug boy shocked him. He felt sympathy and even *"put the pannikin to the boy's lips and he drank"* (Grenville, 2005, p. 277). When he died in front of his eyes, which left him speechless, he decided *"to lock away in the closed room in his memory, where he could pretend it did not exist"*.

William's denial upon the massacre of the Dharug people, including the one that he witnessed, is motivated and blinded by his thirst to own the land. He closes any connection that will link him with the Dharug people, including the death of the little boy and the fact that the Dharug people and their ancestors have been living in his property long before the arrival of the settlers. He knows that he shares the same territory with them but he chooses to ignore the fact. Instead, he partially claims the whole location as his and reproduces the violent approach which also has killed the boy. Grenville stated in one of her interviews that one of her purposes to juxtapose the dichotomy was she wanted to show the tragic inability of both the White and Aboriginal people to communicate their cultural barriers which led to the tragedy of spatial conflict (Koval, 2005). By discussing the potential of land for both parties to become property rights and sacred sites, Grenville initiates negotiation that is failed to erect in the past due to the misunderstanding. The point of negotiation will be discussed in the next section.

Referring to the memory of her late great-great-grandfather through the intergenerational story, Grenville interprets the tragedy as the inability of both the Dharug and settlers to comprehend the meaning of territories (Koval, 2005). The Dharug cannot discern the concept of individual ownership and likewise the settlers cannot understand a sense of territory without any markings. Her interpretation of familial and to some extent personal history as the descendant of the settlers with spatial approach has contributed to the Reconciliation since she is also one of the supporters of the movement.

Negotiation of Spatial Boundaries

This second part of the research particularly discusses how spatial boundaries that have been created are negotiated. When William mentions that *"There were no signs that the blacks felt that the place belonged to them. They had no fences that said this is mine. No house that said, this is our home. There were no fields or flocks that said, we have put the labour of our hands into this place"* (Grenville, 2005, p. 93), it was actually a confirmation to his own belief that the Aboriginal people have no concept of property ownership. Thus, it is justifiable for him and the fellow settlers to claim the "no man" land as theirs.

William has erected boundaries upon the 'free land' to rule the aimed territory. This process is called appropriation. He frequently mentions how important border is to mark somebody's territorial property. The Dharug have *"no fences that said this is mine"* (Grenville, 2005, p. 93). He believes that *"what marked a man's claim was a rectangle of cleared and dug-over dirt and something growing that had not been there before"* (Grenville, 2005, p. 139). Property ownership must be marked by tangible borders that can be sensed. The rules come once the boundaries are erected and trespassing will result in punishment. A land which initially has no boundaries is appropriated and designed to fulfill the colonial interest. The result of the appropriation of space to accommodate political goals is the emergence of a territory that has certain physical boundaries and rules. The appropriation overwrites the chaotic Dharug land that was at first able to accommodate diversity and transforms it as a place which accommodates the colonial interests only. As the effect, it will create contestation between physical boundaries that the settlers put upon their claimed properties and "imaginary" boundaries of the Dharug people that are being covered. The physical boundaries symbolize categorization that normally is employed by colonizers as a means to rule a territory. The physical boundaries will not be able to completely occupy the overwritten space since the diverse space will always find a way to assert their identity as a form of resistance.

Categorization is not alien to the colonials. The division of people in the Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) according to the 1900 Census Act by the colonial that categorized them into Native, Asian, and colored, for instance, led to the production and reproduction of ethnic identities (Muzondidya, 2009). Ethnicities were not there in the first place, but were made. The parameters of ethnicities are then set as a means to colonize. The same case applies to Australia. The categorization of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is made by the colonial power on the base of territories. In a wider scale, the categorization will later distinguish the Indigenous from the white Australians. As the categorizations is a man-made strategy, the set parameters are not fixed. It is open to a room of resistance of the colonized, a negotiation. However, due to the firm grip of the colonial government upon this categorization, the external factors oftentimes cannot penetrate in the discussion and thus leave the categorization as what it is.

If penetration can be performed to thrust the boundaries, there is a chance to make the set parameters become negotiable. This is what Grenville is actually doing by bringing the spatial issues in her narratives. Any forms of resistance from the colonized as a response to the colonial power domination is basically an attempt to return the condition of space to its fluid and chaotic nature. The term chaos in the context of space is not seen as something negative but shows a positive situation where diversity can be accommodated in a fluid situation so that it could suggest new possibilities and interpretations (Upstone, 2009).

When William forms the idea of The Dharug's property having no fences therefore being legal to claim, Grenville is actually introducing a spatial site that is vulnerable to create resistance. There is the categorization of places that have physical boundaries and rules and those that do not. The categorization is made by the colonial administration and will be used as the justification for the settlers to annex the second category of site. The categorization, or in Upstone's term is called appropriation (2009), makes as if the controlled and homogeneous condition were natural. However, real space cannot be completely controlled because whenever power tries to overwrite space, the traces that the powerful side are trying to erase do not completely disappear. In Derrida's term, these traces are not crumbs left from the past or what will appear in the future. Traces have been there since the beginning, even before the beginning of space (Derrida, 1997). This prevents space from being completely homogeneous because it has traces of what power is trying to erase. The traces that remain indicate the diversity of traditions and cultures in the territory that are being overwritten.

Traces in the Dharug's landscape is the diverse and chaotic space that is being attempted to cover by the homogenous colonial boundaries. In the Dharug's landscape, the traces keep appearing and to a certain point, it has perturbed William.

Jack slapped his hand on the ground so hard a puff of dust flew up and wafted away. This is me, he said. My place. He smoothed the dirt with his palm so it left a patch like the scar on his head. This was something that he did not have: a place that was part of his flesh and spirit. There was no part of the world that he would keep coming back to, the way Jack did, just to feel it under him. It was as if the very dirt was a consolation. (Grenville, 2005, p. 329)

When he witnesses Jack, a Dharug, mumbles his right to own the place, William understands that the longing for the ancestral land will stay within Jack forever because it is already adhered in his mind, spirit, and body. The attachment is represented by the dirt that clings to Jack's body. It is as if to mock William's belief that the Dharug people do not have any rights to claim any territory because they do not have any concept to ownership. The dirt that represents the territory has in turn never leaves the Dharug people. This is the traces meant by Derrida. Their appearance evokes and interrogates the power that attempts to cover and blur the natural characteristic of the territory.

Due to the use of white subjectivity with third-person omniscient narration, data in regard to the spatial negotiation are often not involving quotations in the form of direct communication between the settlers and Dharug people. Grenville plays an important role when she chooses to use white subjectivity. By using the third person omniscient point of view, she does not attempt to cross the border by creating cultural appropriation upon the Aboriginal people and culture. I argue that this technique is in turn quite effective to present the settlers as having both power and vulnerability when facing something that they do not understand. The Dharug culture and people seem very alien to them and it becomes the main cause of the dispute. The Dharug may find the same struggle but Grenville is wise not to enter the territory.

She lets the white settlers, represented by William, to struggle with their own frustration when slowly and unintentionally getting close to understand the Aboriginal people. The resistance, thus, is not done directly by the Dharug but through the appearance of their spatial characteristics being noticed by William. We argue that this is more effective to invite audience to know that the Aboriginal people are not a passive group. It will build understanding that is not based

merely on sympathy. Grenville clearly mentioned in an interview with Wood (2018) that she did not want to repeat the patterns of “heroic pioneer” nor “bleeding-heart breast-beating” stories.

Grenville’s construction of the spatial responses by the Dharug people is her decision to deal with her traumatic past as the descendant of the perpetrators. It also represents the self-negotiation that she builds with her familial dark past that has dominated her consciousness as a white Australian. The active response from the Dharug might or might not happen in the first place but any postmemory text should not be positioned as a historical text per se. It should be regarded as a fragment of personal history that deserves to be included to the discussion of the past tragedy. Without the inclusion, the meaningful discussion will stop once the actual perpetrators and victims are gone. Relating to her support to the Reconciliation, the interpretative narrative represents her serious and active involvement to promote mutual understanding between Indigenous and white Australians.

Path to Reconciliation

The Australian identity in the late 20th and early 21st century is still powerfully influenced by the formative national identity which favors an archetypal concept like whiteness (O’Dowd, 2011). This is the legacy of the colonial politics, the same system that glorified and celebrated the concept of *terra nullius*. The term was taken from a Latin expression which means nobody’s land and once has been widely acknowledged legally and politically as an important part of Australian history from 1788 to 1992 (Foley, 2009). This has contributively shaped the Australian identity as a vast land with no prior inhabitants. The celebration of Australian Day annually on 28 January marks it as the undeniable belief that neglects the existence of the Indigenous people but unfortunately has been upheld for centuries. The celebration in general is a commemoration of the first settlement that came to Australia or in other words, the beginning of the land acquisition from the Aboriginal people. It is one of the systemic processes of erasure that was mostly done through violent ways and leaving the Aboriginal people in the most vulnerable and hopeless position.

This particular issue of land acquisition is not included in the Australian historical curriculum. Grenville admitted that she grew up with the “airbrushed version” of Australian history (Wood, 2018). Her settler ancestor that was being transplanted in the colony frontiers is the tool of the British Imperialism to colonize Australia (Genger, 2018). What triggered her

concern on the issue of space was her personal conversations with the Aboriginal people. The conversations drove her to present another perspective in her historical narrative which shows the shared history that needs to be told (Wood, 2018). Grenville’s choice to take the land dispute is her strategy to describe that Australian histories have series of secrets in it (Koval, 2005).

When being asked about her narrative being political, Grenville answered that her main intention was telling stories of power structure and how it shaped where the Australians are today (Australia Writer’s Centre, 2011). She did not intentionally involve herself in practical politics, but she realized that she had concern and means to channel her thoughts on issues like reconciliation through her narratives just like what has been mentioned by Loomba (1998) that literature has the capacity to present the complexity of ideological systems and to identify it. Grenville realized that the non-rigid characteristic of literature opens to various interpretation, both from the writers and readers. She took this as an opportunity to open a room of discussion and negotiation. Grenville did not target a particular group of audience but she clearly had a mission to present a more balanced version of history.

This negotiable perspective is reflected in how she portrays the concept of “Home” for the White settlers in the novel. Knowing that their family will never go home, to England, William decides to regard their past home as “*nothing but a story*” (Grenville, 2005, p. 317). In London, “*they would be outsiders, with their sunburnt skin and the colonial ways*” (Grenville, 2005, p. 317). William has identified himself and his family as non-English anymore with their physical difference and different way of life. This apprehension is reached at the expense of losing their entire ties with the past. In Hawkesbury, there lies their future and the future of their next generation.

The decision to cut ties with England, which has contributed to William’s early years, does not make him completely immersed to build his future in the promising land smoothly. He was constantly “*watching the black shadow of the hill behind him – his own hill – move down across the garden, leaving everything behind in grey dusk*” (Grenville, 2005, p. 332), “*saw a man there, looking down from the cliff top*” (Grenville, 2005, p. 333), “*had to recognize that it was no human, just another tree, the size and posture of a man*” (Grenville, 2005, p. 333). The shadow of the Aboriginal people haunts him continually. The future of the land will always be lurked by their presence as the rightful owners and guardians of their ancestors’ lands. Whether spiritual or

physical presence, their being is permanently engraved in every inch of ground.

The Aboriginal people's constant appearance is a symbol of their unity with the ancestral lands that have been claimed by the colonial power. Although frequently ignored and denied in the discourse of national identity, their presence has been engraved in the lands. In Grenville's narratives, the lands become the medium of resistance to reclaim what they rightfully own in the first place. The white Australians, represented by William, should accredit them as the inseparable part of the nation and give them equal presence in the discussion of the national identity and future. The spatial resistance in the narrative is political since it supports at least two out of the five dimensions of the Reconciliation, namely historical acceptance and equality and equity.

Grenville's more discernible involvement in politics was when she participated in the Reconciliation Walk across the Sydney Harbor Bridge in 2000 (Staniforth, 2013). This personal experience, supported by an encounter with Melissa Lucashenko – an Australian Indigenous writer – who criticized Grenville's writing tendency to say in repeat that her great grandfather "took up" instead of "took" land helped shift her writing trajectory to be more political (Radstone, 2013).

Apart from criticism that she received from a number of historians, she was able to establish herself as a literary figure whose works were deemed significant by the nation when *The Secret River* won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2006. In a more resonating impact, the book was used by the education curricula across the nation. This form of acceptance represents the positive tone of the governmental entities towards her work.

Considering the dimensions of reconciliation goals that cover race relations, equality and equity, institutional integrity, unity, and historical acceptance (Reconciliation Australia, 2021); Grenville's narrative clearly does not specifically target these advanced goals to be achieved. However, seeing it from a literary perspective, the narrative has successfully performed its job to present another portrayal of the relation between the white and Aboriginal people through spatial tension. Her spatial approach is effective because space is a tangible subject that could be checked and understood by the audience. Upstone (2009) mentions that literature is suitable to reveal traces and chaos in spatial locations which eventually can be used by the writer to offer a solution to get out of limited space. It will open possible interpretation

from the readers that will lead them to more balanced and comprehensive understanding of the Australian history.

The stage adaptation of *The Secret River* has proven how the novel is successfully evoking and stirring the general public into the issue of displacement. The audience were invited to ponder how the colonial government systematically controlled the Indigenous people's life. There is a chance for them to relate it to the present condition of the majority of most Aboriginal people who still have not gained equal rights. The situation is not due to their nature but is caused by the systemic domination as the legacy of colonial administration.

The success and criticism that Grenville has evoked with *The Secret River* creates rooms for discussion. Since the narrative is the result of interpretation of her own personal memories that create a significantly different discourse from the popular version, public in general will be introduced to a different perspective of seeing the historical tragedy. This introduction is an important step to make the Australian public feel familiar with various interpretations of the history, particularly those sourced from the personal trauma. While it needs time to completely make the hidden history be widely informed and accepted by the nation, the steps that Grenville has initiated in the arena of Australian national literature deserves to be celebrated.

CONCLUSION

Grenville's strategy to highlight the spatial issue in *The Secret River* is effective to represent the complex relation between the Aboriginal and white people in current Australia. Based on the interpretation of her personal memories as the descendant of the settlers, she creates narrative to provide alternatives on how to interpret the relation between the Aboriginal and white Australians that are often portrayed as dichotomous in the colonial discourse. The dichotomic nature of the relation that creates tension between the two parties is the legacy and strategy of colonialism. Since colonial subjugation always initially deals with the desire to own space, Grenville offers narrative that involves spatial negotiation that tries to redefine the relation between the settlers and Indigenous Dharug people.

Presenting the disputed landscapes as the battleground to justify and claim power, the domination earned by the settlers to place the land as the property rights in order to gain economic interests is constantly overshadowed by the traces of Indigenous Dharug land as the sacred sites. However, the constant appearance of traces perturbs the main character, William

Thornhill, because he finds patterns in the Dharug landscape that are not alien to him and even share similar characteristics to his. The resistance by the Indigenous side that is not initiated based on violent approach, but through spatial revelation, discloses a fact that spatial negotiation is effective to bridge the understanding between the two conflicting parties. The Indigenous communities' ties with their ancestral lands need to be acknowledged and they deserve to get equal representation in the discussion of national identity and future. This belongs to the national reconciliation agenda.

The goal of Australian reconciliation that covers dimensions like equality, equity and historical acceptance needs to be initiated by opening discussion rooms that offer alternatives to the dominant discourse. The spatial negotiation strategy that Grenville employs in her narrative that is sourced from her personal traumatic memories advocates the same attitude to the readers. Her attitude is relatable to the spirit of reconciliation that emphasizes efforts to create a more equitable future for Australia. The widespread national acceptance and also criticism directed to *The Secret River*, for instance, are a sign that the discussion that she wished to happen is already initiated.

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