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MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN THE LANDSCAPE OF KATE GRENVILLE'S *THE SECRET RIVER*

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Abstract - The article analyses the spatial dimension and the relationship between landscape, memory and identity in Kate Grenville's colonial novel *The Secret River* where the landscape is a space inscribed with signs of violence that are covered by silence and secrets. It will be argued that the space of colonial encounters, the contact zone where Grenville's Indigenous and European protagonists meet and clash, is not only a place from which memory is intentionally removed in a process of national dis-remembering, but it is also a place in which scars are left on the ground as well as on the minds, in such a way that memory, both individual and historical, cannot be completely suppressed. It will be pointed out how the discriminating treatment and dispossession of Indigenous people by white settlers, the occupation of a territory that is deliriously claimed to belong to nobody (through the legal fiction of *terra nullius*) and the rise of violent attacks are articulated through the lure of colonial ownership in terms of a space that is occupied and appropriated in an attempt to claim social ransom and racial superiority. In this sense, the colonial space is a place scattered with historical memories that shape a new geography of the landscape. But at the same time, it is also a space in which the memory of places is suppressed into what W.H. Stanner defined "a secret river of blood", that runs hidden in the womb of history, surrounded by "The Great Australian Silence". However, in this mutual relationship between places and memory, the topography of violence draws a landscape on which the spatial inscription of the past cannot be completely erased: its signs are indelible and are overwritten like in a palimpsest.

Keywords: memory; forgetting; belonging; Australian landscape; colonial space; Grenville.

In the context of a settler colony like Australia, the concepts of space and place have been historically connoted and shaped by the dynamics of colonial encounters and violence. The invasion of Europeans and the usurpation of Indigenous lands in the late eighteenth century reconfigured the whole island continent into a non-place: a space claimed to be uninhabited and belonging to no one, a "terra nullius" to be cleared and settled in order to satisfy the needs of the British crown. The legal fiction of *terra nullius*, a doctrine not overturned until 1992, was decreed under the assumption that the "few" Indigenous inhabitants did not use the land in the European sense of cultivating it and therefore they did not own it. In fact, besides justifying European appropriation and exploitation of the territory, the principle of *terra nullius* implied that first comers did not see Australia as a place but rather as a space to be mapped and shaped depending on their needs but, above all, on their own cultural perception and memory. Indeed, Australia's immense space has always been perceived by colonial explorers and settlers as an enemy to be defeated, conquered and domesticated, and the only way to try to come to terms with it was by mapping and representing the unknown space according to European reading grids.

In this sense, perception and memory play an important role in the redefinition of a place that had already been experienced, mapped and shaped by its Indigenous custodians, but that to the blind eyes of colonial settlers continued to be perceived as an empty space. Indeed, the colonization of Australia meant since the very beginning "not seeing": colonial presence and history entailed the absence and erasure of the Indigenous people and of their way of conceiving space and time. The doctrine of *terra nullius* was then fundamental to suppress Indigenous societies and cultures not only

from colonial space, but also from the settlers' perception and narrative. Since the beginning of colonization and well into the twentieth century many Australian literary works have focused their attention on the immense and indomitable Australian space. The perception and representation of the country by colonial explorers, settlers and non-Indigenous writers was, and continued for a long time to be, based on the outback immensity. This contributed to the creation of the myth of the bush, of "the Australian Legend" (Ward 1958) that was part of the process of white Australian identity formation since the end of the nineteenth century and that depicted the white bushman as an uncontested hero[1]. Besides being meant to participate in the process of identity-making, this literary focus added to the settlers' struggle for place-making. In other words, the boundless unknown space, almost impossible to be physically conquered, was narratively represented as the landscape of a new national literature that put white settlers at the centre and did not contemplate the presence of the Indigenous people. Due to these representations, the allegedly uninhabited land passed from belonging to no one to being the place to which white settlers pretended they belonged in order to survive. As Bruce Bennett points out: "The quest for a sense of place, of belonging, may indeed comprise an important strategy for psychological survival" (Bennett 1991, p. 21).

This need, strongly felt by early settlers, to belong to a space, that nevertheless remained unsettled and unsettling, had to do with the sense of vulnerability prompted by the vastness of the Australian space and by the overwhelming prospect of the horizon that Bill Ashcroft has defined "horizonal sublime" (Ashcroft 2005, "Horizonal"). The expression is referred to the typical perception of the Australian space, as it has long been represented in writing and painting, seen through non-Indigenous eyes: "the 'psychic line' of the imagination of place in Australia, the horizon that intimidated the distance and 'placelessness' that overwhelmed the colonial imagination" (Ashcroft 2021, p. 15). This perception of the Australian horizon generates both a sense of freedom and opportunity, related to the vastness of the colonial space, and a sense of fear and anxiety due to "the excess of space that engenders the dystopian terror of an absolute displacement" (Ashcroft 2021, p. 14). In any case, none of these mental (but also artistic and literary) images ever contemplate the presence and rightful belonging of the Indigenous people on the Australian place. On the contrary, as it is the aim of colonial expansion and settlement to displace and replace the Indigenous inhabitants in the name of an alleged superiority of the whites, of the irreconcilable otherness of the Aborigines and of a self-declared right to own the colonized land, the resort to violence to get rid of those who represent an obstacle to this achievement becomes a commonly accepted and justified practice in all frontier spaces.

It is precisely in this context and on these premises that Kate Grenville's novel is set. In *The Secret River* the colonial space is perceived and exploited as a nobody's land by British convicts and white settlers, but it is also a place with a pervasive Other identity, a place from which the presence of the Indigenous people cannot be completely erased and where the confrontation with their undeniable existence and their unacknowledged right to belong – both obstacles to white settlement – generates a violent contact zone. The colony is first of all, in the words of M.L. Pratt, "a social space where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (Pratt 2008, p. 7). This dynamic and chaotic environment is to be identified with a space rather than with a place, if one resorts to Bill Ashcroft's argument that a place signifies colonial control, while space offers a more fluid and open form (Ashcroft 2005, "Newness" pp. 95-97). The area of the Hawkesbury River, the frontier where most of the action in the novel is set and where the protagonist William Thornhill struggles to fulfil his dream of owning a piece of land, is indeed a space transformed in its physical and emotional dimension not only by his attempts to settle the land, but also by his encounters with Indigenous people that reveal different claims to the land and contrasting concepts of ownership. In her analysis of the competing narratives

[1] The term was coined by the historian Russell Ward who, in his influential book *The Australian Legend* argued that the Australian national identity was created out of response to the environmental conditions arising from British colonization and that the stereotyped representation of the 'typical Australian' was built on the image of the nomadic white male worker in the bush differentiating both from the British and from the Indigenous type.

of settlement in *The Secret River*, Sue Kossew defines the Hawkesbury as "a paradoxical space of opportunity and destructiveness, where two different cultural attitudes towards the land collide" and as "a trope of movement and incursion, a channel that enables ticket-of-leave convicts to become settler farmers" (Kossew 2007, p. 13).

The accent on the transformative function of the colonial space and on the shift of identity from the oppressed condition of the convict to the oppressive role of the settler opens the way to the spatial implications of a penal colony. The novel depicts the early period of British colonization and settlement, when the transportation of convicts from the British isles represented an opportunity of social purge and spatial expansion for an industrialized Mother country that had no more space at home for the scum of society and thus seized the space made "available" in a newly-conquered colony. In short, convictism allowed England to cultivate her appearance as a place of progress and civilization and, as a consequence, transportation to Australia corresponded to a sort of Darwinian extinction of those who were unfit to be British. It was an opportunity to remove the worst from the English society and to promote an image of superiority both at home and abroad. In this view, Australia was long regarded as a dump, an "empty" continent, ready to contain what England discarded. The camp in Sydney Cove where Thornhill first lands is described as "a half-formed temporary sort of place" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 77) that had the only purpose of being a container for those condemned by His Majesty's courts. Furthermore, Thornhill's perception of the place is affected by a sense of alterity and alienation that overwhelms him in confronting with such a different environment from that of his homeland: "It all had an odd unattached look, the bits of ground cut up into squares in this big loose landscape, a broken-off chip of England resting on the surface of the place" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 82). The incomplete identity of the Australian place and the vicarious function of the colonial space prove that European invasion nullified the pre-colonized space and that its land was only perceived as lack and absence (Ashcroft 2005, "Newness", p. 97).

However, in contrast with this fake image of *terra nullius* and emptiness, Grenville begins her novel with a proleptic scene that anticipates Thornhill's arrival to Australia (the story actually begins when Thornhill is a child in London) and portrays an encounter with an Aboriginal man who appears in the darkness outside his hut. This narrative choice seems to be meant to put back at the centre the Indigenous presence in their own land and to assert their right to belong and to claim possession of the place. For the Aborigine the place around him is not the penal colony of New South Wales, it is his own place where he and his people have been living for thousands of years. His sense of belonging is conveyed by Grenville's anthropomorphic description of the place: the night is living, the air moves around full of rich smells, the trees stand tall, the breeze shivers and dies. In *Searching for The Secret River*, a writing memoir that details the process of researching and writing the novel, Grenville explains the narrative function of the connection between Aboriginal people and the landscape:

> I began to realise that the Aboriginal people were emerging in a way I hadn't planned: through the description of landscape. The rocks, the trees, the river – I realised that I was often describing them in human terms […] Humanising the landscape could be a way of showing the link between Indigenous people and their land because, in some way that I recognised without really understanding, the country *was* the people (Grenville 2006, "Searching", p. 199).

Given through the perception of Thornhill, the description of the surrounding environment creates an empathetic space that reflects the Aborigine's deep rootedness and harmonious connection with the natural landscape in contrast with the white man's feeling of alienation and dislocation. The Aboriginal man and nature seem to overlap, one has the traits of the other and they become indistinguishable: "It took a moment to understand that the stirring was a human, as black as the air itself. His skin swallowed the light and made him not quite real […] The rock of his face shaped itself around the big mouth, the imposing nose, the folds of his cheeks" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 5). On the other hand, the whole space around is foreign to Thornhill, unreadable and indifferent, even the darkness, the air, the sky. In this spatial loss he can find no reference points – no Pole Star, no Bear that used to guide him on the Thames – and the colony is for him a descent to Hell: "This was a place,

like death, from which men did not return […] He would die here under these alien stars, his bones rot in this cold earth" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 4).

The difference between the two approaches to and perceptions of place and space constitutes what Grenville calls "a space of difference" (Grenville 2006, "Searching", pp. 198-199) that she creates in the novel to represent a hollow. To oppose the invented story of the absence of a population she points her finger at the lack of a story that nevertheless needed to be told without trying to impose a single version of it and without speaking for someone else: "Their inside story – their responses, their thoughts, their feelings – all that was for someone else to tell, someone who had the right to enter that world and the knowledge to do it properly" (Grenville 2006, "Searching", p. 198). This is what Adam Gall calls "the emergence of a space of recognition within settler cultural texts" (Gall 2008, p. 95), which is first the recognition of existence in contrast with a declaration of absence, but also the acknowledgement of the importance of autonomous and unbiased narrative expression. Nonetheless, it is the recognition of different concepts of land ownership and belonging that gave rise to violence and silence and to "a national 'cult of disremembering'" (Kossew 2007, p. 8). In this early passage of the novel a frightened-to-death Thornhill shouts to the Aborigine the words "Be off!", but the man shouts back to him the same words in the same tone. This bold act of mimicry is perceived by William as a threat to his safety but above all to his authority as a white, civilized man whose superiority is not acknowledged and whose presence is not welcomed. In this way, the whole spatial dimension acquires a different meaning because in appropriating the white settler's words, the Aborigine is asserting his own right to be there and Thornhill's illegitimate claim to send him away.

The awareness of having trespassed on and usurped a place belonging to someone else is something that is felt by settlers since the very beginning but it is also a feeling that is hidden away, repressed and turned into violence, whose signs are everywhere in the novel and in the colony. They are visible in the fierce physical punishments of the convict system, in the dispossession of Aboriginal land and in the brutal confrontation between different cultures. They are also revealed through the murderous attacks of settlers who are ready to do anything not to renounce the privileges of their regained freedom and the personal and social fulfilment that only the material ownership of a piece of land can give them. The repressed rage and frustration, experienced by convicts for the severe mistreatments they were subject to, exasperated somehow their aggressiveness as colonizers of Aboriginal people, who were seen as targets for retributive anger at the system that constrained them (Huggan 2007, p. 18). This is also Thornhill's reaction who is not only enraged at the sight of the Indigenous presence that the colonial lie had declared to be an absence, but he is also overwhelmed by an unbearable sense of un-belonging on realizing that the place is alienating and that it is very far from being empty. The feeling of alienation is given not only by his diasporic uprootedness and by his degraded condition of convict, but above all by his perception of living in a space that is a non-place, in an Antipodean reversion of his mental representation of space: "Having never seen anything else, Thornhill had imagined that all the world was the same as London, give or take a few parrots and palm trees. How could air, water, dirt and rocks fashion themselves to become so outlandish? This place was like nothing he had ever seen" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 82).

The connection between perception and representation of space has been explored, in the field of Social Theory, by the French spatial philosopher Henri Lefebvre who demonstrated how space is a social product by developing a dialectical and three-dimensional conception of space production that implies spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces (Lefebvre 1991, p. 33). According to Lefebvre, space is produced by human beings who interact with each other through their activities and practices, bodies, thoughts, sensitivity, imagination and ideologies: hence, the production of space is constituted of perceived, conceived and lived space (Lefebvre 1991, p. 26). Lefebvre's triadic conception of space production thus presupposes that landscapes and mental representations of space are products of spatial encounters which, being lived, affect further perceptions of a given place. In *The Secret River*, William's early impression of the Australian space, and his conception of it, changes indeed as he lives in the colony: what was first alienating, threatening, un-representable to his European mind and experience, later becomes enticing and

alluring. Repulsion is turned into attraction as the newly-lived space forges his conception of place in terms of opportunity and value and, as a consequence, his perception changes as well. On his first voyage to the Hawkesbury (the outback area beyond the juridical administration of Sydney), Thornhill is amazed by the unrestrained beauty of the vast, rich, resourceful land:

> A chaos opened up inside him, a confusion of wanting. No one had ever spoken to him of how a man might fall in love with a piece of ground. No one had ever spoken of how there could be this teasing sparkle and dance of light among the trees, this calm clean space that invited feet to enter it. (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 110)

As Lefebvre points out, "it is not the work of a moment for a society to generate (produce) an appropriated social space […] This act of creation is, in fact, a *process*" (Lefebvre 1991, p. 34). And Thornhill, as a representative of the settler society, undertakes this long process of appropriation with a view to belonging to a place that he first needs to produce. "For it to occur", Lefebvre goes on, "it is necessary for the society's practical capabilities and sovereign powers to have at their disposal special places" (Lefebvre 1991, p. 34). And if the French sociologist refers to religious and political sites as symbolic places of renewal, the place that for William represents a consecrated site of fertility and re-appropriation of identity is indeed the piece of land by the Hawkesbury. The Hawkesbury area, unlike the penal settlement of Sydney Cove, is a still unexplored and unsettled space and to Thornhill's eyes it represents, what Bill Ashcroft calls a "space uninscribed as place" (Ashcroft 2021, p. 9): it is the representation of space before it becomes a place. Talking about the way in which first comers looked at Australia as "an historical space unmoored", Ashcroft observes that they had a foreshortened vision of the environment and this vision grasped for coherence in the memory of the look of British estates. Similarly, when he lands in Australia, Thornhill keeps referring to England to make the alien surrounding more familiar: "It was easier to turn to the familiar, this speck of England laid out within the forest. Sydney looked foreign, but in the ways that mattered to the Thornhills it was the Thames all over again. It had no means of surviving except for the thread that bound it to Home" (Grenville 2006, SR, p. 84).

The memory of the homeland, besides representing a thread for his survival, corresponds to a spatial practice that is lived directly before the new place is conceptualized (Lefebvre 1991, p. 34); it is a visual representation of his idea of place. As a matter of fact, for western perception, based on ocularcentrism, visuality is the model for representation (Ashcroft 2021, p. 9). What Thornhill sees is not something that is passively absorbed by his eyes, it is something he structures and gives coherence and meaning to only by placing it within the frames of reference he has ingrained in his memory. According to Ashcroft again:

> In both physical seeing and metaphoric representation, what we 'see' is a confusing, unstructured array of shapes and colours that must be built up into a picture of the world by a patient and painstaking process in which objects are linked to each other and to broader discursive contexts (Ashcroft 2021, p. 9).

If, based on these premises, we analyse Thornhill's reaction at his first sight of the Hawkesbury, we understand that the "chaos" and the "confusion of wanting" he feels, when confronted with the landscape, must be built up into a picture of his own world, that is the world of the colonizers. And the broader discursive contexts that give a sense to what he sees are those of advantage and ownership. It must be added, however, that the mixture of chaos and purity that this landscape represents for Thornhill also reminds of the 'horrid beauty' of the sublime, which is also to be associated to memory. Quoting the antiquarian Payne Knight's ideas on the picturesque, Simon Schama reports that "true sublimity came wrapped in a garment of memories and associations. The sublime was not simply an apparition that imprinted itself on the untutored senses. On the contrary, the force of its emotional effect depended on the beholder responding through a veil of remembered phenomena" (Schama 1996, p. 472).

As a result, this space becomes in Thornhill's mind (and, later, in real facts) a place to penetrate, possess, own – in the typical colonial approach of raping a virgin land: "It was a piercing hunger in his guts: to own it. To say *mine*, in a way he had never been able to say *mine* of anything at all […] Thornhill was in a frenzy of longing. It was burning him up, to set foot on that promised land" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, pp. 110; 136). The "frenzy of longing" that pervades William is the same that Schama again associates to landscapes like the peaks of mountains or northern lakes, places between heaven and hell that provoke in the beholder "loss of balance, the disorientation of depth and space, the scrambling of perception" and, using P.B. Shelley's words, "a sentiment of ecstatic wonder, not unallied to madness" (Schama 1996, pp. 474-475). Whether Australia was perceived as a Hell, due to the harshness of the convict settlement and the sense of displacement of settlers, or as a Paradise, thanks to its potential opportunities – a dystopian space of alienation or a utopian place of promise – Europeans always put themselves at the centre of its space and at the origins of the place they claimed they had made out of its emptiness. Thornhill, indeed, pervaded by a sense of omnipotence, puts himself at the top, physically and metaphorically, as if he owned that land: "on the crest of that slope, looking down over his own place" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 110). In his spatial centrality, he refuses to acknowledge the existence of the sophisticated civilization of the Aborigines and their right to inhabit the land as legitimate custodians, even when later on he realizes that "the blacks were farmers no less than the white men were" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 237) and that they had a social and political structure that was not so different from the British one.

The convincement that the land could give ex-convicts opportunities for a new life and that colonialism would make it a civilized place contributed to the process of suppression of memory and historical denial of the Indigenous' dispossession and dispersal that has affected Australia's conscience up to these days. Shaped by the mental vision of imperial culture based on land taking, exploitation, exhaustion, the Australian landscape is turned into "a text on which generations write their recurring obsessions" (Schama 1996, p. 12). This is what happens to Thornhill whose obsession with ownership makes him see the land on the Hawkesbury as "a blank page on which a man might write a new life" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 134). As Ashcroft points out, the very act of seeing occupies space, "it becomes that which it sees, thus suggesting the incorporating ontological reach of the imperial gaze" (Ashcroft 2021, p. 10). Thornhill's gaze incorporates the wild landscape and turns it into "a place of promise", but his eyes are both eager to see and blind at the same time. Indeed, it is his willingness to see and incorporate what he needs to redeem his stained identity of ex-convict that determines his choice not to see the obstacles to the fulfilment of his dreams of social climbing.

In this process of redemption, memory plays a fundamental role since it is to memories of the past and of places in London that Thornhill goes back in order to nourish his dream of possession. The fact that a landscape is invented and transformed by memory reveals that it is subjective, a work of the mind related to the sensitive experience of the individual. The interpretation of landscape as a product of the mind, developed by Simon Schama, implies that there is a close relation between landscape and memory, to the point that landscape is not to be seen as an objective entity, but as something that is subjectively created by the gaze and the individual experience of those who look at and live in it: "although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible […] Landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock" (Schama 1996, p. 7).

Evidence of this capacity of memory to transform landscape is to be found both in Thornhill's pre-colonial existence in London and in his colonial experience in Australia. The first part of the novel is set in London, where William and his wife-to-be Sal grow up and live before being deported to Australia. Especially for William, London represents a place of restrictions, misery and extreme poverty where he is constantly overwhelmed by a feeling of stifling and suffocation. The description, at the beginning of the novel, of the single room in which the whole family live and where "no one could move an elbow without hitting the wall or the table or a sister or a brother" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 9) very well conveys this sense of oppression and marginalization William grows up with, unable to develop a full identity and a sense of belonging. Memories of a childhood of privations,

hunger and unhappiness certainly influence Thornhill's looking back at his home country when he is in Australia. London is redefined through his new perception and experience to the point that his memories become dim, blurred and he ends up forgetting about places, streets and other topographical landmarks: "London, that place of hard stone and cobbles, was becoming just another story, its exact shape gone fluid" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 228). Being no more a lived space for Thornhill, London becomes a mental space made of fragments of memories and impressions and, as a consequence, his perception of the place changes. London becomes, indeed, a country of the mind where he realises he will never go back to because, should he return to his homeland, he would always be stained as a convict.

As a reaction to this, and as a way to compensate his fading sense of English identity and belonging, Thornhill invests everything in the new place and reinvents himself in the space of the Australian colony which, in a sense, fills the gap in his memory. Using Schama's words, one can say that his fading memory of a far-away London assumes the form of the Australian landscape itself, which represents a metaphor that becomes a reality, an absence that becomes a presence (Schama 1996, p. 25). He transforms from convict to landowner and reshapes the space he has occupied by obsessively clearing and cultivating the land, not only for evident reasons of survival and self-sufficiency, but also with the aim of using agriculture as a way to assert his property of the place. As Ashcroft points out, "early settlers could not separate the concept of place from that of property because property undergirded any conception of a profitable future" (Ashcroft 2021, p. 6). On the other hand, Indigenous people, who were perceived to be incapable of managing the land, had in the eyes of the whites no right to land ownership. For this reason, Thornhill often resorts to the western logic of exclusive ownership to dismiss the Indigenous' claim to occupy "his" space: "There were no signs that the blacks felt the place belonged to them. They had no fences that said *this is mine*. No house that said, *this is our home*" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 96).

His refusal to accept the Indigenous' inclusive logic of being owned by the land, instead of owning it, brings him to clash with the Aborigines living in the encampment close to his place. But these conflicting encounters, rather than asserting his authority, increase his sense of precariousness and insecurity which he faces by trying to dominate even more obsessively the colonial space: he cuts down trees, gets rid of bushes, erects fences. In other words, he tries to contain and control what actually keeps escaping him. His hundred acres that apparently give him stature, security and hope for the future represent only a temporary space without roots. He becomes aware that if he were forced to leave the place "it would not take long for Thornhill's Point to melt back into the forest. Weeds would spring up on the yard, the bark blow off the hut […] In no time at all, it would be as if the Thornhills had never called it theirs" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 308). It seems interesting here to refer to Lefebvre's definition of 'appropriation' and 'domination' of space (Lefebvre 1991, p. 392) to better understand how precariously 'abstract' Thornhill's position is. Lefebvre argues that the real appropriation of space is associated with the desire to do something, to create, intended as an investment that can only occur through the production of space (Lefebvre 1991, p. 393). Thornhill instead destroys, eradicates, erases what he finds on the land, and he doesn't do this to produce space but to distort it in order to impose his own place. His attempts to domesticate the land represent, again in Lefebvre's words, mere domination: oppressive and repressive powers that can only generate an abstract space with abstract signs of appropriation that would vanish if he abandoned the place.

It is at this point in the novel, in the middle of his delirious attempts to take roots, that the place speaks loudly to Thornhill making it clear that it already belongs to someone else. While digging the land, the man discovers a big rock underneath the ground with a fish carved in it and, though he tries to deny it at first, he has to admit to himself in the end that it is the work of a human hand. Through this impressive image of natural beauty, the presence of the Aborigines and of their culture appears to be metaphorically inscribed in the land and in the collective memory of the place, and it stands out in front of William's eyes as a memento. It is significant that William, however, desperately tries to erase it with his foot without being able to, because just like "the lines were part of the fabric of the rock" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 160), the Aborigines are part of the land, of its sacredness and of

its deep historical memory. So, if the rock in the ground speaks a language Thornhill doesn't want to understand, the story it tells corresponds to a map of the historical presence of the Aborigines and of their belonging that Thornhill grasps but keeps denying. As a matter of fact, in response to this discovery, he covers everything up, pretends he hasn't seen anything and some years later he builds the foundations of his new house over it.

In this pivotal part of the novel the topics of blindness and suppressed memory introduce the metaphor of the palimpsest that stands for a multi-layered structure on which multiple visions and impacts of different cultures overlap so that subsequent layers do not erase all the traces of the earlier ones which remain visible. When applied to the landscape, the image of the palimpsest implies that the territory can be compared to a text on which what was initially "written" is erased and replaced with a new spatial representation. However, the making of the landscape is a temporal process and so the landscape itself always reflects some of its past properties (Meinig 1979). And in the specific context of the Australian colonized landscape, "the pronouncement of the inarticulacy of the indigenous occupants is an important erasure, a constitution of empty space on which place can then be constructed palimpsestically by the various processes of colonial discourse" (Ashcroft 2005, "Newness", p. 101). Indeed, in a colonial context the struggle over place determines a continual state of transformation and creation and so newness is always a potential product of the dis-articulated resistances and transformations of the inhabitants: "The acts that create the colonial text of place are those of erasure, inscription and narration. Notice that these terms also tend to invoke the metaphor of the text as a flat plane. But they occur vertically through time as well as laterally in space" (Ashcroft 2005, "Newness", pp. 96-97).

In *The Secret River*, Thornhill, by pretending not to see, covering the stone and re-writing his white ownership over it, evidently treats the land in a typical colonial approach, as if it were a palimpsest. However, in the process of deconstruction/construction of the place, the past properties of the landscape, below the overwritten lie of white civilization, cannot completely be erased and so for William, just like for other non-Indigenous Australians, the space can only be settled on the surface, while the essence of the place will always be unattainable. Even in his new identity of landowner, with a rich villa erected on the hidden evidence of the Aboriginal civilization and with a personal history invented for himself as a gentleman, Thornhill feels he does not fit. The signs of the past remain below and haunt his present:

> Under the house, covered by the weight of Mr Thornhill's villa, the fish still swam in the rock. It was dark under the floor-boards: the fish would never feel the sun again. It would not fade, as the others out in the forest were fading, with no black hands to re-draw them (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 330).

With the metaphor of the carved swimming fish, Grenville implies that although the Indigenous people have been dispersed by the greedy violence of white settlers or killed in tragic massacres, their historical memory cannot be suppressed and the signs of their belonging will continue to speak even in the silence of darkness. As Sara Upstone points out, in the spatial appropriation of colonial overwriting "a new reality is layered over the old, which nevertheless continues to exist as a trace, akin to the silences of a written text (Upstone 2009, p. 6). The reference to silences that speak aloud can be connected to the function of memory and to the consequences of suppressing memory. As a matter of fact, the image of the palimpsest can also be referred to memory itself because, as Pierre Nora maintains, places retain memories but memory "remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived" (Nora 1989, p. 8).

In *The Secret River* all events of violence against the Indigenous are surrounded by silence and secrets and they are purposely removed by memory. When Thornhill visits Smasher Sullivan, the most violent and murderous settler, and discovers that he has locked in his hut a young Aboriginal woman, chained like an animal, and that he repeatedly abuses her, he is so shocked that he goes away

with the firm decision of saying nothing either to his wife or to anybody else. A similar reaction is to be seen when Thornhill finds out that all the members of an Aboriginal group, women and children included, have been killed with rat poison camouflaged as flour and lie dead on the ground of their encampment. In both cases, William dismisses the terrible images that remain impressed in his memory and chooses silence as a way not to take on the responsibility of knowing and denouncing: "That was another thing he was going to lock away in the closed room in his memory, where he could pretend it did not exist" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 290). But it is in particular the topical episode of the massacre of the Aborigines on the Hawkesbury at the hand of white settlers that can be read in relation to silence, historical repression and memory inscribed in the landscape. The violence of the massacre is described mainly through sounds and noises: the firing of the guns, the shrieks and cries of women and children, the deafening roars and blows of the slaughter. But when the carnage is over what remains, apart from the heap of dead bodies lying on the ground, is "a great shocked silence hanging over everything" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 323). It is the silence of death and of horror that cannot be verbally expressed, but it is above all the silence that will lead to the suppression of memory and to the manipulation of history. The slaughtering of the Indigenous people of Australia will remain hidden in what the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner defined "the Great Australian Silence"[2], or covered by lies and secrets under a different version of history in which only the heroic gestures of white settlers will be included.

For Thornhill, whose fortune derives from the consequences of the massacre and from the secrets lying behind the re-invention of his identity as a wealthy settler, memory works as a treasure chest. The images that disturb his conscience are stowed away so that the past can be conserved inside, though removed in a hidden space of individual and collective memory, whilst the present can go on undisturbed. This mechanism of memory is explained by Pierre Nora as "archival":

> Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image […] The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs – hence the obsession with the archive that marks our age, attempting at once the complete conservation of the present as well as the total preservation of the past (Nora 1989, p. 13).

In a similar process, at the end of the novel, William's memories of the past are not experienced from the inside, but they are transposed and represented outside, in the place and space that surround him. As it happens to those who experience the sensory disorientation of very high altitudes, the exterior space perceived from his high social position becomes the endless space of his interior self, the landscape of his soul, "the frighteningly roomy contours of the mind" (Schama 1996, p. 489). William has invented a new story for him and his family, "a well-made story, every corner of its construction neatly finished" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 335), a story of honesty, sacrifice and success that comes easy to him because "a person was entitled to draw any picture they fancied on the blank slate of this new place" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 333). But the traces of his previous identity as a social waste, archived in his memory, become visible through the exterior signs of his new place, which "was not quite what Thornhill had pictured. Something was wrong with the way the pieces fitted together: some were too big, others too small" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 329). The Australian villa bears signs of the rich houses in London that William looked at with envy when he was a child. So, the memory of what he used to be is preserved, by contrast, through ostentatious architectural elements like the stone steps of the verandah, copied from those of St Mary Magdalene in Bermondsey, or the lions on the gateposts like the ones at Christ Church. But these elements also reveal that his present affluence has not been obtained in the right way ("something was wrong"): the steps are "dwarfish and awkward", the lions are "a more domestic type of creature" (Grenville 2006,

[2] In 1968 W.E.H. Stanner in his Boyer Lecture "After the Dreaming" talked about the "cult of forgetfulness" practiced on a national scale in Australia, which he termed "the Great Australian Silence", meaning that Australians do not just fail to acknowledge the atrocities of the past, but choose not to think about them at all, to the point of forgetting that these events happened.

SR, p. 329). These pieces that somehow do not fit are the metaphorical representation of how Thornhill's presence in that place does not fit. Having archived his past identity is not enough for a new one to be conserved in the present, because the visibility of these images reveal traces of violation and abuse.

Just like William's place represents the "exterior scaffolding" of his personal memory, also the space around him bears outward signs of a suppressed historical memory. The atrocities of the massacre, the brutality, the violence, the horror can be archived in William's (as well as in the whole nation's) memory, but their traces remain on the landscape, like the blood stains that would not come off his shirt when he washes his clothes in the river after the massacre. On the ground where the massacre was perpetrated "a patch of bare yellow earth beside the lagoon" remains visible "where the bonfire had burned into the night" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 340). Vegetation doesn't grow anymore on that spot but this emptiness holds the memory of what has been suppressed: "Nothing was written on the ground. Nor was it written on any page. But the blankness itself might tell the story to anyone who had eyes to see" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 340). As Sue Kossew notes, the blankness represents "the gap in history that enabled the massacre to be suppressed" (Kossew 2007, p. 16). Historical records reconstructed events from a different, manipulated perspective, talking of natives guilty of depredations and outrages, of an affray and of settlers that dispersed them. But, as in the words of Nora mentioned above, places retain memories and memory remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting (Nora 1989, p. 8).

In conclusion, it can be argued that *The Secret River* shows how the memory of violence was meant to be removed both from the personal memory of white settlers like Thornhill and from the collective memory of the nation in a process of national dis-remembering. However, as Dolores Herrero argues, the novel depicts "a story of violence that has left perennial traumatic marks on the psyche of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians" (Herrero 2014, p. 90) and even though the story deals with the colonial past, the character of Thornhill can also be seen as representing a mirror for the reflection of contemporary Australians "within which to glimpse an emerging 'place where we live'" (Radstone 2013, p. 294): an Australia that is 'remembered' (but, I would add, also 're-membered') through the evocation of its past. And indeed, the scars that remain on the landscape prove that memory cannot be forcibly suppressed, as it is retained in places and spaces in "permanent evolution", so that new stories and new identities are continuously appropriated and re-invented: "In this place, where everyone had started fresh-born on the day of their arrival, stories were like those shells down on the beach. A crab might live in one for a while, until he grew too big for it, and then he would scuttle around to another, the next size up" (Grenville 2006, *SR*, p. 335).

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