

**The Myth of Certainty and the Matrix of Uncertainty: Five Contemporary Australian  
Novels Confront History**

by

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## Abstract

The intersection of postcolonialism and historiographic metafiction can be seen in novels written over the last several decades by British and Antipodean authors concerning the British colonial era in Australia and its aftermath. Novels from this sub-group of writers of historiographic metafiction fit both Linda Hutcheon's description of historiographic metafiction and some of the concerns of postcolonial writers and theorists, as they revisit the colonial era and critique or reassess the historiographic writings that helped galvanize pro-colonial perspectives and marginalize and dehumanize the Indigenous communities there. While there is much scholarship on historiographic metafiction and postcolonialism, this volume focuses on the specific nexus of those two concepts and its coalescence in contemporary Australian novels of the colonial and postcolonial experience. The novels covered in this volume—by Peter Carey, Matthew Kneale, Rachel Leary, Richard Flanagan, and Alexis Wright—share an interest in 19th Century Australia, the violence and injustice that were an inescapable part of the foundation of the country during that period, and the potential dubiousness of historical documentation. The self-reflexivity, magical realism, intertextuality, and other elements of historiographic metafiction in these novels force a reckoning with the textualization of history and illustrate the epistemological effects of official documentation and widely accepted or mythologized historical accounts and the way such writings create understandings of events and historical figures that can shape beliefs and ideologies for centuries.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction: The Myth of Certainty.....	5
Peter Carey’s <i>True History of the Kelly Gang</i> : Truth in Lies .....	22
Avenging History: Richard Flanagan’s Use of Magical Realism, Intertextuality, and a Fish Called Gould to De-Silence the Sarah Island Prison .....	53
<i>Bridget Crack</i> : Cracks in History .....	83
Nothing is Certain, Unless Publication Makes It So: Intertextuality, Parody, and Polyphony in Matthew Kneale’s <i>English Passengers</i> .....	109
“Our Country is a Very Big Story”: The Present is the Past in Alexis Wright’s <i>Carpentaria</i> ..	141
Conclusion: The Matrix of Uncertainty .....	168
Works Cited .....	181

## Introduction: The Myth of Certainty

*“What history is changes with time and place.”*  
– Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 1995 (25)

Despite the authority history and historical documentation have been afforded over the centuries, despite the confidence with which historians tell their tales and readers receive them, despite the seemingly unscalable mountain of absolutism and conviction with which historiographers may preload their explorations of the past, historical certainty is a myth. This myth of certainty is compounded by the matrix of uncertainty one finds when researching and assessing the past—a web of differing perspectives, contradictory accounts, official documentation of questionable veracity, revisions, omissions, imprecisions, and, sometimes, collisions of fact and fiction. In fact, historiographers write with the same tools as writers of fiction, and they can include, exclude, emphasize, or de-emphasize material to create an effect or advocate a viewpoint. In some cases, it’s not a stretch to say that historiography is propaganda, a lie told by those in a position to tell it.<sup>1</sup> Even with the most objective and benevolent intentions, though, history is fluid, revisions are frequently necessary, perspectives shift, and, as the Trouillot quotation in the epigraph above suggests, what may be considered true history in one place may be considered a lie somewhere else. History, then, no longer has the authority it once had—and still claims to have.

Writers of historiographic metafiction are acutely aware of this. British authors such as Salman Rushdie, Julian Barnes, and Jeanette Winterson have written novels that have been described as historiographic metafiction, a term coined by Linda Hutcheon in 1989 for a type of

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<sup>1</sup> In the words of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “At best, history is a story about power, a story about those who won” (5), and “history [is] one among many types of narratives with no particular distinction except for its *pretense* of truth” (6, italics mine). This is especially true of historiographies written in the aftermath of colonial occupation, such as the Victorian era.

fiction that presents a direct challenge to historiography, or at least is keen to highlight some of its shortcomings and dangers. Hutcheon used the term for works that included “the mixing of historical and fictive representations,” an intense “self-consciousness of the fictionality, the lack of the familiar pretense of transparency, and the calling into question of the factual grounding of history writing” (*The Politics* 33). This approach applied to fiction depicting colonial times or with postcolonial concerns about the continued relevance and systemic ramifications of colonialism can work as a critique of the oppressors and an examination of the role that incomplete or biased historiographies and other official documentation might have had on persisting perspectives. Victorian-era historiographies and documentation on race and Indigenous people, for instance, surely continued to oppress in print through the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and beyond just as the colonizers had done on the ground.

While it may be a given that writers of historical fiction may feel their versions of history are just as valid as any historiographer’s, writers of postcolonial historiographic metafiction are doing something different, something more, and something very specific: arguing that their historio-fictional hybrids may be even *more* valid than a historiographer’s, because the historiographer’s carries with it a presumption of certitude that gives it the power of authority it may not deserve. The writer of postcolonial historiographic metafiction, on the other hand, seeks to bring to light the injustices both of the colonials’ aggression *and* their historiographic creations, as well as advancing long-suppressed narratives of those wronged by colonial aggression. Doing so may not necessarily make all historical writing—either from the field of historiography or the desk of the novelist—definitively provable, but it can limit or push back against the monolithic power of historiography and illuminate some aspects of the colonial past that had been either twisted beyond recognition or completely muffled. By revisiting and

reassessing history, writers of these types of novels create contemplations and conversations about the accuracy and definitive authority of historiography; address decades- and centuries-old stereotypes and oppressive attitudes and actions toward minorities, the marginalized, and communities of color and of Indigenous people; and point toward a more equitable future.

This intersection of postcolonialism and historiographic metafiction can be seen in novels written over the last several decades by British and Antipodean authors concerning the British colonial era in Australia and its aftermath. Novels from this sub-group of writers of historiographic metafiction fit both Hutcheon's description of historiographic metafiction and some of the concerns of postcolonial writers and theorists, as they revisit the colonial era and critique or reassess the historiographic writings that helped galvanize pro-colonial perspectives and marginalize and dehumanize the Indigenous communities there. While there is much scholarship on historiographic metafiction and postcolonialism, this volume focuses on the specific nexus of those two concepts and its coalescence in contemporary Australian novels of the colonial and postcolonial experience. The novels covered in this volume—by Peter Carey, Matthew Kneale, Rachel Leary, Richard Flanagan, and Alexis Wright—share an interest in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Australia, the violence and injustice that were an inescapable part of the foundation of the country during that period, and the potential dubiousness of historical documentation.

While the postcolonial aspects of these novels are apparent—their critiques of British colonialism and colonialism more broadly, their interest in the lingering aftereffects of the colonial period—their elements of historiographic metafiction deepen their scope in the way they also examine the power and credibility of historiography and other official or authoritative published documentation. Hutcheon's theories of historiographic metafiction drew my attention to the novels in this volume—the way Carey's *True History* parodies historiography, for

instance, and Kneale's portrayal of racism as a foundational element in colonial-era scientific and religious documentation in *English Passengers*—and undergird my analysis. Reading these novels as works of historiographic metafiction helps illuminate some of their elements and themes. For instance, these five novels display the kind of intense self-reflexivity Hutcheon discusses, which calls attention to their *textualization*, a turning of what once was reality into a representation—a process that has an inherent and profound ability to memorialize and sanctify. Since, as Hutcheon says, we can only know history “through its textualized means” (*A Poetics* 119), this memorialization and sanctification is dangerous and can lead to misrepresentations and misunderstandings of the past—and thus also, by extension, of the present. With this self-reflexivity and other elements of Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction such as magical realism, intertextuality, parody, and the mixing of fact and fiction, these novels force a reckoning with the textualization of history: If we know that some/much historiography and official historical documentation has been wrong, biased, shoddy, subjective, incomplete, or intentionally misleading with the intent of forging positive beliefs *for* one group of people or negative beliefs *against* another—or all of the above—then this forces a reassessment of the past and of the beliefs and attitudes formed by it that still exist today.

These novels illustrate, and are contemplations on, the sweeping epistemological effects of official documentation and widely accepted or mythologized historical accounts and the way such writings create understandings of events and historical figures that can shape beliefs and ideologies for centuries. They are, then, suited to being read as works of historiographic metafiction; as Hutcheon says, they “re-present the past . . . to open it up to the present [and] prevent it from becoming conclusive and teleological” (*A Poetics* 110). Building from Hutcheon's original definition of historiographic metafiction; touching on the theoretical work of



others who have expounded on her ideas such as Brian McHale, Susana Onega, and Barry Pomeroy; and integrating some relevant insights from postcolonial critics including Homi Bhabha, Franz Fanon, and Stephen Slemon, this volume seeks to illuminate and offer insight into five novels that feature elements of historiographic metafiction with Australian and Tasmanian settings and a strong interest the Australian colonial period.

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These five novels emphasize the violence and brutality of Australia's founding and growth as a young country, while their elements of historiographic metafiction highlight the difficulty of historical certainty. These epistemological pursuits emphasize the slipperiness of the historical record and official documentation and the way they can create historical myths that can last seemingly forever. Today, for instance, there are deniers of slavery, genocide, the Holocaust. In Australia, as Sven Lindqvist puts it,

They deny the obvious fact that before the British arrival the country belonged to the Indigenous population. They deny that the Aborigines resisted British occupation. They deny that settlers killed large numbers of Aborigines on the frontier and terrified others to submission. They deny the role the British invasion played in the catastrophe that annihilated some nine-tenths of the Aboriginal population, extinguishing several hundred peoples, each with its own language and culture. (Location 5711)

It takes whole systems to tell these lies and make them stick, as the theories of poststructuralist writers like Michel Foucault have discussed. “[H]istory,” Foucault argued, “is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*” (*Archeology* 7, italics his), a transformation reliant on systemic factors to reach such monumental status. Systems of religion, education, science, politics, government, language, and policing each announced and reinforced the English

way during colonization, and the more these systems became entrenched, the more they became ingrained. Systems of punishment and discipline, as Foucault has pointed out, played a key role in the development and fortification of colonial societies.<sup>2</sup> In Australia, founded as it was as a penal colony for overflow prisoners since the English favored imprisoning so many for so many different crimes—many small, many petty, many involving minor thefts out of hunger and desperation—this system of crime and punishment was baked right into the crust of the cracked-earth country. The system of racial hierarchy intermingled with this penal system, too, as many of the original inhabitants were poor Irish arrested for crimes large and small and detested for their Irishness. Indigenous Australians were seen as an even lower race than the Irish, of course; most of them died before even being afforded the possibility of prison time. Figures like the well-read M.D. Robert Knox in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century helped galvanize public belief among European citizens in the righteousness and necessity of their cause and of the supposed inferiority of people of color. Knox was writing about races generally but in places put special emphasis on Indigenous Australians. For instance, he noted that Australia seemed to be a land where Europeans could thrive, with the presence of the Indigenous populations being the only real obstacle, and an easy one to overcome. The plan he advocated for there can only be called horrific:

In Australia it can scarcely be said that an antagonistic race faces them, so miserably sunk is the native population. A ready way too of extinguishing them has been discovered; the Anglo-Saxon has already cleared out Tasmania. It was a cruel, cold-blooded, heartless

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, in his *Discipline and Power*, Foucault notes that public punishment “assures the automatic functioning of power (201), and that the “ceremonies, the rituals, the marks by which the sovereign’s surplus power was manifested” creates “a machinery” (202), a type of system that, far beyond merely providing justice and meting out deserved punishment, helps maintain a societal order and keep those perceived by those in power to be of a lower class or lesser importance *in their place*. These types of systems of social hierarchy and public punishment were a major part of colonial societies, as in Australia.

deed. Australia is too large to attempt the same plan there; but by shooting the natives as freely as we do crows in other countries, the population must become thin and scarce in time. (144-5)

Knox's declaration that "There must be a physical and ... psychological inferiority in the dark races ... [which] may not depend altogether on deficiency in the size of the brain ... [but to] ... the quality of the brain itself" (151), may have contained the word "may," but the certainty with which he wrote is indicative of the certainty with which English colonists and settlers in Australia went about their business of starting and running a country and attempting to cement notions of white supremacy. Publications like Knox's in the mid-1800s, as writer and filmmaker Raoul Peck notes, created a sense of rationality, and of certainty, that claiming and colonizing the land of darker-skinned people was right and completely justifiable—even if meant killing off entire nations of them as if they weren't even human. "Racism," says Peck, "was accepted and became a central element in British imperial ideology, ... genocide came to be regarded as the inevitable byproduct of progress, and prejudice against alien peoples, which had always existed, was now given organized form and apparent scientific validation." In other words, racism itself became a central cog in the system of colonial machinery.

Without these systems and the English pride in their own greatness, their certainty in their own righteousness, their absolutist definitiveness in their puffed-up power and God-given right to spread their systems throughout the entire world, conquering and metamorphosing all who stood in their way, it is unlikely—no, impossible—to imagine that the English project to colonize and Anglify the globe would have matriculated very far beyond the small set of windswept isles jutting off the northwest coast of Europe in between the cold and treacherous waters of the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.

Even with all those systems in place and operating with cold and inhospitable efficiency, it still took one other system to make it all work—documentation—and as gifted as these English explorers, conquerors, and colonizers were at exploring, conquering, and colonizing, they were even better at documenting. They were great at producing legal writings, judicial decisions, governmental decrees, political proclamations, religious tracts, declarations of war, pseudo-scientific racial rankings, journalism, essays, pamphlets, and of course historiography: *putting it all in writing*. This made it official. This made it authoritative. This made it history.

It didn't necessarily, however, make it true.

The novels discussed in this volume aren't necessarily true, either. They are, after all, novels. They, in fact, have fun with the whole concept of truth, right from the ironic title of Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* to the magical realism of Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* to the imagined pyrotechnics and cyclonic apocalypse of Alexis Smith's *Carpentaria*. In other places, they fictionalize feminist warriors fighting back against their English oppressors from the margins to which they've been forced (Rachel Leary's *Bridget Crack*) and Indigenous warriors doing the same (*Carpentaria* and Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers*). In true historiographic metafiction form, these novels interweave fact and fiction, fantasy and reality, myth and history, the officially documented and the un-documentable, in a way that calls into question the verifiability and verisimilitude of supposed historical facts and presumed-true historical narratives. They seek out other narratives lost to time—histories untold, unrecorded, intentionally silenced, or never even heard in the first place—and satirize, deconstruct, and demythologize the authoritarian tales of English, Eurocentric, Christian, and white superiority that held thrall over the histories of English colonial ventures broadly and the English-Antipodean colonial venture specifically. These novels are fiction, yes. They are

playful, to be sure. They are sardonic, self-reflexive, intertextual, and non-receptive to simple or singular interpretations. They are, however, works that *seek* the truth, trying to find it in places that historiographers and other official documenters might have—unintentionally or otherwise—overlooked. They see history not as a system of language and documentation, fixed and unquestionable, but as fluid, as constantly in need of revisiting and revising, and as ever-changing and volatile as the waters of the Atlantic Ocean off the English coast or the shipwreck-strewn waters of the Pacific Ocean off Tasmania. They confront colonial history; critique the lies, hypocrisies, and violence(s) found there; and suggest that there are more voices from the past that deserve—and need—to be heard. They attack the myth of certainty and find in its place a matrix of uncertainty. They are not made entirely of verifiable facts, nor do they claim to be, but neither was the concept of manifest destiny, the idea that Columbus “discovered” anything, or the notion that any king had ever been divinely chosen to lead a nation.

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So much of these novels is about an interweaving—an interweaving that reflects the interweaving of race and ideologies of racial superiority, religion, politics, military and other forms of institutionalized violence, language and publishing, and the pursuit of wealth and power that we know are part of the fabric of colonialism but that we also know go back at least to the 11<sup>th</sup> Century and the Crusades, when, as Peck explains, “race, color, and blood became institutionalized for the first time” as “the Christian kingdoms of northern Spain, together with the church leadership and other European monarchies, decided to take over Muslim-controlled trade routes to the far east” (Peck).<sup>3</sup> England, of course, would eventually join in these crusades, which would spread over several iterations and last until the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Though

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<sup>3</sup> Peck adds, “The ultimate goal of the church and the European rulers was never just about winning souls to Christianity. It was also about gaining wealth and power through annihilation.”

attempts at the conquering of others' territory most assuredly dates back to the earliest human communities (think of the waterhole, for instance, in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*), this interweaving of race, politics, religion, and writing—fueled by the power of wealth, violence, and naked ambition—provided the blueprint for future colonial efforts, the underpinnings for the systemic racism inherent in them, and the documentation (historiographic and otherwise) that helped spread the epistemologies that justified and concretized such ventures from India to North America to Africa to Australia, virtually wherever there was land they could claim as their own and darker-skinned people they could dominate and eradicate.

In many ways, it is this colonial domination, illustrated through the interweaving of these systems, that is the central focus of the five novels at question in this volume. Without these systems, and the interweaving of them, it is difficult to imagine the tremendous successes (read: deadly damage) they had—or their ultimate failures, or the fact that so much residual aftermath still lingers in many of these societies in the form of white supremacy and institutionalized racism and bigotry today, or the fact that contemporary authors are so keen to revisit these periods and illuminate their darker aspects. In Carey's *True History*, for example, we see Kelly's actions not justified or explained away but as an outgrowth of the fact that he was Irish and thus subject to the ideology of racial superiority that allowed the English to look down upon the Irish as lazy, cowards, apelike, and in need of being "civilized." As the son of an Irish convict sent to the prison on Van Diemen's Land (later Tasmania) for the theft of two pigs, Ned works as a kind of gateway to considering the British colonial experience in Australia. The novel interweaves Ned's accounts of England's penal and judicial systems, corrupt police, and the unfair systems of land distribution and economic inequality, as being the inextricably linked structures that defined the colonial Australian experience throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The Indigenous presence in the

novel—as in reality throughout the century—is muted, reflecting the large numbers of Indigenous Australians killed by colonizers and settlers in four major massacres and other violence, as well as through deaths by sexual abuse and European diseases, by the time of Ned’s life in the mid-late 1800s (Harris).<sup>4</sup> Those that remained were subjected to continued racism, pushed aside to the margins of society (much like Native Americans in the U.S.), or expected to assimilate and accept their positions as lower-class citizens in their own country. Tying all these threads together in Carey’s novel are the elements of parody and satire related to its historiographic metafiction structure. That it is titled as a *True History* calls into question historiography’s claim to the truth; that it is told from one person’s point of view highlights the subjective aspect of any written document; that it integrates fiction with non-fictional elements, intertextual elements that take the reader outside the scope of the book to add layers of understanding to the reading, and parodies of other types of official documentation such as legal writings, documents associated with museums and libraries, and journalism interrogates the air of presumed authority of these types of writings and the effect they can have on epistemological understandings of whole swaths of people.

*True History*, then, is a true work of historiographic metafiction, calling attention to its own fictionality as well as the fictionality of other forms of writing generally accepted as truly non-fictional. It is also a work of postcolonialism in its attempts to revisit, reconsider, and recontextualize a colonial era with an eye toward its ramifications that still exist today. Carey has said he is interested in why a figure such as Kelly would still have such relevance and resonance in today’s Australia, and his novel’s perspective on the colonial experience

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<sup>4</sup> Estimates vary and controversies exist, but John Harris estimates that at least 30,000 Indigenous Australians were killed through settler violence, sexual abuse, and European diseases from the beginning of British settlement in 1788 through the first forty years of occupation. Harris also cites a study that suggests “a 96% decline in Aboriginal population” by the 1920s (Harris 81).

underscores the systemic corruption and violence at the heart of the founding and growth of the country. My chapter on *True History* uses Hutcheon's writings on historiographic metafiction as a touchstone and centerpiece and provides a close reading of the novel utilizing recent criticism of the novel and theoretical writings to place the novel at the intersection of postcolonialism and historiographic metafiction. The chapter explores how Carey's novel speaks to the abuses, corruption, prejudice, and violence inherent in the colonial project, and to the whitewashed versions of its history propagated through time.

The chapter on Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, published in 2001, discusses the novel's use of persistent self-reflection, intertextuality, and magical realism to narrate the fictionalized story of William Buelow Gould, a convict and painter in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century on Van Diemen's Land. A great deal of research is available on the real-life Gould, who was chosen by colonial authorities to paint a sketchbook of fish known to live in the region—a book that eventually took on great historical significance. The novel allows Flanagan the opportunity to use his narrator to explore the “nightmare of the past” and “a natural history of the dead” (63), bringing to light long-neglected voices and atrocities from the colonial past. The novel embodies and embraces Hutcheon's concepts of historiographic metafiction as a brazen exposure of the unreliability of texts, the relevance of intertextuality as a key toward any kind of definitive understanding of the past (or of the “truth”), and the postmodern as inextricably aligned with the political. The narrator notes that one character in the book, Mr. Lampriere, believed that “the past was the past, but his interest was the future” (231). To a degree, this line could speak for the whole novel, as well as for the whole project of historiographic metafiction.

The chapter here on Flanagan's novel sees the work as a contemplation not only of the underbelly of colonial Australia—like *True History*, the work depicts the penal system as cruel



and corrupt—but also of the slipperiness and fluidity of historiography, language, and narrative. Drawing primarily on scholarship related to magical realism, intertextuality, and historiographic metafiction, the chapter locates the work within the tradition of contemporary novels that blend fact and fiction and history and fantasy in a way that calls attention to their own fictionality while at the same time playfully deconstructing the construction of historiography. The setting in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century on Van Diemen’s Land is important for all the novels discussed in this volume: Leary’s novel is also set then and there; Carey’s is mainly set several decades later on mainland Australia but sees Kelly’s life as an outgrowth of his family’s transportation and his father’s imprisonment on Van Diemen’s Land during those early decades of the century; and Kneale’s sprawling novel takes place partially on Van Diemen’s Land in the early 1800s, with those passages being some of the most important of the work, and partially later in the century. Wright’s is the only novel in this volume with a significantly different setting, but as a work set in contemporary Australia with the history of the nation’s Indigenous people and the violent founding of the country as a constant undercurrent, it is thematically linked to this timeframe, as well. Like these other works in this volume, Flanagan’s revisits the early 1800s in Australian history and the crafting of historical narratives around it, suggesting the importance of always interrogating history and recognizing that one voice can never speak for it all.

Seen one way, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was one of powerful European nations such as France, Belgium, and Great Britain spreading their empires throughout the world. Seen another way, it was a century of those nations hastening the demise of cultures throughout the world that they saw as inferior, less civilized, and less human. Those two perspectives, though, are really one and the same; we couldn’t have had one without the other. Like the other novels discussed in this volume, Flanagan’s makes this two-sided proposition clear.

The most recent novel in this volume is Leary's *Bridget Crack*. Again set in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century primarily on Van Diemen's Land, Leary takes readers to the margins of this time and place: into the penal system, among bushrangers and other outlaws. Perhaps most importantly, it centers its narrative around a woman convict, a group of people whose histories, like those of Indigenous peoples, have been silenced. It's possible to know some factual certainties of women convicts of the time, and my chapter on Leary's novel touches on some of these—roughly how many there were, for instance, and what types of crimes they were typically arrested for—but finding the perspective of an actual woman convict or outlaw from the era is virtually impossible. Their accounts simply do not exist. Leary gives voice to a fictionalized woman convict and outlaw in the novel, illustrating the limits of historiography. The intertextual elements of the novel and the blending of fact and fiction identify it as a work of historiographic metafiction, while it also works as a feminist statement on the historical treatment of women in colonial societies *and* on the history of historiographies as a primarily male venture. How different might our understanding of history be had more women historiographers been among the earliest chroniclers of the past? *Bridget Crack* offers a speculation that there would have been a greater understanding of the injustices, inequities, and oppressions that women endured throughout history had that been the case. We don't know how many colonial women—in Australia or elsewhere—might have had histories similar to Bridget's, but we *do* know that if any did, we never learned about it. Through the lenses of historiographic metafiction, postcolonial theory, and feminism, and using scholarly sources, historical documentation, and my own personal interview with Leary, my close reading of her novel makes these points and observations and places the work within the framework of this volume—the

intersection of historiographic metafiction, postcolonialism, and the contemporary British-Antipodean novel.

Kneale's 2000 novel *English Passengers* places a disparate cast of characters aboard a ship in the mid-1800s bound from the Isle of Man to Van Diemen's Land. Using more than twenty narrators, the novel embraces the concepts of intertextuality and polyphony and critiques the notion that any one historical source can be the verifiable "truth." As with *Gould's Book of Fish*, the book is inherently political and uses its historical content and context to critique the past *and* the present, and to look to the future. Its shifting chronology and narrative perspectives imply a connectedness between historical epochs and events and exemplifies Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction. Ultimately, it could be argued that Kneale's novel critiques the colonial project and illustrates the fragmented nature of both history itself and the way it is constructed.

Finally, Wright's 2006 novel *Carpentaria* also fits Hutcheon's definitions of postmodernism and historiographic metafiction. The narrative is fictional, but Wright's work, focusing on tensions between Indigenous communities and European officials in contemporary northern Queensland, works as a postcolonial critique and contemplation of the effects the nation's colonial history has had on its Indigenous population. In this chapter, I focus some of my attention on the intertextual elements of this novel and how they allow for more thorough understandings of the history of the colonial project in Australia, the treatment of Indigenous people there, and more recent events illustrative of colonialism's aftermath, such as the development of mines, degradation of the land, and marginalization of what remains of the Indigenous population of Australia. I also discuss Wright's use of myth, magical realism, and metafiction in the novel. Wright herself is a member of the Indigenous Waanyi nation, and her

novel blends these elements in a way that challenges the dominant historical understandings of the colonization of Australia, its promises, and its legacy. It takes us from past to present—or rather, a present infused with the past—and offers a punctuation to the discussions in this work.

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It is impossible to truly know history; we must always strive to *understand* history. These statements may seem at odds, but the novels in this volume make a case for the necessity of recognizing the truth and importance of both statements and of how they function together. We know that as colonialism spread throughout the globe, strengthening behind the expanding wealth, weaponry, and power of European nations in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, whole swaths of Indigenous peoples were wiped out in the Americas, the Caribbean, Africa, and the Antipodean islands. In Africa, the total numbers of white, English, and European colonizers never came close to overpowering the numbers of native Africans, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, most of these colonial ventures fell apart, defeated by uprisings or felled by their own greed, corruption, or incompetence. The postcolonial legacies remain throughout the continent, though, because of failures to fill vacuums of power in some places and continued hostilities between tribal factions that once lived separately and peacefully but were forced into arranged nations by new European-drawn national borders.

In Australia and Tasmania, on the other hand, as in North America, the Indigenous populations were so thoroughly banished and beaten that the entire character of the continent was forever changed, and there remained among the new (nearly all-white) Australian population the same sense of manifest destiny that propped up the colonial venture—the idea that the English and European colonizers had been blessed by God with the qualities of civilization and righteousness that made them not only superior to those who looked, behaved, and believed

differently than them but also chosen to spread their values and social systems around the world, transforming all those *others* into metamorphosed versions of themselves and eradicating those who would not allow themselves to be so metamorphosed. There remains in Australia a faction of the population that still looks at figures like the bushranger Ned Kelly as something of a national folk hero, someone who dared stand up to the English colonial overlords. In recent decades, the nation has turned toward gestures like “National Sorry Day” to collectively apologize for their treatment of—it can really be called no other word than “genocide”—the native Indigenous population. The five novels in this volume are expressions of guilt and regret, of remorse, of a desire to look back with contemporary eyes and strain to see history for what it really was. They are attempts to hold the colonial perpetrators to account and to recognize their continued relevance and ramifications. They seek to un-silence suppressed voices and to critique the authoritarian voices of colonial-era historiography, documentation, and mythmaking that helped create and perpetuate those silences. They are about Australia specifically, but they are also about colonialism more broadly. They are about the Crusades, they are about India, they are about Africa, and they are about America. They are also, though, about the presumed certainty that drives such events and the frustrating persistence of uncertainty. We seek reality in history, and we often find it there. Sometimes, though, as in the five novels discussed in this volume, the harshest realities—ones we must face—are found in fiction.

## Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*: Truth in Lies

Peter Carey's 2002 novel *True History of the Kelly Gang* exists at the intersection of historiographic metafiction and postcolonialism. Linda Hutcheon's original definition of the term "historiographic metafiction" identified three main characteristics: "self-consciousness of the fictionality, the lack of familiar pretense of transparency, and the calling into question of the factual grounding of history-writing" (*Politics* 33). These works can problematize traditional understandings of history, link the past to the present, and undermine the voracity of not only historical documents but documents of a variety of "official" sanctimony and authority such as journalism and legal and judicial documents. *True History* is a novel written (mostly) in the uneducated first-person voice of famous/infamous bushranger Ned Kelly with claims of telling his "true history" to his real-life daughter, a daughter who did not exist in real life (nor, in fact, did the mother Carey invented to give birth to the fictional daughter). In Ned's hands, the concept of telling "true history" is muddled by a variety of factors, not the least significant of which is its *intense interest in itself*—what to discuss, what not to discuss, what he knows and doesn't know, what to delay a complete telling of until later, and the idea that he could be totally honest about his actions and words when his attempt is to justify his actions as a criminal and murderer and to do so in a way that doesn't offend the sensibilities of a young daughter or other future potential readers.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hutcheon's discussions of parody, and the link between parody and self-reflexivity, are also useful to note here. Carey's novel is a parody of both historiography and autobiography, while at the same time containing brief parodies of other forms of writing such as journalism and legal documentation. This synthesis of parody and self-reflexivity creates a kind of "imitation characterized by ironic inversion" and "repetition with critical distance" (*Theory* 6), which is a hallmark of historiographic metafiction and a call to readers to question both the narrative they're reading *as well as* previously written documents about the same subject(s).

The novel is set in British colonial Australia circa the 1870s.<sup>6</sup> The Australian colony is approaching one-hundred years old, and thirteen-year-old Ned Kelly, a son of Irish immigrants, is beginning a life of crime in southeastern Australia that would ultimately lead him into a head-to-head confrontation with dozens of police and, more generally, the British colonial system. Irish immigrants, Ned's family had experienced racism, poverty, and crime. They were on one of the lowest socio-economic levels in the young country, but not the lowest. On that level would be the Indigenous people, and the racism, classism, and abuse always run downhill to them in the novel. Ned calls the Indigenous people "savages" (16), and, in one early scene, one of Ned's happiest days as a schoolboy is ruined by seeing an Indigenous person walking down the street wearing boots: "we was raised to think the blacks the lowest of the low but they had boots not us and we damned and double damned them as we run" (14). As in Carey's 2018 novel *A Long Way from Home*, the Indigenous community makes up only a small part of the narrative in *True History*, yet their presence hovers ghost-like over the proceedings. The novel examines this colonial period and its prevalent attitudes—the cultural norms at the heart of the colonial experience—in a way that implies a deep connection between those attitudes and attitudes of today in Australia. Carey has noted that "the two big issues in [Australian] lives is that we began as a convict colony and ... we invaded another person's country and took it from them and then pretended that we didn't. There is a great tendency to deny both of these ... and I feel we can't grow up as a nation until we come to grips with these things" (Interview with). In *True History*, Carey entered the past to try to unmask history and better understand the present.

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<sup>6</sup> While the novel is set during Ned's lifetime, the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century loom throughout, as Ned's father was born in Ireland in 1820, transported to the Australian penal colony in 1842 for stealing a pig, and works as sort of a metaphor for the history and foundation of the colony.

Part of this unmasking, this attempt for a fuller and more nuanced sense of the colonial days, is illustrated by Carey's use of intertextuality, the references to other works that require a knowledge of the referent to grasp its significance to the work making the reference. This happens frequently in *True History*, beginning with the title itself, a reference to what Carey describes as "the first big book on Kelly" (Interview with) *The Complete Inner History of the Kelly Gang and Their Pursuers* (1929) by J. J. Kenneally. Though it's unlikely that Kenneally was being ironic or self-reflexive with that title in the way Carey was with his, it certainly seems to scream out at the reader that those proclamations found inside can't be trusted; after all, how could any author possibly know with any degree of certainty the "inner lives" of a whole group of people, and a group of outlaws, at that, who presumably bring their own layers of unreliableness already simply because of their status as criminals? Yet Ned's title emphasizing "True" and "History" and his opening promise that he "burn in Hell if [he] speak false" (7) ring perhaps equally as unlikely as the claim of Kenneally's title, as most readers aren't likely to believe Ned's narrative as unequivocally and completely "true" in every instance.

This battle for historical narrative underscores the idea that historians are generally in the business of *interpreting* history, perhaps even *personalizing* it, and that they are often far removed from the actual historical events that happened.<sup>7</sup> In an important sense, a first-person teller of history, such as the fictionalized Kelly in this book, is also far removed from the actual events, too, because of his or her own personal perspectives, prejudices, and blind spots. The intertextual and other metafictional elements in the novel emphasize this sense of historical

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Butler's discussion of historiographic metafiction and of works typically described as historiographic metafiction such as John Fowles's 1969 *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Julian Barnes's 1989 *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* might be useful to note here. He comments on the deconstructive nature of works of historiographic metafiction and how they don't "play fair" with the relationship between a text and the real world it supposedly represents. "This mixes historical and fictional material," Butler writes, "and thereby implies or states a postmodernist critique of the realist norms for the relationship of fiction to history" (70).



contingency. In the words of Mahdi Teimouri, intertextuality and other metafictional elements in fiction make “the point of exposing the unreliability and constructedness of the putative realistic writing by interrogating its representational pretensions” (5). While *True History* is “historiographic in that it re-visits ... history ... by presenting an alternative account of it from the position of those who witnessed it but were denied the right to take part in writing it” (7), the intertextual elements of the novel deepen and complicate both the generally understood history of the founding and growth of Australia and the actual writing of the history itself. These intertextual elements stretch the narrative, taking the reader outside the scope of the book for information needed for a full contextual understanding of what’s happening in the story. This, of course, is true of any narrative or literary work that traffics in extra-textual allusions—a practice nearly as old as creative writing itself. Carey’s use of it in this novel, however, not only deepens the work’s themes and expands the reader’s contextual knowledge (assuming the reader engages in further research of the intertextual elements), it also undercuts the notion that any real historical truth can be understood through engagement with one source alone, or even a few. It could be said that it undercuts the notion that any sense of “true history” can be knowable at all. Peter Ackroyd has noted that “the most important thing about any biography is the biographer” (qtd. in Onega); extended to historiography more broadly, this puts Carey’s novel (and even, it could be argued, Ned as narrator; i.e., his own biographer) in a position generally hostile to, or at least dubious of, the totalizing knowability and validity of history. In Butler’s words, a novel like *True History* “enacts a disturbingly sceptical triumph over our sense of reality, and hence also over the accepted narratives of history” (70). Like most works that can be defined as historiographic metafiction, *True History* offers something of an epistemological investigation,

widening and blurring the line between the knowable and the merely believable, with intertextuality being one of the key elements in this investigation.

In a work of historiographic metafiction like *True History*, then, this intertextuality serves not exactly a historic purpose—since it argues that *true* history is impossible to fully know—but an epistemological one. Carey’s construction of the novel, with its intertextuality and undercutting elements interspersed throughout, is arranged in such a way as to create not a clear-cut understanding of historical people and events, but more of an exercise of meaning creation of the kind Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin discuss in their book *The Empire Writes Back* (first published in 1989). Postcolonial narratives, they argue, aim for a process of abrogation and appropriation:

[A]brogation or denial of the privilege of “English” involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. ... Abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, ... and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning ‘inscribed’ in the words. It is a vital moment in the de-colonizing of the language. ... Appropriation is the process by which the language is taken and made to ‘bear the burden’ of one’s own cultural experience. (37-38)

This follows Michel Foucault’s poststructuralist line of inquiry into the creation of meaning: “The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network” (23). A historical novel, then, even one constructed with elements typical of postmodern historiographical metafiction, creates not absolute truth but a *theory* of the truth. Since books

memorializing supposed “true” history work much the same way—constructed with the same tools fiction writers use and reliant on readings of multiple texts, unable to completely stand on their own with absolutism—then they also create not *truths* but *theories* of truths. As Patricia Waugh has said, metafictional works suggests “not only that writing history is a fictional act, ranging events conceptually through language to form a world-model, but that history itself is invested, like fiction, with interrelating plots which appear to interact independently of human design” (49). Waugh goes on to say that some metafictional works—and I would suggest *True History* falls into this category—suggest that “there can never be an escape from the prisonhouse of language” (53) <sup>8</sup> and that “language *constructs* rather than merely *reflects*” (54, italics hers) reality or history. Looked at this way, Carey’s novel is a rejection of the original language of the colonizers, as well as the language of later historiographers of the era, and the meanings such language would have been intended to create and offers a counter-theory to their original theories.

Like other contemporary fiction dealing with the colonial past of Australia, *True History* allows the subaltern to address their colonialized condition as opposed to the monolithic voice of colonial authority and official U.K. history dominating the discussion. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said argued that cultural beliefs are constructed through language, a practice that leaves the most powerful users and disseminators of language with the most control over public perceptions. Said writes of how “European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively” (3) through the writings and perspectives of those within the European colonizing power structure: the meaning- and myth-making of the powerful outsider interloper. Through the late 19<sup>th</sup> and well

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<sup>8</sup> In her discussions of the “prisonhouse of language,” Waugh is drawing on Frederic Jameson’s *The Prisonhouse of Language* (Princeton and London, 1972), p. 159 and his essay “Metacommentary,” *PMLA*, 86 (1971).

into the 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, this allowed British authorities and historiographers, as well as white settlers and officials in British colonies, to shape the narrative and claim the history. Just as Said explores and explains this concept in relation to the Asian continent, so, too, does it apply to the meaning- and mythmaking of the Australian one. Said points out the importance of the “author’s position” with relation to the geographical and geopolitical place he or she writes about, and of the “Western projection” (95) in books and writings that help create an understanding of a place and its people and history—the result of these two phenomena being a fictionalized blanket of understanding laid upon the area in question. Carey, like other recent writers of postcolonial historiographic metafiction, has taken up the challenge to respond to those earlier claims to historical forthrightness in which inevitably, the colonizers were the heroes in their own story, and the treatment of Indigenous Australians, people of color, convicts, and the poor were typically whitewashed or outright ignored. *True History*, like other works of historiographic metafiction, removes that metaphorical blanket.

This follows Barry Pomeroy’s assessment that “[p]ostmodern historiographic metafiction works within, by either tacitly accepting or self-reflexively undermining, these historiographical conventions in order to foreground the constructed nature of the conventions themselves as ontological objects of inquiry” (location 211). Carey takes this perhaps a step further by emphasizing the constructedness of the novel throughout—with the novel’s conceit that Kelly’s writings were found and then pieced together, for instance, and with passages in which narrator Kelly delays information that he already knows until he’s ready to reveal them. A prime example of this is Mary’s account of her father’s assault at the hands of the crossdressing, anti-Union Sons of Sieve in Parcel 10, when Ned could have revealed this much earlier. The delay basically serves only the purpose of plotting and to offer a justification for Ned’s antipathy

toward his father and for his fractured psychology—more precisely, his toxic masculinity, and his propensity toward violence and antiauthoritarianism, unless, of course, it's he who is acting in an authoritarian way.

When Ned is first told that his father had been seen wearing a dress, his reaction is denial and a threat to stop the accusation with force. “You watch your lip young fellow do you hear” Ned says to Sergeant O’Neil, who is describing the scene of John “Red” Kelly riding in a dress, followed by Ned’s quickly unsuccessful attempt to violently put an end to O’Neil’s narration: “I leapt upon his high armoured boot I tried to twist him off his saddle” (15). Ned can only see this as “slander” (15), and later, when he finds his father’s buried dress, he burns it, as it “made [his] stomach knot” and “a mighty anger come upon” him (18). The depths of his anger and resentment upon learning of this propensity of his father’s to dress in women’s clothes—not knowing that the practice was not necessarily related to homosexuality but rather was an antiauthoritarian display of the bucking of established English societal norms (Smyth)<sup>9</sup>—leads him to completely disown his father and reveals some psychological insight into Carey’s depiction of Ned:

I lost my own father from a secret he might as well have been snatched by a  
roiling river fallen from a ravine I lost him from my heart so long I cannot even now  
properly make the place for him that he deserves. Forever after I unearthed his trunk I  
pictured him with his broad red beard his strong arms his freckled skin all his manly  
features buttoned up inside that cursed dress. (19)

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<sup>9</sup> Per Smyth: “Carey’s Sons of Sieve appears to be based on agrarian secret societies that were active in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Ireland and Wales as in Europe more broadly. Beginning in 1761 and continuing until approximately the 1840s, these groups were organized among the peasants as a response to and protest against changes in land use, rising rents and tithes, and oppression by landlords” (195).

This idea of manhood—strong, muscular, manly, and in charge—seems to drive Ned’s psychology as he grows into a gang leader and lawbreaker defiant of all authority figures who stand in his way, all of whom, naturally, are English or of English descent and representing the English power structure. In later instances, Ned threatens to kill his brother Dan after seeing him and Steve Hart wearing dresses (204-5), becomes enraged at the thought that a woman insinuated that Ned might be gay after he refused to dance with her (206-7), and was inclined to not let Steve join the gang on the basis that he thought Steve was “a sissy” (216-7). Even after Mary explains the Sons of Sieve to Ned and that their crossdressing was part of their violent insurrection against the English, Ned still can’t fully accept or even understand it: “what horrible visions assaulted me e.g. what were my father doing with that dress in the tin trunk and to what purpose. That is the agony of the Great Transportation that our parents would rather forget what come before so we currency lads is left alone ignorant as tadpoles spawned in puddles on the moon” (290). Ned’s bias against crossdressing, transvestitism, and homosexuality not only helps explain something about his desire to be seen as strong and manly, but also about his antiauthoritarianism—both in the criminal sense and in the storytelling sense. “We would write our own damned history from here on,” he tells Steve (255), and his narrative to his daughter becomes this “true history,” not a history that others would write about him and others in the marginalized communities of Australian outlaws, Irish descendants, and the poor, but their own reckoning of the way things were. By emphasizing the constructed nature of the supposed “true history” and allowing Kelly control of the narrative, using his language to help construct beliefs about him and the colonial era in Australia, Carey confronts previously constructed histories and the nature of historical epistemology. As Heinz Antor put it, “Carey gives Ned Kelly a voice

that challenges and subverts the official discourse of the law and of the contemporary Australian colonial authorities” (134).

Carey’s novel begins with this challenge and subversion already underway, opening with Ned’s defiant wishes for his true story to be told and his claims that other versions will be false. Early in the novel, Ned also discusses his family’s Irish heritage, his father’s supposed unethical treatment by the English police and authorities, and how Ned’s own schoolteachers in Australia would insult and demean the Irish in official school lessons, calling their history “the history of cowards” (11). According to Antor,

Kelly’s reference to the injustice suffered by the poor Irish places his story in the context of British colonialism in Ireland and of the history of convictism in Australia, which was characterized by a particularly high number of Irish among the transported convicts due to the fact that the exploited and impoverished Irish were often forced by dismal circumstances into petty crime and then sentenced to spend the rest of their days in the penal colony where they were once more exploited and discriminated against. By positioning his story within this historical framework, Ned Kelly stresses that he is a victim rather than a perpetrator. (135)

Kelly, of course, stressed his own victimhood in his own words during his lifetime, too, most famously in a letter he wrote while on the run from the police. Carey based Ned’s narration in the novel on this letter, which the real Ned had penned while holed up in the New South Wales town of Jerilderie and wanted published in the local newspaper. This letter was intended to tell his side of the story, explaining his actions, and those of his pursuers, in a way that would exonerate him, but it was not published in his lifetime. Ned’s fictionalized narrative voice drawn from this letter provides the dominant language in the novel, but Carey also allows other voices

to narrate in places, too. Carey quotes passages from contemporaneous newspaper accounts of the gang, allows Ned's brother Dan and wife Mary to correct the public record, and attributes some passages to the Melbourne Public Library and an unidentified observer. Carey also allows Ned's betrayer Curnow to have the last word, quoting him as saying, "*What is it about we Australians, eh? ... What is wrong with us? Do we not have a Jefferson? A Disraeli? Might we not find someone better to admire than a horse-thief and murderer? Must we always make such an embarrassing spectacle of ourselves?*" (364, italics Carey's). Though Ned's voice is dominant, this multi-voiced approach that ends with Curnow's complaints—which echo, it should be noted, the voices of many contemporary Australians who see Ned as an ugly blot on their history<sup>10</sup>—emphasizes the battleground nature of historical narration and rhetoric. It is far easier to prove as true the idea that people disagree on the truths of history and that they use language and rhetoric as their weapons of choice than it is to prove as true any single historical notion. The newspaper accounts quoted in the novel are "corrected" by Mary and members of Ned's gang, and the police given voice in the novel are often depicted as duplicitous and untrustworthy—such as Constable Fitzpatrick, in one scene Ned's friend, in the next his

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<sup>10</sup> The contemporary Australian attitude toward bushrangers in general and Ned in particular is complicated and controversial. The folk-hero stance toward Ned can be evidenced in Sidney Nolan's series of paintings, the Ned contingent of the 2000 Sydney Olympics parade, and, at least according to the video "Stand and Deliver: The Ned Kelly Story" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQ5bzMFKTM4>), the way Ned's story is taught in some Australian grade schools, with an emphasis placed on Kelly's poverty and his supposed mistreatment at the hands of the authorities. In her personal interview with me, author Rachel Leary commented on the controversy: "I think of these men as people who considered themselves extremely hardly done by, as victims of oppression. It seems that at least to a degree those feelings were justified (many of them were Irish). You might, if you could go back, ask them who they thought the actual criminals were. So many dreadful things happened that were lawful, so I can understand them not having a great deal of respect for 'law'. [T]his is something Peter Carey points to as well. How you view Ned Kelly will depend a lot on your own relationship to authority, I imagine" (Leary). While it's impossible to gauge with mathematical certainty how many Australians view Ned and bushrangers as folk heroes versus how many view them as unredeemable criminals who should not be looked on positively, according to many sources and articles written on the matter, opinion is probably split pretty close to right down the middle. A few examples: David Fickling, "Ned Kelly, the Legend that Still Torments Australia," *The Guardian*, 29 Nov. 2003; Ben Pobjie, "Why is Australia so Obsessed with Ned Kelly?," *Crikey*, 24 June 2019; and Bruce Tranter and Jed Donoghue of the University of Tasmania, "Ned Kelly: Australian Icon" ([ecite.utas.edu.au/54999/1/Donoghue-Jed-Session-10-PDF.pdf](https://ecite.utas.edu.au/54999/1/Donoghue-Jed-Session-10-PDF.pdf)), which cites that "Fifty seven percent of Australian adults view Ned Kelly as either a very important or important symbol of Australian identity."



tormenter, in the next drunk and making a pass at Ned's sister. These voices in the novel exist more or less simply to be beaten back by Ned's.

Carey's novel, then, becomes first and foremost a battle for language and its use in historical meaning making. Those with a voice—or, more precisely, with the ability to have their voices heard—and who can thus control language, can create information, ideas, ideologies, and myths. Carey's Kelly becomes a voice of protest, fighting for the power to reclaim his own voice that during his lifetime was denied him; by extension, it is also a fight for others whose voices were denied both in and after the colonial era. This fight echoes one of the chief concerns of historiographic metafiction: Who controls the narratives? While Kelly is certainly the dominant voice in the novel, it's worth noting how many other voices that are allowed to speak in the novel speak with a professional, clinical, authoritative tone and a presumption of *certainty*, particularly the schoolteacher Curnow (who feigned friendship with Ned and then betrayed him to the police), the newspaper reports, and the Melbourne Public Library writings. These three institutions of education, journalism, and public displays of historical material are pillars of historical understandings and mythmaking (similar to statues and plaques, such as ones lionizing American confederate leaders and soldiers, and others in Europe and around the world that honor historical figures with ties to slavery or other controversial connections, that have recently come under such scrutiny).<sup>11</sup> Like historiography, a display in a library or museum is a legitimizing force, and Carey emphasizes this legitimation in *True History*. The fictional conceit of the novel is that decades after Kelly's life, these bundles of papers bearing Kelly's narration—the

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<sup>11</sup> Hutcheon emphasizes a political component to all postmodern works, which necessarily includes all works of historiographic metafiction. As such, Carey's novel may place readers' minds in the present, reflecting on how some of the controversies of Ned's time are still present today, or how there is a definitive connection between these historical occurrences and events of the present day, just as today's monument controversies in the U.S. is tied to the country's history of slavery and white supremacy. As Butler puts it, a work of historiographic metafiction like *True History* makes "us look for such ... parallels to recent political history" (72).

“parcels” of Kelly’s writings to his daughter that work as the book’s chapters—were found, authenticated, preserved in the Melbourne Library, and eventually published word for word in the form of the *True History*. That the novel is framed by these voices and institutions emphasizes the struggle for historical authority: Ned may have written the book, but it’s published on others’ terms and framed—*captured*—by others’ words and conventions like a bird in a cage or an impertinent colonized subject in a dank, dirt-floor jail cell.<sup>12</sup> The framing device traps Ned’s personal perspective in much the same way historical accounts of the period trapped the stories of others within them—such as immigrants, the poor, bushrangers, and Indigenous peoples—by defining them with officially authorized and institutionalized language and cultural perspectives.

Several other intertextual elements arrive even before Ned’s opening lines about telling the truth. The phrase “*True History*” also refers to all the many other works that have laid claim to the truth of the Kelly story. Dozens of books have been published on Kelly and his family and gang over the decades, and a number of films have been produced on the subject, as well (including one of the oddest movies ever made, 1972’s *Ned Kelly*, a raucous musical version with Mick Jagger in the title role), each (or perhaps most) of which have their own claims to veracity. In fact, at a little more than an hour long, the film *The Story of the Kelly Gang*—without the weight of the words “*True*” and “*History*” in the title but still laying down a strong claim for verisimilitude with the article “*The*” in front of “*Story*”—was purportedly the first “feature-length” film ever made anywhere in the world, or at least the longest to have been made up to the point when it was released in 1906. Carey is alluding to the constancy of people

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<sup>12</sup> The kind of cell where Ned’s father spent most of his final days succumbing to illness before finally being released to die at home, as described by Ned at the end of Carey’s Parcel 1.

claiming to know the absolute truth about Ned Kelly and calling into question the ability to ever know the absolute truth about anyone or anything.

This idea calls to mind one of the controversies against postmodernism (in general, and against historiographic metafiction in particular), that it simply does not believe in *truth*. As Laurie Clancy argues, this is not the case: “Postmodernist literary theory has often been caricatured as denying the concept of truth,” Clancy stated in 2006. “In fact, it doesn't do this. What it says is that truth is not an objective concept but *a constructed and disputed one*” (italics mine). This element of *True History*, the suggestion that truth is constructed and disputed, is evident throughout the novel but stands out in relief in Parcel 10. Titled “The History is Commenced,” this chapter is anchored by the back and forth between published accounts of Kelly’s exploits in *The Morning Chronicle*—a London newspaper, no less—and the corrections inserted primarily by Ned’s brother Dan and wife Mary. Here we see this dispute emphasized as these corrections and commentary are lobbed like grenades at the empowered and institutionalized voice of the settlers. For instance, Mary’s corrections and editorializing range from disputing the *Chronicle*’s claim that Dan had an “ugly face” with “*D. Kelly has clear blue eyes, strong cheekbones, a strong and handsome face*” (304); to correcting the newspaper’s account that Ned “gave the clear impression he would give himself up if the government would release his mother” from jail with “*Not true. He never said this. He will give himself up on no account*” (306); to challenging its account that Ned’s first order during the robbery of the Euroa Bank was to “tell the females in the house what visitors they had and to bring them back” with “*No. First, [Ned] Kelly requested money, was given £300 in cash and told there were no more—a lie*” (308, italics Carey’s). Then, before this back and forth sequence ends, Carey adds that “[s]everal lines here [had been] obliterated completely” (308), further questioning the idea of

complete historical verisimilitude and the authority of the supposed authoritative voices of the time and emphasizing the fragmented nature of historiography and, for that matter, all forms of writing.

Here, as in the novel as a whole, history and truth are fraught, fought over, and finagled, with no clear and obvious victor—except the notion that truth and history are always in dispute. As Renate Brosch notes in “Vernacular Landscape: Narrative Space in Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang*,”

The main part of the novel is Kelly’s story, in which he desperately wants to exonerate himself, but he is hedged around by people who want to write him into meta-narratives of their own, and the novel itself contains and overwrites his story with other versions. Its postmodern deconstruction of unified autonomous character is supplemented with an anti-illusionist form of writing which does not allow a primary interest in the events of the story but is constantly disturbed by the interventions of different voices which emphasize the mediated, discursive nature of the story. (290)

This, as Brosch notes, creates “an explosion of the whole concept of the unified, intelligible personality that realist fiction is based on” (290), but the novel’s embrace of the “true history” concept takes this multi-perspectival approach and lack of individual wholeness in seeing history—whether one’s own history or the history one is documenting—even further. It is not merely a postmodern fascination with multiple perspectives, broken chronology, and fractured and fragmented narratives. Instead, it is an inquiry into, and a repudiation of, the basis of historical belief, which ultimately works to “undermine and problematise any totalizing visions of fictional characters and events, the experienced reality, or historical accounts” (Klonowska 99). By suggesting that “the multi-vocal concept of the past [is] a cacophony of numerous

voices rather than a disciplined composition” (Klonowska 103), Carey’s work casts doubt on the making of historical meaning and emphasizes the constructedness of historiography and the artificiality and myopia of *some* historiography, such as those in the Victorian era that lauded the colonial project.<sup>13</sup> When a book speaks with one voice, it has the voice of authority. When other voices intrude, the illusion of authority is shattered. As Hutcheon put it about works of historiographic metafiction, *True History* “simultaneously installs and blurs the line between fiction and history” (qtd. in Teimouri 6). Looked at this way, the novel posits that language, cognition, personal biases (even if unknown or unacknowledged), and the individualized workings of epistemology make any attempt at historiography fraught with the dangers of misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and rhetorical obfuscation—certainly those with an agenda of institutionalizing positive beliefs about the powers behind the publication.

This inquiry/repudiation begins even before the first actual word of the novel. The lack of the article “The” preceding the title, substituted by an understood “A,” “signals the tension between the authoritative and non-authoritative accounts of the past and draws attention to the more fundamental principles conditioning such hierarchies” (Klonowska 104). This works much the same way as the title of Julian Barnes’s 1989 novel *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* does in signaling right from the start that the work is just one of many possible histories. That we can’t even trust a history as narrated by a person directly involved, or by contemporaneous reporting, or by professional writers of history, echoes from that missing article all the way through to the end of the novel and Kelly’s (presumed) last words before his hanging, “Such is life.” Also before the novel’s actual opening line, though, Carey provides readers with a map of the Colony of New South Wales, north/northeast of Melbourne, presumably accurate for its time.

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<sup>13</sup> It also begs the dubiousness of autobiography: Might the *last* person to trust to tell one’s life story be the person himself or herself?

Its accuracy, however, can't be verified and most likely wouldn't have been absolutely correct if it had been drawn during the colonial period, yet there it is at the beginning of the book, exactly the way maps are often included in books of history. It is a way of establishing a book's historical bona fides; if it starts with a map, it earns trust and authority for its historical reliability. Maps, though, are difficult to get absolutely right; they frequently change; they are often altered with political, military, and economic powers playing an inordinately forceful and invasive role in the drawing of their boundaries; and they certainly changed a lot in a place like Australia in the mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, still being explored, claimed, and mapped. The map is a sign of trust that is signifying a fictionalized story being sold as "true" yet sowing distrust even before the first word of the book.

After the novel's epigraph ("The past is not dead. It is not even past," a line from the 1951 novel *Requiem for a Nun* by William Faulkner, another novelist who, like Carey, seemed to seek a reckoning with his nation's past and often began his novels with fictionalized maps) come the framing and organizing structure that would give the novel a persistent intertextual sense: writings that one might find in a library display or museum. The novel opens with the first-person handwritten account of Kelly's final shootout with dozens of police, followed by language that would be displayed adjacent to such a historical piece of writing—"Undated, unsigned, handwritten account in the collection of the Melbourne Public Library. (VL 10453)"—followed by a series of brief explanatory narratives preceding each of the book's thirteen chapters. These are not called "chapters," though. They are called "parcels" and are part of the narrative conceit of the book: It supposedly was written contemporaneously by Ned Kelly during the last weeks of his life, sections of which were finished, wrapped for safe keeping, hidden, lost to history, then eventually uncovered in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to be displayed and are now published

in book form. The idea of “contemporaneous notes” has its own air of authority. They are typically given a sense of authority in a court of law—certainly, it is assumed, more accurate than an account that wasn’t written down for months, years, or decades, or one that was written by someone not involved in the actual events. The first-person account and the library writings call readers’ attention to the high degree of trust afforded such kinds of texts, ones that are generally considered to have some sort of “official” authority: contemporaneous notes, legal writing, judicial writing, museum pieces, history books. Simply by their official status, these types of texts are often foundational texts supplying interpretations of and meanings from historical events to large swaths of people within a society or culture, creating generally accepted epistemological “truths” and widely held ideological and political positions. By problematizing all these different kinds of texts that *produce* historical beliefs for the masses, *True History* illustrates the fact that they all, including writers of fiction, write using tools from the same toolbox.<sup>14</sup> History writers use the same tools and strategies as novelists; writers of fiction, history, and legal texts choose what to include, what to leave out, what to shade positively, what to shade negatively, what tone to use, etc.; there is an agenda. There is an inherent bias to all texts that lay claim to historical veracity, and there is a codependency within all texts and forms of discourse. No one text can ever tell the whole truth. To come closer to true veracity, one needs to examine the intersections of a variety of texts and discourses, and even then, full knowledge of the absolute truth is still impossible.

The novel also integrates references to other real-life texts that further this sense of codependency, such as judicial findings and legal rulings. The references to the Duffy Land Act

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<sup>14</sup> Waugh: “Telling stories may not, in fact, be telling lies, but until one has established the nature of ‘truth’ it will be impossible to know. So all metafictional novels have, finally, to engage with this question of the ‘truth’ status of literary fiction, and of necessity therefore with the question of the ‘truth’ status of what is taken to be ‘reality’ ” (90).

of 1862, for example, undercuts the colonial government's claims to fairness and equality through Ned's perspective. Designed as a way to spread landownership and a shared sense of community through low-priced land deals, in Ned's narration the Land Act is revealed as a land grab, with the wealthiest quickly claiming all the best plots of land, poor and immigrant families like Ned's left with the smallest and least productive plots of land priced so expensively they'll never be able to hold onto anyway.<sup>15</sup> In Ned's eyes, the Land Act was a sham. Many readers invited to research the historical land act are likely to conclude the same.

Left unsaid in the novel is not only that the Indigenous Australians had no rights to landownership as part of this Land Act, but also the fact that the land did not belong to the English settlers in the first place. This is left unsaid because of Ned's antipathy and racism toward the Indigenous people, but Ned's silence on this issue is in a sense one of the intertextual components of the novel, too. That the Indigenous people are only marginally accounted for in the novel is a reflection of their marginalization in the eyes of the colonizers, but present-day readers know or can readily learn that Indigenous people had "been in Australia for between 50,000 and 120,000 years" prior to settlement, and that "[t]here were between 300,000 to 950,000 [Indigenous] people living in Australia when the British arrived in 1788" ("Working with"). These intertextual qualities of the novel create sort of a playful joining of Ned's words with other documents and readers' understanding of contexts. In Hutcheon's words, this is an "ironic and problematizing play of enunciation and context" (*A Poetics* 78). Hutcheon's analysis of William Kennedy's 1975 historiographic metafiction novel *Legs*, about another true-life outlaw, the American Jack "Legs" Diamond and narrated from the fictionalized perspective of

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<sup>15</sup> For more on the Duffy Land Act of 1862, see this page on "Land administration" from the State Library of Victoria website: [http://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/land-exploration/land-management/land-administration#:~:text=The%20Land%20Act%201862%20\(known%20as%20the%20Duffy,and%20the%20business%20interests%20of%20the%20wealthy%20squatters.](http://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/land-exploration/land-management/land-administration#:~:text=The%20Land%20Act%201862%20(known%20as%20the%20Duffy,and%20the%20business%20interests%20of%20the%20wealthy%20squatters.)



Diamond's lawyer, can be applied to a reading of *True History*. "Its narrator," she writes of *Legs*, "is always aware of his productive act of meaning-making in relation to both reader and context. ... Because of such contextualizing, this fictionalizing biography manages to teach us much, not only about Diamond, but also about his times ... and the [setting] and its history." In *True History*, this "performative use of language ... open[s] it up to a consideration of the political and socio-cultural processes in which they are bound and in which they are given meaning by the historian" (*A Poetics* 79). Carey's novel, then, with its self-conscious, self-reflexive, intertextual, metafictional discourse driving its narrative and its language, works to replace certain fraudulent and incomplete versions of Australian history with Ned's own version—which is itself fraudulent and incomplete but creates a place of meaning-making somewhere within the web of where all these discourses meet.

Though the novel does claim some positive characteristics for Ned—loyalty, for instance, and devotion to his mother—the novel neither portrays Ned in a particularly flattering way nor denies that he and his family, like the settlers in general, were willing participants in the colonial project and took Indigenous land, or that Ned was clearly racist. Carey's portrayal does not absolve Ned and his family and gang of being a part of the genocidal invaders, nor does it offer justifications for his murders and other crimes, other than through Ned and the gang members' own self-justifications. Reading the novel as a work of historiographic metafiction emphasizes the dubiousness of nearly all of Ned's claims and of the overarching idea that the systems of colonization (in Australia but also more generally) were corrupt and deeply racist. His claims of being a colonial resister would have been irrelevant to the Indigenous population—after all, the Indigenous had their land stolen, while even a troubled and poor family with a criminal history such as Ned's could claim for themselves a plot of land and build a home there. The novel does

suggest, though, that Ned's belligerent and antiauthoritarian attitudes might be one of the reasons he is still thought of with such favor by some contemporary (white) Australians, and that his writings (both his real-life writings and the fictional ones here) are indicative of the difficulty of finding absolute truth or certainty through language.

Ned's "Jerilderie letter," for instance, which he wrote and sent for publication in the *Jerilderie Gazette* toward the end of his life as he was holed up in hiding, was his attempt to explain himself to his contemporaries and is another element of intertextuality at play in Carey's novel. The newspaper refused to publish his letter during Ned's lifetime, but after its eventual publication, it could be seen as affecting the public's beliefs about Ned and, by extension, the British colonial authorities and the colonial project as a whole. In fact, it was Ned's true voice—or at least his true writing style—that was one of Carey's main inspirations for the writing of the novel (Interview with). Carey's attempts to replicate and expand this voice, right down to its shortcomings in grammar and punctuation, may hinder complete transparency but also give the work a claim to authenticity and illustrate the interconnectivity of all the voices in the discussion.

All of these moments of intertextuality throughout Carey's novel are part of a consistent pattern of self-conscious self-reflexivity, one of Hutcheon's three main elements of historiographic metafiction. Such self-reflexivity highlights the concept of *representability*. Carey's novel looks at itself as intensely and persistently as René Magritte's 1929 painting *The Treachery of Images* with its declaration that "This is not a pipe." Like Magritte's painting calling attention to its status as the *representation* of a pipe and *not* the pipe itself, *True History* declares that it is *not* a "true history"; instead, it is a *representation* of *some* true history *from one specific perspective*. Teimouri argues that

by using metafictional features, [historiographic metafiction] highlights the area in which interpretation enters the domain of historiography. Such an ambivalent approach amounts to the disparaging of any notions of history as objective presentation of past events. It also contests the idea of writing history as an exclusive prerogative of the advocates of grand totalizing narratives. (6)

The metafictional elements in *True History* call to mind the differences between a representation and the real thing; the creation of that representation; and the perceptions, prejudices, and agenda of both the creator and receiver of the representation. As such, Carey's novel embodies the idea that the writing of history is not solely the job of a historiographer. Others can take up the mantle of chronicler of the past, as well, such as a Ned Kelly or a Peter Carey, because no matter who is presenting the past, it is just that: a *presentation*, which brings with it clear evidence of selectivity, omission, emphasis, and bias. Ultimately, it is the reader or recipient of history who defines the information as "true," anyway, and not the information itself. Ned claims his words are true, just as a historiographer does, but those words are just representations, shades, signifiers of something that once happened deemed true only by the recipient with his or her own personal biases and blind spots.

Carey's Kelly exemplifies this idea of history as subjective presentation, and the novel's self-reflexive recognition of itself as a subjective presentation acts as a constant shield to automatic acceptance as truth. All a reader has to do, for instance, is to research the real Jerilderie letter to know Carey's Kelly is not the real Kelly, or to know that Mary was fictional. These two elements alone show that Carey is winking at his readers, playfully integrating these intertextual elements into the narrative to underscore its fictionality. Carey also employs a few brief bits of magic realism, as well, which further this sense of parodic play. Kelly speaks of the

banshee that follows his family around and of a mystical “rat catcher” who brought sickness and death to the family in the same sort of straightforward way that Chinua Achebe’s narrator in *Things Fall Apart* speaks of supernatural beings and events: They are accepted and presented as just as true and real as anything else in the story. Perhaps the most interesting of these moments of magic realism is Harry Power’s telling Ned the story about how James Witty got his land by selling his soul to the devil in Parcel 3. The story is told in such a deadpan way that to disbelieve it would seem incredulous to Ned (and probably Harry, too). The story of Witty, though, has no bearing on Ned’s story. It is merely a brief aside, some comic relief, or a minor nugget in Ned’s character development. Its only real significant purpose, then, is to intertwine the magical with the supposed realistic and historic—another wink. Furthering this self-reflexivity and unreliability, Carey chooses to have Kelly write with various affectations aimed at the main audience for his memoir, his daughter, so as to explain himself in a way that he wants her to see him while also not offending her sensitivities. To this end, he does not use profanity in the novel, instead frequently substituting the word “adjectival” for profanities or spelling them with dashes, such as “b-----s.” He is clearly speaking, though, to a wider audience: the general public of the future. Certain future generations will think of him as a murderer and thief, and he chooses his words and narrates his scenes in an attempt to change that narrative. His language, rhetoric, and writer’s choices allow him to do this. He begins his narrative by proclaiming to never speak false, then spends the entire length of the work essentially undermining the prospect of his ever being able to do that one thing.

Some of Ned’s most self-conscious self-reflexive moments involve his descriptions of his father. To Ned, Red Kelly was an honorable man, railroaded into an adulthood spent frequently in damp dirt-floor jail cells that would eventually bring about the pneumonia that ended his life.

Ned's dad even took the fall for his son by claiming it was he, not Ned, who had slaughtered a cow in one early scene in Parcel 1. The realization that John sometimes dressed as a woman, though, is a knowledge that Ned simply can't handle. Picturing his father "inside that cursed dress" (19) clouds his understanding of his father, family, women, the concept of manhood in general, and the use of violence. Ned delays the potential explanation of his father's crossdressing—or at least the incomplete and rudimentary understanding of it that Ned can eventually come to—until later in the novel, a narrative strategy of misdirection for the heightening of suspense and the potential narrowing of readers' understandings frequently employed not only by novelists and other creative writers but by historiographers, journalists, lawyers, etc., as well. There is little or no reason for Ned to delay his discussion of the Sons of Sieve—the (fictional) anti-authoritarian, anti-British, crossdressing band of drunken pranksters and anarchists that John was a part of—until later in the novel other than the making of meaning. Furthermore, while the Sons of Sieve was a fictional creation of Carey's, it is based on known history of groups of Irish men, both before and after the establishment of the Australian colonies, whose crossdressing was a way of thumbing their noses at the British establishment and presumed notions of "proper" British behavior (Smyth). As Carey explains,

Among social bandits in Ireland, and there were many of them, cross dressing was part of the business and not so much disguised. It goes back into pre-Christian times and has more to do with masks that you put on the days when normal rules of society are to be abandoned. ... I was interested in what has been maintained from the original Irish. ... The advantage of the dress is that when Ned sees this it unmans his father in his eyes. That misunderstanding is one of the causes which leads to that moment when Ned feels he has to become the man of the house. (Interview with)

This bit of metafictional intertextuality calls to mind the endemic historical racial prejudices between the English and Irish, certainly the ones many Irish felt the English held toward them. (That it may also call to mind Monty Python may be unintentional and simply my own personal connection but may nevertheless still be insightful.) It also places the rivalry between Ned's family and the British authorities within the context of the fraught Irish-British history and the rivalries between the bushrangers and the Australian police and British ruling class. As Brosch notes, bushrangers opted

out of a political system subservient to British colonial authority but also defying the opposition between wilderness and civilization, crossing the boundaries between properties freely, venturing out into wild country, and generally refusing to heed property ownership. Populating an in-between space, bushrangers could be seen as representatives of colonial self-assertion and undaunted nomads of inhospitable spaces. (284)

Ultimately, all of these fourth-wall-breaking postmodern aesthetics add up to a “re-evaluation of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present” that “does not deny the *existence* of the past” but questions “whether we can ever *know* the past other than through its textualized means,” which Hutcheon argues works of historiographic metafiction do (*A Poetics* 119, italics hers). She notes that “to re-write or re-present the past in fiction and in history is to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological” (*A Poetics* 110). There is no recognizable design or purpose to history, and history is not guided by some unseen hand or mechanism leading it to some inevitable positive end, but by taking ownership of history, an author—whether historian or fabulist—can then attempt to guide it to a desired end, a way of it being seen, interpreted, and remembered by its readers and future generations: essentially a political act. What power, then, the historian has, being the producer of historical

information that will be assumed to be the truth by millions of people across the world and deep into the future, also helping shape political and ideological beliefs. Traditional “official” accounts of the colonial history of Australia would typically soften or eliminate altogether representations of the relationship between the colonizers and the Indigenous people, and certainly in such texts, there would be no mentions of racial bigotry, corruption, or unethical behavior on the part of police or colonial authority figures.<sup>16</sup> Ned’s narrative, on the other hand, goes into depth about all of the above and writes graphically about it, depicting the colonial situation as a system organized by money, class, and race; with that organizing system strictly enforced by colonial leadership, governmental and political officials, and the police force; and with those people in those positions of leadership and power acting frequently in unethical, immoral, and criminal ways. By challenging both the dominant historical discourse and the very act of writing history, Carey’s novel is the kind of work that Bosch says “helps to create the site upon which the cross-pollination between history and fiction (historiographic metafiction) occurs” (398).

This cross-pollination fosters a sense of historical indeterminacy and epistemological uncertainty. Carey’s *True History* holds itself up for comparison with earlier “official” histories of the Australian colonial era and as a *re-visioning* of Australian history. Indigenous people in Australia, New Zealand, and Tasmania were nearly eradicated from the planet—in fact, many individual Indigenous ethnicities *were*. Poverty and a general outcast position in society have been the way of life for many Indigenous people in the decades that followed, all the way up to

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<sup>16</sup> See various recent accounts Australian history, such as Thomas Keneally’s *A Commonwealth of Thieves*, Robert Hughes’s *The Fatal Shore*, James Boyce’s *Van Diemen’s Land*, and David Hunt’s humorous *Girt* series as examples.

today, despite being given the much-belated classification of being Australian citizens *in 1967*.<sup>17</sup> Racial bigotry, like it is in most of the world, is an issue in Australia. Carey's work causes this rethinking of what we thought we knew about the colonial history of the era. With new perspectives that such a rethinking may create in its readers, perhaps readers may also come to a greater understanding of their contemporary world, as well. *True History's* re-visioning of Australia's colonial history lays neatly over the present like a slowly falling net, inexorably linking the two.

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Hutcheon sees all postmodern work as inherently political. According to her, if it's not in some way at least a little bit political, then it's not postmodern. Like a political document or any kind of "Grand Narrative" that attempts to explain all things under the same pattern of social organization (democracy, capitalism, colonialism, empire, communism, socialism, religion, etc.), Carey's novel carries within it its own ideology. Ned's story could have the effect of creating sympathy for him, for instance, or antipathy toward the British colonizers and colonial project, or distrust of police (or, of course, just the opposite of any of those three). Brought into the country as an infant by Irish immigrants who were poor and already a target of derision and suspicion because of prior criminal activities (in the novel, Ned's earliest memories, described in Parcel 1, are of constant harassment of his family by the police), the Ned of the novel was belittled by teachers, bullied by the English, forced by his parents and the family's general situation into a life of crime, railroaded by the cops and property owners over and over, and eventually attacked—in his mind, unfairly—in a police ambush that put Ned in a position of having to

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<sup>17</sup> Though some Indigenous Australians were granted the right to vote in 1962, the 1967 Referendum changed the Constitution to allow the Commonwealth, and not just the states, to make laws regarding the Indigenous population; and to allow Australians of Indigenous descent to be included in the national census.



defend himself. He murdered three police and overnight went from being merely wanted by the authorities—primarily to make an example of—to being the most wanted man in the country. He spent the rest of his life on the run, fending off attacks, hoping to avoid snitches, frequently out of food, money, and ammunition.

Somewhat like the crime duo in America during the Great Depression Bonnie and Clyde, Ned became something of a folk hero to many in southeastern Australia. Also like Bonnie and Clyde's, Ned's life and exploits were followed with great interest by newspaper readers, many of whom were afraid and wanted him and his gang caught for the safety and well-being of the community, while others cheered for him as a symbol of resistance. (The parallels of the two stories are echoed in the novel in a number of ways, not only by the coverage of their crimes in the media but also by Ned's first botched attempt at stagecoach robbing in Parcel 3, similar to the depiction of Bonnie and Clyde's botched first attempt at robbing a bank as depicted in Arthur Penn's 1967 film *Bonnie and Clyde*.) Through the chronology of the novel, this perspective of Ned as a positive symbol of resistance persists. Like the woodworm in Chapter 1 of Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, providing his perspective of the story of Noah's Ark, Ned's perspective is of "the voice of the repressed, criticizing the bosses and their dominant discourse" (Butler 72). Carey's Kelly is also depicted much like the famous midcentury paintings of Ned by Australian artist Sydney Nolan—which Carey has cited as one of the chief inspirations for his desire to write the novel (Interview with)—insinuating Ned as a singular uncompromising, unafraid, defiant figure, frequently armed and atop a horse in heroic poses of vengeance or valiant defeat, staring steely-eyed and myopically through the eye-slits he carved into his homemade suit of armor he wore for his final gun battle blaze of glory. Carey has said the still-strong pro-Ned sentiment in Australia this interests him (Interview with, and elsewhere).

What does it say about his home country that a rogue like Ned is a national hero to so many? Carey's novel attempts to engage that question, as well as the opposing view that Ned is a scoundrel, should not be thought of as a hero in any way, and certainly should not be thought of as a bedrock of the Australian character.

By seeking to depict "true history" and "fiction" at the same time, *True History*, like other works of historiographic metafiction, problematizes and critiques the very notion of *all* depictions and representations, and since "history" itself—or, more accurately, the art of creating it, historiography—is a major focus of a work of historiographic metafiction, it gets problematized the most. After all, fiction lays claim only to being fiction, while history lays claim to being "*the truth*." History itself means nothing without the influence of the historian and the perceptions of the receiver—or, it could also be said, without the credulity, gullibility, or pliability of the receiver. Carey's use of intertextuality and self-reflexivity undercut some of the more flattering or incomplete notions of the colonial past and their associated ideologies while at the same time undergirding its own ideological notions. The book itself, in whole and in parts, is, ultimately, a work of parody, the final characteristic that defines Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction. It is a parody of a history book, of a memoir, of an autobiography, and of a diary, while also including other brief parodies-within-a-parody such as those of museum writings, legalese, and newspaper reporting. In Hutcheon's definition, parody is not always meant solely to ridicule but can also contain a "respectful homage" with an "ironically thumbed nose" at the works being parodied (*Theory* 33). This creates difference within similarity, allowing for a reworking or recoding of the original. In *True History*, this "blatant fictionalizing/poeticizing" of history "parod[ies] history's legitimizing strategies" (Pomeroy location 1322). Narrator Ned's fabulist descriptions of his family's banshee and his

counterarguments to some of the crimes he was accused of fly in the face of what could be considered “true history,” yet there they are, presenting themselves as the absolute truth. For instance, in Parcel 6, when Ned is accused of punching the hawker McCormick in a dispute over whether McCormick’s wagon was stolen or rescued and borrowed by Ned and Ben Gould, as well as the ensuing package of calf testicles and insulting note Gould had Ned deliver to McCormick, Ned’s comic explanation certainly strains incredulity: “Mrs. McCormick then struck my horse on the flank with her impertinent weapon and the horse jumped forward and as I were holding the rein it caused my fist to come into collision with McCormick’s nose” (166). Surely no such passage would exist in a book of presumed true history, yet passages in many books of history may also strain credulity, as well—certainly traditional historical accounts of British history and the colonial era. As such, *True History* becomes an idea of the foundation of the Australian character, of the Australian colonial venture specifically, and of the concept of British colonialism more broadly—but just one of many possible ideas. An idea can be the product of an ideology, or it can be a *producer* of an ideology; to Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction “is self-consciously ... image, narrative, product of (and producer of) ideology” (*Politics* 29). The novel is an attempt to control the past, but not to control or enshrine any particular reading of the past; it is instead an attempt to corral the idea that it is possible to control the past, broadening the scope of possible ideological readings of the past while simultaneously critiquing and undermining some of the accepted readings birthed and perpetuated by official colonial voices. In his 1983 *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said questioned “why so few ‘great’ novelists deal directly with the major social and economic outside facts of their existence—colonialism and imperialism—and why, too, critics of the novel have continued to honor this remarkable silence” (177). In the years since Said wrote that, the

practice of historiographic metafiction grew and became embraced by writers from the U.K. and elsewhere, throwing their voices into that silence.

Ultimately, Carey's novel seeks not just to revisit the story of Ned Kelly and probe the underpinnings of the hold he has historically had, and continues to have, on the Australian cultural memory, but to revisit and recode the history of the colonial moment and contribute its own ideological commentary into the contemporary cultural conversation. It is political and parodic in the sense Hutcheon discusses, focusing on the past but situated firmly in the present with an eye toward the future. As Pomeroy says, "[h]istoriographic metafiction is not a discourse which merely myopically examines its own practice, but rather one which uses these pre-existent powerful historical and political codes to foreground contemporary ideological practice" (location 452). Carey's novel does examine the past, and the practice of creating historical meanings and myths, but it situates these examinations within the present of Australian and British attitudes about history, colonialism, race, and justice. By doing this while simultaneously arguing against the totalizing authority of history, it makes the case that its voice is worth hearing, too; that there are many voices that deserve to be heard; and that the conversation must continue.

Avenging History: Richard Flanagan's Use of Magical Realism,  
Intertextuality, and a Fish Called Gould  
to De-Silence the Sarah Island Prison

*"All books are grand follies, destined to be forever misunderstood."*  
– Hammet, narrating *Gould's Book of Fish* (30)

*"[B]ook[s] are only open doors inviting you into an empty house, & once inside  
you just have to make the rest up as well as you can."*  
– Gould, narrating after having metamorphosed from Hammet (46)

Though their failures in Africa and expulsion from India were still many decades away when the first shipments of convicts and settlers began arriving in Australia in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, by the time the Antipodean colonies were taking shape in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the future of the empire could have possibly been foreseen. Perhaps this is one of the main reasons that many recent writers of English and Australian descent, including those of Indigenous backgrounds, have been so interested in stories of Australian colonialism and its aftermath: This was a turning point in the history of the empire, when once-glorious dreams started to be seen as hollow and hypocritical power plays, and when the path toward world dominance plateaued and began to flatline—it's just that very few in the British and U.K. populace, let alone the world at large, would be aware of this flattening and its accompanying skepticism and backlash for well more than a century, aided in large part by two factors: the power of words and the power of silence.

Like many other English and Antipodean authors in recent years, Richard Flanagan has found an interest in revisiting the colonial years in the Australian isles. His 2001 novel *Gould's Book of Fish* is set during the 1820s, a period of particularly special interest to other writers such as Peter Carey, Matthew Kneale, and Rohan Wilson. I define *Gould* as a work of historiographic metafiction due to its use of magical realism, intertextuality, intense self-reflexivity, the free

mixing of fact and fiction, and an undercutting of the validity and trustworthiness of historical documentation and other forms of writing typically afforded a high degree of authority (traits originally defined as elements of historiographic metafiction by Linda Hutcheon). In Hutcheon's words (from "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History"), a novel like *Gould* creates a "self-conscious dimension of history" (3) that "works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction" (4). In doing so, this novel fulfills another role of historiographic metafiction as defined by Hutcheon: It "challenges ... both any naive realist concept of representation and any equally naive textualist or formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the world" (6). By freely and obviously mixing history and fiction/fantasy and using elements of historiographic metafiction, especially magical realism and intertextuality, Flanagan's novel, in Hutcheon's words, forces the reader "to acknowledge not only the inevitable textuality of our knowledge of the past, but also the value and the limitation of that inescapably discursive form of knowledge" (8)<sup>18</sup>; we recognize, when reading the novel, that we may know some of what happened during the time and place of its setting, but certainly not all, and virtually none with an absolutist degree of certainty—and that the writers of the history that we *do* know also used the same tools that writers of fiction use. Flanagan's novel revisits the period of the 1820s in a setting particularly useful to an investigation of what went wrong with the British empire and the goals of colonialism: the prison at Sarah Island on Tasmania, a filthy hellhole where the presumed worst criminals and most determinedly anti-English Indigenes were sent, usually to be tortured, rot, and die. The protagonist of Flanagan's novel is William Buelow Gould, a fictionalized version of the real-life Gould, a Sarah Island

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<sup>18</sup> I'm drawing here and throughout this chapter not only from the work quoted above but also from several other of Hutcheon's works, notably *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, 2nd ed. (2000), *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1995), and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989).

convict who was spared many of the most horrific abuses at the prison for one key reason: He was seen by at least one English authority figure to be useful to the empire. Usefulness, it seems, could save a convict or Indigenous person from certain doom.

Before Gould begins his narration in Flanagan's novel, though, a frame narrator opens the book, and magical realism takes hold as one of the defining traits of the narrative. The narration begins by Sid Hammet, a furniture maker and forger—linking him with one of Gould's crimes, forgery—who finds a copy of Gould's paintings of fish, which in actuality is called *William Buelow Gould's Sketchbook of Fish* and is today housed in the Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts in Hobart, Tasmania. Unlike the real sketchbook, Gould's book in the novel contains more than just the paintings; it also contains fictional scribbles from Gould written in and around all the sketches detailing his life and the lives of those he encountered during his days as a convict, prisoner, and painter, as well as his ruminations on the British empire and its systemic cruelty to convicts, Indigenous people, and the poor. The entire fictional conceit of the book is primarily bound to the concept of magical realism: Hammet finds the book, has it with him at a bar, sees it glowing with "a speckled phosphorescence" (13), leaves it at the bar to go to the rest room, returns to find it has mysteriously melted into a puddle of water, and undergoes the impossible task of rewriting and re-painting the entire book, which ends with Gould magically transforming into a fish and finally escaping the Tasmanian colony by swimming out to sea. Another important aspect of the central conceit of the novel, as Ben Holgate has noted in " 'The Impossibility of Knowing': Developing Magical Realism's Irony in *Gould's Book of Fish*," is metamorphosis—primarily characters metamorphosing into fish, but also one character metamorphosing into a dog, Hammet metamorphosing into Gould, and their

two books doing the same. Noting that metamorphosis is a common trait of magical realism,<sup>19</sup> Holgate contends that “[t]he metamorphosing of humans into fish is a response to the regression of human behaviour, given that the savage barbarity of the Sarah Island penal colony is a perverse, and ironic, outcome of the imperialist, rationalist project,” and “represents human evolution ‘going on in reverse,’ [Gould 3] from land creatures to sea creatures rather than the other way around as Darwinism asserts” (4). This “evolutionary reversal,” as Holgate calls it, is an element of magical realism at the heart of the novel that infuses the story, its setting, and its impression of British colonialism with an irony that suggests the slipperiness and untrustworthiness of both the novel’s narrative and the claims underlying the colonial project being depicted.

An unreliable narrator—Gould says that he is “the most untrustworthy guide you will ever trust” (53)—combined with an unstable text and episodes that can only be explained by magic create a story that is constantly shifting and dubious and, in the words of Holgate, “personifies the unreliability of orthodox history, pointing to the artifice of historiography and blurring the boundaries between fiction and history” (4). This grounding of the book in magical realism and irony creates a reading experience that, as Hutcheon describes in her definitional writings on historiographic metafiction, casts doubt on the validity or truthfulness of what is being read: Words and expressions of presumed truth, it seems, can’t be trusted. Originally (and generally) associated with works from Latin American authors such as Gabriel García Márquez of Columbia, Jorge Luis Borges of Argentina, Cuban Alejo Carpentier (who is credited with originating the term in 1949<sup>20</sup>), and many others, magical realism has been defined by Brian

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<sup>19</sup> Holgate notes Wendy Faris’s work on this point in her “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction.”

<sup>20</sup> McHale, *Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism*, 78.



McHale as involving “violations of natural or scientific law that cannot be explained away as subjective delusions or the effects of advanced technologies (as they might be in science fiction) ... [and] are generally accepted as routine and banal” (77).

The term can easily be applied, of course, to works both before Carpentier <sup>21</sup> (writers such as Franz Kafka and William Faulkner from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century come to mind, as well as writers as far back as Boccaccio, Rabelais, and Chaucer) and to later-generation postmodernists working in genres such as cyberpunk, futurism, and alternative histories (McHale refers to these as practicing a form of “postmagical realism” [184]). Indigenous writers with histories of supernatural beliefs that diverge from traditional western ideas of scientific reality and empirical evidence such as Chinua Achebe sometimes practice a form of magical realism, as well, with metaphysical occurrences depicted in novels like *Things Fall Apart* in an objectively realized way just like other “realistic” actions are depicted in the same work: It’s *real* and not *magical* because the cultural beliefs of the Indigenous characters make it so. Thus, in a work like *Things Fall Apart*, the cultural beliefs of the colonized peoples are given an authority over the beliefs imposed on them by the colonizing outsiders seeking a hostile takeover of them, and the novel acts as a critique of the colonial venture and the assumptions of superiority of the colonizers.

In analyzing the use of magical realism in the works of Flanagan and Alexis Wright, an Australian writer of Indigenous heritage also discussed in this volume, Jamie Derkenne notes that in “the Australian context, many works use unresolved ontological ambiguity to approach a historical experience of such immensity that the only way it can be represented is through its reimagination” (281). Derkenne says that Flanagan does this in his novels such as *Gould*, *Wanting* (2008), and *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2014) “so as to allow the possibility

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<sup>21</sup> Spindler points out the term actually originated in Europe in the 1920s when it was applied to paintings (“Magical Realism: A Typology,” 75).

of reshaping the Australian historical narrative,” and that in doing so, “retells and reimagines the known fragments ... so that history is re-regarded” (281). Derkenne refers to the use of magical realism in works such as these as “magical nihilism,” typically because the outcome for most of the main characters is doom and the potential outcome for readers is to question the veracity of history and long-held cultural beliefs. My reading of *Gould*, however, (and other novels in this volume) echoes the thoughts of Stephen Slemon, who in his “Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse” says that in postcolonial works that utilize magical realism, there is a “battle” between the dominant discourse—at once established by colonial officials, authorities, and writers during the era of takeover and settlement, and later firmly cemented by historiographers, biographers, and other claimants to the supposed truths of the past—and the silenced discourse of the marginalized colonial subjects. These silenced include both Indigenous peoples and others on the margins of society or under the thumb of colonial power, such as the convicts brought to Australia in the early days of its colonization, their offspring, and others in the lower socioeconomic strata of society or of presumed lower racial or ethnic background, such as the Irish and Asian. In magical realism, Slemon writes, “this battle is represented in the language of narration by the foregrounding of two opposing discursive systems, with neither managing to subordinate or contain the other,” thus “recapitulat[ing] a dialectical struggle within the culture’s language” (12). In her discussions on realism, magical realism, postcolonialism, and the theories of French philosopher and Gilles Deleuze, Eva Aldea notes the signifiers and signifieds present in a postcolonialist work: “realism is not a matter of verisimilitude as such,” she writes, “but of the text belonging to a particular regime of signs or reflecting a particular ontological orientation. Realist fiction keeps up the appearance of referentiality through the regime of signs and subjectification” (115-6). She goes on to note that to Deleuze, such a work—for instance, a

traditional historical novel grounded in supposed “reality” and with no elements of magical realism—is a “model of pre-established truth, which necessarily expresses dominant ideas or the point of view of the colonizer” (qtd. in Aldea 116).

A work like *Gould*, then, purposely ruptures the expectations of reality or verisimilitude in a way that signifies a break from the dominant narrative, its elements of magical realism or absurdity signaling to the reader that the dominant language of the colonizers present in the time and place of the novel’s setting was itself rooted in untruth—to the same degree of absurdity, it could be interpreted, as the magical moments in the novel. Flanagan’s use of magical realism, in Aldean terms, becomes a “making up of new myths” that acts as a “resistance” to the dominant narratives that previously defined the cultures (116-7) (the English-Australian culture and the Indigenous cultures *as defined by* the English-Australian). Working primarily through the theoretical lenses of Marxism, structuralism, and poststructuralism, Aldea’s analyses of a variety of postcolonial magical realist novels can be applied to *Gould* to assert that it makes some human characters inhuman (in *Gould*, they become fish) as a way of asserting the humanness of those previously so often dehumanized; that “the magical elements ... are all acts of resistance, precisely because they are the acts of thinking a new people”; and that “it is only because they exist ... as creations of the new and not representations of the past or present situation, that they can betoken such a revolutionary resistance” (144-5). Reading *Gould*, and other postcolonial fictions situated in the Antipodean isles—particularly, for my purposes here, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century—in this way identifies it as a signification of the falsity of the previously dominant historical narratives and of the need of finding a new way of looking at the colonial venture. The absurdity of *Gould*’s magic, in other words, signifies the absurdity of much of the colonizers’ actions and the beliefs fostered about them through the historiographies that would follow.

Magical realism is a close cousin to, and something of an offshoot of, surrealism, which developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and sometimes shares with surrealism one important trait. As Spindler points out, “[s]urrealism was, to a large extent, a reaction against the excessive emphasis on a rational outlook demanded by the Western traditions of empiricism and scientific positivism” (76). Magical realism, in a work of historiographic metafiction like *Gould*, works much the same way: It is a reaction against the excessive emphasis demanded by Western traditions on the authority of history and historiography. In *Gould*, the entire book can’t be trusted because it is based on a rather obvious fictional apparatus and made up of individual moments that likewise are fairly evident to be magical rather than realistic: Hammet metamorphoses into Gould and then Gould into a fish; pages fall out of books without provocation (25); the complexion of a prisoner who shares a cell with Gould undergoes multiple pigmentation changes, from light to dark to darker to green, right before Gould’s eyes (51-2); another character, Jorgen Jorgenson, becomes a bipedal talking dog (291); and Gould finds himself trapped in a book that he hadn’t even finished writing yet (336-7). These events are narrated as matter-of-factly as other mundane, everyday events in the book, placing the same weight of verisimilitude on the otherworldly as the solid and sound. This kind of historical “play” that often happens in historically situated postmodern narratives, particularly those that can be defined as historiographic metafiction and/or magical realism, is a signal to the reader that what might be presumed true from the historical time depicted may bare investigation, critique, or reexamination, as if to suggest that the magical, whimsical, or absurd could be as likely as what is commonly held as historically indisputable. Such historical fictions are, according to Samantha Young in her survey of the evolution of the historical novel from its traditional presumed fact-based approach to the postmodern approaches that often involve magical realism

and other playful qualities, “are capable of offering readers access to a past unavailable to traditional or ‘proper’ modes of historical research” As she puts it, “facts can be manipulated in ways that can serve paradoxical views, and ... ‘truth’ in an age of relativity and perspectivism is a volatile concept. The reader appreciates the writer’s play with history and that very ‘playing.’ it can be argued, may succeed in representing a time with more validity than by other methods”

(2). I argue that this is precisely the effect of *Gould*: Its magical elements give the book a sense of pushing back against the authority of words and the power of historical narrative and offers its readers something that may *suggest* a “truth” with insights—if not *facts*—that are truer than what can be gleaned from contemporary or historiographic accounts of the same time and place.

Given the historical focus of *Gould* on real-life events and people who were part of this crucial time in the history of the founding of Australia and the development of the British colonial system—all of which had previously been documented in historical writings that brought favor to the empire and minimized or overlooked the fates of the Indigenous population, the convicts, the poor, and the marginalized—the sanctimony and presumed righteousness of supposed colonial virtue also come into question.

Spindler differentiates between two primary modes of magical realism: anthropological magical realism and ontological magical realism (79-83). The anthropological strain includes works like *Things Fall Apart*, in which the magical events are most commonly manifestations of long-held mythological, cultural, spiritual, metaphysical, or religious beliefs depicted with a certainty of their existence and a full belief in their reality. One main result of these types of depictions is usually that the author upholds the beliefs as real and valid against the dubiousness and arrogant dismissal of the (usually Western) characters in the narrative (as well as against the probable dubiousness and arrogant dismissal of many readers, as well). Depicting gods,

goddesses, monsters, and metaphysical happenings in the same matter-of-fact manner as everyday occurrences pushes back on colonial claims that Indigenous peoples were less advanced, civilized, evolved, and enlightened than their colonizers: These things are true and real, such a depiction argues, so beliefs of our lesser-ness should cease.

The ontological strain of magical realism, on the other hand, “resolves antinomy without recourse to any particular cultural perspective” (Spindler 82). Literary works using this practice, Spindler points out, are typically not written by one within a particular culture with an aim toward validating cultural beliefs, as in Achebe and other writers from colonized Indigenous communities (including Australian), nor do they usually depict “the mythical imagination of pre-industrial communities. Instead,” as Spindler continues, “the total freedom and creative possibilities of writing are exercised by the author, who is not worried about convincing the reader. The word ‘magic’ here refers to inexplicable, prodigious or fantastic occurrences which contradict the laws of the natural world, and have no convincing explanation” (82). This approach creates a contingency in meaning; whereas the intent or outcome of Achebe’s magical realism is somewhat clear, in a work of ontological magical realism, the presumed purpose or target of the tactic is less evident. Why or how Gregor woke up as a giant vermin, for instance, is never explained in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, but leaving the transformation unexplained creates a paradox for the reader that can only be resolved through an interplay between the form of the transformation (he’s an unhappy lowly clerk who becomes a bug) and other elements of the story (he’s part of a mostly uncaring and sponging family, he works for a soulless company and an authoritarian boss, and he lives in a highly bureaucratic and materialistic society)—in addition to an interplay between the action of the story and the culture within which it was created (a highly structured and regimented society heading quickly into Nazism). The paradox

of unexplained ontological magical realism destabilizes the narrative it's in but offers sort of a roadmap for the reader to make sense of the work without some of its central plot elements making any sense at all.

This is how the ontological magical realism works in Flanagan. The elements of magical realism destabilize the narrative in *Gould* while at the same time also destabilizing the traditional stories that have been told about the time and place, and about the whole British colonial venture (and, by extension, colonialism writ large), leaving the reader not to try to piece together how Jorgen turned into a dog (or why), or how a sketchbook melted into a puddle, but instead what convicts, dogs, sketches, and water have to do with British colonialism. Though the foundation of Flanagan's work can't stand—it is, after all, not only a work of magical realism but *a novel*—it still aims for some sort of understanding of the truth of this period in the British colonization of Australia. One of the ways it does this is through intertextuality, a frequent postmodern practice and specifically a practice of historiographic metafiction.<sup>22</sup> Mixing true-life and fictional characters, places, and historical events, inventing dialogue that obviously could not have been documented with any reliability, and adding elements of magical realism and the absurd, calls attention to the fact that many of the characters are based on real people, and many of the episodes are based on real historical events that occurred at real historical places. The novel doesn't claim to be verifiably accurate true history, but it 1) calls into question the verifiability and accurate truthfulness of previous historiographies of the time and place, and 2) invites the reader to do some research for himself or herself.

Take Risdon Cove, for instance. The real-life Gould was born in Liverpool in 1803 and transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1827 for the crime of stealing three articles of clothing,

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<sup>22</sup> See Hutcheon, McHale, Teimouri, etc.

though he already had an extensive criminal record, having been arrested multiple times, mostly for theft (including of arts supplies), forgery, and public drunkenness (Mulhern). Flanagan alters these facts, however. In his novel, Gould arrives in 1803, jumping off a convict ship with a gun at his back, swimming ashore at Risdon Cove, and planting a Union Jack on the beach in a metaphorical image of colonial conquest (41). Upon this arrival, he is immediately arrested and escapes a year later, only to be recaptured and sent back to England “to live the life of a rat under different names for the next twenty years, until [he] once more was apprehended and transported back” to Tasmania (42). This timeframe allows the novelized Gould to re-arrive at roughly the same time that the real-life Gould would have in 1827, but the creation of this first arrival in 1803 allows for a timestamp to be coordinated with what has come to be called the “Risdon Cove Massacre” or the “Risdon Cove Disgrace,” in which the English Lieutenant John Bowen either—depending on the perspective and beliefs of the storyteller or historiographer—slaughtered without provocation dozens of Indigenous Tasmanians on a kangaroo hunt, or bravely defeated them after they attacked Bowen and his men. Placing Gould at Risdon Cove in 1803 allows him to tell his version of the events of 1804 that came to be called the Risdon Massacre:

Lieutenant Bowen, in his fury, took the subsequent arrival of a few hundred blacks out with their families hunting kangaroo as a declaration of war, and immediately ordered our cannons to be opened upon their clustering mob on the seashore, leaving some forty-five dead men, women, and children on the sand, & who knows how many more whom their countrymen dragged off to die with them in their distant camps. (42)

Gould here sides with versions of the account that cites Bowen and the Brits striking first and the number of Tasmanian dead being higher than others. Making Gould present at this event



and allowing him to narrate it also allows Flanagan to link the episode up with another element that is important to the novel, the idea of racial classification (or even *species* classification, since many British pseudo-scientists of the era felt Indigenous people and other people of color were actually a separate—and of course *lower*—race than whites<sup>23</sup>), an idea that many in British authority and scientific circles were eager to prove to help validate their claims to colonial rights and world supremacy. In the novel, after Gould describes the massacre, he notes that the man who had held the gun to Gould’s back on the ship, Mr. Banks,

was delighted to find most of their black bodies still intact ... & while I was shackled to a tree to await my sentencing, my fellow convicts got on with the severing and pickling of the heads of the blacks. Mr Banks was well pleased with the half-dozen barrels of bobbing heads when they were finally presented to him, feeling, said he, that they could only greatly enhance our understanding of such misbegotten issue of the human race. (42-3)

This one fudging of an historically accepted fact—that Gould arrived on Tasmania in 1827—allows Flanagan to narrate the massacre at Risdon Cove in a way that supports the version traditionally told and understood by the native Tasmanians; to introduce the idea of racial ranking and the pseudo-scientific practice of placing human races/“species” in a hierarchy that would inevitably (and obviously) flow from the colonizers and settlers at the top to the Indigenous people at the bottom (which would become a recurring and crucial theme in the novel); and to emphasize the cruelty, dehumanization, and unsettlingly high degree of disrespect and debasement with which the Tasmanians and other Indigenous peoples were routinely treated

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<sup>23</sup> Notably Robert Knox’s 1856 publication of *The Races of Men: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Influence of Race Over the Destinies of Nations*. In *Gould*, this idea is expounded upon in scenes involving, and writings of, the settlement surgeon, who espoused such beliefs (primarily pp. 302-3).

by the British colonialists. Here, it's not just the Indigenous people themselves that are debased but *even their remains*. That Flanagan treats history with such buoyancy, using and rearranging it as he wishes, identifies the novel as part of what might be termed the historiographic metafiction project—loosely bound and largely unacknowledged by its practitioners though it may be, this “project” is made up of a group of writers like Flanagan and others in (and out of) this volume whose deliberate mish-mashing of history, mixing of fact and fiction, entangling of the realistic and the magical, and emphasizing of the pliability and refurbishability of historiography, insinuates themselves and their works between the believed and the believable, separating the ossified historical narratives of the powerful from the whispered narratives of the powerless.

A number of Australian historiographers of English descent, notably Nicholas Clements and Henry Reynolds, have argued for the Indigenous point of view on Risdon Cove and the “Black War” more generally, despite that, as Clements puts it, “Australian historians were locked in a furious debate, known as the history wars, about whether the Black War was actually a war at all” (“Noted Works”). In his *The Black War: Fear, Sex and Resistance in Tasmania*, Clements argues that “more than 100 Tasmanians” approached the settlers that day, that “[t]heir intentions were not clear,” that “the white man in charge considered them ‘very far from friendly,’ ” and that “Risdon was probably not the large-scale ‘massacre’ some have suggested it was” (35). Still, though Clements contends that the Tasmanians did *not* initiate the violence, he notes that the affair launched a series of violent confrontations that would continue for years, and that the Tasmanians were surely stunned by the large and growing ever larger contingent of aggressive, heavily armed, and violent new intruders to their homeland, concluding that “the Tasmanians surely never imagined the overwhelmingly male strangers would multiply as they

later did, and thus had no reason to take drastic or indiscriminate action” (36). In their *Van Diemen’s Land: An Aboriginal History*, Murray Johnson and Ian McFarlane largely back up this account, but their chapter devoted to “Risdon Cove and the Long March to War” essentially cites the Risdon violence as the striking of the match that ignited the decades-long violent conflagration that all but wiped the native Tasmanians out in their own homeland. That some of the details of this history remain in question is not the point—all historiography is subject to interrogation. What remains, though, when reading the histories of the Risdon Cove affair specifically and of Australia more broadly, is that the voice of the Indigenous people (and others marginalized there, such as convicts, former convicts, and the poor) is largely missing, while the voice of the colonizers is given such frequent and vociferous—often truculent—authority and wide berth. That a work like *Gould* is a critique, even an attack, on the colonial system is fairly obvious, but it is also a lampooning of accepted British historiography specifically and historiography more generally. The fictional Gould’s account of the Risdon Massacre here, to a discerning and unbiased reader, rings truer than the whitewashed account of a British soldier on the scene or a historian writing about it years later from a stuffy office with a stiff upper lip based on the hearsay of prejudiced non-eyewitnesses.

Still, that doesn’t prevent many to question an account like the fictional one in *Gould* and to more easily accept an account that sees Bowen and his men courageously defending themselves and the Crown against the onslaught of violent, animalistic savages, or the idea that the encounter was a much simpler, smaller affair. In fact, such a controversy exists to this day, with many Australians rejecting the account of it as a “massacre” or that the settlers did anything wrong or unjustifiable at all. The only existing recorded account of the British 1803 landing at Risdon Cove and the ensuing violence is from Bowen, who described the Indigenous as

approaching the settlers in a hostile manner (Boyce 30), and no accounts exist from the native Tasmanians' perspective. According to Boyce,

The details of what became known as the "Risdon massacre" have been hotly debated for over 200 years. What is definitively known is that the soldiers under Moore's command opened fire on a large group of Aborigines that included women and children. Muskets and a carronade (a ship's gun then being deployed in the settlement) were used. The shooting started at about 11 o'clock in the morning and continued for three hours until the carronade was fired and the Aborigines finally fled. Three bodies were eventually collected by the British, but a precise fatality figure is impossible to estimate. (43)

Boyce goes on to describe how Moore claimed the soldiers acted in self-defense and quotes or refers to other non-firsthand accounts that also either downplay the severity or violence of the encounter, deny English culpability, or place the cause at the feet of the Indigenous people (k-43-46). Further, he notes that "the only direct witness" to counter Moore's claims was the convict Edward White, whose account was recorded during the inquiry into the events twenty-seven years later. Boyce writes that "White ... claimed that the Aborigines approached peacefully and that there were 'a great many of the Aborigines slaughtered and wounded; I don't know how many' (43). Boyce also devotes much space to, and confidence in, "the deep sense of vulnerability felt by the British in the first year of settlement" (k-44), and what a "frightening experience" it was to the settlers living in a strange land with difficult terrain, dangerous wildlife, and the unknown qualities of the natives (45-7).

Boyce is a well-respected academic and historian who has written extensively on Australian history and the Indigenous peoples and is clearly sympathetic to their culture and causes, so pointing out this perspective that is understanding toward the settlers' accounts is not

meant to question his validity as a researcher or historical authority. Nor am I arguing that Moore's account or any other that seems to lean toward accepting the settlers' and soldiers' descriptions of events are definitively false. Other historians have noted the same sorts of legitimate questions regarding what exactly happened at Risdon Cove, as well <sup>24</sup>, and to this day, legitimate questions still abound as to what exactly happened there, with many contemporary Australians refuting the accounts <sup>25</sup> of soldier hostility or culpability. <sup>26</sup>

I am, instead, pointing out the effects on a reader of *Gould* when its intertextuality is taken into account. There is, for comparison, evidence that the Holocaust occurred, and no evidence exists to back up accounts of Holocaust deniers and neo-Nazis. There is evidence that slavery occurred in America; that enslaved people were horribly treated, tortured, and dehumanized to an extreme and unfathomable degree; and that violent and dehumanizing actions such as lynchings and Jim Crow laws continued for decades after the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation; and no evidence exists to back up the claims of white supremacists, neo-Confederates, and those who deny or de-emphasize the severity or inhumanness of the slavery era in America or the conditions that continued for African Americans long after slavery was abolished, or that slavery and the relationships between enslaved people and slaveholders were anything remotely like it was romantically depicted in works like *Gone with the Wind*.

Despite this evidence, and likewise lack thereof, many people today simply believe what they

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<sup>24</sup> See contemporary historians such as Hughes, Kennealy, and Henry Reynolds, as well as the first major writer of a Tasmanian historiographer, John West, whose mammoth two-volume *History of Tasmania* was first published in 1852, whose account of the Risdon Cove event concludes that it was begun when a single Indigenous Tasmanian approached the soldiers in a hostile manner and attacked with a spear, shortly followed by five-hundred Indigenous in attack mode (Section II, [The Project Gutenberg eBook of The History of Tasmania, Volume II, by John West](#) ).

<sup>25</sup> See recent reactions against "Sorry Day" events seeking to downplay the need for Australian contrition for events like the one at Risdon Cove, other settler-Indigenous encounters that included violence, and even the entire concept of the colonization of Australia at all.

<sup>26</sup> [This webpage](#) offers an insightful look at how the incident is taught in some Australian grade schools, with both accounts given and schoolchildren asked to determine which side of the story they find more believable.

believe, seek texts and perspectives within their own information silos that reinforce their beliefs, and refuse to consider the perspective of *the other*—the Indigenous Australian out on a kangaroo hunt confronted by a hostile-looking outsider dressed in strange apparel and brandishing a weapon heretofore never seen, the Jew or gypsy or homosexual on his or her way to the gas chamber, the enslaved person on the auction block or being raped, the African American dangling from a rope in a tree, or anyone speaking on behalf of those who have been *othered*. Flanagan’s novel, and the passages in it like the one describing the events at Risdon Cove, not only present the perspective of the other, and in such a way that exhibits verisimilitude and empathy, but it also engages with these other texts, these other voices, inviting readers to do the same. Tasmania was, after all, the homeland of its native peoples for more than three-hundred generations before colonization, and the colonists had only just arrived with their claims to sovereignty and power; and while accounts do exist of some of the Tasmanian and Australian natives welcoming their new landlords, trading with them, etc.,<sup>27</sup> it’s certainly not a stretch to understand that many of them would have justifiably felt violated and angry, or that many of the colonizers would have treated the natives with disdain, disrespect, or deliberate violence. One can take *Gould* at its word as if it is the authentic *and only* voice of true history, but that would be as wrong as taking Moore’s word as such, or Boyce’s, or West’s, or Keneally’s, or Knox’s, or Margaret Mitchell’s. *Gould* is as much an invitation to visit multiple texts and consider multiple perspectives as it is a critique of the very notion of monolithic historiography.

*Gould* also works intertextually with a number of other extra-textual works, as well, that are referenced here and there throughout the novel. Perhaps most noteworthy among these are

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<sup>27</sup> See Clements’s *The Black War: Fear, Sex and Resistance in Tasmania*, for example, which discusses many such encounters, including some presumably consensual sexual and romantic engagements (and many, of course, non-consensual).

the references to works regarding phrenology and other pseudo-scientific systems that attempted to classify and categorize human races according to skin pigmentation, size of certain anatomical parts, etc., with their ultimate goal being a ranking of the races from most advanced or most civilized (read: *best*) to least advanced or least civilized (read: *worst*, and/or most animalistic, closest on the biological scale to animals). Naturally, the darker the skin, the lower on these rankings a racial category usually was; hence, a work like *Gould*, simply by referencing these concepts, works as a refutation of them. That, of course, is not to suggest that a refutation of these types of ideas *should even be needed in the first place*, but they do still exist in some quarters of the world today, and highlighting them as crucial to the colonial project and the justifications for it is important in taking stock of the project, given that this idea of racial classification represents essentially the foundation of colonialism—and if the foundation of something is shown to be a lie, then that helps explain the crumbling of the whole system. Works of historiographic metafiction like *Gould* and others (in this volume and not) act as mirrors being held up to the colonial system to reveal the falsity and destruction of it, as well as the cracks that led to its crumbling; the years in and around the decade of the 1820s is revealed to be where some of these biggest cracks can be seen—and can be seen to be widening.

The third chapter of the novel, for instance, named “The Porcupine Fish,” takes the reader deep into these cracks. In this chapter, Gould is having discussions with Mr. Lempriere, the settlement surgeon interested in Gould’s paintings and knowledge of fish, as he is very interested in classification of the natural world and of human races. Noting that “ART” is the “SERVANT” of “SCIENCE” (117, caps Flanagan’s/Lempriere’s), Lempriere seeks Gould’s company to expound his beliefs about classification to Gould and to enlist his artistry in trying to advance these notions. Lempriere references Carolus Linnaeus (122 and elsewhere), whose

work in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century, notably his *Systema Naturae* for animals, was groundbreaking and noteworthy for introducing nomenclature for many species of animal and plant life and establishing a hierarchy for their classification. Lempriere seeks to take this system of hierarchical classification further: “TIME IS RAPIDLY COMING,” he says, to “PROPERLY CLASSIFY NOT JUST ANIMALS—ALL LIVING THINGS—*EN UN MOT?*—PEOPLE—YES? NO? YES” (122). Lempriere had already extolled the virtue of ranking convicts in terms of who deserves which punishment and where they rank in terms of societal virtue and value. Gould says that he,

as surgeon, occupied a position of considerable power over us, who were, it was already obvious to me, no better than slaves. It was Mr Tobias Achilles Lempriere who would determine whether a man was too sick to be sent out working on some back-breaking task or other on one of the gangs, or whether the man deserved to be charged & flogged for such malingering. It was Mr Lempriere who would determine if a flogging should cease ... [and] whether the stroke of the cat [o’ nine tails whip] was too light & needed to be heavier & more forceful. (109)

Already wielding such power over the convicts and, indeed, the entire settlement, Lempriere’s ideas of classification is only a step or two away from classifying all human life, and thus echoing the concept of hierarchical racial classification at the heart of the British colonial system: “FIRST SUCCESSFULLY CLASSIFY ALL CONVICTS IN A CLASS FROM 1 TO 26,” he remarks, “THEN ON SUCH BASIS MAKE SOCIETY ANEW” (122). Lempriere links these ideas not only with the foundation of a growing British society with aims to spread ideas, power, and influence throughout the globe, and with the classification system of Linnaeus, but also with French botanist and zoologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (122-3). While many of



Lamarck's ideas were important to the development of the understanding of the idea of evolution, Lempriere homes in on one particularly frightening interpretation of Lamarck's theory: "the infinite perfectibility of pigs through breeding" (123); in Lempriere's twisted mind, the same could be done with people. Gould sees his being drawn into Lempriere's ambitions as "madness, this job of painting fish to further another man's reputation in another country" (127), and that helping Lempriere attempts at "breaking the world into a million classifiable elements that would lead to a whole new society" (124) was a "gargantuan act of vandalism" (126). This whole idea of racial classification and hierarchical ranking could be seen as the central and most important element in *Gould*, as it represents the hollowness, hypocrisy, and violence—cultural violence in theory, actual violence in practice—at the core of British colonialism, and linking these narrative passages intertextually with the scientific publications and theories of Linnaeus and Lamarck (and later Pliny's *Natural History*, as well [131]) increases the novel's reach and emphasizes its qualities of historiographic metafiction critique. Perhaps Gould's description of Lempriere's physical characteristics metaphorically cements this critique:

His appearance was so dreadful that on first sight it made me shudder. He was so rotund he looked as if he had been coopered rather than conceived. ... What was most distinctive about him was also what was most terrifying—the utter whiteness of his great bald head. ... Contrasting with the white desert of the rest of his face were flaps & folds of fat in which darkness ran in scheming rills ... [and] he used glistening white lead powder to make himself look as if he had been freshly floured. (108)

Not only does this description call to mind Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* with its emphasis on whiteness and its contrast with darkness, but the description of Lempriere having been "coopered rather than conceived" and using a white powder on his surface to mask the reality underneath

also metaphorically emphasize the attempts of the British power structure to artificially remake the world in its own image and hide the realities under the surface. This idea is echoed in the structure of *Gould* and in numerous lines throughout, such as Gould's remark that England was attempting "the remaking of Europe [on Tasmania] as a stunted island of misconceptions" (107), the prison commandant's declaration that England "would reinvent Europe on Sarah Island, only this time it would be even more extraordinary" (157), and this description from the chapter called *The Leatherjacket*: "Van Diemen's Land—intended by authorities to be a transplanted England—is mutating into a bastard world turned upside down" (197). Lempriere's appearance, attitude, and goals represent the ultimately failed British colonial project, further amplified by Gould's emphasis on Lempriere's "rotund" shape and "bald head": round like the world, uncertain and dangerous at the core. Holgate identifies the phrenology theme as perhaps the "most grotesque facet of the novel" (8), that Lempriere's makeup gives him "the impression of a clown," and that "his buffoonish declamatory dialogue of capitals" underscores Flanagan's satire of the totalitarian nature of British imperialism (7). To this I would add that Lempriere represents the worst of imperial and colonial authoritarianism, the folly of certitude, and the loudness with which authorities of the British empire, the British colonial venture, and British history shouted their beliefs across the globe and through time. The certainty with which they spoke and wrote may have seemed convincing at the time, and for decades after, but historiographic metafiction novels like *Gould* puncture their puffed-up presumptiveness with satire, irony, intertextuality, and literary aesthetics such as magical realism.

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What emerges through a reading of *Gould*, especially when considering its qualities of historiographic metafiction, is an emphasis on the slipperiness, unreliability, and contingency of

the written word, and the way the uncertainty of the written word—and the *uncertainties* it produces in its readers—is an ugly depiction of British colonialism and an illustration of the misunderstandings of it so pervasive during the colonial era and beyond. Historiographies and other written accounts left in the wake of colonialism certainly helped foster these misleading accounts, but *Gould* also depicts active attempts to create silences, muffling and stifling the more damning elements of the colonial system. This is perhaps illustrated most clearly in the novel in the scenes involving the records being kept at the Sarah Island prison, the kind of straightforward bureaucratic bookkeeping that generally elicits the same level of trust and authority as recorded history. In *Gould*, they create obfuscations and vacuums of silence into which false narratives nestle. Charged by the prison commandant “with keeping all the records of the island” (246), a charge so sweeping as to be utterly impossible in the first place, Jorgenson—the same Jorgenson who at one point in the novel was a bipedal talking dog—begins the record-keeping task on the basis of a chilling declaration by the commandant: “If I cannot control the past now, ... I will at least control it in the future” (246). These records and this attempt by the commandant to control the past through illegitimate documentation is seen as “a necessary clerical invention [to aid in] the much grander project of reimagining the penal colony” and part of “the necessity to lie to Governor Arthur in Hobart Town & to the Colonial Office in London” (284). In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft et al. assert that “the control of the means of communication is the empowering factor in any colonial enterprise,” and that “control is always manifested by the imposed authority of a system of *writing* [italics theirs], whether writing already exists in the colonized culture or not” (78). This control would be doubly impenetrable in an emerging culture like that of the English-led Tasmania: Convicts certainly would neither have been allowed nor would have had the means to write their own accounts of history or their

contemporary lives, and native Tasmanians had oral histories and no established culture of writing or documentation. This “intrusion of literacy [by] the colonial power,” according to Ashcroft et al., takes advantage of “the vulnerability of oral societies” (81), as well as the vulnerability of the imprisoned and otherwise marginalized. As Ashcroft et al. put it,

The presence or absence of writing is possibly the most important element in the colonial situation. Writing does not merely introduce a communicative instrument, but also involves an entirely different and intrusive (*invasive*) orientation to knowledge and interpretation. In many post-colonial societies, it was not the English language which had the greatest effect, but writing itself. In this respect, ... the *invasion* of the ordered, cyclic, and “paradigmatic” oral world by the unpredictable and “syntagmatic” world of the written word ... [and T]he *seizing* of the means of communication ... by the *appropriation* of the written word become crucial features of the process of self-assertion and of the ability to reconstruct the world as an unfolding historical process. (81)

My italics in that passage emphasize the war-like and militaristic nature of the way the colonizers’ writing—and not just their language—worked as a weapon in the battles of colonial conquest. This concept of writing as military tool becomes a major feature in *Gould*:

Gould/Hammet fights back against it with art (paintings and the written word), and the novel itself, with both its own content and its extratextual allusions, strikes a blow against the powerful force of colonial writing and postcolonial historiography. Knowing that revealing the truth of the situation on the ground in the Sarah Island prison specifically and Tasmania more broadly was untenable and inconsistent with the lofty and righteous stated goals of colonialism, lies and silences had to be directed to those in the highest administrative positions, which in turn would be directed to the general public and future generations: “The world as described by Jorgen

Jorgensen in those blue-inked pages,” Gould writes, “was at war with the reality in which we lived. The bad news was that reality was losing. It was unrecognizable. It was insufferable. It was, in the end, inhuman. It was also impossible to stop reading” (284-5).

This impossibility, though, echoes the great possibility of influencing present and future readers with lies. As Gould continues, Jorgensen “had created an image of the settlement that would persuade posterity of both the convicts’ animality & the administrator’s sagacity, a model of the power of unremitting, tempered discipline to transform pickpockets into cobblers and catamites into Christians” (287). Jorgensen’s ability to hide the horrors of the settlement, to make the convicts and Indigenous Tasmanians out to be far worse criminals than they really were, and to create silences where once were facts and realities, suggests that the entire power structure on which the colonial project rested was one big lie, one big silence that would echo through time, free to be filled with whatever words and ideas one wanted to fill them with. Gould puts this another way: “The idea of the past is as useless as the idea of the future. Both could be invoked by anybody about anything” (372). This might seem to support Derkenne’s term of “magical nihilism,” but Slemon argues that a focus on such silencing or obfuscating of historically marginalized voices is instead positive: It is “a kind of alchemical process,” he writes,

    somewhat analogous to a way of seeing, in which the silenced, marginalized, or dispossessed voices within the colonial encounter themselves form the record of ‘true’ history. The re-visioning of history, then, takes place when the voices or visions ... come into dialectical play with the inherited dominant modes of discourse and cognition in

colonialism's "phenomenal legacy"<sup>28</sup> and work towards transmuting perception into new "codes of recognition." (15)

This theme of silence, with its residual alchemical transmutations, reverberates throughout the novel. Gould notes that while he had been chosen to paint images of fish and was also free to paint other images of the island such as other animal and plant life, it was illegal for him to paint any images of the convicts, with "the very making of such pictures ... forbidden upon the pain of severest punishment" (45). The commandant once wore a smiling mask that others in the settlement began to wear as well (150)—an image of silence and the obfuscation of truths and realities—and, as Gould later notes, the commandant "wanted the city to be silent" and to "communicate through an elaborate system of written messages [that] would be rolled up & placed in small wooden cylinders, that would be propelled with compressed air along pipes, shooting the message off to wherever & whomever it was meant," because, according to the commandant, "Speech was given to man to conceal thought" (195). This scheme, "a sheer mechanickal impossibility" as noted by Gould, is a small moment of magical realism that deepens the idea that the leadership at this penal colony depended on a code of silence both to conceal truths and to allow for silences within which to replace those truths with feel-good lies: that they were improving the lives of the convicts and colonized, and that the colonial ideal was moving forward as planned, enlightening and bettering all the places and people within the scope of its advancement. The bobbing heads of the massacred natives (222-4 and elsewhere) is another image of this silence—a disturbing image of the silencing of the Indigenous populations wiped out by the colonial march.

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<sup>28</sup> Quoting here from Wilson Harris, "The Phenomenal Legacy," *The Literary Half-Yearly*, 11, No. 2 (July 1970), 1-6.

This silence, essentially, is totalizing. In an Omerta-like way, the system operating on Tasmania and at the Sarah Island prison forbids any open criticism of colonial leadership (64), and ultimately, as Gould scours all the records he can find, he is unable to find one single word that implicates the commandant or any other colonial official of any evidence of corruption. This totalizing silence is a reminder of the totalizing and universalizing goals of British colonialism and imperialism, and of the totalizing aims of the Enlightenment that preceded and underscored it. Using Slemon's theories of how magical realism works within a postcolonial context, and connecting it to my theories of how historiographic metafiction works within the specific postcolonial context of Antipodean novels, these totalizing silences in *Gould*, and the ideas the novel fills in those silences with, is "an imaginative reconstruction of" the colonial culture that "recuperate[es] ... lost voices and discarded fragments, those elements pushed to the margins of consciousness by imperialism's centralizing cognitive structures, ... thematically decentering images of fixity while at the same time foregrounding the gaps and absences those fixed and monumental structures produce" (16).<sup>29</sup> In *Gould*, this is an attack on these silences and the power structures that enabled them, but it is also an attack with a much wider target than just that. Holgate says that *Gould* "attack[s] the European Enlightenment and Western metaphysics, as being tools for imperialist domination and the subjugation of Indigenous societies (1), ... while at the same time seeking to uphold the humanitarian ideals that the movement betrayed in nineteenth-century Australia" (6). Invoking these silences is another way of cajoling a reader into investigating what the silence might be replacing, a jolt for those lulled by the soporific of history. As Slemon puts it, "the thematic foregrounding of ... gaps, absences,

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<sup>29</sup> Here, Slemon notes Jameson's argument that magical realist films depict "history with holes, perforated history" as a way of explaining "why magic realism may be especially viable as a mode of discourse in post-colonial cultures" (Slemon Note #34).

and silences produced by the colonial encounter and reflected in [a] text's disjointed language of narration" (13) is an effect produced by a work of postcolonial magical realism, an effect that destabilizes the historical foundation of its subject. *Gould* does just this, destabilizing the colonial history of Australia and Tasmania, creating a disjointed rupture in the certainty of its rendered past, and "recapitulate[ing] problems of historical consciousness in its [postcolonial] culture" (Slemon 14). This period of British colonialism, and its manifestation in Australia, seems to be so necessary to investigate to so many recent writers because it is such a definitive portrait of this attempt at totalization and the failure of the colonial system to uphold the standards of humanitarianism, decency, and morality on which it was purportedly based. In the novel, Gould describes himself as "the Murderer of the Enlightenment" (256), and Holgate describes the nexus between the ideals supposedly embraced and promoted by both the Enlightenment and British imperialism this way:

Although the Enlightenment's philosophical underpinning ... held that the rational intellect could explain anything, in a cultural sense this was mixed with a free-market commercial imperative to continually seek out new markets for profit, and a political imperative to expand sovereign frontiers to new territories. In Australia, the Enlightenment rationale resulted in a penal colony that was essentially a totalitarian, militaristic state ... . In Gould's time, ... the Enlightenment resulted in a hellish gulag for its prisoners and the attempted genocide of the Indigenous population. Freedom and liberty were sacrificed for commercial and political expediency. (6)

Australian writer and professor of literary studies and creative writing Maria Takolander, who has written extensively on the use of magical realism specifically in Australian texts, argues that "magical realist literature is fundamentally about fakery and is itself [fakery]" (165). In a



defense of magical realism against its critics, she writes that, “[i]n line with Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, magical realist texts are less interested in replacing one image of reality with another than in revealing the basis of all constructions of identity and history in the shared and differential world of discourse” (169). I would argue that *Gould* is a text that, in Takolander’s words, “thematizes its operation as a hoax that aims to expose the fraudulence of realism and of authorized representations of reality” (169). *Gould*, to be sure, is a hoax—or, given that Hammet reproduces a hoax version of Gould’s original sketchbook, a hoax of a hoax. Further, it is narrated by an outlaw—or put another way, an outlaw narrating the narration of another outlaw.

Perhaps, though, the novel seems to argue, it takes an outlaw to get the truth out when the truth is so firmly cemented in a kind of impenetrable sarcophagus of silence and lies: “the lies I now dragged behind me,” Gould laments near the end of the book, “would one day be all that remained of the settlement ... all through the machine of the Commandant’s monstrous fictions! As though they were the truth! As though history & the written word were friends, rather than adversaries” (312). He laments that he is powerless against the “sled of lies called history” (322), and that the only outlaw powerful enough to “avenge History” (312) was Matt Brady, a real-life bushranger known as “Gentleman Brady” because of the politeness with which he robbed people, who, much like Ned Kelly, has gone on to become something of a folk hero to many Australians to this day. Gould wants to get all the records he can to Brady to expose the truth about the inhumane conditions at the prison and the harsh treatment of convicts and the native Australians, but he is unable to do this; instead, it is Gould’s own book that becomes the avenger. His paintings and book become an antidote to the silence, a revealer of the barbarism of the colonial system on Tasmania, and a check on the lies of historiography. An argument that

perhaps an outlaw from the past was not as terrible a criminal as he or she has been made out to be is an invitation to revisit not only all we know about that outlaw, but also all we know about those who made the accusations of the person's outlawry to begin with, and, by logical extension, to revisit all we've been told about history in the first place by those supposed trustworthy arbiters of it. *Gould* and other works of historiographic metafiction offer invitations for these revisits. In the end, Gould is returned to the sea, an image of the human devolution sadly possible in the grasp of the twin totalitarians of empire and history.

## *Bridget Crack: Cracks in History*

*“You might, if you could go back, ask the outlaws in colonial times who they thought the actual criminals were. So many dreadful things happened that were lawful, so I can understand them not having a great deal of respect for ‘law’.”*

– Rachel Leary, 2021

Rachel Leary’s 2017 debut novel *Bridget Crack*, about an English convict sent to Australia in the 1820s to be a domestic servant who finds herself a thief on the run and taking up at one point with bushrangers, is in conversation with other texts. It is in conversation with other recent novels and texts concerned with postcolonialism and the status of convicts and Indigenous peoples in colonial Australia, it is in conversation with historical personages and documents of colonial-era Australia and Tasmania, and it is in conversation with history. It is also in conversation with various voices of Englishness that defined something about the English character so often evoked as of such high morality and virtue as to be worthy, even necessary, to spread throughout the world. One such voice is that of William Wordsworth, whose 1802 poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” is quoted in full in Leary’s novel, dogeared in a book at the lavish home of Captain Marshall in Van Diemen’s Land (later Tasmania), where convict Bridget works as a domestic servant. The romantic poem conveys the beauty of nature and the joy and pleasure that can come from appreciating it, enough to even blot out one’s loneliness or sadness—ideas very true and valuable, no doubt. The poem, though, taken in dialogic context of Leary’s novel, also expresses the elitism, presumptiveness, and entitlement of the colonial-era English—the same presumptiveness they evoked to claim foreign territories and attempt to transform them into Little Englands (or rather, *New* Englands, as, like Australia or India, for instance, they weren’t always so little), and the same sense of entitlement they felt to do so as if it were their birthright, and as if their cause and national character were so righteous as to make their colonial mission glorious, unquestionable, and necessary. Further, the poem expresses—or

rather, *reveals*, as it lacks the self-awareness (a lack that inevitably accompanies entitlement) to elicit such an expression—an assumption of the naturalness of a luxurious leisureliness that belongs, naturally, to the English by virtue of their God-given entitlement. This luxury, this leisure, this simple *ability*, to stop and cherish the beauty of daffodils—or any other single aspect of the natural beauty around them—did not exist for ground-floor Australians: the convicts, servants, and Indigenous peoples that essentially made up the foundation of the Australian and Tasmanian colonies. True, they were English by birth or heritage (or, of course, in the case of the native population, by force), but they had neither the time nor the opportunity for cloud watching or daffodil appreciating. They were too busy, it seems, being preoccupied by order following, punishment taking, or desperate fleeing. Dancing with daffodils indeed. Dancing with death, more like.

Though lacking somewhat in some of the more obvious elements of historiographic metafiction—there is only the barest hint of magical realism, for instance—the intertextual nature of *Bridget Crack*, its mixing of fictional and historical characters and events, and its reimagining of history through the eyes and perspective of an outcast and outlaw allows it to illustrate aspects of history omitted from and silenced by traditional historiographies. In addition to the reference to the Wordsworth poem, the novel also quotes a passage from Mary Shelley’s *Mathilda*, published in 1819 just prior to the action of Leary’s novel, which Bridget briefly picks up and reads from. The passage quotes Shelley’s titular narrator and protagonist making a couple of statements that link her to Bridget: she is alone, and “no voice of life reaches” her (35). The Shelley book, though, serves no practical plot-related purpose in Leary’s novel; it could be described simply as color, a small detail that shows that the Marshall household, where Bridget is a servant, is a literate one with books, is a family of means, and has leisure time for reading.

In terms of moving the plot forward, Leary could just as easily have chosen for her to pick up a copy of *The Canterbury Tales*, or an almanac, or a cookbook, or an astray with an inscription on it. The fact that it was *Mathilda*, though, and that the character in the passage shares some similarities with Bridget, invites the reader to draw a connection between the two works, to read *Bridget Crack* intertextually with Shelley's novella. Building on theories expounded by Mikhail Bakhtin <sup>30</sup> in her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel," Julia Kristeva discusses how "literary structure does not simply exist but is generated in relation to *another* structure" (35-5, italics hers), and how a " 'literary word' [is] an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), [and] a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context" (36). Her definition of intertextuality was essentially that a "text [is] a dynamic site in which relational processes and practices are the focus of analysis instead of static structures and product" (Alfaro 268). Kristeva says this is all the more true with the "poetic language" employed by literary writers such as novelists (35), and she again evokes the Bakhtinian theory that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another," and therefore, "poetic language is read as at least *double* (36, italics hers). This creates a dialogic or intertextual conversation between works when one of them directly quotes another, or even refers to another in a way that is not blatantly obvious or opaque. Bakhtin further elucidates this point in his "Discourse in the Novel" when he posits that "languages of various epochs and periods of socio-ideological life cohabit with one another" (34), and then, especially and even

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<sup>30</sup> In this essay, originally published in 1966, Kristeva is credited with the first use of the word "intertextuality" (Alfaro 268). In it, she draws primarily from Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (tr. Helene Iswolsky, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1965) and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (tr. R. W. Rotsel, Ann Arbor, Mich., Ardis, 1973) in advancing the thesis that the "poetic word ... adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of recognized culture" (36).

more so, when a writer appropriates an earlier writer's words for his or her own purposes: Such an appropriation of words "becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker [or writer] populates it with his [or her] own intention, his [or her] own accent, when he [or she] appropriates the word, adapting it to his [or her] own semantic and expressive intention" (35). He continues: "The prose writer as novelist does not strip away the intentions of others from the ... language of his [or her] works," but instead "welcomes them into his [or her] work, ... mak[ing] use of words that are already populated with the social intentions of others and compels them to serve his [or her] own intentions, to serve a second master" (36). (Perhaps the fact that I have appropriated Bakhtin's words to serve my own needs, as well as adding my additional implied commentary with the insertion of multiple uses of "or her," proves his point even further, but I digress.) In the case of *Bridget Crack*'s quotations from Wordsworth and Shelley, Leary appropriates these words from the two literary authors of the English past to help add thematic layers to her novel—the words of Shelley and Wordsworth now serve Leary, their new master.

When I, then, as a contemporary reader of Leary's contemporary novel, engage in this dialogic, interpreting the thematic implications of the dialogue between *Bridget Crack* and these two prior literary works, as well as sharing in the dialogue myself with the other three, a theme emerges that underpins the novel. Wordsworth's poem applies to an ironic <sup>31</sup> reading of Leary's narrative in that Bridget and other underclass, marginalized, and oppressed members of the foundational colonial Australian population were never afforded the luxuries assumed by the entitled British class who were busy building their new society(-ies) on the backs of the marginalized and oppressed. *Mathilda*, meanwhile, tells the story of a young English girl who comes to learn that her father has incestuous desires for her and eventually commits suicide,

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<sup>31</sup> Irony is one of the elements that Linda Hutcheon identifies as a frequent aspect of historiographic metafiction; it is also found regularly in postcolonial fiction, as well.

leaving Mathilda to deal with the horrific knowledge until her death in her early twenties—it is a story, then, of Mathilda finding out how twisted, demented, and immoral the foundation of her upbringing was, that the man whose seed brought her into the world was wicked, and that her youth—indeed her whole life—had been a tormented web of lies and depravity. In Bakhtinian and Kristevian terms, my intertextual reading of Leary’s quoting from these two literary works tells me that *Bridget Crack* is an unmasking of the foundation of British colonialism, specifically as it relates to Australia but also to colonialism more broadly and completely. Though the passages of literary intertextuality of the novel are somewhat limited in totality, the thematic understanding that emerges from this dialogical reading echoes through the rest of the novel—which can be read to be in intertextual conversation with the history of the colony itself, with the previous historiographies of it, with the historical assumptions birthed by these historiographies (both in terms of what was typically included in them and what was not), and with both contemporary perspectives on British-Australian history and contemporary literary and artistic creations reflective of the era.

In telling the story of the runaway convict servant Bridget, Leary’s novel is positioned in places that typically were not included in those historiographies. Jeanette Winterson, a novelist whose works have been described as historiographic metafiction, has expressed a view on history that is applicable to a reading of *Bridget Crack*:

The past is not a place that we know. We weren’t there. And no matter what records are given to us, what objects, what stories, what histories, we don’t know, because we weren’t present. So to get at the past, fiction is as likely a way of interpreting it as any. . . . We are continually understanding our past in a different way because we are continually reinterpreting it and fiction does that very well. (qtd. in Kiliç 128)

In his analysis of the historiographic metafiction and intertextual qualities of Winterson's work, Kiliç says that Winterson's works such as *The Passion* (1987) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) illuminate stories of marginalized characters that otherwise would not have been told (132),<sup>32</sup> which is exactly what *Bridget Crack* does, as well, albeit without the fantasy and magical realism so present in Winterson's work. In addition to the two literary quotations mentioned above, the intertextual elements in *Bridget* include an 1826 proclamation from Colonel George Arthur, Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen's Land, that is mostly word for word as it was originally published in the *Hobart Town Gazette*, with notable changes to make it relevant to the novel. For one, the original proclamation began with a focus on Matthew Brady and his gang, but in Leary's novel, their names have been changed to that of Matthew Sheedy and members of his gang, which is the fictional gang that Bridget takes up with while she's on the run; Leary explains in her "Author's Note and Acknowledgements" at the end of the book that the Sheedy gang and many of their actions were based on her research into bushrangers, "particularly Matthew Brady and his gang" (313). Leary also inserts Bridget into the proclamation, which concludes with the governor's reward for the apprehension of Bridget being "Fifty Guineas, or ... Fifty Acres of Land, free from all restrictions" (118). That's quite a reward for the capture of someone whose original crime had merely been using a known forged coin to buy a small amount of bread—because "they needed food" (178)—which emphasizes the desire of the British colonial authority to bring law and order to the land at any cost. Later in the novel, Leary fictionalizes some Arthur dialogue in which he says about his desire to catch Bridget:

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<sup>32</sup> Kiliç quotes in this discussion of *The Passion* from Bengston, Helene, "The Vast Unmappable Cities of the Interior: Place and Passion in *The Passion*," in *Sponsored by Demons: The Art of Jeanette Winterson*, Odense, Scholar's Press, 1999, p. 23.



I am little concerned with the offender's sex. I don't really care if the thief is an hermaphrodite. What I am concerned with is the maintenance of order in this colony. That is my role, to maintain order, and whether it be a man, a woman, a monkey or any other creature threatening that order, I do not care. What I care about is that they are brought to order, and imminently. (280)<sup>33</sup>

This is in line with the way intertextuality generally creates multiple layers of potential meaning in a text, merging original implications with current situations and implications, creating, in the words of Elenora Federici, "echoes of previous works" (98). According to Federici,

Postmodern intertextuality is based on the intertextual awareness in both author and reader of the 'double coding' of art and its reading. The direct appeal, the clear and specific allusion to a previous text within a novel can be taken as one of the various examples of 'markers' of intertextuality that we can identify reading a literary or cultural text. Intertextuality as a postmodern concept ... is not only a rhetorical device, but becomes the true kernel of the text's plot. (92)<sup>34</sup>

This works in *Bridget* as a "recodification of social and political contents" and helps "determine the global ideological perspective of the work [by] "play[ing] with political and social subversion" (Federici 92-3). This de-/re-/double coding in *Bridget* acts to both parody and satirize the hypocritical and callous nature of the colonial system and the contemporary and historiographic writings that helped cement and enforce it. As Kristeva puts it, when "two texts meet, [they] contradict and revitalize each other" (49). In this instance of intertextuality in

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<sup>33</sup> This calls to mind the police overseer in the 2005 Australian film *The Proposition* (discussed later in this chapter), whose brutal public lashings and other punishments of convicts reflect his overarching mission and ruthless means of achieving it: "I will civilize this land."

<sup>34</sup> Federici quotes here from Manfred Pfister, 1991: "How Postmodern is Intertextuality." In: H.F. Plett, ed. *Intertextuality*. Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 207-24.

*Bridget*, Leary gives Arthur's original words "a new meaning while retaining the meaning it already had," and thus the utterances—Arthur's original and Leary's commodified and altered—become "*ambivalent*" (Kristeva 43, italics hers): "It is the writer [in this case Leary] who 'speaks,' but a foreign discourse is constantly present in the speech that it distorts" (44).

Allowing true historical colonial speech into her novel and then distorting it infuses Leary's novel with a sense of dislodging meaning from historical understandings, unmooring the often exculpatory or even hagiographic renderings of the colonial past and reallocating them to the present, giving voice to contemporary perspectives that seek to revisit, critique, and hold to account colonialism's questionable motives, modes, and mores. This places the novel within the framework of Linda Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction. As Hutcheon has noted, historiographic metafiction "suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from becoming conclusive and teleological ... [and create] a world of provisionality and indeterminacy" (*Poetics* 110-1). Looked at this way, *Bridget* "works to subvert dominant discourses, but is dependent upon those same discourses for its very physical existence. Certainly," as Hutcheon continues, a work like *Bridget* "is marked by a return to history, and it does indeed problematize the entire notion of historical knowledge, ... erode our old sure sense of what both history and reference meant," and ask "us to rethink and critique our notions of both" (*Poetics* 46). In other (of Hutcheon's) words, *Bridget* works as historiographic metafiction in that it "manages to satisfy ... a desire for 'worldly' grounding while at the same time querying the very basis of the authority of that grounding" (*Parody* 5). By grounding her novel in realistic details and an overall sense of realism and verisimilitude while also couching it in these kinds of subversions of historical groundings, Leary brings the past into the present—not merely to bring the past alive, as some

traditional historical novels may have aimed for, but to offer contemporary readers an opportunity for reassessment of the past, of historiographical renderings of it, and of the relationship between situations on the ground in colonial times with perspectives (and actions) on the ground *in the present*.

She does this with other intertextual moments throughout the novel, as well. The reference to “the Van Diemen’s Land Company” on page 172, for instance, might lead readers to information about the actual company: for instance, that it was established in 1824—in line with the setting of *Bridget*—primarily “to ensure a cheap supply of wool for British factories”; that it “sought a 500,000 acre land grant and ... [that n]o thought was given to the dispossession of Aborigines”; that convicts and indentured servants were chiefly tasked with the treacherous labor in establishing the company; that a convict insurrection was eventually launched against the company’s masters “due to no bedding, ragged clothing and poor rations”; and that while the company proved profitable, its original stated goal of wool production was “a failure” (Lennox). It might also be enlightening to readers to learn that Edward Curr, who along with William Sorell was a director of the company, “admitted being a ‘coercive master’ who doled out strict justice and discipline,” including holding back on “rations, wood and water” to the workers as punishment for various offenses, and that the company had a hostile relationship with Indigenous peoples, despite claims to the contrary. According to Lennox,

the supposed humanitarian sentiments of directors towards Aborigines are often deemed mere outward show, especially in the light of violent acts by Company personnel. After early skirmishes, with huts burnt and sheep speared, three Aborigines were killed at Ritchie's stock hut in 1827. At Cape Grim, when shepherds attempted to “take liberties”

with Aboriginal women,<sup>35</sup> a convict was speared in the thigh and over one hundred sheep were killed. Reprisal by shepherds on 10 February 1828 saw about thirty Aborigines killed. The despicable murder of an Aboriginal woman at Emu Bay on 21 August 1829 saw [Governor] Arthur thwart justice and explain away the affair under the guise of martial law and personal disputes.

The reference to the Van Diemen's Land Company also calls to mind the East India Company, the massive trading company that eventually undergirded the British foray into India, relied on the labor of enslaved people, and became so huge that it had its own army that by 1800 claimed some 200,000 soldiers, more than twice the size of entire British army (Duignan). The inference here is that profit, not enlightenment or improvement, not Christian ideology or brotherly love, was the bedrock of the British colonial system. Greed, violence, and racism, and the intersection of all three, were the true holy trinity of colonialism; Leary's novel, and its intertextual references, can lead readers to this perspective. Other references in the novel, such as passages evoking Arthur's "hundreds of new land grants in the Interior," his "order stating that the military and settlers could use force to drive natives away from properties" despite the fact that "settlers had already been using force" (294), and articles in the *Colonial Times* stoking fears of the Indigenous population and a build-a-wall mentality (294 and elsewhere), reinforce these themes in the novel. A reference to Port Arthur's Dead Island (101), also called Isle of the Dead, which was originally used by Indigenous peoples to gather food but eventually became a cemetery for convicts and free people of the Port Arthur penal colony (Thorn and Piper), is yet another reference in the novel that, linked to these others, in Hutcheon's words, "plays upon the

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<sup>35</sup> This echoes historical details of the frequent raping of Indigenous women in the Australian territories by British officials, settlers, and ex-convicts as discussed in numerous sources, such as Nicholas Clements's *The Black War: Fear, Sex and Resistance in Tasmania*, U. of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Queensland, 2014.

truth and lies of the historical record” and “foreground[s] the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error” (*Poetics* 114). Parts of *Bridget* are true known historical facts and taken from historical records. Most of it is fiction. It can lay claim, though, to being just as true<sup>36</sup> a representation *about the truth of* the British colonial days in Australia and Tasmania as any history book on the subject one might pick up. This is the way historiographic metafiction works. It argues, again in Hutcheon’s assessment, “that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past” (*A Poetics* 89), and that historical fiction, particularly ones with specific elements of historiographic metafiction, constitute “the process of dialogue with the past carried on through a performative use of language” (*A Poetics* 79).<sup>37</sup> In a sense, the postmodernist historiographic metafiction novel is in direct competition with history itself, believing perhaps that it can tell history better than any historiography, and that it can reach “truth” in a truer way. *Bridget Crack* might indeed be representative of this.

In fact, it does this in a variety of ways, most notably in its approach to detailing issues of crime and punishment in the colony, especially as it relates to Indigenous peoples and to gender. While there aren't many actual Indigenous characters or lines of dialogue spoken by Indigenous people in Leary’s novel, their presence is felt throughout, hovering almost ghost-like through the proceedings. This is somewhat similar to treatments of Indigenous characters in other contemporary novels, such as Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001) and *A Long Way from Home* (2017), in which Indigenous characters are depicted only occasionally and are

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<sup>36</sup> Perhaps I’m channeling the Father in Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* a bit here in arguing that Leary’s fiction is “less real perhaps, but truer” than the actual historical events: Real-life people change from minute to minute, but fictional characters, and thus by extension fictional narratives, are always true to their natures.

<sup>37</sup> Here Hutcheon is referencing the theories of Dominick LaCapra.

rarely given dialogue, but they—and the violence perpetuated against them—stand in suggested relief against the actions depicted in the novel. (In *A Long Way Home* especially, as the reader approaches the book’s final chapters, the significance of Indigenous peoples in the history of Australia and in its present becomes starkly evident.) John Hillcoat’s 2005 film *The Proposition* also springs to mind, as “one of a spate of Australian films about violence and the (post)colonial encounter released in the early twenty-first century” that “reconstructs the trauma of the frontier, ... worries over the meaning of violence on the Australian frontier, [and] explores what has become speakable (and remains unspeakable) in the public sphere about the history of the frontier encounter, especially in terms of ... race” (Elder 165). That film, written by Australian screenwriter and musician Nick Cave, “begins with the now quite common warning for Indigenous viewers that the film contains images of deceased Indigenous peoples and that they should be aware of this in case the images cause distress,” and follows that warning with images showing “both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, in orderly situations, with everyone carefully and neatly dressed in Western clothing” ... [that] alludes to a well-accepted link between the archive and historical veracity [and] suggest[s] the coming nation” as one of natives and settlers living in harmony (Elder 169). This is quickly juxtaposed with a series of photographic images that depict violence toward both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and in the film that follows, Indigenous characters are shown to be either in servitude to the white settlers and police; working with outlaws in the outback; or being objects of bias, scorn, or violence by settlers. These brief and mostly wordless depictions of Indigenous characters, then, and the settlers’ attitudes toward them, push them to the margins of the film—just as they were pushed to the margins in actual Australian history—making their mistreatment and the violence perpetuated against them one of the key themes of the narrative. The use of the actual

photographs in the film and the voicing of this theme contradicts historically perceived notions of the benevolence of the colonial system and “calls into question the idea of the document and history” (Elder 169).

This is similar to what we see in *Bridget*. For instance, in her review of the novel, Ellen Cregan notes that “[w]hile travelling with the gang of bushrangers, [Bridget] is shocked when she sees two Indigenous men, and is even more surprised when one speaks English fluently.”

Cregan continues:

In this encounter, we see a glimpse of the horrors colonial rule perpetrated in Tasmania—these men have been forced to assimilate into the underside of this new society, dealing with men like Sheedy to survive. There are traces of Indigenous Tasmanians throughout this novel—while there are almost no Indigenous characters, there are multiple reminders that this is their land. Almost all of the useful information Sheedy and his gang know about the land comes from encounters with Indigenous people. This novel is set during an active genocide of Indigenous Tasmanians, and we are not allowed to forget this.

Their physical absence in this book is another reminder of the horrors of Australia’s past. (Cregan)

Other scenes in the novel foreground the Indigenous peoples and the violence perpetuated toward them, even as they themselves remain a somewhat muted presence in the proceedings. Captain Marshall and his wife Eleanor, for instance, who initially kept Bridget as a servant, argue about the proper attitudes and treatment of the natives. While the captain displays, in his wife’s word, “high ideals” (36) for extending empathy toward the Indigenous people and trying to protect them, Eleanor takes a more hardline approach. “ ‘Their children are dying, Eleanor,’ ” the captain argues, and “ ‘[w]e have some obligation to protect them,’ ” an entreaty that is met

with momentary silence, until Eleanor finally responds with, “ ‘I lie in bed at night and imagine them coming down out of the hills, coming here to this house. . . . The trouble is there’s a horde of savages out there who would kill us as soon as look at us and all you can do is make excuses for them” (36-7). Shortly thereafter, Bridget overhears a conversation about how a settler farmer had “twelve sheep . . . [s]laughtered by natives” (45), which highlights not only that the “natives” were automatically assumed to have been the criminals without proof, but also that even if it had been Indigenous people who’d committed the crime, the sheep were on land that was rightfully the natives’ own land in the first place. A few pages later, Bridget sees some young settler kids playing a game with wooden soldiers in their back yard, as well as shooting at imaginary targets with their fingers as guns. At one point, the young boy “aimed his fingers at [a] tree. . . . ‘Boom. Die, you black bastard,’ ” he says. “ ‘Boom. Boom’ ” (48-9). This is how deeply engrained into the settlers’ psyche anti-Indigenous bias was: They are assumed to be criminals, they are assumed to be inhuman savages, and young children grow up believing that to kill them is their birthright and duty—or, in fact, just a game. Later, as Bridget is alone and on the run and her situation is becoming more and more dire each day, she has two encounters with Indigenous characters. In one, she sees evidence that a war with them is ongoing (191-3). In the other, as she is nearing death and her hunting dog has caught a kangaroo, a native also on a kangaroo hunt approaches and gestures that the kangaroo is his. Bridget kicks the kangaroo and tells the man to take it (302-3). Whether this was out of fear of being killed by the man, out of kindness, or out of some sense of her being an interloper on his rightful land is not the point. That it is suggestive of the truth underlying the colonial venture that contemporary voices of the time and later history ignored or misrepresented—that the English stole their land and erased their culture—is.



This is indicative of a grappling for a sense of national identity inherent in a postcolonial country. The settlers and colonial authority depicted in Leary's novel, brief disagreements aside, seem to have neither than inclination toward seeing the country as anything other than their own, anything other than purely English, nor even the capacity to consider that it could be possibly belong to anyone other than them. This seemed to be the prevailing attitude all the way up until the *Mabo and Others v Queensland (No. 2)* decision of 1992 acknowledged that *some* Indigenous Australians had *some* proprietary rights to land and "acknowledged the history of Indigenous dispossession in Australia" (Mabo and Native), though this hardly reduces the impact of the near genocide of the Indigenous population during settlement, the total genocide of many tribes, the fact that only about 3.3% of the population of Australia and Tasmania today identify as Indigenous (Korff), and that according to a 2019 study in the *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, "Seventy-five per cent of Australians hold an implicit bias against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples" (*Guardian*). This struggle for a national identity was a part of settlers' lives in colonial days—as it certainly was for the Indigenous population, as well—during and after colonization, and all the way up to today. According to Alan Lawson, " 'Who am I when I am transported?' [was] an inevitable colonial question ... in countries where the climate, the landscape and the native inhabitants did little to foster any sense of continuity" (168). It became imperative to English-Australian writers, Lawson argued, "[t]o define ... images of identity, of community, of history, of place" in a new place seemingly hostile to their previously held view of themselves and of their national identity. "Nationalism is a reaction of peoples who feel culturally at a disadvantage" (169),<sup>38</sup> Lawson argued, which goes a long way toward explaining the need for the colonials in Australia and the writers of Australian history through the 19<sup>th</sup> and

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<sup>38</sup> In this essay, Lawson is primarily discussing issues of national identity for the colonizers and settlers, but his theories are also applicable for Indigenous populations, as well.

early- to mid-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries to continue to use language, rhetoric, and absence—the absence of focus on the violence toward the Indigenous population and other disreputable practices of the early colonial administrators and settlers—to construct and defend their own version of Australian national identity. As Lawson put it, “When the cultural identity in question is that of a people transported to a new and strange place, . . . the language undergoes great strain” (169).

This strain on the language led to a straining of credulity that only began to be addressed more directly by writers of postcolonial literature set in the Australian colonial days that illuminated these shortcomings of language, misuses of rhetoric, and sleight of hand of historiography. *Bridget Crack* doesn’t come out and tell readers that prior to colonization, Tasmania “was occupied for at least 30,000 years by a hunter-gatherer people, the Tasmanian Aborigines,” that they “were increasing in population at British colonisation in 1803,” that by “1835 only one [Indigenous] family remained in Tasmania,” with the “vast majority [having] been killed, or [having] died from introduced disease, or [having] been forcibly removed from their homeland,” or that the “only survivors were those who escaped government control—in a sealing community on the Bass Strait islands” (Lyndall). It doesn’t have to. Its intertextual qualities can lead readers to other documents where they can learn these facts. Further, its other elements of historiographic metafiction—primarily mixing fact and fiction; ascribing fictional actions, attributes, or dialogue to historic personages; and telling stories of people marginalized, forgotten, or silenced through time, those whose own histories were denied by contemporary publishing and later historiographies—suggest that the history of the nation and its colonization bare scrutiny, and that the stories *not* told through historiography, the voices *not* heard, the lives marginalized and silenced, warrant uncovering.

Bridget is at further disadvantage in the story, in considerably more physical danger, and in more danger of having her story go uncovered during her lifetime—and thus unreported through history—because of her gender. The idea of gender in this novel—that is, Leary’s decision to make the central character a woman instead of a man—is an important part of the story that reflects how the British colonial system, and British society more broadly, was heavily weighted against women. British history (and most of all history, for that matter) being so deeply patriarchal and both oppressive toward and disrespectful of women—indeed even violent toward women, as well, both culturally violent in a large sense and physically violent in specific cases—is reflected in Bridget’s narrative. Her gender and socioeconomic status essentially gave her no chance to begin with, and her position eventually forced her into a partnership with violent bushrangers and lecherous men like Budders, who, in addition to frequent verbal sexual harassment of Bridget, also openly tried to rape her (95) and another teenage girl (99-100) right in front of the rest of the gang. In one episode, for instance, Budders tries to rape Bridget, and though another bushranger, Henry, steps in to stop the assault, he essentially blames Bridget for the whole incident with his eyes (95), while in another, Matt proves to be especially cruel to Bridget, assaulting her and nearly suffocating her by stuffing her head into a pile of flour (197). Eventually, Bridget is forced to go it alone, becoming a thief and trying to survive by herself in the unforgiving outback, having found no peace among the bushrangers and no place within the colonial system itself, revealed in the novel to have its own structure of sexism and misogynistic oppression. This is perhaps stated most vividly by Captain Marshall when he notes that “[t]he wonderful thing about women of lower classes is that they can’t ask anything of you’ ” (77), and later by surveyor Price to Captain Marshall when he says of women, “ ‘They’re all whores, Captain’ ” (287).

This astonishing and sickening level of institutionalized, philosophized, and rationalized sexism and classism—seen in *Bridget* as part of the bedrock of colonial thought—is reflected not just in moments such as these in the novel but in its narrative arc in general. According to Leary, the lack of this kind of narrative arc in authorized historical accounts of Australian history was a key impetus in her decision to tell a story about a character such as Crack; the novel would be a direct challenge to accepted, institutionalized, memorialized history: “I wanted to insert her, or at least the idea of her,” she said, “into the history.” She further noted that she was

suspicious of our accepted, legitimated, notions of [history]. ... It is valuable to uncover (or *create* [italics mine]) the stories of those pushed to the edge: because in part these “other” stories ask us to question [history and] who our heroes are. These “other” stories often cast a different light on those we have created as heroes, complicate these hero tales. That is one reason ... I began to wonder: where I am in these histories? I can no longer really relate to the Ned Kelly story, to the male Australian bushranger stories, so who and where are the women in these stories? Their stories tell a different history.

(Leary)

Here we see Leary’s novel working intertextually with historiography, myth, and other contemporary works of historiographic metafiction *and* postcolonial fiction all at once with a clear goal of challenging the monolith of history and seeking untold aspects of it—not because these aspects may have the verifiability of historical fact, but because they may speak to real truths of the time, real experiences of real people that can shed light on what colonial life may have been like for those whose stories, attitudes, and experiences have never been told.

Bridget’s fictional story gets told; history’s absolutism gets rebuked.

These metafictional and intertextual elements of Leary's novel combine to create a political subtext to the novel that not only investigates and castigates the politics of the time but also contributes to various political discussions of the present regarding race, gender, postcolonialism, and the proper way to view uncomfortable aspects of a nation's history. In the novel, class becomes another part of this discussion. The combination of Bridget's gender and her low socioeconomic status puts her at a disadvantage nearly impossible to overcome in early 19<sup>th</sup> Century England, and then with one legal strike against her and transportation orders to Van Diemen's land, the trajectory she would follow from low to lower to all alone in the outback foraging and stealing for survival was essentially set in stone. In his analysis of the 2005 novel *The Captive Wife* by Fiona Kidman of New Zealand, Hamish Dalley notes that the protagonist of that novel lacks

the freedom to move that is available to men ... [in] a captivity narrative in which she becomes the object of competing male attempts to control her sexuality. The violence imposed on her ... renders the gendered nature of the historical novel's conventions explicit, bringing them to the center of the narrative and highlighting the agency of those who impose their power on others. The effect is to denaturalize frontier violence by presenting it less as an inevitable effect of colonial relations than the product of masculine rivalries played out on feminized bodies. (62)

*Bridget Crack* is doing something similar here, encoding in Bridget's story, and in her struggles related simply and solely to the fact that she was born a woman—doubly coded by her also being born poor, and then triply coded by her being caught committing a (small) crime—highlight her lack of agency.

In my interview with her, Leary elaborated on this lack of agency, a lack that often manifested itself in the kind of physical harm and sexual assault Bridget faces in the novel. In her research for the book, Leary says she

came across in the records ... that often, female convicts were moved from Hobart to Launceston. They would be walked there by a police officer, who was always male and often an ex-convict himself. Should they be raped on the way, which ... was common, of course, they [had] no recourse. The same of being assaulted by their masters, also common. They did have methods of resistance, but they were also to a fair degree at the mercy of the system they were stuck in. Many of them would have had PTSD. (Leary)

This kind of information, not highlighted in common, authoritative historiographies, can be highlighted in poetic and fictional works like Leary's through these metafictional elements, intertextuality, and a confrontation with generally accepted and widely held sanitized versions of the past. Ugly parts of history have a way of being whitewashed out of the official stories. Not in a work like *Bridget Crack*. "It was important to me," Leary says, "not to write a pretty or romantic story. So much of what these women dealt with was not at all pretty." Leary's decidedly not-pretty story highlights the power of the British society of the time, a power so immense that it has the agency Bridget—and other women of her time and place—lacks.<sup>39</sup> It can also determine who within its society may also be endowed with some agency—and who is denied the possibility of any agency at all.

It could be argued that when Bridget eventually sets off alone, self-isolating from the control and influence of the British colonial society, the society of bushrangers, and the society

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<sup>39</sup> Leary also noted in my interview with her that she is of Irish heritage, that most of her family who were present on Tasmania during the colonial days were convicts and ex-convicts, and that she "was interested in understanding the history of [her] own family on the island ... [and] wanted to tell ... stories about the relationship to the landscape" that her ancestors and others like them had. (Leary)

of men, she achieves some measure of agency, but the consequences of this self-forged agency are as tragic as they are inevitable. Hers was not a world in which a woman alone—certainly not a poor one—could survive, let alone thrive, which may seem an obvious fact, but one that still yields valuable insights into the past, into historiographic renderings of the past, and into the present, as well. Leary’s decision as a fiction writer to revisit this era in British and Australian history—as with the decisions of other contemporary British and Australian writers, as well—opens up for examination and debate the very basis for British colonialism, the historical British character, and the validities and omissions of British historiography. This approach also allows readers to avoid the temptation to compartmentalize uncomfortable aspects of the past, thus rendering them unproblematically *of the past* and rationalizing them away as having nothing to do with us here in the present. On the contrary, they have *everything* to do with us here in the present. They reveal traditionally understood versions of our history (by “our” I am referring here both to “their” British and Australian history, as well as to “our” history as world citizens) to be myths that worked as a palliative, allowing us to brush aside harsh and painful aspects of the past and soothe us without revealing the root of lingering discomfort. They draw connections between the past and the present. They argue that illuminating the past can enlighten the present and, by extension, the future.<sup>40</sup>

Leary’s novel calls to mind not only documents of the era and historiographies written—and *not* written—about the era, but also other recent novels that seek to illuminate this same era. Like some of these works, it depicts the harsh punishment meted out on those who would

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<sup>40</sup> It may be worth noting here that two novels discussed in this volume, Carey’s *True History* and Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*, both begin with epigraphs from American writer William Faulkner, another author whose fictions revisited the decaying days of an earlier society built on violence, racism, and lies, and emphasized their connections to the present. As the epigraph Carey chose points out, “The past is not dead. It is not even past” (from Faulkner’s 1951 novel *Requiem for a Nun*).

transgress British laws, violate conceptions of what the society was supposed to be, and sully, in today's parlance, the British *brand*. Bridget is a representation of the convicts that made up a large chunk of the base of the early Australian population. The first fleet in 1788 brought around 1,400 convicts, soldiers, and free settlers, and between that arrival and the end of convict transport in 1768, more than 160,000 English convicts had been shipped off to Australia (Convicts). There were some serious criminals among the transported, such as those convicted of murder, but by far the most common offense was theft (Convicts); women convicts were primarily young, single domestic servants convicted of petty theft (Female Convicts)—like Bridget. Like other contemporary works that draw attention to English colonial crime and punishment, such as Carey's *True History*, Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001) and *Wanting* (2008), and the film *The Proposition*, *Bridget* illustrates punishment that was harsh and often public. While working as a servant in the Marshall house, Bridget was charged with "insolence and disorderly conduct" for lashing out at the head servant Mary for waking her with a clanging bell next to her head; sentenced to two hours in the stocks in the middle of town; sent to "the Female Factory," the name given to the women's wing of the jail (38-9); and, before being sent back to the Marshall home, had her hair cut off (41), one of the punishments frequently given to women convicts because of its "humiliating" effect and "precisely because the women detested them ... [and] were felt to be personally degrading or ... defeminizing" (Female Convicts)—and, I might add, dehumanizing. Elsewhere in the novel, public hangings are described, including one for the theft of a sheep, as well as public burials of those hung (239-40). In one scene, Bridget witnesses the hanging of a woman prisoner and is shortly thereafter warned, " 'That's what happens to girls who don't behave themselves' " (205). These scenes, reminiscent, for example, of the scenes of public flogging and the parading through town of captured outlaws in a



pen being pulled by a team of horses in *The Proposition*, bring to light the harshness of the British-Australian penal system—and while it's understandable that authorities needed to bring law and order to a lawless land with limited and poorly armed police forces, *Bridget* and the works noted above seem to implicate the British in the creation of the circumstances that would give rise to such a sense of lawlessness to begin with. With Bridget's descent herself into further lawlessness and futile attempts to survive in the outback causing her eventually to look "for all the world more like an animal than a human being, let alone a woman" (290), the novel emphasizes the cruel and untenable nature of the system and its dehumanizing effects.

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A literary work set in the past is about two different time periods simultaneously: the period within which it is set and the period within which it is created. *Bridget Crack* is about the 1820s in Tasmania, and it is also about the 2010s (and the 2020s, for that matter) in Australia (and elsewhere). It is in conversation with the history of the time and place within which it is set, and it is in conversation with works created in recent years also set during those years, and it is in conversation with a variety of literary, theoretical, cultural, and political conversations that are ongoing today. As Julia Kristeva put it, "The only way a writer can participate in history is by transgressing ... abstraction through a process of reading-writing; that is, through the practice of a signifying structure in relation or opposition to another structure. History and morality are written and read within the infrastructure of texts" (36). In this way, Leary, in *Bridget Crack*, is, also in Kristevian terms, inserting history into her text and her text into history (39). Had Bridget been a real historical woman, hers would have been a "story ... not ... recorded by the mainstream culture," as Kiliç (128) says of one of Jeanette Winterson's characters. In Winterson's own words,

People like to separate storytelling which is not fact from history which is fact. They do this so that they know what to believe and what not to believe. This is very curious. How is it that no one will believe that the whale swallowed Jonah every day Jonah is swallowing the whale? I can see them now, stuffing down the fishiest of fish tales, and why? Because it is history. Knowing what to believe had its advantages. It built an empire and kept people where they belonged, in the bright realm of the wallet. Very often history is a means of denying the past. Denying the past is to refuse to recognise its integrity. To fit it, force it, function it, to suck out the spirit until it looks the way it should. We are all historians in our small way. (qtd. in Kiliç 129)

In *Bridget Crack*'s version of history, the realm of the marginalized is important in emphasizing how this empire got built—and how it began to crumble. Hutcheon sees in works of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and historiographic metafiction

a strong shared concern with the notion of marginalization, with the state of what we could call ex-centricity. In granting value to (what the centre calls) the margin or the Other, the postmodern challenges any hegemonic force that presumes centrality, even as it acknowledges that it cannot privilege the margin without acknowledging the power of the centre. (“Circling” 153)

Leary's novel legitimizes the margins of colonial society while also acknowledging the inherent problematic nature of its frequent lawlessness, but it offers a double critique, as well, of colonialism's center: Its own dishonesty, viciousness, and lawlessness was what drove many to the lawless margins to begin with. Further, the novel challenges the hegemonic force not only of the colonial system itself but also of Victorian-era historiography and myths of colonial righteousness. With its “thematic concerns regarding history and marginality [and its]

foreground[ing of] textual gaps,” (Hutcheon, “Circling” 150), *Bridget* draws attention to the flaws and absences of authorized history, and by mixing fact-based characters and events with clearly fictional ones, it draws attention to its own fictionality—in fact, it draws attention to its status as challenger to history, as an epistemological rendering of *true ideas*, if not necessarily *verifiable facts*, of British-Australian history, *and* as a way that modern Australians (and any others interested in history, colonial or otherwise) might look at that past. Writers of more traditional historical novels in previous eras went to great lengths to privilege the historical record, peppering their works with numbers, dates, facts, figures, statistics, footnotes, etc., to give them the strongest air of accuracy (i.e., authority) possible, an assumption they expected readers to embrace. As Mahdi Teimouri notes in his essay “On the Question of Overlap between the Post-Colonial and the Postmodern,” these writers

were conscious of the superiority of history over fiction. They saw history as made up of facts which stood for truthful record of what had really *happened*. Such a conception of history is dangerous as ... writing history becomes the privileged vocation of the conqueror [and] ... paves the way for the smothering of alternative voices and truth-claims. As a result monolithic or teleological perceptions of history become confluent in their complicity with the hegemonic rule. (6, italics his)

For writers of postcolonial fiction and historiographic metafiction, the effort is one of counteracting such privileged and hegemonic views. A work like *Bridget Crack* has a way of freeing history from the grip of presumed fact and “debunking any ways of conceiving history as a given or as a *donnée*” (Teimouri 6). As Teimouri puts it in his analysis of Salman Rushdie’s 1981 *Midnight’s Children*, Leary’s novel is “historiographic in that it re-visits the history of [in the case of *Bridget Crack*, Australia’s colonization] by presenting an alternative account of it

from the position of those who witnessed it but were denied the right to take part in writing it” (7), and it is metafictional in the way it splices together fact and fiction and invites intertextual readings, drawing attention to its own fictionality and artifice. It fictionalizes the past and speaks to the present. It investigates and revisits the British empire at a crucial time—when it was still in its building stages but the signs of cracking and collapse were beginning to show, and the holes in its conception of itself as a force for morality and benevolent enlightenment throughout the world were beginning to grow—and illuminates some of its aspects that would eventually lead to its downfall. In 1988, Jamaica Kincaid’s said that “the English have become such a pitiful lot these days, with hardly any idea what to do with themselves now that they no longer have one quarter of the earth’s human population bowing and scraping before them. They don’t seem to know that this empire business was all wrong” (92). *Bridget Crack* does.

## Nothing is Certain, Unless Publication Makes It So: Intertextuality, Parody, and Polyphony in Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers*

*"As colonial expansion progressed, it ... distorted how colonized people think of themselves.  
The vehicles for this were missionary activity, state laws, philosophies and violence."  
– Samson and Gigoux, Indigenous Peoples and Colonialism (38)*

*"So I did guess the whole truth. This was some dying place."  
– Peevay, English Passengers (221)*

The structure of Matthew Kneale's 2000 novel *English Passengers*, with its call-and-response pattern, one narrator answering—or, usually, correcting or calling into question—the previous one and twenty-one narrators altogether, both echoes and critiques historiography and the epistemological transforming power of publication. Any notion of certainty in the novel becomes lost amid, even because of, the absolute certainty with which most of its narrators speak and their persistent differences of perspective. This structure also works as sort of an example of the general concept of intertextuality: reading one chapter will only result in limited knowledge or a biased understanding without also having read the previous chapter(s). Likewise, the novel's narrators, characters, and episodes call to mind historical events and personages related to British colonialism, the theological and cultural violence perpetuated by British colonists toward Indigenous peoples, and the historiographic documentation of the British colonial project. Umberto Eco's contention that "books always speak of other books" (20) is borne out in this work, as it harks back to religious, scientific, and historical documents. Taken together, Kneale's fiction and these once-presumed factual types of writings create a third space of understanding; like the other two, this third space is not verifiably *true*, as it relies on perceptions of writer and interpretations of reader, and it unmoors the whole concept of certainty that one may like to feel about history. The novel is also a work of parody, which Linda Hutcheon notes in her article "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History" is often

one of the tools employed by writers of historiographic metafiction. When these works “parodically cite the intertexts of both the ‘world’ and art,” she writes, they “contest the boundaries that many would unquestioningly use to separate the two, ... opening the text up, rather than closing it down, ... [and] both provides and undermines context” (7-8). These effects are present in *English Passengers* as it looks back at the British colonial period in Tasmania (and Australia more broadly) and the rhetorical and historical discourses that created the historiomythological understandings of it that persisted until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (and that presumably still persist in some quarters), undermining through irony, parody, and juxtaposition the claims of education, civilization, betterment, and Christian good will that accompanied the imperial project. Fitting Hutcheon’s definitions of postmodern as political and of historiographic metafiction as self-conscious, lacking in transparency, and dubious of the definitive factuality of historiography (*Politics* 33), *English Passengers* illustrates the point made by Samson and Gigoux in the epigraph above: that the British colonial experience robbed the Indigenous peoples there of their cultures and identities through missionary activity, laws, philosophy, and violence. While the critique of the colonial project through the depiction of these concepts and their effects on Indigenous populations is foregrounded in the novel, also coursing through the work—in fact, unifying all the narrators and plot threads—is a critique of the whole concept of *certainty*, historic, historiographic, or otherwise. Even the Indigenous narrator Peevay quoted in the epigraph above confirms this: He has determined “the whole truth,” yes, but it is still only a “guess.”

The polyphonic use of multiple narrators and perspectives adds to the guesswork nature of the novel’s approach to history. One narrator’s explanation of events counters or corrects another, and the sheer volume of different voices and perspectives making up the totality of the

narrative emphasizes the subjective nature of both experience and historiography. While polyphonous narratives are not new to literature by any means, the contradictive and ambiguous attributes of such a narrative construct has been embraced by many postmodern writers and echo Hutcheon's view of historiographic metafiction as denying the objective absolutism of historiography. A polyphonic novel, in Brian McHale's words, "acknowledges and embraces a plurality of discourses and the ideologies and world-views associated with them" (166). By allowing his narrators to compete for readers' sympathies and understandings, the novel becomes *about* such epistemological competition—while still, at the same time, putting forth Kneale's own thematic understanding of the characters and the colonial experiences described (i.e., by emphasizing the hypocritical, corrupt, violent, capitalistic, and often downright risible claims of the colonizers and the cultural displacement and racial disparagement therein). There are multiple worldviews expressed in the novel, and the novel itself expresses one in and of itself—though nuanced and interpretive it may be. This "juxtaposition or confrontation of world-views," as McHale puts it, projects a world that is itself a realization "of discursive world-views": "heightening the polyphonic structure," he says, "foregrounds the ... confrontation among discourses, thus achieving a polyphony of *worlds*" (166, italics his). By setting forth a "plurality of discourse," Kneale's novel becomes a "vehicle for the confrontation and dialogue among worldviews and ideologies" (166), which again fits Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction, pushing meaning from one prescribed centrifugal spot to many spots branching off from that unstable center. Postmodernist writing, and historiographic metafiction in particular, "erects this [heteroglossia] into a positive principle; the side-effect is shifted to the center," as McHale puts it. "Instead of resisting centrifugal tendencies, postmodernist fiction

seeks to enhance them. Heteroglossia is used here as an opening wedge, a means of breaking up the unified projected world into a polyphony of worlds of discourse” (167).

The novel, then, uses polyphony, satire, and parody to establish a critique not only on the behavior and attitudes described, but on the act of describing historical behavior and attitudes itself—on historiography. Like Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang*, the satiric and parodic critique on historiographic certainty begins even before the first word of Kneale’s novel. Following the title page, an authentic-looking frontispiece announces one of the novel’s central conceits: that part of the ocean voyage depicted in the novel is a quest to locate the Garden of Eden on the island of Tasmania. (That the main—and only—purpose of the expedition for the ship’s captain, Kewley, is bootlegging contraband also satirically defines the mission as, at its core, venture capitalism.) The announcement is from the title page of a pamphlet written by one of the novel’s narrators, Reverend Geoffrey Wilson, whose absolute certainty in his Christian beliefs and the location of the Garden of Eden pop off the page with words and phrases like “proof,” “truth,” “conclusively shown,” “revelation,” and “full and extended explanation.” Wilson’s “proof,” though, had yet to be ascertained, as he had not yet even been to Tasmania, and in his first narrative section in Chapter One of the novel, his certainty is shown to be based in nothing more than a dream and professional ambition. He begins this section by noting that he had “walked in Diemen’s Land” (Van Diemen’s Land being the previous name of Tasmania, with the name change coming in 1856, one year before Wilson’s narration begins), but then describing that it had only been a dream, one that he tells his unimpressed wife “is a sign” (17). He follows the description of his nocturnal revelation with ruminations on his station as a provincial reverend; the reader is invited to note how his professional and personal ambitions may have colored his determination to follow this dream to “where no Christian had yet trod”



(16): “Twenty-six years as a parish priest in rural Yorkshire had been more than long enough to imbue me with the ways of country people” (17). Wilson then elaborates:

... while I was honoured to perform my humble priestly duties, and found the parishioners—in their direct way—wholly charming, I must confess that there were moments when I did wonder if I had not been intended to perform some greater service on this earth. ... I found myself also increasingly concerned for the happiness of my dear wife. ... Being much troubled by her unhappiness, which I seemed powerless to alleviate, I became increasingly drawn to taking long walks, along the cliffs or across the moors.

(18-19)

Driven, then, by professional ambition to exceed the confines of his village life and personal ambition to spend time away from his wife, Wilson publishes three pamphlets in quick succession, each of which espouses his tremendous certainty in Christian scripture. The first of these is a rebuttal to a recently published book written by an “atheist geologist” that Wilson describes as “slander” because of, among other claims, its assertion that some “Silurian limestone was no less than one hundred thousand years of age” when Wilson knows with “absolute certainty” that “the earth was created a mere six thousand years ago,” making, in Wilson’s eyes, this book “a most poisonous assault upon ... truth” (20). In these pamphlets, Wilson explains his theory of “*Divine Refrigeration*” (21, italics Kneale’s), how the earth came to cool in a much shorter time than geologists believed, and how the Garden of Eden must be “far to the east, as far even as Tasmania” (23). While Wilson somewhat recedes to the background of the novel for much of its length, his plot thread’s position at the start of the book mimics and lampoons the religious ideas that were purportedly at the start of the colonial enterprise—and one of its primary foundational justifications—undercutting both the validity of

the doctrine and the idea that colonialism sprung from some egalitarian and benevolent place. These passages also parody the pamphlet writing of the era and the religious dogma underscoring much of it, providing opportunities for intertextual reading and the kind of “seriously ironic parody” that Hutcheon says is often found in works of historiographic metafiction where “the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel (though not equal) status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the ‘world’ and literature” (“Historiographic Metafiction” 4). As Hutcheon argues, “The intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction ... offers a sense of the presence of the past, but this is a past that can only be known from its texts, its traces” (4). Dating back to the 1500s, pamphlet writing was a popular practice in Britain, with pamphlets on all manner of political, social, and religious subjects being published regularly, often creating the kind of back and forth of warring pamphleteers,<sup>41</sup> as happens here between Wilson and his critics. While many of these pamphlets may seem today outdated and misinformed, they were presented to their readers as the truth—texts that entered the public sphere and left traces through time. Kneale’s parody of this practice and the religious underpinnings of pamphlets like Wilson’s, and its placement near the beginning of the novel, call into question the basic assumed moral foundation of colonialism. As Wilson notes, “Publication is a powerful thing” (21), and in works of historiographic metafiction like Kneale’s, so is parodying publications that sent traces of questionable ideas about history through time.

These sorts of intertextual references aren’t uncommon in postmodern works by any stretch, and Hutcheon describes them as part of the historiographic metafiction milieu, so often used that some theorists, like Patricia Waugh, sometimes see them as cliché or a shopworn gimmick, though certainly with a purpose. “Ostentatious use of literary and mythic allusion,”

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<sup>41</sup> Joad Raymond’s *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* provides a broad and exhaustive overview of the publication of these works and the “wars” they sometimes caused.

she writes, “reinforces the notion of fictionality, and the reader’s awareness of the construction of alternative worlds. Such explicit intertextual reminders are common in metafictional novels and suggest to the reader that” (113) repeated overlapping of alternative worlds implies the constructed nature of *all* worlds, the slipperiness of definitiveness, and the implausibility of fixed meanings.<sup>42</sup> That Kneale’s intertextual references are to supposedly *true* historical documents and publications intended to imply accuracy and real-world insight reinforces these notions even further. The use of such historiographic intertextuality in a metafictional work like *English Passengers* places an emphasis on the unreliability of historical or official documentation of all sorts, and working alongside some of the other elements of the novel—its polyphonic structure, for instance—creates a sort of dissonance in the work, a cognitive dissonance in the reader, a historiographic dissonance in the implications.

The placement of Wilson’s pamphlets at the beginning of this non-chronological novel not only sets this historiographic dissonance in motion, it also sets in motion its missionary subplot. The Indigenous Peevay is shown to be the product of the missionary aspect of the British colonial venture into Tasmania. Peevay had been separated from his parents and placed into a white settler home—as was the case with many Tasmanian children (Boyce),<sup>43</sup> ripped from parents and culture and forced into becoming a “proper Brit” with the manners and philosophical and spiritual outlook of the whites. Peevay has been taught the English language, but the English religious ideas he has been taught do not take hold, despite the efforts of English missionary Robson, who prods Peevay repeatedly to answer the question, “ ‘Who made you?’ ” until Peevay gives in and provides the answer Robson wants to hear: “ ‘God made me’ ,”

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<sup>42</sup> Here Waugh quotes from Stewart, Susan (1979) *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*. Baltimore, Md, and London.

<sup>43</sup> Boyce’s *Van Diemen’s Land* discusses this practice in numerous chapters, particularly on pages 39-44 and 78-88, where it discusses, among other aspects of this, the *usefulness* of Indigenous children to the English.

followed by Robson continuing to repeat the question as if in some sort of brainwashing mantra. Answering the question that way would cause Robson to smile, but Peevay notes, “Of course, I knew it wasn’t really this fellow God who made us. It was other ones who are secret, like everybody knew. ... Everybody knew who our real ones were, as they could see them every night shining in the sky” (218). Later, Peevay is taken to a Christmas party hosted by the governor of Tasmania, where this idea of cultural erasure is again on display. Wilson is at the party, as well, and again attempts to engage Peevay in discussions of Christianity, which comes across to Peevay as “some great puzzle to confuse,” because, as he says in narration, “this was nothing of ours” (313). Wilson continues trying to convince Peevay and his mother that “God is everywhere, and always was,” and that “[m]ost of all, he is in us.” Peevay’s mother, incredulous and hostile to the white settlers and colonialists, responds with, “So he must be in your dirty stinking arse, Vicar” (314).

Clearly there is a satiric edge to scenes like this and other similar ones involving Wilson, Peevay, Tayaleah (whose birth name is replaced with George Vandiemer), and Tayaleah/George’s school headmistress. This includes later scenes when Wilson, nearing madness because of his failure to locate Eden, questioning his faith, and thinking he sees god in a bag of sugar (369), eventually concludes that Eden had probably been in England all along (411). These scenes and the entire arc of Wilson’s story show Kneale working with satire, parody, and intertextuality all at once. According to Hutcheon, “When linked with satire, ... parody can certainly take on ... ideological directions” (“Historiographic Metafiction” 12). Seen this way, Kneale’s novel takes on the kind of ideological and political dimensions that Hutcheon claims makes a work postmodern<sup>44</sup>: The book’s satire and parody work together to make an

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<sup>44</sup> This is a position she has taken in multiple works, for instance *The Politics of Postmodernism*.

ideological statement about the abuses of the British colonialists in Tasmania (and by extension, of course, most everywhere else they went). Like other contemporary British novels that deal with Antipodean colonialism and postcolonialism, *English Passengers* is a call to present-day readers to reconsider the past with an eye toward the future.

The book, then, represents something of an attempt at a reckoning with the colonial past, with one of the primary targets being the legal system brought to Tasmania. Highlighting what Kneale says in the novel's epilogue was "the bizarre cruelties of the convict system" (439), the book confronts contemporary readers who would question the need for a reappraisal of the past or bristle at any contemporary criticisms of past behavior. After Australia's founding as a penal colony, much of the legal focus was on policing the former convicts who had either served their time or escaped (Samson and Gigoux 73), and on policing the Indigenous population.<sup>45</sup> Seeing the Indigenous population as less than human made the latter a near *fait accompli*. Two of the narrators of *English Passengers* are Secretary for Colonies Sir Charles Moray and Governor of Van Diemen's Land George Alder, both clearly based on historical figures: Moray based on Secretary of State for War and the Colonies from 1820-1830 Sir George Murray, and Alder based on Sir George Arthur, Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen's Land from 1823-1837. During Arthur's governorship, Van Diemen's land, which at the time was the main (and harshest) of the Australian penal colonies, was also the place of a war against the Indigenous population, first undeclared then officially declared in 1830 on the basis that the attempts by the Tasmanians to fight back represented "outrages" and "hostilities" and that "to inspire them to terror ... will be the only means of security for the future" (Boyce 209). While Arthur favored

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<sup>45</sup> In addition to Samson and Gigoux's book, Boyce, *The Indigenous Experience: Global Perspectives*, and *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples, 1600-1850*, also provide some insights into the English penal and judicial systems in their colonies in the Antipodean islands and elsewhere.

capture without injury, he also recognized that would be nearly impossible in most instances; his proclamation of November 1828 that “bloodshed be checked as much as possible” was, according to Boyce, popularly interpreted by British authorities and soldiers as providing “legal immunity and state sanction for the killing of Aborigines wherever they could be found” (210). At various times in the novel, the war against the Indigenous people is described by the English as “*a little bird hunting,*” “*shooting crows and such*” (68) (italics Kneale’s during the epistolary sections of the novel), and “a grouse hunt” (135), while Peevay notes “they were hunting us” (140), emphasizing a dehumanization of the Indigene, and an attitude suggestive that they were closer to the animal realm than the human one, that may have helped justify such murderous actions.

Readers, then, can see the satire in the parody letters written from Moray to Alder, and vice versa in Chapter Four, as an illustration of the kind of motives and questionable morals not typically subscribed to colonial leaders in the rhetoric of then-contemporary reportage or the historiographies of the era published later (at least earlier than the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century). This kind of satire of behavior in historical fictions is a signal to readers of a critique of the actions and those performing them but also a signal to consider such behavior or attitudes in a contemporary context, as well. The kind of parody we see here in *English Passengers* has a similar signaling component. As Monika Fludernik notes, “By means of parody or by reflecting current issues and concerns, [such works] fill the gaps [in] earlier versions of the ‘same story’ ” (3). This leaves readers of Kneale’s novel reflecting on what they thought they already knew about the time period and the people involved, what previous histories of the era had depicted, what *this* work puts forth about the subject, and the space where all of the above meet. Fludernik

describes the differences between writing historiography and writing fiction, which may shed light on Kneale's construction:

Historians ... construct the most convincing and consistent account of events possible from their sources (which may also be narratives). ... The historian is not free to invent his/her own story; the only room for speculation is in the areas of indeterminacy between the fixed points provided by historical sources. Despite these restrictions, historical discourses do not tell a single, unambiguous story since each historian has a particular view of things and tends to emphasize certain aspects of the age and the events being described while omitting others. History always has to do with perspective. ... Every history ... can be traced back to a particular perspective. (3)

Here we see difference mainly as *intent*: The historiography *intends* toward absolutism but cannot avoid ambiguity, whereas the fiction writer makes no such claim to absolutism but *intends* toward truth. In both cases, whether intentional (fiction) or unintentional (historiography), a perspective still guides the proceedings and can be interpreted by a perceptive reader. (Perhaps it should also be noted that many historiographers may *attempt* to come across as completely objective but write from a place of definitive perspective—which again may be recognized by perceptive readers, probably often quite easily.)

As Serpil Oppermann explains in his article “The Interplay Between Historicism and Textuality: Postmodern Histories,” the type of interplay between texts we see here offers “critiques of teleological history by foregrounding the theoretical problems of factual versus fictive representation” ... and investigates the relation of power to knowledge in the past—in short as social and political construction ... [and thereby] challenge[s] the accounts of the past

produced by consensus historians” (14).<sup>46</sup> Kneale’s novel peers into history and finds many perspectives there—some previously authenticated, idealized, and given great authority, others opaque, suppressed, or silenced. His language and juxtapositions of characters, perspectives, texts, and textual strategies, as well as his interplay of parody of texts and voices, belies the absolutist claims of history while still placing value on the search for the truth—even given the implausibility of such definitive factualness of long-ago occurrences, especially in light of how deeply embedded historical beliefs are within various cultures. “Postmodern histories” such as Kneale’s, in Oppermann’s words, “with more or less overt metafictional strategies, aim at a demystification of the viewpoint basic to traditional history. Their emphasis on the role of language and discourse in the creation of historical contexts calls into question definitive answers, complacencies and certainties of traditional history” (23). The parodies in *English Passengers*—invented by Kneale, utilizing intertextuality and satire, signaling perspective, and creating ambiguity and an opportunity to rethink prior historical assumptions—deepen the sense of historiographic metafiction in the novel and strengthen this questioning of historical certainty, as we can’t quite square the discrepancies between the narrators and their versions of history with each other or exactly with “known” history, either.

Moray’s letter to Alder is a good example. Moray begins his letter to Alder by saying he “*concerned as to the plight of the aboriginal race*” and that “*the blacks’ numbers have become greatly reduced,*” fearful that “*before long, he will be entirely extirpated*” (96). The presumed altruism and compassion of his pleas to avoid killing or injuring Indigenous people,

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<sup>46</sup> In his article, Oppermann argues for the unreliability of historiography based on its use of poetic language, fictive narrative structures, personal perspectives, and selective omissions while analyzing several historiographic metafiction novels such as Graham Swift’s 1983 *Waterland*, Raymond Federman’s 1990 *To Whom It May Concern*, and Timothy Findley’s 1981 *Famous Last Words*, with much of his analysis of these novels ringing true in respect to *English Passengers*. Oppermann draws on a variety of theorists such as Jonathan Culler, Stephen Greenblatt, Hayden White, Louis Montrose, and Dominick LaCapra, as well as Hutcheon, in making his claims about historiographic metafiction and the slipperiness of historiography.



though, is undercut by his own language and his most definitively argued reason for such treatment: “*The destruction of this aboriginal nation, however remote its station and savage its nature, would form an indelible stain upon the reputation of this country, and would most certainly be used by foreign powers seeking to cause embarrassment to His Majesty and his representatives*” (96-7). His concern first and foremost for the reputation of the British above the wellbeing of the Indigenous population—their right, even, to live—comes across as clearly callous, un-Christian, and inhumane.

In his response, Alder describes events that shadow what came to be called the Black War of Governor Arthur’s tenure, with bushrangers and former convicts hired as mercenaries working alongside British soldiers seeking to capture and begin to assimilate those of the Indigenous population that they could but to kill them if they needed. Alder’s biased language implicates the Indigenous people even as he argues against violence and for the need to make “*every effort to protect and improve them*”; to him, they are “*savage*” and “*bent on revenge, venting their wrath upon any white they could discover,*” implying they “*have no comprehension of ... order*” and live in a “*state of moral darkness,*” and infantilizing them with the use of the word “*protect*” (97). He also bemoans the behavior of runaway convicts who have joined in the war, literally hunting for Indigenous people, and settlers and landowners who have also “*tarnish[ed] the reputation of His Majesty’s representatives by playing on the free population and suggesting they are not protected against the violence of the blacks*” (98). Alder’s plan to keep the situation from sinking even deeper into warfare “*is to divide colony into two entirely separate realms,*” casting Indigenous people onto the part of the island that is least amenable to sustained life, “*comprised largely of wild, mountainous country, which yields less in the way of sustenance than the rest, [but since] the natives appear now so greatly reduced in their numbers*

... *I have no doubt it will prove amply sufficient for their needs*" (98-9). These lines echo those of Arthur's as quoted in Boyce, with the plan echoing Arthur's "Black Line" policy (Boyce 273-6): a black line in the Black War that, through violent colonial aggression, had turned the island nearly all white.

This aggression, though, needed the institution of laws for enforcement, which Alder discusses in a letter in Chapter Six. In this letter, composed to a Mr. Smithson of the oxymoronic named Prison Committee of the Society of Friends, Alder vows "*to devise an effective mechanism for the improvement of men: a dependable and unerring engine to correct those who have strayed from the path of righteousness*" (129). This mechanical form of control, coercion, and assimilation of criminals, non-Christians and those of un-Christian behavior, and, by extension, free Indigenous people would be a "*machinery of punishment*" (130), mirroring the fundamental core of the claims to colonial purpose:

*[H]is progress ... depends entirely upon his own conduct. If his behaviour is goodly and honest, he will rise, slowly but surely, and his circumstances shall grow ever less harsh, until finally he reaches the uppermost of the seven levels of punishment, and is issued with his ticket-of-leave, which marks the beginning of his transition to full freedom within the colony. ... It is ... a means for the shaping and enlightenment of human minds: a mighty engine of betterment, designed to bring the happiness that follows improvement. ... To this purpose I have created a most effective machinery of policing, including constant checks of identity and travel passes throughout the settled districts.* (129-30)

To make this remarkable machinery work, Alder has also undertaken the task of keeping "[e]xhaustive records ... on all men dwelling in the colony, free and fettered." The name for his "set of mighty volumes" of surveilled personal information is somewhat chilling: "*the Black*

*Books*,” naturally (130). In these epistolary sections, Kneale employs satire, parody, and intertextuality to undercut the whole colonial project and the historical narratives that ascribed a supposed great moral heart at its center. The center here is depicted as a dark heart—greed, power, land, domination, control, surveillance, invasion of privacy, and assimilation all wrapped in the cloth of education, betterment, and salvation, and enforced at the end of a rifle, bayonet, or cannon. The crimes of colonial aggression that led to the near extinction of the people who had lived on Tasmania for centuries are presented in stark relief in Kneale’s work, juxtaposed against his depiction of Peevay, his mother, and Tayaleah as more sincere and human than the machinery of colonialism and its mechanisms of laws and punishments, regardless of how much the colonial leadership in the novel, their counterparts in real-life figures such as Arthur and Murray, and the sometimes near-hagiographic writing that followed the era claimed high purpose and benevolence.

In Kneale’s novel, violence is far more significant and transformative than benevolence. While missionary work and laws laid the groundwork for the colonial conquest of Tasmania, violence carried out the playbook. *English Passengers* places much of its Tasmania-set scenes during the genocidal wars with the Indigenous population and amid other acts of physical and cultural violence carried out by the colonists on the Indigenous people. The decades depicted in the novel, between the 1820s and 1860s, saw English colonizers and settlers “expand their territorial control at the expense of the Aboriginal peoples” throughout Australia, New Zealand, and Tasmania, “while acquiring increasing levels of self-government,” a process of “[l]and grabbing justified by racial ideologies [that] contributed to the genocide of Aboriginal peoples as frontier violence spread throughout Australia [and New Zealand and Tasmania] in the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries” (Samson and Gigoux, 17).<sup>47</sup> Mostly told through the first-person perspective of Peevay, his family’s story works as kind of a central metaphor for the brutalities of the British presence in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Tasmania and the Antipodean islands. Peevay was the half-caste offspring of his mother and the white English settler who raped her, cast out by her as she devotes her life to the quest to kill Peevay’s father and exact violent revenge on the colonialists. His mother, Walyeric, is one of the characters in the novel based on a real person, in her case an Indigenous woman named Walyer, a warrior who fought the settlers in the early colonial years (Funk 71). While intermingling fact-based and fictional characters in a narrative is nothing new, the ironic distance Kneale creates between his historical fictionalizations and previous anodyne histories of the era, as well as providing a voice to characters such as Walyeric, create this intertextual space for readers to settle on their own personal understandings of the material, as well as drawing attention to itself as a work of fiction, an aesthetic of self-referentiality that furthers the status of the book as historiographic metafiction. There are also elements of parody and irony at play here, too, which adds, in Hutcheon’s estimation, a “self-conscious dimension of history” (“Historiographic Metafiction” 3). According to Funk, like Kneale’s fictional Walyeric, the historic Walyer fought against the settlers until she was captured, raped, and banished to a compound with other Indigenous captives until she died shortly thereafter in 1831 (71). Like other characters in the novel, though, Walyeric is a composite. In the novel, Peevay is eventually able to give his mother a culturally proper burial by fire, but her skeleton is stolen by Potter to be displayed as a sample of the Indigenous species that Potter claims to be on the lowest end of his ranking of races. This narrative of Walyeric’s bones, though, matches not the known history of Walyer but that of another Indigenous

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<sup>47</sup> Samson and Gigoux also reference Woollacott, Kociumbas, Reynolds, Mercer, and Gardiner-Garden in their notes.

Tasmanian warrior named Truganini (Funk 71). This leads to one of the multiple punch lines at the ending of Kneale's novel, in which Potter is killed on the journey home and his bones eventually displayed as an unknown aborigine (438). As Funk points out, Truganini had helped George Augustus Robinson<sup>48</sup> (the Robson of the novel) negotiate with the Indigenous Tasmanians, helping lead to their displacement from the homeland (67). By keeping the parts of Truganini's story that were helpful to the ironic and satiric ending for Potter in the novel but replacing some troubling aspects of her life (capitulation and apostasy) with other more positive traits (fighting for the rights of her people), Kneale is able to critique both the colonial venture *and* undermine the notion of the authority and certainty of the published written word, particularly historiography.

The net effect of basing these characters on historical figures, and of ironically situating their fictional representations in such a way that casts the colonial excursion in a negative light, does not merely call attention to the racism, violence, and malfeasance found commonly throughout colonial practices. Postcolonial scholars, writers, and historians have been discussing and illuminating the histories of colonialism and its aftermath since at least the days of the earliest publications on the subject by Frantz Fanon in the 1950s,<sup>49</sup> and Kneale's is another voice in the discussion highlighting the cruelties and hypocrisies of colonial practices in one particular part of the world. His criticisms are clear and present throughout the novel. *English Passengers*, though, works in the way other works of historiographic metafiction work in this important regard: Rather than arguing that *its* truth is *the* truth about Tasmanian colonialism, or that *all* previously reported historical accounts on the subject are verifiably false, the novel

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<sup>48</sup> Funk points out that "Robinson's so-called 'Friendly Mission' [led] to the desecration of bodies that accompanied and aggravated the slow annihilation of the Tasmanian Indigenous population" (64).

<sup>49</sup> Particularly *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961.

foregrounds the idea that, in Hutcheon's terms, we can only "know the past ... [t]hrough its discourses, through its texts ... through the traces of its historical events ... the archival materials, the documents, the narratives[s]" (*Politics* 34).

For instance, Kneale's character of Potter is part of the expedition, taking detailed notes on what he finds and perceives. His characterization satirizes the supposed scientific wing of colonialism while also parodying the pseudo-scientific race-based publications of the time that sought to rank the races based on supposed notions of civilization and human potential—essentially propping up the white/English/European/Western/Christian while downgrading people of color and those with certain specific physical features. Potter's writings are a compendium of phrenological thought and other writings of pseudo-scientific racism that began circulating in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century such as Eugenics and Type Theory; they also illustrate Oppermann's claim that historiographic metafiction critique not only historiographies but other authoritative writings that espouse supposed "empiricist and positivist epistemologies, ... realiz[ing] that even the scientific knowledge cannot lay claims to self-evident truths (21). The book Potter is working on is called *The Fate of Nations*, and it calls to mind other publications of the time (and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and into the 20<sup>th</sup>, as well), especially the work of the real-life author of such a work, Robert Knox, whose 1850 *The Races of Men: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Influence of Race Over the Destinies of Nations* attributed the growing world dominance of the Anglo-Saxons to physical attributes and an acceptance of Christianity. Regarding the Indigenous Antipodean peoples, Knox noted that the Indigenous Australians had been beaten back to a state of facile irrelevance and the Indigenous Tasmanians had already "been cleared out" by the Anglo-Saxons (144-5) primarily because, as he saw it, while "the dark races stand still, the fair progress" (222) and because "there must be a physical and,

consequently, psychological inferiority in the dark races generally” (224). He argued further that the failure of the Indigenous Tasmanians and Australians also failed in his tests of civilized character because of their lack of true Christian faith: “Civilization and Christianity are identical, it is true; but then it must be real, and not sham Christianity—the actual, not the shadow” (399).

The Christian teachings offered by the English to the Tasmanians in Kneale’s novel result in this kind of “shadow” belief. Tasmanian characters like Peevay and George Vandiemmen are never shown to embrace or even lend any credence at all to the English teaching of religion or culture; Peevay’s mother, of course, represents the open hostility to the ideas the English brought and the thought of accepting any of them; and Peevay played along for a while, pretending to believe their teachings while keeping his real spiritual beliefs secret, and after trusting in the supposed sincerity in Robson’s attempts to help him, eventually sees them as corrupt, dangerous liars and rebels against them. Any pretense of real belief in English customs or Christian doctrine are feigned. There is a kind of double parody at work here, with Kneale’s Potter parodying Knox’s writings and other such works designed to entrench English and Christian beliefs throughout the colonies (and thus, by logical extension, given the global aspirations of the British empire, the world), and the Indigenous characters in the novel such as Peevay and George Vandiemmen parodying the English language, culture, and spiritual beliefs while keeping their own hidden—and so that they might possibly preserve their true inner selves and the beliefs and customs of the cultures they came from.

This hiding of spiritual and cultural beliefs by Peevay and other Indigenous characters in the novel reflects the many kinds of cultural violence carried out against the historical Antipodean people. As Samson and Gigoux point out, “Aborigines and their descendants have lived for 60,000 years in Australia [and] possess ‘songlines’ that are maps in music and song,

each one describing the land, animals, waters, trees and spirits of places familiar to groups of Aborigines” (72-73). With these types of customs and beliefs ridiculed and mocked by the colonists, and with the Indigenous Antipodeans under forced assimilation or the threat of imprisonment or death, these songlines and spiritual beliefs were silenced in the ways depicted in Kneale’s novel. Both of these situations, though—Potter’s pseudo-scientific posturing and the display of presumed capitulation by Peevay and Tayaleah/George—contribute to the cultural violence enacted by the colonizers on the colonized. Potter’s words become enshrined by publication, which brings with it the authority of scientific and historical texts, establishing an epistemological foundation that would reverberate through its (presumably mostly white English Christian) readership, thus entrenching historical beliefs registering through time.

The pointedly satiric parodying of a text like Knox’s appears in other places in the novel, too, such as the aforementioned epistolary and pamphlet sections, and a parody of the journalism of the day in a bit from *Colonial Times* (an actual newspaper published in Hobart from 1828-1857),<sup>50</sup> lengthening the ironic distance between the original writing of the era and works of today, both non-fiction and fiction. This distance, and the parody and satire of the novel, may play into the hands of critics of postmodernism and historiographic metafiction who might argue that such a critical or questioning stance toward historiography amounts to nihilism, as though authors of works such as Kneale’s believe all historical writings are untrustworthy and truth can’t be known. A work of historiographic metafiction, though, is not a repudiation of all published history but is instead part of an attempt to wrestle with the past and its rhetorical traces in order to try to get at something perhaps closer to the truth than many of those distant writings; it is not, in fact, nihilistic at all, but hopeful and purposeful. According to Hutcheon,

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<sup>50</sup> <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/title/24>



[i]f the discipline of history has lost its privileged status as the purveyor of truth, then so much the better, according to this kind of modern historiographic theory: the loss of the illusion of transparency in historical writing is a step toward intellectual self-awareness that is matched by metafiction's challenges to the presumed transparency of the language of realist texts. (“Historiographic Metafiction 10)

*English Passengers*, then, becomes not so much a historian working through history to get at the truth, but a fictional text working through other texts to get its readers at something like a reasonable assessment of the idea of how textual representations work—which, in turn, can open up a reader to a more enlightened view of the history being represented. In Hutcheon’s words, novels like *English Passengers* “challeng[e] ... conventional forms of ... history through [their] acknowledgment of their inescapable textuality (“Historiographic Metafiction 11). The intertextual irony of Kneale’s novel, then, works in tandem with its parody to satirize both the written works of the colonial times and the ideologies that sprang from them, especially the harmful ones still alive today such as white supremacy.

Potter’s writings, for instance, echo Knox’s while also satirizing the way works such as Knox’s echoed through time with the kind of “normative and hegemonic power” that Federici points out canonical and historiographic works have on their readers (101). Consider some of Potter’s language in his chapter titled “On the Future Fate of the Races of Men (correction)”:

The dominating characteristic of the Black Type being barbarism, he has no comprehension of ideas, or enterprise, or time ... . [T]he savage, for though he lacks any faculty of reasoned thought, he is possessed of a brutish cunning. Worse, he is filled with a malevolent envy of those races who have—in a fashion incomprehensible to himself—developed the wondrous fruits of civilization. ... This sorry tribe [of Indigenous

Tasmanians] has, ever since the island was brought within the fold of the civilized world, been widely acknowledged as representing the very lowest of all the races—or species—of men ... midway between humankind and the animal kingdom. (392)

The similarity to Knox's writings will not be lost on those readers familiar with it; its similarity to other racist beliefs propagated through the colonial era and beyond through other written texts will not be lost on readers even unfamiliar with Knox, with words like "barbarism," "savage," "brutish," and "animal" being employed against people of color and other Indigenous peoples throughout the world for centuries long after the colonization of Tasmania and helping justify systemic racism throughout the world from slavery to Apartheid to the genocide of Native Americans, Jim Crow, and miscegenation laws in the U.S. That Potter follows this discussion by describing the colonizers as "goodly," "civilized," "honest," and the "kindly and sentimental Saxon" (393) not only calls to mind Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (especially the dichotomy between the way Marlow described the Africans and the way he described the whites, English, and Europeans) but also focuses Kneale's satire on the power of such scientifically hollow and culturally damaging language of works such as Knox's and the power they can have over generations. Potter is a brilliant and educated man writing essentially deranged gibberish that would help to obliterate millions of Indigenous peoples and seek to create—or cement—the idea that their cultures and beliefs were subhuman and indefensible and must be eradicated. This is parody working as satire of the mindlessness of colonial attitudes that sought to explain and justify the physical and cultural violence that undergirded the whole colonial enterprise.

That Potter's chapter is also a "correction" further critiques the notion of the definitiveness and authority of the written word. Potter and Knox were writing what they saw as the truth, enshrining their ideas with the power of publication, but science is theory that holds

itself up to questioning and revision, and historiography is, like fiction, subject to the perspectives of the author as well as the revisions and corrections of future historiographers, themselves subject to their own perspectives and use of the same narrative tools used by writers of fiction. The certainty of writers such as Knox/Potter belies the reality of the genres within which they work. This is the kind of “parodic intertextuality (both aesthetic and historical)” that Hutcheon says calls into question the entire notion of subjectivity (“Historiographic Metafiction” 7). She says that while “postmodernism manifests a certain introversion, a self-conscious turning toward the form of the act of writing itself,” historiographic metafiction goes even further than that. “After all,” she continues, “we can only ‘know’ (as opposed to ‘experience’) the world through our narratives (past and present) of it ... and the overt intertextuality of historiographic metafiction serves as one of the textual signals of this postmodern realization” (“Historiographic Metafiction” 9). Kneale’s novel, then, offers the realization that its texts—like all texts—subverts actual reality and replaces it with an ideologically functioning graphic imitation. Form and function work together in a novel like *English Passengers* to call attention to its ideological and/or political stance—in the case of *English Passengers*, a stance that seeks to subvert both the ideologically slanted texts of the past and the genres within which they were situated.

One reason historiography attains such an authoritative status is that, in the perspective of Barry Pomeroy, “history can only be transmitted by document [and thus] valorization of the textual document allows it to possess a weighty and almost unexamined metaphysics of presence” (622). The fact that historiography is also a construct and that it necessarily omits, includes, and emphasizes based on factors as wide ranging as the perspective of the historiographer, ideology, graphic space, and the geopolitical moment may be lost on consumers

of historiography, further cementing its authoritarian hold. Historiography is generally written chronologically, as well. When a work like *English Passengers* approaches the past in a non-chronological way, the effect is to scramble the events of the past and place them in a deliberate pattern that may emphasize and clarify the writer's ideological intentions. Kneale's call-and-response pattern achieves this by allowing one voice to critique or correct another, one perspective to deepen while others diminish, and readers to be somewhat overtly led to assumptions of right and wrong, accurate and inaccurate, historical and fabrication. As Hutcheon puts it, this "intense self-consciousness about the way all this is done"—with "all this" referring to the construction of both historiography and historiographic metafiction like *English Passengers*—"plays upon the truth and lies of the historic record. ... [C]ertain historical details are deliberately falsified in order to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error" (*A Poetics* 113-4). In this way, *English Passengers* makes readers aware that history may not always equal truth, and that historical ideologies may not have always been grounded in what we might call ethics, morality, or righteousness. It questions both the texts of the pasts and the very notion of whose texts get to be told.

Of course, just as various texts seeking to justify colonialism can be seen as subverting the voices of the Indigenous populations subjected to violence, diseases such as dysentery brought by colonizers and settlers (Funk 68), assimilation, and cultural erasure, so, too, could Kneale be criticized for putting *his words* in the mouths of *his* Indigenous characters. This could be seen, despite Kneale's clear and stated intentions<sup>51</sup> to depict these characters with dignity, as cultural appropriation, as it is *his* concept of dignity and *his* writing as a white Tasmanian of

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<sup>51</sup> In interviews with *Compulsive Reader* and elsewhere.

English descent. Kneale addressed this potential criticism in a 2003 interview, saying, “The rest of the book consists of individual narrators, and if I made an exception of Peevay I felt that this would have been flying in the face of the whole style of the book, and would have almost been a kind of apartheid within the book. Also, the main subject was the English and the terrible things they did in Tasmania” (Kneale Interview). Furthermore, giving Peevay his own narrative sections, and giving dialogue and interior lives to him and other individual Indigenous characters in the novel, allows it to work on a metafictional level: *of course* Kneale couldn’t have known how characters such as Peevay or Walyeric, or a real historical personage such as Walyer, would have thought or talked. Giving these characters their own voices, though, calls attention to the novel’s own fictionality—a tenet of both postmodernism generally and historiographic metafiction specifically—and to the lack of representation of Indigenous voices through the 19<sup>th</sup> Century relative to the dominant colonial culture. As Kneale puts it, colonial imperials denying, denigrating, or attempting to silence cultural practices and beliefs of whole societies is “monstrous ... [and a] very English form of torture” (Kneale Interview).

Such contemporary controversies of representation like cultural appropriation or lack of authenticity could follow a novel like *English Passengers*—to be sure, Kneale is a white man of European descent representing in language and narrative Indigenous people and stories, albeit for fairly obvious positive purposes (to expose colonial violence and corruption, for instance, and illuminate admirable aspects of Indigenous culture). While the fact that Kneale’s parents fled their native Germany to England to escape Nazi persecution (Tonkin) is relevant to his sympathies for the oppressed, this sense of his ostensibly *speaking for* Indigenous Australians may come off as misguided or condescending. The aspects of the book, though, that seek to dramatize and narrativize Indigenous culture, language, etc., are secondary to its fractured

structure, its deconstruction of authoritative writing, and its theme of attempting to uncover truth—not *actually* uncovering truth, of course, but simply the act of *attempting* to do so. This is the historiographic metafiction undergirding of the novel, which works with its postcolonial inquiry in becoming, in Homi Bhabha’s words, “a battle for the *status* of truth” (33, italics his). Bhabha’s criticism of how colonial discourse initiated and dominated by the dominant or colonizing culture, no matter how well intentioned, creates “discriminatory effects” because “[c]olonial authority requires modes of discrimination (cultural, racial, administrative...) that disallow a stable unitary assumption of collectivity” (34) might apply here (as, say, Chinua Achebe’s similar criticism of Conrad applied) had not the novel been structured with its polyphonic call-and-response pattern placing more of an emphasis on the matrix of uncertainty than on aspects of cultural appropriation. After all, as Mudrooroo points out, “ninety-nine per cent of Australian culture is of European derivation” (228), and even though “too often the Aborigines [have been] observed through British eyes and culture and put down in British forms” and as a result “Aboriginal culture became as distorted as others seen through British eyes such as the Irish, African, Indian and Chinese” (229), there is still a place in contemporary Australian and British arts and literature for revisiting not only colonial times but also reassessing the historiographies and monolithic writings that grew this myth of certainty surrounding British history, the histories of the lands they colonized, and the Indigenous people therein, no matter the ethnic background of the artist. Kneale’s is not a work of cultural appropriation, colonial domination, or historical certitude but instead a work that examines the historical and historiographic ellipse that emanated from the British colonial venture into the Antipodean isles. As Oppermann puts it, historiographic metafiction like *English Passengers*

offer critiques of teleological history by foregrounding the theoretical problems of factual versus fictive representation. They incorporate the understanding of history both as poetics, a discursive practice, and as a discipline that investigates the relation of power to knowledge in the past—in short as social and political construction. By reconstructing existing or conflictual histories, postmodern novels challenge the accounts of the past produced by consensus historians (14)

In doing so, Kneale's novel and other

[h]istoriographic metafiction embody a postmodern recognition of the poetic nature of historiography where ... the past events ... [become] the ground over which history meets metafiction, ... [draws] attention to the process of textualization as much as to the historical reality behind the text, ... recontextualizes both the production and the reception processes of history, and invites us to reconsider historical knowledge.

(Oppermann 17)

These elements of Kneale's novel that pit historiographic words against fictionalized voices create an ebb and flow within the work that, like the call-and-response structure of the novel, dislodges meaning from the entrenched and authoritative historical understandings and puts it within Kneale's own personal vision—and within the reader's own personal understanding, as well. We are all involved in this “battle for the *status* of truth”—Kneale and his readers alike.

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Postcolonial theory has long sought to illuminate the harm that colonialism wrought onto the colonized and onto the world at large with its practices of land grabbing, violence, political domination, enforced ideologies and societal organization, and cultural displacement through hierarchical power structures. Edward Said coined the term “Orientalism” to indicate in part

how the whole idea of the Asian—as if there were only one Asian culture—was invented by white Europeans who had nearly no knowledge of Asian life at all, creating a conception of *the exotic other* to be folded under the Western ideal, allowing it to be seen as *lesser-than*. Frantz Fanon’s 1961 *The Wretched of the Earth* called attention to the dehumanizing effects on the colonized. Other postcolonial theorists, as well as theorists in fields such as poststructuralism, deconstruction, Marxism, and postmodernism, furthered postcolonial thought with writings that argued against Western mythmaking in non-Western cultures (Derrida), the universalizing effects of Western rationality layered on top of other cultures’ belief systems (Foucault), and the damaging and destabilizing outcomes of “Grand Narratives” (Lyotard), and theoretical explorations of colonialism and its aftermath continue. Hutcheon’s work on historiographic metafiction draws on many of these theorists in localizing her interest in works that blend fact and fiction—and that bend history—in ways that destabilize the authoritarianism of historiography, and these concepts of historiographic metafiction and postcolonialism often work in tandem in novels, films, and other artistic and creative genres of the past several decades. This blend has become especially noteworthy in the works of British and Antipodean novelists in recent years, as they grapple with the history of British imperialism and the decentered nations and cultural contingencies left in its wake.

While Kneale’s satire and characterizations make it fairly clear that part of his vision is to focus on the brutality of English colonialism, his distortions of real historical figures and parody of scientific, political, and historical writings identify his novel primarily as a work of historiographic metafiction, thus putting focus on the historical writings themselves and their epistemological legacies—the transformative power of the published word. His depictions of the English legal, economic, and religious systems set up in Tasmania during the colonial days, as



well as of the physical and cultural violence perpetrated on the Indigenous population, draw a sharp contrast with the more benevolent notions that undergirded the colonial venture and the early historiographies of it. Chapter Six, for example, presents the narrative of settler and landowner John Harris, who explains how his wife, Lucy, brings in the runaway Tasmanian youth Tayaleah in an episode that calls to mind how, according to Samson and Gigoux, “[o]ne of the most profound influences on Aboriginal identity was the forced removal of mixed-descent children from their families and their placement in foster institutions or in adopted non-Aboriginal families” (17-18). Not only are forced removals and name changes clear-cut cases of dehumanization, the incidents described in this chapter in Kneale’s novel illustrate both the cultural violence inherent in the colonial land grab and the hypocrisy underlying even those settlers with presumed good intentions. (That they also bring to mind the recent American administration’s forced child removal policies at the U.S. southern border speaks to the continued relevance of Kneale’s novel and the virtue of further exploration of these kinds of actions.)

The chapter begins with Harris describing a scene that only a wealthy interloper could have experienced in that time and place: “It was a fine summer’s evening, I had finished my day’s work and was sitting on the verandah, enjoying a quiet smoke” (127). After hearing a “curious yowling noise,” Harris’s cook “came marching up, dragging behind him a little pickaninny.” That slur begins Harris’s description of Tayaleah, which continues with “creature” and “the little brute,” while describing Tayaleah’s companions as a “mob,” “scoundrels,” “thieves,” and “savages.” Lucy’s plan to bathe, clothe, and educate Tayaleah is met with scorn from Harris, as he says Tayaleah “looked comical” dressed in English clothes, saying he did not feel the boy could be “useful,” and arguing that even “[t]en pounds was a lot to waste on such

foolishness” as trying to help the young Tasmanian (126-8). While Harris wants Tayaleah dispatched or imprisoned, Lucy aims to help the youth. She believes Tayaleah “would never last a week” at the Hobart Orphans’ School, so they entreat schoolmaster Nathaniel Stebbings to take the boy in, but not before changing his name first, as Harris contends that “the creature had better have a name” other than his given name, which Harris describes as “Tayaley or some such nonsense, which was no name at all” (128), and thus Tayaleah is given the name George Vandiemer and shipped off to Bristol, England. In Chapter Eight, Stebbings reports that he housed and educated George for two years and that the experiment proved successful: After a rough start, George became a “well behaved and likeable child,” proving especially (and, for Stebbings, surprisingly) adept at mathematics, so Stebbings shipped George back to his homeland, taught in the ways of the English and now prepared for “some official post, perhaps in the service of colonial government” (175-6).

Tayaleah, though, is never given a voice in the novel and is only briefly heard from again after returning to Tasmania. Kneale does reveal in the book’s epilogue, however, that the character was based on a real Tasmanian youth who had been separated from his family, taken in, shipped off to Lancashire, educated there, and sent back to Tasmania, where he soon fell ill and died, and “[h]is short history was soon forgotten” (439). Kneale follows that information with a brief discussion of Knox. Like Wilson and other characters in the novel, the real-life Knox wrote at times in his book of treating Indigenous peoples with some measure of respect and care, yet his words betrayed any real sense of empathy, or even that the Indigenous peoples were capable of rising to the level of humanity, civilization, or intelligence where white English and Europeans were situated. In Kneale’s epilogue, he elaborates on Knox:

Knox was among the first writers to claim that the various races of mankind were actually different species ... [and] he proposed that the Saxon, of England, was among the most exalted. His book was an immediate best-seller. For the first time it became acceptable, even fashionable, to see the world in these terms. Though such ideas were strongly opposed in some quarters they continued to gain influence, forming a kind of ugly background music to the latter part of the century. (44)

This background information on Knox/Potter is juxtaposed in the epilogue with the real “George Vandiemer’s final school report, written by his teacher in Lancashire” (440), which proclaims that his experiences with George proved to him “that Man is on all parts of the Globe the same” and imploring, “Let us place indiscriminately all the shades of colour in the human species in the same climate [and] allow them the same means for development of intellect, ... for colour neither impairs the muscles nor enervates the mind” (441). This school report of the real George Vandiemer, who was given neither a name nor a voice in history, is juxtaposed with the story of Peevay, whom the colonists attempted to Anglify and who eventually takes a leading role in rebellion against the colonizers. In Chapter Ten, Peevay is reunited with his “nearly brother” Tayaleah and is horrified to see that Tayaleah is “speaking num talk quick like some white man” and has become “Robson’s best blackfellow,” dressing like a white man and embracing the concepts of capitalism, journalism, English education, and English spiritual practices, including burying instead of burning the dead (247-9). Peevay, already banished with the few remaining Indigenous people to Flinders Island, soon also learns that his father was a white man who raped his mother and makes up his own “prayer,” substituting his words for Robson’s: “LEARN WHITE MEN’S SHIT / GET OFF THIS PLACE / FIGHT THEM AND FIGHT THEM / FOR EVER AND EVER” (248). His guerilla rebellion is in part inspired by the

cultural violence he sees perpetuated on those like Tayaleah and the hypocrisy he eventually sees in the white men's ways, but also in revenge for the death of his mother and her failure to be given a proper burial by fire and, in a further act of degradation, her skeleton stolen.<sup>52</sup>

This Tayaleah/Peevay juxtaposition presents a contrast between the ideas of capitulation and rebellion. The English colonizers entered Tasmania, claimed the land as their own, nearly wiped out the entire population of multiple Indigenous tribes through disease and violence, and forced the last few remaining into inhospitable parts of the country, destroying most of their cultural history and beliefs in the process. Kneale's novel, like Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*, makes an argument for the righteousness of the rebellion and respect for the rebels. It also makes the argument against authoritarianism—of political leaders, religious doctrine, reactionary legal systems, and historical documentation. Postcolonial theorists have sought to reassess the histories of colonial venture around the world, investigating the events of colonial times, the motives of the colonizers, and the aftermath of their endeavors—eradication of peoples and cultures, power vacuums left in their wake, harmful racist ideologies surviving to this day. *English Passengers* provides something of a microcosm of the colonial experience: a journey to a foreign land uninvited by its historical inhabitants; chaos, war, violence, and almost comical (if it weren't so horrifying) bungling while there; and a massive wreck left behind. The novel also provides something of a model of historiographic metafiction, as well: You can't always trust what you're reading, even when what you're reading tells you that you can't always trust what you're reading. Sometimes, you have to read between the texts.

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<sup>52</sup> *Transgressions: Critical Australian Indigenous Histories* (<http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p21521/mobile/index.html>) provides an exhaustive look at the history of Antipodean cultures, including sections on rebellions against the colonists; one Tasmanian warrior discussed here called Mosquito may have inspired some of Kneale's characterizations.

“Our Country is a Very Big Story”: The Present is the Past  
in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*

“Wonderment was the ear on the ground listening to the great murmuring ancestor”  
– *Carpentaria* (409)

“If you had your patch destroyed, you’d be screaming, too.”  
– *Carpentaria* (11)

At first glance, Alexis Wright’s 2006 novel *Carpentaria* may not seem to meet the definition of historiographic metafiction. It is, though, in every word, paragraph, chapter, and theme, about history, about historiography, about who gets to write history and who gets to *define* history. For Wright, a member of the Waanyi nation of Indigenous Australians, it is not the original invading British who get to define Australia’s history, nor is it the contemporary international corporate cohorts from the Netherlands, the U.S., or Germany—or even opera singers from Italy, for that matter. For Wright, as illustrated in this novel, it is those of Indigenous Australian heritage—their ears to the ground listening to the past, their minds in the sky communicating with centuries-old spirits, their cultural beliefs and mythologies still alive despite the damage wrought to them and their societies by mine owners and capitalistic dynasties ripping holes in their earth and ignoring their dignity, disregarding their humanity, and destroying their past—who have a right to their own history. While Wright’s novel has been looked at for its environmental warnings, as a statement on climate change, and for its critique of capitalism and apocalyptic view of race in postcolonial Australia,<sup>53</sup> examining the work’s elements of historiographic metafiction encompasses all the above while also issuing a stark

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<sup>53</sup> Many articles offer some great insights into these thematic aspects of the novel, including Anne Brewster’s “Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*” (*Australian Literary Studies*, 2010), Lucy Rowland’s “Indigenous Temporality and Climate Change in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*” (*Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 2019), and Adelle L. Sefton-Rowston’s “Hope at the End of the World: Creation Stories and Apocalypse in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*” (*Antipodes*, 2016).

reminder of the generations of Indigenous Australians who have had both their cultures and their histories stolen from them. Historiographic metafiction sees history not as a fixed product, stable words on a page that stand unchanging and unchallengeable through time, but as a process of constant reevaluation, reassessment, and revision. Linda Hutcheon sees the postmodernist approach to the past as a “problematizing return to history” that seeks to confront the “provisional, indeterminate nature of historical knowledge” (88), part of her definition of works that she calls historiographic metafiction,<sup>54</sup> and works like Wright’s *Carpentaria* participate in this ongoing reconsideration of historical epistemology. The novel is set in a fictional contemporary town in northern Queensland, but it is alive with the past and a screaming rebuttal to any version of Australian history not told by a true native Australian. It is the present of Australia, and it is also its past.

### **Australia, “where legends and ghosts live side by side” (*Carpentaria*, 94)**

Magical realism has long been associated with postmodernism, postcolonialism, and historiographic metafiction.<sup>55</sup> Frequently used as a binary or oppositional tactic pitting the believable or intrinsically realistic against spiritual, metaphysical, or mythological elements in a narrative, magical realism can put the reader in a position of being forced to choose which voice, which version of a story, to accept. In his “Typology” of magical realism, William Spindler differentiates between three specific types of the form: 1) metaphysical magical realism, in which events and objects are described more or less realistically but are seen from unusual angles or perspectives creating a sensation that is uncanny, as if they are real but somewhat odd;

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<sup>54</sup> An approach that echoes Lyotard’s distrust of Master or Grand Narratives.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen Slemon’s “Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse,” from *Magical Realism*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, provides an overview of the intersection between magical realism and postcolonialism.

2) ontological magical realism, in which realistic actions and descriptions are depicted alongside others that are clearly non-realistic in detail yet presented with the same matter-of-factness as the other more realistic depictions; and 3) anthropological magical realism, which typically includes a binary component pitting characters in a work against one another in terms of what they see as real or unreal—supernatural events, for instance, may be depicted in the same deadpan way one might find in a work of ontological magical realism, but the key difference is that certain characters in a work of anthropological magical realism will see these supernatural events as real and expected, whereas other characters in the work will not *see* them at all, and certainly will not believe them as true or real (79-84).

It's important to note that the anthropological strain of magical realism is frequently employed by postcolonial writers or in works that depict cultures whose traditional spiritual and metaphysical beliefs and practices clash with those of outsider and/or more "modern" cultures depicted in the work. This type of magical realism can be found, for instance, in some of Chinua Achebe's <sup>56</sup> work, such as his 1959 novel *Things Fall Apart*. Here we see Achebe's Nigerian characters expressing their traditional spiritual beliefs to unbelieving western colonists intent on changing the beliefs and practices of the Indigenous population, with Achebe describing the spirits in a matter-of-fact way, such as the passage in Chapter Ten in which the tribal spirits known as *egwugwu* appear to take part in a tribal council (89-94), and this later passage in Chapter Thirteen that further explains the frequent appearances of the *egwugwu* among the living:

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<sup>56</sup> Spindler notes that this is a widely diverse strain of magical realism that tends to reflect "a thematic and formal preoccupation with the strange, the uncanny and the grotesque, and with violence, deformity and exaggeration" (81), and that, along with its appearances in much Latin American, Caribbean, and African fiction, can also be found in the works of writers of American southern gothic writers like Faulkner and (I would add) Flannery O'Connor.

Now and again an ancestral spirit or *egwugwu* appeared from the underworld, speaking in a tremulous, unearthly voice and completely covered in raffia. Some of them were very violent, and there had been a mad rush for shelter earlier in the day when one of them appeared with a sharp machete and was only prevented from doing serious harm by two men who restrained him with the help of a strong rope tied to his waist. ...

The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors.

There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors. (122-3)

There is more implied here than in a work like *The Metamorphosis* when Gregor turns into a bug. The depictions of these spiritual ancestors in Achebe's novel as true and real exist in stark relief against the dubious colonists<sup>57</sup>—not only because these colonial invaders doubt the veracity of the Africans' beliefs and want to change them, but also because the colonists bring with them their own set of religious/spiritual beliefs that seem just as doubtful to a non-believer (a virgin birth, for instance, as well as angels, demons, miracles, etc.) as any of the African beliefs. By depicting these *egwugwu* as real physical beings manifesting themselves among the living, then, Achebe's novel creates an us-versus-them binary dynamic that favors the Africans over the colonists: These metaphysical beings are *real*, the book argues, which essentially renders as nonsense the idea that the Africans *need* the colonists to come in and change their

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<sup>57</sup> Spindler says that this form of "Magic Realism gives ... magical beliefs the same degree of importance as Western science and rationality [and] furthers the claims of those groups which hold these beliefs to equality with the modernising elites which govern them" (82). We certainly see this in Wright and some other recent Antipodean authors that use elements of magical realism, such as Richard Flanagan.



ways. The entire colonial project, then, comes into question by virtue of Achebe's anthropological magical realism.

This notion makes a postcolonial work a prime vehicle for magical realism. As Jamie Derkenne notes, “[M]agic realism usually posits competing, epistemologically coherent ontologies usually as binaries ... [and] for the most part favors one system over the other” (277). This is the case in Wright's *Carpentaria* and other postcolonial novels from Australia, and Stephen Slemon has observed that magical realism works in postcolonial narratives in this anthropological, binary, oppositional way. By depicting the supernatural beliefs of a marginalized or oppressed culture, such a work encodes authority to these sets of beliefs generally dismissed and disrespected by colonizing groups, de-marginalizing and re-legitimizing the invaded culture and Indigenous population in the process. “The use of the concept of magic realism, then,” Slemon argues, “can itself signify resistance to central assimilation” (10). Magical realism, certainly in postcolonial works, creates “a battle between two oppositional systems, ... two worlds [that] are incompatible” with each other (10-11).

This type of battle, of course, took place in Australia during the colonial era just as it did in Africa and elsewhere throughout the British Empire, involving physical, cultural, spiritual, linguistic, and historiographic battling. In Wright's *Carpentaria*, the battle is still raging—this despite two factors that may seem to indicate the war ended long ago: first, that the Indigenous Australian population was nearly wiped out decades ago, with less than 4% of Australians and Tasmanians today identifying as Indigenous (Korff); and second, that public reconciliation efforts have been widely embraced (though not without controversy or pushback) throughout the country in recent years, such as (the condescendingly named) National Apology Day, National Close the Gap Day, Harmony Day, and National Sorry Day. In Wright's fictional town of

Desperance, though, in northern Queensland on the Gulf of Carpentaria, her characters and narrative illustrate that the fight is still ongoing, and that its ultimate endgame is not only about rights and respect for present-day Indigenous peoples but for ownership of the country's history, as well. In *Desperance*, the Indigenous live in, around, and on top of trash heaps on the margins of town; whites live in more comfortable suburbs and run the town; and the giant internationally owned Gurfurrit Mine (which includes interests from the Netherlands, the U.S., the U.K., and Germany) dominates the landscape. As Ben Holgate puts it, Wright's work is "typical of much magical realism in that it re-imagines history from the point of view of the marginalized or, in this case, the country's original inhabitants" (635). Legends, ghosts, spirits, and inexplicable happenings appear frequently in *Carpentaria* without any hint of doubt regarding their viability and written with the same tone of verisimilitude as other passages of the mundane and the quotidian. In fact, some of these magical happenings are the primary bedrocks to the novel's plot, such as when old man Elias Smith—previously murdered at sea by mine officials—walks in from the sea, essentially kicking off the central events of the narrative. This seemingly fantastical moment is treated by Wright's narrator with the same deadpan delivery as descriptions of the many times locals from Desperance have encountered extraterrestrial aliens:

Nobody could laugh at these things because aliens were a serious consideration and the town had stories about these aliens that could send a cold shiver down your spine. There were real people who could tell you the stories of how they had been taken away for weeks on metallic-disc spacecraft with red lights flashing across the sky, and who knows, they said when they came back, if aliens were invading the whole countryside. ... Those

stolen people<sup>58</sup>... acted very sane when they spoke of their adventures. ... Now, a man had walked in from the sea. (73)

Elias, a white man who has no memory but “was able to acquire other people’s memory ... [and] their imagination” (80), walks in from the sea and is befriended by the Indigenous characters Normal Phantom and his son Will, who are at the center of the novel’s action. Elias appears alive to Normal and Will, but at other points in the narrative is quite clearly dead and is seen that way by others. Will eventually determines to return Elias to the sea, with Will (and readers) still uncertain whether Elias is dead or alive: “Will kept on talking, speaking to and replying for Elias as though he was alive. ‘How could you be dead, Elias,’ ‘Well! I can’t tell you because ... because ... because I don’t know what happened to me” (175). In other scenes, Elias speaks to Norm in a “deadpan voice” (such as on page 238, for instance), and during a long scene in Chapter 6, Will and Elias are forced to evade mine security, police, and others in his quest to return Elias to the sea, once using an old Indigenous method of walking to the same footsteps of nearby wallaby and kangaroo to evade detection (177). As Will takes Elias deeper and deeper into the bush and “stare[s] ... into the past itself” (192), he seems to be going deeper and deeper back in time, as well, once hiding in a cave surrounded by voices of the spirits and able to sit “outside the cave, killing time, ... while enjoying once again the sight of *his* country’s blue, green, and red paintbox landscape” (182), with my italics here emphasizing who that paintbox landscape originally and rightfully belonged to before the invasion of the British, the whites, the Christians, and the industrialists. These invaders are symbolized in the next few

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<sup>58</sup> This phrase, of course, is reminiscent of the Australian national and state policies that, for around a hundred years beginning in the late 1870s, led to the removal of Indigenous children from their families, supposedly for their own good, creating what became referred to as “the stolen generation.” As Deibert points out, a “1997 inquiry by Australia’s Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission found that ‘the taking of Indigenous children from their homes by force and their confinement to training homes, orphanages and mission dormitories amounted to deprivation of liberty and imprisonment in the meaning of the common law’.”

sentences by the unexpected arrival of Irish-descended Father Danny with “the roaring engine” of his vehicle: “It was the last thing he expected to see coming along the road which had overnight metamorphosed itself into a long glistening snake river of muddy water” (182), a scene and imagery representative of the roar of the colonials, arriving from far away, loudly proclaiming their presence, and transforming everything.

Elias’s resurgence and the difficulty of his being returned to the sea—indicative of the power of the English- and European-descended whites in Australia and of the sheer impossibility of Indigenous Australians to ever return the whites to from whence they came (the ocean, uninvited)—is one of the central magical realist elements of the novel’s plot, but there are other moments of magical realism throughout that continue and deepen this binary sense of cultural and historical opposition between the small cast of Indigenous characters with essentially no actual power and the larger group of white Australians who control virtually every aspect of Desperance, including its history. Much of the magical realism in Wright’s novel has to do with the ancient mythology of Australia’s Indigenous population and the concept of “Dreamtime,” a kind of “spiritual cosmology” understood and practiced by many Indigenous Australians for generations that “ties its members closely to the land of their ancestors” and includes an understanding of the mythical creation of the land by a giant snake (Deibert). A description of this seminal snake opens the novel and ties the mythical Indigenous past to the present:

The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its creative enormity. It moved graciously—if you had been watching with the eyes of a bird hovering in the sky far above the ground. ... It came down those billions of years ago, to crawl on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils in the Gulf of Carpentaria. ... When it finished creating the many rivers in its wake, it created one

last river, no larger or smaller than the others, a river which offers no apologies for its discontent with people who do not know it. This is where the giant serpent continues to live deep down under the ground in a vast network of limestone aquifers. They say its being is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin. (1-2)

Some of these “river people” are the characters in the novel, separated from their history by decades of western mythology, popular culture, and capitalism, represented by the mine that dominates the town economically and physically, both by its giant size and its digging up of the clay soil. Much of the magical realism in the novel is tied to this concept of “Dreamtime” and other elements of Indigenous mythology. For instance, a mythical creature named Abilene is mocked by the whites during an early scene in Chapter 4 (111-3), then brought to life by an Indigenous character named Cyclone in the next chapter: “Cyclone was old and clever ... and became the first person in contemporary times to turn imagination into reality [when he began] messing with magic in his fingers, crawled into the guts of his twentieth-century story and brought it to life” (153). Many scenes display an Indigenous character having a close mental connection to the earth or animal life, often birds (examples can be found on 239, 284-5, and elsewhere) or fish: “The old people always spoke of [a] limbo world, where fish never seen by man were really spirit women who lived and swam through holes in the captured man’s ribcage, and perpetually fiddled with his brain to make him forever yearn to be rescued” (245). Readers, in fact, see such a fiddling take place within Norm’s brain when he is “[c]aught in the sphere of the sea lady” and “the widows” and spends several pages battling in his own brain with competing ideas of Indigenous and Christian mythology, ideas extracted from popular culture (primarily country-and-western songs), and “green snakes streaking across the skies” (265-8).

These and other elements of magical realism serve to draw a distinct separation between the Indigenous characters and their culture and that of the whites. When Wright presents these magical or mythical elements in a matter-of-fact fashion, the novel privileges the experiences and beliefs of the Indigenous people over those of the whites—thus also privileging their version of history over any other—while also emphasizing the cultural and spiritual confusion among Indigenous characters who remain. Wright has discussed her experiences with and observations of poor and marginalized Indigenous communities in Australia and their treatment at the hands of non-Indigenous whites and those with ties to the international mining industry:

The people of these affected communities had very little, owned nothing but enormous poverty, but they were being bombarded by a rich multinational mining company that was backed absolutely by the state. These communities were given little choice but to argue with each other, and forced to choose how to hold on to fragile cultural interests, from a sale price that was a pittance in the scheme of things, just so that the vast interests of the company could proceed. From the side on which I was standing, it was like being in a place where a bomb had exploded, and those left in the rubble knew that they could not depend on any real support from anyone in the social and cultural devastation they could see was their destiny. (“On Writing”)

It’s clear how these experiences influenced Wright’s work on *Carpentaria* and the depictions of her Indigenous characters with their poverty, displacement, isolation, and confusion. Some, like Norm and Will, continue to wrestle with these issues, while most of the younger characters have lost touch with the old Indigenous customs and beliefs altogether. Mozzie Fishman is the Indigenous character in the novel perhaps most firmly still entrenched in the old ways, and he leads the drive to sabotage and destroy the mine, which becomes the central

act of the last several chapters and the central metaphor for the novel's binary construction. That the novel ends with the explosive destruction of the mine and the cataclysmic cyclone that essentially wipes out the town, cleansing it of all its western influences and paving the way for a rebirth—the cyclone basically acting as a new ancestral serpent—lends an apocalyptic feel to the end of the novel but a victory of sorts in the battle for the history of the land. The presence of the mine and the dominant—and racist—white culture in Desperance have created among the Indigenous characters an “historical amnesia” (Derkenne 279). The spirits and ghosts still roam the countryside and fiddle with people's brains, but there is no agreed-upon “epistemological certitude” (281) by the populace. Instead, a fluctuation takes place within the narrative and within the minds and beliefs of the characters that mirrors the Indigenous-white binary that still exists to this day throughout Australia. This binary is tied most closely to history/historiography. In Derkenne's words, “Wright reimagine[s] so as to allow the possibility of reshaping the Australian historical narrative” (281). Wright, who is from Cloncurry, just south of the Gulf of Carpentaria, allows the ancient spirits to live and breathe and walk and talk in her novel, to be just as real as the human characters, thus allowing for a recapturing of the history of the land and an emphasizing of the humanity and dignity of its original inhabitants. Wright's spirits and the conclusion's destruction signify rebirth, while her magical realism signifies authority for the Indigenous peoples' versions of history over any and all others.<sup>59</sup>

### **“A bucketful of lies” (*Carpentaria*, 189)**

Meanwhile, those other versions of history—those of the British colonists, the historiographers who followed in their wake, and the fictional townspeople of Wright's

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<sup>59</sup> In Wright's words, this makes “*Carpentaria* ... a narration of the kind of stories we can tell to our ancestral land” (“On Writing” 2).

Desperance—are exposed in the novel to have been “a bucketful of lies.” For the (in chronological order) colonized, nearly totally eradicated, and marginalized—such as the Indigenous Australians—options are generally limited to assimilation and/or acceptance of the place within the colonizers’ culture and society they’ve been relegated to. In the U.S., for instance, this has amounted to life on reservations for most of Native American heritage, while in Wright’s *Desperance*, those of Indigenous ethnicity are limited to life in the trash heaps on the outskirts of town and of accepting the whites’ views on race, class, spirituality, and history. Why? Early versions of American history either ignored the so-called Indian Wars or maligned the Native Americans as “savages,” just as early versions of Anglo-Australian history did with the Indigenous population. In *Desperance*, the “descendants of the pioneer families ... claimed ownership of the town [and] said *the Aboriginal was really not part of the town at all*” (4, italics Wright’s), and “neither Normal Phantom and his family nor his family’s past or present [standing in for the Indigenous population at large] rated a mention in the official version of the region’s history” (10). Even the so-called “Frontier Wars” between the settlers and Indigenous peoples that took place essentially from the arrival of the English in Australia in 1788 steadily through the 1840s but can be said to have lasted well into the 1930s,<sup>60</sup> were told completely from the perspective of the conquerors. What of the Indigenous perspective of these wars? “The old people,” the narrator of *Carpentaria* says, “wrote about the history of these words on rock” (26), while the conquering Anglo-Europeans wrote *their* versions of history in officially sanctioned books—the words of which, unlike those written on rocks, can reach multitudes and can’t be erased (or, as it were, slowly eroded).

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<sup>60</sup> According to many multiple accounts (such as Robert Hughes’s 1988 *The Fatal Shore*, the most common estimate of Indigenous people lost in these wars totaled at least 20,000—but that’s just an estimate of those lost in actual military-style battles alone. The total lost to displacement, disease, other forms of violence, and vestiges of generations of forced assimilation is certainly in the hundreds of thousands.



Wright's novel recognizes an erasure/erosion of Indigenous culture and the difficulty of having their voices heard against a dominant and hostile culture. In town council meetings in *Carpentaria*, the Indigenous "Pricklebush" people are not only marginalized and ignored but are also demeaned, berated, threatened, and physically violated. Popular mayor Stan Bruiser, for instance, "said the government should put the Abos to work," because, according to his town motto—proudly stated to the entire town—"[i]f you can't use it, eat it, or fuck it, then it's no bloody use to you" (35), and "he bragged about how he had chased every Aboriginal woman in town at various times, until he ran them into the ground, then raped them" (41). This extreme violence from someone in an official capacity echoes the violence perpetuated toward the Indigenous community throughout the founding of the nation, as well as the raping of Indigenous women known to have taken place through this period, as well.<sup>61</sup> This social and cultural dehumanization of Indigenous people is as pervasive in the novel as it has been throughout the history of the nation. As Anne Brewster says in her examination of whiteness in the novel, "Because Indigenous people were positioned as being outside European languages, Christianity, the secular sciences and democracy, they were considered inferior, lesser beings. The Indigene was in effect stripped of the dignity and agency attaching to the 'civilised' human being, and seen instead as the passive recipient of the colonising mission" (87). That the Indigenous characters in the novel are pushed to the trash-strewn margins of Desperance and subjected to rape, physical violence, police and political corruption, and other indignities is representative of the kind of othering Brewster discusses, and places the contemporary setting of the story within the framework and context of colonial history, a microcosm of the kind of "living hell of the

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<sup>61</sup> Nicholas Clements's *The Black War: Fear, Sex and Resistance in Tasmania*, U. of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Queensland, 2014, discusses the frequent raping and other abuses of Indigenous women at the hands of colonists.

lives of many Aboriginal people” that Wright sought to depict in her narrative (qtd. in Brewster 85).

It is also representative of the kind of “major social displacement of ... aboriginal communities” discussed by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha argues that an “awareness that the epistemological ‘limits’ of ... ethnocentric ideas are ... the enunciative boundaries of a range of ... dissonant, even dissident histories and voices” such as those of “the colonized” and “minority groups” (936). That the type of violence against Indigenous peoples in Wright’s novel is taking place in the present (the early 2000s) is indicative of how far these boundaries have been pushed—the boundaries of Indigenous life pushed to the extreme edges of the margins (trash heaps), and the boundaries of white behavior pushed well beyond the extreme edges of acceptable.

Reaching these far edges of boundary requires more than just victories in physical warfare: Language and its epistemological reach must also play a significant role. In his *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon discusses the role of narrative in ingraining and perpetuating cultural and racial stereotypes, particularly the insidious way that white-penned narratives can cement beliefs about minorities and members of any racial, ethnic, or marginalized class of people. For instance, Fanon discusses the way that popular stories like *Superman* that depicted white characters as heroes and outsider characters—either villains or those in need of (white) salvation—depicted as people of color or of a non-Caucasian ethnicity perpetuated the idea that *the other* needed to be saved by white culture, and that those in white culture share a sense of superiority and righteousness over these non-whites.<sup>62</sup> In such works, the identification with

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<sup>62</sup> These “white savior” narratives, of course, have a long history in literature, film, and popular culture. American filmgoers will be particularly familiar with many movies that depict friendly and helpful whites acting as the bridge between downtrodden African Americans and a happier, more respectful future, such as the recent 2018 Oscar-winning *Green Book*, but there is also healthy use of the trope involving Indigenous Native Americans, too, such as

such characters and narratives can bend toward a sense of forced assimilation, a cultural eradication via glorification of one set of ethnic attributes (whether real or fabulist) and castigation and erasure of another. In his Foreword to the 2008 Pluto Edition of Fanon's book, Ziauddin Sardar expands Fanon's analysis:

Anthropology was developed specifically to describe, manage and contain the black man. Political science places white man at the apex and is deeply Eurocentric. Science and Empire went hand in hand. ... All these disciplines and discourses are the products of a culture which sees itself hierarchically at the top of the ladder of civilization; they postulate all that the world contains and all that the world has produced and produces, is by and for the white man. (xvi)

The epistemological reach of the structuralized elements of empire relies on language and written narrative (historiographic, scientific, literary, religious, political, *official*), which follows the movement of empire into newly colonized territories, helping to create new nations—which, of course, is not possible without the eradication of old ones. This colonial movement displaces Indigenous peoples and homogenizes around the conquering culture's value systems and socio-political arrangements, wiping out those of the previously existing ones. This, of course, applies to colonial Australia and the historiography of the country post-colonization: most of the Indigenous population destroyed, then most of its history destroyed, as well, replaced by homogenized Anglo-Australian historiographies and cultural identifications. Even well-meaning English authors and Australian authors of English and European descent intent on illustrating the

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the 1990 Oscar-winning *Dances with Wolves*. Native Americans and African Americans can make it, these types of works seem to argue, just as long as there are some whites to help guide the way—and as long as these minorities assimilate and adopt attitudes and *morés* of white culture. In addition to advancing the narrative that “the other” needs the white savior, these two films, and most others narrative works of their ilk, also have a history-erasing quality to them, as well, as if to argue that the Indignities, violence, and genocide of the past can all be wiped away—along with the histories of the Indigenous and minority communities—since this one act of reconciliation has taken place.

depravities of the historical Australian colonizers, the lies of their historiographies, and the evils of colonialism more broadly—such as ones discussed elsewhere in this volume—can't quite address the historical absences and erasures, and the pain they left in their wake in present-day communities of people from Indigenous backgrounds, the way authors from these Indigenous populations can.

Wright is such an author working not from a place of sincere and empathetic postcolonial criticism from the outside but rather *from the inside*. From this position, the binary oppositional forces of her novel turn the tables on the historical cultural structure brought about by the violent colonial displacement of Indigenous people, their culture, and their history. As Brewster puts it,

The narrative viewpoint [of the novel], realised through a reflective and apperceptive consciousness, establishes Indigeneity as the default ontological and epistemological position. If [Wright's] novel imaginatively normalises Indigeneity, it concomitantly "others" Australian whiteness: it renders white authority fragile and challenged, documents the anxiety of the white nation, and performs the work of defamiliarising whiteness. (92)

In doing so, *Carpentaria* overturns the othering of Indigeneity that had been happening persistently throughout the history of the Anglo-Australian nation and in the pages of its historiographies and other epistemological aspects. It's certainly not that non-Indigenous authors such as Peter Carey and Matthew Kneale (or even writers of theoretical works such as this one, for that matter) can have nothing valuable to contribute to the postcolonial discussion; of course they can, and they do. However, as Bhabha argues, there is a "crucial importance, for subordinated peoples, of asserting their Indigenous cultural traditions and retrieving their repressed histories" (940). Such assertions can carry so much more power than, say, a large

number of white Australians of European descent all saying “Sorry!” at the same time.<sup>63</sup>

Confronting the vast erasing and disenfranchising monolith of colonialism with effectual insight and power perhaps can most effectively and powerfully be done *from the margins*—the places those who were pushed from the inside *to*—in order to chip away at the Eurocentric notions of national identity and culture that replaced those of previous Australian identity(-ies).

Seen this way, Wright’s Indigenous characters in *Carpentaria* reach into the past to connect with long-forgotten traces of previous Indigenous traditions, heritage, and spirituality as an act of insurgence—not merely a sentimental journey back in time. In doing so, they create an alchemical (using Bhabha’s term) “past-present” (938) to explode the current racist-classist postcolonial Australian hierarchical structures. Using centuries-old Indigenous practices—laughed off or ignored by Anglo-Australians—Mozzie and the Phantoms push back from the trash heaps and bring about not only the destruction of the international mine but the giant cyclone that destroys the town of Desperance, wiping it clean so that it can start anew. The Pricklebush people of Wright’s novel “had kept the chronicles of the land hereabouts since time began” (48), while the whites of “Uptown” culture in Desperance would tell the children of the town to “*search through every single line of all those whitefellas’ history books*”; when they did, though, they would only discover “knowledge stuffed in their heads about white people and started to believe” that the Indigenous Australians “had nothing—no culture, no song, no sacred places” (58, italics Wright’s). Like the minority kids reading *Superman* in Fanon’s piece, the Indigenous youth in Wright’s novel see only what the white historians want them to see in their history books or what they get from popular culture.

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<sup>63</sup> Especially when we can infer with great confidence that a large number of white Australians of European descent *don’t* join in on this supposed joint venture of apology, and many openly resent it—just as many white Americans openly resent, for instance, teaching about slavery or institutionalized racism to high school students.

Although most of the younger Indigenous generation depicted in the novel are more impacted by popular culture than any historiography, some of the Indigenous characters in the novel know the *true* history of the country better than any history books, white man's or otherwise. Will Phantom, for instance, "knew his country in its stories, its histories, its sacred places better than [any] stranger" (384). Meanwhile, Mozzie, closely tied to the historical Indigenous past and attempting to sabotage the mine, knew the entire history of the land in his head and how far contemporary culture in his town (and country) had gotten from the way he thought it should be: " 'I am pointing to my brain,' he said, pushing his fingers into his head. 'Inside here is the whole history of your government. I can tell you if everything is correct, right back to when time began. ... I can tell you perfectly for four hundred years. ... I will show you because I have been alive forever' " (423-4). Through his vast metaphysical knowledge of the entire history of the land and his ability to see through to the truth of everything, Mozzie is able to discern that two Indigenous youths—who, like marginalized youths of many cultures, have ended up poor, frequently in trouble, and struggling with drug and alcohol addictions—were not guilty of the murder with which they've been charged but instead had been set up by the police, the scenario that sets Mozzie on his course to sabotage the mine and the town as the novel reaches its destructive denouement.

The novel's conclusion in conflagration and cyclonic power-washing echoes *and reverses* colonialism's power to subvert historical narratives and destroy ancient cultures, a major part of the work's postcolonial-cum-historiographic metafictional imperative: identifying and illuminating devices and elements of a nation's colonizing infrastructure and understructure that seek to defy, destroy, and delegitimize the area's previously existing cultural traditions and histories through political and historiographic means, as well as through other means such as

policing and brute physical force. The cyclonic cleansing of the finale offers a metaphoric way forward—the need to banish the banishers. Furthering the historiographic metafictional undercurrent of the novel, fact and fiction are intermingled in its story. For instance, the “city of Desperance is but the fictional site of the real racial conflicts Aborigines were subjected to in the Seventies and Eighties” (Concilio 28), as well as being a stand-in for racial conflicts throughout the history of Australia as a colonized nation (beginning, of course, with the Frontier Wars).<sup>64</sup> Elements of the fictional town do resemble two real locations in the Gulf of Carpentaria, Burketown and Normanton, including the geology, flora (grasslands, tropical savanna, brush, and spinifex), and the fact that they are all situated near deep-water gulfs. In addition, the marginalized trash-heap living quarters on the outskirts of Desperance reasonably resemble similar “remote Indigenous housing” in Normanton from much earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (“*Carpentaria*”), and this depiction works as a scathing satire of the living conditions in Australia and around the world where many Indigenous peoples, people of color, minorities, and the socioeconomically disadvantaged live.<sup>65</sup>

Most importantly, the mine in the novel is based on the multinational Century Mine in the Lower Gulf of Carpentaria that began open-pit zinc mining in 1999 and ceased its activities sixteen years later only after complete depletion of resources and assets (“Century Mine Project”). Wright has written that the development of this mine and the protests and activism

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<sup>64</sup> From Susan Barrett: “The novel attributes the origin of the town’s name to the fictitious middle name of the explorer Matthew Flinders but for the reader it is an ironic reminder of the town of Esperance in Western Australia. Esperance was supposedly named by French explorers who took shelter there during a storm in 1792 but in 2007 it was hit by a violent storm which caused significant flooding which destroyed hundreds of homes and washed away part of the highway linking it to Perth” (32).

<sup>65</sup> The coastal town of Esperance, as referenced in the previous footnote, also included its own history of controversial mining ventures. Furthermore, while reading Wright’s novel, one may also be reminded of the 1961 novel *Wake in Fright* by Australian Kenneth Cook, a psychological thriller set in the fictional mining town of Tiboonda with its English characters persistently disrespecting the displaced Indigenous characters and gradually falling deeper and deeper into madness and degradation.

against the mine, primarily by Indigenous people from around the area, inspired the writing of her novel:

When the Waanyi people were contesting the development of the Century Mine on our ancestral domain of the southern highlands of the Gulf of Carpentaria, a large number of our people were camping in the Lawn Hills National Park along with numerous others from our neighbouring tribal nations who would also be affected by the plans to build this multinational mine—the biggest of its kind in the world. I listened to one of our major spokespeople saying with a proud heart, that he could personally stop the development of the mine. He explained how he could stop the mine in a really inspirational speech, of the kind that carries you away, to believe in him, that anything in this world is possible if you put your mind to it. ... I felt his confidence. We all believed he could. ... You could feel the embrace of our ancestors. (“On Writing”)

That inspirational (though ultimately unsuccessful) speaker and activist beget the character of Mozzie in *Carpentaria*, and while the Century Mine of recent Queensland history inspired Wright’s story, that speaker and mine are not the only real-life echoes resounding through the novel.<sup>66</sup> The Mount Isa Copper Mine, which also mines for zinc, is located in northern Queensland near the Gulf of Carpentaria and just southwest of Normanton. Like the mine in Wright’s novel, the Mount Isa mine has been the site of land degradation and protests from Indigenous people for the destruction of the land and historical and sacred sites important

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<sup>66</sup> Barrett further discusses some of the ecological consequences of mining throughout some of Australia’s history: “[M]ining has always been hugely destructive for the Australian environment; Wittenoom in Western Australia, for example, was the site of an asbestos mine from 1943 to 1966 and contamination is such that in 2006 the State government took the rare decision to de-gazette the town, removing it from maps and closing all access roads to it. In Queensland, the acid run-off from gold and copper mines at Mount Morgan from 1882 to 1991 has let the Dee River a strange orange colour, totally devoid of fish and algae for a twenty kilometre stretch” (29-30). Furthermore, Barrett notes that “[T]he mining industry accounts for 35% of Australia’s exports, one of the highest rates in the world, and the mine owners have a huge lobbying power” (29).



to them (Deibert). The mine began operations in the 1950s, seeking the “vast lead, silver, and zinc deposits beneath and around” the McArthur River in the area, and expanded to the even more damaging aboveground or “open-cut” mining, including exploratory drilling, in 2003 (Deibert). Despite being granted legal ownership of the area “in 1977 under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act, which allows Indigenous people to establish ownership of land based on traditional occupation” (Deibert), the local Yanyuwa people have been able to do nothing to halt mining activities there, despite constant protesting, activism, and legal challenges. According to Deibert, not only have these efforts been futile, but profits from the lucrative mining never seem to flow down to the rightful owners of the land: “It was a fight the traditional owners were never likely to win,” Deibert writes, “but the circumstances and terms of the battle serve as a poignant and distressing commentary on the power that corporations can exercise over the lives of disenfranchised communities in Australia today.” The giant hole in the ground, it could be said, mirrors, in Deibert’s words, the “hole created by discrimination, unemployment, and destruction of traditional cultural and family structures” in Indigenous life that “has increasingly been filled with alcohol abuse, despair, and poverty.” This is the state that the Pricklebush people find themselves in living on a trash heap on the margins of society in *Carpentaria*: degradation and pollution of resources that *should* belong to them, power and profits rolling uphill benefiting international capitalists and descendants of Euro-Australian colonizers instead.

In Wright’s novel, then, these true-fact issues intrude on and intermingle with the fictional elements of the novel, giving the work an intertextual texture that combines with and deepens its themes of history, ownership of the past, and the “bucketful of lies” perpetuated in the historiographic narratives of conquering colonists—as well as the bits of history that never made it into any historiography in the first place, silenced through intentional omission,

expurgated by targeted censorious muzzling. That Will's life is eventually saved after all the destruction by a floating trash heap is a sardonic reference to ecological destruction and an illustration of Wright's "critical voice speaking in defence of the environment and the Ocean polluted by what is by now notorious as 'Great Pacific garbage patch' or 'Pacific trash vortex' " (Concilio 30); it is also another blending of fact and fiction and, being the experience of a lone individual from a marginalized community that puts the powerful in a negative light, speaks to the kind of event typically not memorialized in any historiography. In writing the novel, Wright has said that she wanted to "try to write something down of ourselves of what has been unwritten, so as to affirm our existence" ("On Writing" 8); to tell stories that "relate to all the leavings and returnings to ancient territory" (6); and to wage a battle over "the deterioration and destruction of Aboriginal culture" (3). In doing so, she crafted a work that is infused with politics, history, and a contemplation of what is possible—and *not*—to be truly knowable (all in line with Hutcheon's original definition of historiographic metafiction<sup>67</sup>). Its elements of postmodernism and historiographic metafiction make magic and myth as plausible as realism and written history and suggest that a cataclysmic rebirth is more righteous than corporate and capitalistic progress—the heirs to colonialism's destruction of centuries-old cultures, traditions, histories, and beliefs.

**“[O]ne will never know what really happened” (*Carpentaria*, 409)**

In Wright's novel, very little can be known with absolute certainty. Much of what the Indigenous characters believe to be true are revealed to them in dreams or hallucinations or are

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<sup>67</sup> Hutcheon's original concept of historiographic metafiction as "self-consciousness of the fictionality, the lack of familiar pretense of transparency, and the calling into question of the factual grounding of history-writing" can be found in her 1989 *Politics of Postmodernism* (33) and expounded upon elsewhere.

fervently held spiritual beliefs, and some of the Indigenous characters are clearly struggling from some degree of substance abuse or delusion. The whites, on the other hand, are untrustworthy for a variety of reasons, including distortions based on racism and pursuit of political, personal, or profit-seeking power. Some of the whites only make brief appearances and arrive seemingly out of nowhere—such as the Italian man happily singing opera in the rain while Indignities and destruction engulf the community (381-3), an image of the unknowable and unpredictable European presence in the area, surviving and thriving while the land itself is wrecked. There are no history books to be found, only popular culture, received versions of Anglo-Australian history, and the Indigenous characters' traditions of "Dreamtime." Desperance may have "become a boom town with a more sophisticated outlook now, because it belonged totally to the big mine" (98), but that sophistication did not trickle down through the socioeconomic layers in the community, as the poverty of the Pricklebush people and lack of sophistication in historical or general knowledge of most in the community show. Instead, as Will Phantom expresses, the kind of sophistication in Desperance merely results in power for those at the top, with the educational system they put in place entrenching their version of history and obfuscating any others. " 'Power,' " he says, " 'that's what destroys democracy, education used to destroy the rights of other people, ... [and] using technology to control people' " (192). What's known of the mine is told to the public through the popular media from the mine's point of view and filtered through the lens of commercialism. Even after the explosion, "The multimillion-dollar mine, from infancy to its working prime, was probed, described, and paraded to network viewers. Interviews and footage of scenery went jig-jogging along in soap opera intensity, before shifting to pan, and viewers were encouraged to dissect what had become of this showcase of the nation" (411), and yet, despite this journalistic intensity and scientific probing,

the truth of the mine's destruction is never known. This is reminiscent of the way some of what passes as "history" in today's popular culture comes from hour-long segments on a cable television program—perhaps told with journalistic effort and good intentions, but with only a tiny fraction of the information actually touched on, and all of it filtered through corporate headquarters. As the Gurfurrit Mine boss says as answers are being sought to the mysterious murders and mine sabotage, "Remember we are mining men and mining men look after their own and mining men keep their bloody mouths shut" (441); a reader could substitute the phrase "British colonists" for "mining men" in that statement and place it in the context of Australian history, and the history of British colonial history more generally, and it would have the definitive ring of insight. It would also provide insight into some of the key themes undergirding Wright's novel. In an earlier scene, the Town Council decides that in the media's coverage of this murder, "nobody was ever to see the crying face of Desperance on television" and "made a humble request to the citizens to keep their mouths shut"; there, "decent, lip-sealed people lived," and "[n]o one would see Desperance laying its soul bare" (314). This officially enforced silence is like the silences of history broadly and British colonial history specifically, silences wherein the truth is sealed and can't be found.

One of the enduring controversies and criticisms leveled against postmodernists and writers of historiographic metafiction is the idea that such works are nihilistic and that by asserting that real truth and verifiable history are impossibilities, such works are empty and devoid of purpose, meaning, or life-affirming human value. Such works, though, don't deny the existence of truth or historical reality, but instead argue for the importance of reassessment and perspective. While further criticisms along the lines of "situational ethics is a dangerous proposition"—sort of the *slippery slope* argument—may also be leveled against such works, a

novel like *Carpentaria* hits back in the way that other works in the postcolonial and historiographic metafiction milieu do, as well: Even though truth and historical veracity may not always be easy to ascertain, it's important to pursue histories that have been overlooked or intentionally denied, disguised, or distorted by those with the most prominent positions and most powerful voices. There certainly is a binary in the novel between realism and occurrences that could only be described as magical, mythical, hallucinatory, or some combination of the above. This binary, using Derkenne's words, creates a "subversion of certitude" (277) in the novel that acts as a "disruptive agenc[y] on complacent historical narrative" and "can be seen as expanding epistemological borders" (282). In the novel, then, an "uncertainty ... drives much of the narrative," which allows Wright to "reimagine history so as to allow the possibility of reshaping the Australian historical narrative" (Derkenne 281). The uncertainty of the novel, looked at this way, is not in service to a nihilistic or fatalistic view of information and knowledge, historical or otherwise, but a shifting of perspective from a domineering and often provably questionable one to one that has been dominated and driven to epistemological silence and obsolescence by powerful historiographic overlords. The domineering voice of a conquering or colonizing force drives epistemological contingency throughout a culture and creates ontological contingency within the colonized, marginalized, and oppressed populations. This is neither a fatalistic viewpoint nor nihilistic cynicism. It is a valid argument aimed at debunking dangerous historical mythmaking and restoring histories, cultures, and dignity to those harmed by the violence—physical and otherwise—of colonialism's reach.

Just as their perspectives and cultures have been dominated and decimated through time, the Indigenous populations of the Antipodean nations were themselves (just as similar Indigenous populations the world over were, as well) decimated by colonial invaders, and the

histories of these people—the original (read: *rightful*) owners of their land—were erased in the aftermath of the colonial encounters. *Carpentaria* seeks out the histories of the aggrieved and the perspectives of the marginalized. Wright’s novel is set in the present, but the history of Australia pulsates throughout. In this novel, as Holgate says, Wright explores

Australia’s specific circumstances as a settler nation, particularly to address its history in which the Indigenous population was dispossessed of their land and suffered from ongoing oppressive government policies of attempted cultural and racial annihilation.

These policies continued after British colonialism in the 19th century and lasted well into the 20th century, when Australia had officially become decolonized. In this sense Wright regards Indigenous Australians as still being at war, and as still colonized in a supposedly postcolonial nation. (635)

The Frontier Wars weren’t officially declared over until “as late as 1934”; in Queensland alone, the setting of Wright’s novel, “the death toll [from the wars and colonialism more broadly] may have reached 60,000 Indigenous people” (Booth). That is a very big number for just one of Australia’s states, and with the depiction of the Pricklebush people and Indigenous characters living in a trash heap squaring off against Anglo-Australians and international corporate operatives throughout her novel, clearly Wright sees this warring as still an ongoing clash in her very big country.

Australia is, indeed, a very big country with a very long history, and that history is very much still alive in the present—recognizable in the scant percentage of the current population that claims Indigenous roots; in the policies that favor the wealthy, the corporate, and the Eurocentric; in the communities so downtrodden as to be seen satirically as trash heaps. It is also

recognizable—for better and for worse—in creations like National Sorry Day, well meaning and sincere though it may be, ineffectual and condescending though it may be, too.

Absolute truth and historical definitiveness may be difficult, perhaps even impossible, pursuits. In *Carpentaria*, though, Alexis Wright examines the ramifications of Australia's colonial history and the perspectives of those disenfranchised and marginalized because of it. Much of their history may not have been written down, but much of their conquerors' recorded history is not to be trusted. Much of their traditions and spiritual beliefs may rest in myth and magic, but their conquerors' spiritual beliefs involve virgin births and miracles. Absolute certainty is itself a myth, true history is difficult to definitively delineate, and uncertainty is everywhere all around us—a complex and ever-expanding matrix of uncertainty. This is why the novels of authors such as Wright, working in the modes of postcolonialism and historiographic metafiction, exposing colonial wrongs and illuminating the fractures in supposedly solid historical narratives, can carry so much weight and power: Because when presumed history is written down for the ages, told with the aegis of a conqueror's network of official approval and passed off as infallible and fixed, the results can be calamitous and unjust.

That much is true.

## Conclusion: The Matrix of Uncertainty

*“There is no truth to be found, but only stories that go on searching [for] it.”*  
– Serpil Oppermann (21)

In the U.S. recently, twenty state attorneys general recently signed a letter against the teaching of what has come to be called “critical race theory,” essentially readings and lessons in history (and any) classes that teach that slavery and racism were significant factors in the rise of the young country and were thus systemic parts of the institutions, economy, legal system, and overall fabric of the nation (Williams).<sup>68</sup> They joined others, primarily on the political right, in decrying the teaching of such a perspective, arguing it distorts history, accusing it of a kind of reverse racism, and saying that it deepens racial divides. In other words: *just stop talking about it!* The Pulitzer Prize-winning “1619 Project,” originating from a series of essays on the topic in *The New York Times Magazine*, draws much of the ire, as it seeks to shine a light on the severity of slavery and racism in early America and how much and how deeply racism was interwoven into the country, its laws, its culture, and its attitudes. The myth of American exceptionalism is so strong in this segment of the population that it simply will not allow any room for any criticism of its history or any serious investigation into any of its troubling aspects—and certainly not into the possibility that there might still be ramifications from it in contemporary society that should be addressed or at least acknowledged.

Similar controversies over how to teach history exist in many other parts of the world, too, of course. In Australia—unlike America—the national government has established guidelines and recommendations for the teaching in public elementary and secondary schools of

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<sup>68</sup> Oklahoma, for instance, has passed a bill that, while not using the term “critical race theory,” “prohibits educators from teaching concepts that could cause students [read: *white* students] to feel uncomfortable or responsible for actions their race ... committed in the past”—despite that, according to Oklahoma State Department of Education spokesperson Carrie Burkhart, “No one has received a complaint that a school is teaching critical race theory” (Forman and Martinez-Keel).



issues around race, colonialism, and Indigenous peoples.<sup>69</sup> It could be argued that this and the existence of “National Sorry Day” and other similar initiatives<sup>70</sup> put Australia ahead of the United States in terms of acknowledging, in some official capacity, the existence of racial inequities and horrors in its past; as far as any official U.S. policy or doctrine is concerned, violence against the Native Americans was fully justified and slavery was a minor inconvenience best illustrated by a movie scene in which a beloved enslaved woman helps a young debutante fit into a social dress.<sup>71</sup> Still, teaching colonial and Indigenous history in Australian classrooms, even with governmental prodding of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority and the National Aboriginal Education Policy, which in 1989 “mandated requirement to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, knowledges and histories in teaching and learning in Australian schooling” (Bishop et al), is challenging. In the 2019 study authored by Bishop et al., teachers reported feeling unqualified to teach Indigenous history and perspectives, unsure how to effectively embed such lessons in the classroom, and disappointed with the generally unengaged response from most of their (nearly all white) students, which seems to echo the overall national attitude: kind of a halfhearted apology with a shoulder shrug. Some teachers noted that, because of time constraints and lack of personal knowledge (or “out of my comfort zone,” as one put it), their teachings on the subject amounted to little more than

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<sup>69</sup> See: Australian Curriculum (<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/>); the “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures” page at Australian Curriculum (<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/cross-curriculum-priorities/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-histories-and-cultures/>); “Teach Aboriginal History and Truths in the Classroom” (<https://education.abc.net.au/newsandarticles/blog/-/b/3419994/teach-aboriginal-history-and-truths-in-the-classroom>); the “Curriculum” page at the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority website (<https://acara.edu.au/curriculum>); the “Curricula Project” page at [indigenous.gov.au](https://www.indigenous.gov.au/teaching-guides/curricula-project) (<https://www.indigenous.gov.au/teaching-guides/curricula-project>); and Bishop et al (see Works Cited page).

<sup>70</sup> In addition to National Sorry Day, Australia also commemorates the treatment of Indigenous Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, including the Stolen Generations, with Day of Mourning, Harmony Day, Mabo Day, NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) Week, National Reconciliation Day, National Reconciliation Week, and Reconciliation Australia.

<sup>71</sup> I.e., *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

checking off a box and moving on. One teacher in the study was quoted as saying “I’m blatantly aware how Anglo the room looks ... [and] I don’t want to do something that is tokenistic,” while also noting that being pushed to teach the material was “a bit insulting” (Bishop et al). Another put it this way:

I’ve always felt that I wasn’t very good at embedding Aboriginal perspectives in my lessons. It was always, for me, seen as a tick box, and I spoke about Dreamtime, I ticked a box, and that’s it. ... I wasn’t able to delve deep in the Aboriginal perspectives.

Because I wasn’t sure, you know, how far I could go ... you didn’t want to step on any toes, and you didn’t want to offend anyone, so you just ... skimmed the surface. (Bishop et al)

I taught Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* in a recent literature course in an American university and showed my students a series of videos related to Ned Kelly and “Kelly Country,” the area around where Ned grew up and committed his crimes. In one, called “Stand and Deliver—Ned Kelly Story” (from a 1999 Australian television series called *Our Country*), a teacher at Sacred Heart Primary School in Yea (about an hour and a half drive to Glenrowen, which is the site of the Kelly siege and where a cottage industry of Kelly-related tourist attractions has flourished, including the popular twenty-foot-tall “Big Ned Kelly Statue”) related Ned’s story to her 8- and 9-year-old students, stressing how difficult Ned’s life must have been growing up poor and mostly without a father. One young student notes that because of his circumstances, someone in Ned’s position might “turn bad because he would be very very cross,” and the students try on a facsimile of Ned’s suit of armor (“Stand”). One student in my class was angered by the video, suggesting that it was wrong to try to teach Ned’s perspective in this way, that it would only foment anti-police attitudes. That this student of mine was an adult

and a police officer is immaterial. The point is that he was offended, angered, and disturbed simply by this teacher seeking to have her students understand, or at least contemplate, Ned's perspective. With the school in the video being right in the heart of "Kelly Country," though, these children would have grown up with an awareness of Ned and imagery of him armed and in his armor.<sup>72</sup> They would have had at least some awareness that he fought with police and most likely that many revere him as something of a folk hero. It's certainly an understandable position to argue that these children were too young for such a lesson, and I agree with my student's point that it would be wrong for any teacher anywhere to try to indoctrinate students with anti-police or antiauthoritarian views. The fact that this was in an American university and not an Australian one further makes my student's comments understandable.

However, the experience illustrates the trickiness of revisiting the past. History has always been a battleground of sorts, but in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries, and especially since World War II and the postmodern era, the degree to which history ignites controversy has significantly increased: There are more arguments and debates about history than ever before, about more aspects and eras of history, about interpretations, understandings, perspectives, meanings, and ramifications. The vehemence with which these debates are carried out, the vitriol that's often involved, and the absolute certainty with which many argue their case further amplify this sense of history as a concept being fought over. The growth of the internet and social media has expanded and amplified this ongoing argumentation over history; now anybody can publish his or her views, and just about anybody, it seems, can get a spot on a primetime cable TV news

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<sup>72</sup> In addition to the statue, tourists can also visit the Ned Kelly Museum & Kelly Homestead, walk down Siege Street where the Siege at Glenrowen took place, enjoy an "animatronic show of the Kelly Gang's last stand," and see many other plaques, landmarks, and attractions in Ned's childhood hometown of Greta, Euroa (where Ned and his gang robbed the National Bank), and several other cities and historical sites. See: "A Tour of Ned Kelly Country: Following the Trail of Australia's Most Famous Bushranger" (<https://www.thetravellingindfields.com/2020/01/a-tour-of-ned-kelly-country-following.html>).

discussion show to debate what is or isn't true history, what from the past is or isn't still relevant today, whose views on history should or should not be silenced. In America, some of the current angst regarding history revolves around the removal (from public taxpayer-funded lands and on official grounds such as around state capital buildings) of confederate statues and other monuments to people who may have had ties to the confederacy, slavery, or white supremacy. Many opponents of this practice (again, usually on the political or cultural right, and *not* only from southern states) argue that removing such monuments is an attempt to erase history, a ludicrous argument considering how little "history" can actually fit on a small monument plaque, how much historiography there is available on the people memorialized in such statues, and that very few (if any) of these monuments in question include historical notations about who originally erected the monument and for what reason (many were erected in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century during the Jim Crow era by white supremacists in an effort to intimidate African Americans).<sup>73</sup> Proponents of such removals argue that it's finally time to face uncomfortable facts about American history and stop glorifying slaveowners who, after all, fought a civil war in an attempt to maintain their right to continue the practice of slavery. *But that's just the way it was back then*, some might say. *Just leave history in the past. It's over now. It's irrelevant to today's world.*

All history, though, is relevant to today's world. Australia, at least officially, seems to recognize this more than America. For whatever its controversies and shortcomings may be, at

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<sup>73</sup> See: "Confederate Statues Were Built to Further a 'White Supremacist Future' " at npr.org, in which Jane Dailey, an associate professor of history at the University of Chicago, is quoted as saying, "Most of the people who were involved in erecting the monuments were not necessarily erecting a monument to the past ... [b]ut were rather, erecting them toward a white supremacist future" (<https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544266880/confederate-statues-were-built-to-further-a-white-supremacist-future>). In the same article, James Grossman, the executive director of the American Historical Association, is also quoted as saying, "These statues were meant to create legitimate garb for white supremacy. Why [else] would you put a statue of Robert E. Lee or Stonewall Jackson in 1948 in Baltimore?" Many other sources back up this obvious fact/perspective.

least Australia’s “Sorry Day” and other officially sanctioned days of remembrance acknowledge and offer regret and remorse for the treatment of the country’s Indigenous peoples; good luck getting any sort of official apology from the U.S. for slavery or its treatment of its Indigenous peoples. (The U.S. Congress put forth resolutions in 2008 and 2009 offering an apology for slavery but has passed no official bill.) For instance, many Australian publications, films (such as *The Proposition*, discussed earlier in this volume), and websites today that present documentation, photos, or videos pertaining to Indigenous people, culture, or history (or even that discuss Australian history more generally) begin with a statement acknowledging the nation’s Indigenous people as Australia’s “first peoples” and recognizing the value of their cultures.<sup>74</sup>

Further, the 2020 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin sparked protests not only around the U.S. but in other parts of the world, too, including Australia, where many Australians saw their country’s treatment of its Indigenous population—throughout history as well as in the present day—reflected. Tens of thousands of Australians defied coronavirus bans on large gatherings to peacefully march at rallies in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, and elsewhere, with chants and signs that noted the connections between the Floyd murder (and many other episodes of white American police shooting and killing unarmed African Americans, as well as the disproportionate numbers of incarcerated African Americans

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<sup>74</sup> For instance, the “Statement of Acknowledgment” prominently displayed at the homepage for the city of Casey in Victoria states, “The City of Casey proudly acknowledges the traditional owners, Casey’s Aboriginal communities and their rich culture and pays respect to their Elders past, present and future. We acknowledge Aboriginal people as Australia’s first peoples and as the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we work and live. Our Statement of Acknowledgement recognises that we value the unique status of Aboriginal peoples as the original owners and custodians of this land and waters. It is one step on the path to reconciliation. . . . Reconciliation is about understanding the Aboriginal history of Australia. It also recognises the place Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have in that history and in Australia today. Learning about one another’s histories, cultures and heritage is the first step in understanding and respecting each other. For Aboriginal people, land has a profound spiritual value. Land is a source of life to which Aboriginal people belong by virtue of their birth into a region and group of people” (<https://www.casey.vic.gov.au/statement-of-acknowledgement>).

in relation to the overall population and the percentages of incarcerated white Americans) and the continued treatment of Indigenous Australians by their police and legal and judicial systems. Signs at these events reading “I can’t breathe” and “Same story, different soil” illustrate the inspiration many Australian citizens took from the American protests and the Black Lives Matter movement<sup>75</sup>, and the Australian protest movement has emphasized damning statistics: While Indigenous Australians currently make up only about 3% of the nation’s population, for instance, they make up 21% of the prison population, and “roughly half of all juvenile prisoners are Indigenous.”<sup>76</sup> This makes the idea that many Australians look at Ned Kelly as a heroic icon while Indigenous people continue to be over-policed, incarcerated, and brutalized at a disproportionate rate ironic—and galling.

Despite these efforts by tens of thousands of citizens to push for an end to racism and racist police and legal practices, and despite the concerted efforts to apologize for historical treatments of Indigenous people, there are still those there who are ambivalent or hostile to the idea, and the statistics around crime and imprisonment and the views of many on the Australian political right show that, as in America, there is still much change needed. A confrontation with history and a willingness to face and accept the horrific aspects of the colonial past and its continued systemic ramifications in the present must be a part of this change. The novels discussed in this volume, through their elements of historiographic metafiction and their interest in early colonial times, present just such a confrontation. In their re-visionings of the colonial past, the five works discussed here depict the systems of colonialism, the mechanics of society that allow for nation building, such as policing and prisons, racially biased governmental and

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<sup>75</sup> See the BBC News article “George Floyd Death: Australians Defy Virus in Mass Anti-racism Rallies”: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-52947115>.

<sup>76</sup> See BBC New Article “Why Aboriginal People are Still Dying in Police Custody” by Frances Mao from BBC News Sydney: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-56728328>.

political policies, and economic and land-ownership practices. The nexus of postcolonialism and historiographic metafiction at which these novels function evokes the innerworkings and underpinnings of a nation in the process of becoming what it is today.

In essence, this can be boiled down to two concepts at which English and European colonizers excelled that enabled them to have such success at expanding their empires: fighting and writing. A third concept was vital to this process, as well—the ability to act with absolute certainty that what they were doing was right, that they had been ordained by God to carry out their missions, and that they were definitively superior to those whose lands they conquered—but without the means for oceanic travel, killing large swaths of people up close and at a distance, and chronicling their beliefs and their versions of their actions in historiography and other official documentation, the vast colonialization of the globe could not possibly have taken place the way it did, and the parts of the world that were reshaped by their colonial efforts would undoubtedly be significantly different today. That alone makes claims that the past is not relevant to today’s world completely preposterous.

Today, it’s probably not a stretch to say that many people get their “history” from thirty- or sixty-minute television documentaries,<sup>77</sup> popular movies, Wikipedia, and ideologically biased “news” outlets as opposed to legitimate, credible, well-sourced historiographers. Many seem to be getting views on history from politicians who speak of “alternative facts” or compare the Holocaust to mask mandates. The world is precarious enough as it is—in fact, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists currently puts its Doomsday Clock at 100 seconds, the closest it’s ever been to midnight (“Current Time”)—and humanity’s inability to agree on what’s true, what’s real,

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<sup>77</sup> I think of the TV pop historian in the chapter called “The Visitors” in Julian Barnes’s *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, who was chosen by a group of Middle Eastern terrorists who have hijacked a cruise ship to explain to the passengers what historical events and issues had led to their actions, and if he’s unable to do so, they will kill all the passengers. Naturally, he is unable to do so.

what's a fact, or what's history makes it even more precarious. Challenging the concept of verifiable or universal truth has long been a part of postmodernism theory. Fredric Jameson noted in his 1991 *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* that the postmodern era is "an age that has forgotten how to think historically" (4), wrote of "the disappearance of the historical referent" (28), and questioned the possibility of "identify[ing] some 'moment of truth' within the more evident 'moments of falsehood' of postmodern culture" (41). Christopher Butler wrote in 2002 that "much postmodern analysis is an attack on authority and reliability—in philosophy, narrative, and the relationship of the arts to truth," that

real news is too often subordinated to image manipulation, that the dissemination of basic information is always distorted by business corporate interests, and that even horrifyingly immediate events, which cause unimaginable suffering to individuals, like the Vietnam and Gulf wars, had become in some way just "dramatized media events" which "take place on TV" in scenes constructed for political ends by the cameras. There is a strong feeling ... that the political and historical event always reaches us in a fictionalized form, in a narrative, massaged by the more or less hidden hand of political or economic purposes. (110-1)

That was even before a global pandemic was called a "hoax" by powerful media outlets and a U.S. congressman compared the January 6, 2021, armed insurrection on the U.S. Capitol to "a normal tourist visit"—that was Rep. Andrew Clyde, who, incidentally, was photographed barricading House doors against the mob (Colson).

Whereas statements like those and the narratives Butler was describing are put forth as true, the novels discussed in this volume make it clear that they are works of fiction and that they are intentionally mixing fact and fiction. The novels are not trying to convince the reader that



everything inside the covers is verifiably true or historically accurate. Some parts of the novels may be true and accurate, yes, but the playful aspects of them—for instance, their elements of magical realism, polyphony, parody, and fourth-wall breaking—make it clear that they are not pretending to be the definitive truth. They bear some equivalence to René Magritte’s 1929 painting *The Treachery of Images: Carey’s True History of the Kelly Gang* might as well have been called *This is Not the True History of the Kelly Gang*, and *Gould’s Book of Fish* might likewise have been titled *This is Not the Real Gould’s Book of Fish*. In much the same way Magritte’s work was pushing viewers to contemplate the idea of *the image* and its relationship to *the real thing*, these novels push readers to contemplate the idea of *historiography* and its relationship to *real events*.

These works are about more than just that, of course—they are also about colonialism, empire, England, Australia, race, genocide, Indigeneity, white supremacy, religion, hypocrisy, the connections between the past and the present, and even, here and there, fish—but this is what defines them as historiographic metafiction. Linda Hutcheon, whose research, writings, and pioneering and definitional work on historiographic metafiction guided and undergirded this project, pointed out some of the shared characteristics of historiography and fiction:

They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. (105)

In other words, like fiction, historiography is not “the truth” but *a representation* of the truth—or, perhaps to be more precise, it is *a historiographer’s attempt* to craft a piece of writing that

will give the *appearance* of being true while using the same tools that fiction writers use and including the historiographer's own personal perspectives, biases, etc., as well. Historiographic metafiction, then, in Hutcheon's words, "asks us to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time, [which] problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here—just unresolved contradiction" (106). We can see these unresolved contradictions in fiction. We can certainly see them in works of historiographic metafiction like the novels analyzed in this volume. We can't always see them in a work of historiography—and we can practically *never* see them in an ideologically driven news report trying to pass itself off as true or in the words of a politician motivated to stay in power.

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Uncertainty is all around us. Science can prove phenomena exist and theoretical premises are accurate, but later theories and research may alter those conclusions. The Rashomon effect in human psychology is observable daily, as people can understand an event in a way that's totally different from the way that same event is understood by other people with different personal or cultural perspectives and beliefs, or simply a different vantagepoint. Religion and political and cultural beliefs—some of the ideas that many of us believe in with the greatest degree of certainty—are unprovable matters of faith. Even matter is uncertain. A table may look solid, but break it down to its tiniest bits of matter and get to the molecular level and you're left with mostly nothing—and what *is* there does not behave in any way that we expect real matter to behave. History may be the most uncertain concept of all. None of us was there, none of us saw it, and what we know of it has been filtered through others' own personal biases and perspectives—and our own.

That is not to say, of course, that no history is true. When Sven Lindqvist, for instance, writes that the concept of “terra nullius,” or “nobody’s land,” was evoked by British colonialists as evidence that it was within their rights to claim Australia as their own, we can believe that is true—he cites evidence for it and for how England and other colonizing powers used it to justify their colonial conquests (Lindqvist). We can also believe him—have *faith* in him—when he tells us that, in Australia during the colonial period and the Black Wars, “Killing a [B]lack was considered no worse than shooting a dog” (216), that Indigenous people “were punished on the spot for their crimes [and that] trials were considered unnecessary” for them (216), and that, by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the policies behind the Black Wars morphed into attempts to breed what remained of Indigeneity out of the country by taking “ ‘half-castes’,” already lighter skinned than their ancestors because of child separation and forced breeding, away “from their native parents at the earliest opportunity, to be ‘reared in a more healthy and elevating environment,’ ... [but that] people did not want them in [their towns anyway because] they constituted ‘a danger to health’ and exerted ‘an undesirable influence on white children’ ” (252).<sup>78</sup>

We can also believe many other historians and historical theorists, as well. It’s important, though, to recognize the web of contingency—the matrix of uncertainty—that is an inevitable mix of what we read and what we *choose to believe*. History is inevitably linked to epistemology, and epistemology is inextricably interwoven with ontology: We are what we believe. Despite their fictionality, we can believe the novelists covered in this volume, too. We can believe Peter Carey when he tells us that Constable Fitzpatrick was a two-faced liar who convinced Ned Kelly of his friendship only so he could date Ned’s sister. We can believe Richard Flanagan when he tells us that colonial-era Australian and Tasmanian prisons were cruel

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<sup>78</sup> Part of the reason we can believe him on this point is that he is quoting from an actual committee formed in 1923 in Darwin.

and inhumane places. We can believe Rachel Leary's accounts of the mistreatment of women convicts (and women generally) in early Australia, we can believe Matthew Kneale's assertions of hypocrisy and racially motivated violence during the founding of Australia, and we can believe Alexis Wright's depiction of the continued biases toward and marginalization of Indigenous Australians up to this very day.

Most major nations that have ever existed were, in one way or another, founded upon colonial or colonial-like methods: One group of people in one part of the world decides to claim another land somewhere else as their own even if there are already people living there. From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, major European powers sought to claim and colonize as much of the world as they could with little or no regard to the native populations. Their "right" to do so was fueled in large part by the ideas that God had chosen them for such a mission and that they were wholly superior to the Indigenous peoples (and people of color in general), who they saw as inhuman savages doomed to extinction anyway—so speeding them on their way to extinction was perfectly acceptable. For decades, centuries even, the general European population in Europe and in their colonized lands were fed lies in the form of historiography and official documentation that justified the actions of the colonizers, downplayed any violence or racism involved, and dehumanized Indigenous people and people of color. Most believed what they were told.

Not anymore.

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