

Griffith University

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Nomad fictions and reinterpreting the past

Abstract:

This creative presentation examines fiction's potential to reinterpret history, to 'unsettle' notions particular to colonialism, such as 'settlement'. With its genesis in the author's perception of an entrenched racism underlying the Australian nation-state, the short story featured reinterprets the affect of 'settlement' by exploring 'glimpses' recorded in the historical record – in this case an excerpt from the diary of one of Victoria's 'founders', Joseph Tice Gellibrand.

Historical orthodoxy isolates and makes aberrant incidents that open to question the dominant ideology, leaving only faint traces, or glimpses, of events that challenge the status quo. By exploring 'glimpses' left in the historical and landscape text, my 'fictional mosaics' seek to evoke in the reader some of the sensate affect of settlement, and thus raise ideological questions. In using fiction to 'get under the reader's skin', the phenomenology of colonialism can be problematised and, thus, the sovereignty claimed over Port Phillip in 1835 becomes unsettled.

Actively seeking to de-bunk the normalisation of white sovereignty, the work draws on Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's, and Stephen Muecke's, exploration of nomadology; on Michel Serres exposition of the sensate realm of experience; Paul Carter's 'ground truthing' and the history of the Australian state of Victoria in an attempt to bring into being alternate narratives of place.

Biographical note:

Harriet Gaffney is a PhD candidate in the School of Humanities at Griffith University, with Honours and Masters degrees in Professional and Creative Writing from Deakin University. Her research seeks to unsettle notions of place and sovereignty, particularly in the post-colonial context. In 2015 Harriet was awarded the Varuna Eric Dark Flagship Fellowship to further this work and was a finalist in the Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Awards for the novella this work draws from. In 2014 she won the Writers Victoria Regional Writers Award for the short story 'Recognition', and in 2012 The Grace Marion Wilson Award for the creative non-fiction piece 'A Battered Heart'.

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Creative research – nomadology – post-colonialism – white sovereignty – unsettlement

As I wrote this paper two prominent Australians found themselves at odds, again, with various sections of the community because of their perceptions of Australian history. Vociferously maintaining his argument that ‘...it’s absurd to blame’ Aboriginal suffering in the present ‘on a single event, let alone a historical one going back generations’ (Bolt, A 2008), columnist Andrew Bolt continued to contend that the Stolen Generations never happened and accused Australian Football League (AFL) player Adam Goodes of being ‘racially divisive’ (Bolt, A 2014). Lauded by the public for almost 15 years as he strode to the top of his game in Aussie rules, Goodes found the tide of popular opinion turned against him when he began using his position as Australian of the Year to point out the entrenched racism confronted in everyday life by Aboriginal people. Called an ‘ape’ and a ‘gorilla’ and booed vehemently at games across the country, this erstwhile hero retired in 2015 without fanfare or the customary lap of honour. The issue, well-known white Australians tell us from across the country and the globe, was not racism but the player’s own character. A man who won the AFL Best and Fairest award twice.

These anecdotes show the extraordinary divide in the Australian community when it comes to history. ‘Communities’, Stephen Muecke posits, ‘lie on the tracks and byways of experience, not on the national highways of myth and ideology’ (1997: 185). As the country is rocked by escalating arguments about the truth of Aboriginal experience since settlement, the need to interrogate foundations of the nation to unearth narratives that have been silenced becomes, for this writer, increasingly clearer. What are the unreported stories of settlement, the tracks and byways of lived experience for those on the other side of the rich potential spotted from the ships? And how do these stories play out in the present?

Don Watson asserts that ‘no one should be surprised when reality mocks the stated intentions of ambitious people’ (1984: ix), yet many well-known Australians, including our second-longest serving Prime Minister, continue to deny many of the acts perpetrated in the name of Empire in order to secure land – regardless of movements in contemporary history. The result, I believe, is further entrenchment of racist attitudes that underscored settlement: attitudes that saw Aboriginal experience denigrated and denied; attitudes that continue to impact Aboriginal people today.

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My experience of the extraordinary vitality of Aboriginal culture in the north of Australia was in direct contrast to what I experienced on ‘coming home’ to Victoria after almost twenty years away: Lots of *sorry* stickers on the backs of cars. An incredible fecundity of Aboriginal presence in the ‘traces’ I found in the landscape I walked each day – but no accompanying rich presence of Aboriginal people.

By a stroke of fortune I found myself living twenty minutes from Geelong in the tiny coastal hamlet of Breamlea. Despite the beauty, what I sensed as I wandered wetlands and scaled sand dunes of my new home was the same ‘cult of forgetfulness’ that W.E.H. Stanner had discussed in his Boyer Lectures of 1968 (Stanner 1968). This cult of

forgetfulness remains rooted, I suspect, in an ongoing lack of willingness to encounter the complexity of the colonial past. To encounter our own ghosts.

I got a job writing text for a local winery. Vines had been brought to the region back in the mid 1800s by Swiss migrants, the vintner explained. This was a tantalising bit of early Victoria, but what he said next astonished me. We were standing on one of those rolling green hills that evoke such pleasure in the viewer and to our right, away from the vines, was a stand of huge gums. ‘There weren’t any Aboriginals ‘round here though – too cold’, he said. I gave him a look that should probably never be shared with a new employer. We were in full sight of a magnificent old tree whose large scar half way up the trunk told of the canoes that were used to move up and down the waterways in search of eels and birds, fish, and at the bottom of the hill ran *Merrijig* (Wathaurong for *very good*) Creek. Yet here I was, stumped for words by a perspective on history I thought Australians had left far behind.

I continued to survey my new community on the tracks and byways of casual conversations – in shops and schoolyards, over coffee, at the supermarket, the playground and the service station. I found that, although there was now some room to admit ‘bad things’ had happened to Aboriginal people, on the whole those bad things had happened somewhere else. Not here.

While there has been movement in the discourse of Victorian settlement history, in the everyday collective consciousness a significant proportion of white Victorians remain ‘untouched’ by the taint of genocide or racism that might exist in other parts of the nation, allowing us to hold high the ‘fair go’ banner of national myth. As Bill Ashcroft explains, however: ‘This myth of national identity, the myth of imagined community, is fundamental to the survival of the nation, but to operate, the myth must displace the exorbitant proliferation of actual subject positions within the state’ (2011: 20).

This displacement – or silencing – of alternate voices remains alarmingly evident in the Australian cultural consciousness, as the anecdotes that began this paper demonstrate. I became obsessed by a need to bring some of those subject positions back, wondering if by doing so I might make the connections between past hurts and present upset more clear. But the question that remained was: how?

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What the writer of history struggles with – as do so many novelists – is making threads of experience cohere for those involved. Complexity is reduced in the name of a linear narrative arc and thus the rich tapestry of lived experience is, as Michel Serres puts it, ‘leveled’ (2008: 239).

This became extraordinarily apparent to me when I read the letters, diaries and records of the ‘Victorian Pioneers’ (Bride 1969). When ‘skirmishes’ between the traditional owners and settlers were recorded, it was most often the case that whites were valiantly defending themselves and their property against unjust attacks. Only very rarely could I find a dissenting voice in response to acts perpetrated against Aboriginal people and, as is

the case with the character presented in the short story ‘Compensation’ that follows. When I found such a voice, the dissenter quite vaingloriously presented themselves as the hero,¹ overshadowing the very acts committed and the impact on the people they ostensibly defended. More disturbing, however, was that this perspective has, largely, been upheld.

The writer who seeks to pursue the proliferation of subject positions that exist outside these records is left only with glimpses, torn fragments that flutter in the marginal zones of official history, shards. Watson maintains that ‘monuments honour deeds and end questions’ (1984: ix), and my research confirmed his point. Lost to the obfuscations of imperial history and language, the incidents I discovered – in what was left unsaid in the archives – lived only if I allowed myself to get beneath the leveling Serres warns of: I had to ‘dwell’ in ‘the glories of our initial sensuous perception of the world’ (2008: xiii) so I could begin to feel what it is to be human, in that experience, now. Once I had allowed myself to feel the landscape I had moved to and the stories I continued discovering, my only option seemed to be to *create* alternate subject positions with which to discover the lost stories of settlement, to render incoherent that which was said to cohere and in this way unsettle settlement myths.

What I found as I began to collect fragments of experience that glisten in traces of Victoria’s history and landscape is that, although they differ, often, in terms of perpetrator and victim, location and witnesses, even end results, in the end the stories all begin to feel a bit the same: Violent and cruel and without justification. Against any sense of Christian idealism or basic humanity. Completely at odds with key 19th century ideas of civility and progress – tropes that continue to be used on the tracks and byways of experience to silence alternate points of view about how settlement was won.

The focus of my work is, thus, firmly fixed on the agency and mis-firing of white action in order to de-normalise and make strange what continues to be considered normal by mainstream culture: theft of land, destruction of homes and food sources, murder, abuse, rape. This work does not seek to investigate Aboriginality: I am not interested in examining the ‘Aboriginal other’ with anthropological intent – my objective is to raise to awareness ‘other’ ideology of colonialism.

It is the central authority of the settler experience in Australian history that my work actively seeks to question. As Muecke notes, nomadology is ‘an aesthetic/political stance ... constantly in flight from ideas or practices associated with the singular, the original, the uniform, the central authority, the hierarchy...’ (1984: 15). In my gathering of glimpses and traces into alternate stories of settlement, I attempt to make uncomfortable white Australia’s connection with the land itself: to de-bunk the uniformity of ideas that continue to proliferate about settlement in order to help the reader ‘enter a different understanding of the meaning of place’ (Ashcroft 2011: 26); an understanding that recognises there are a variety of viewpoints, that no one story is the true story, that destination ‘Australia’ is not irrevocable or fixed.

I take the glimpses I find in the historical record and, like an equation, add them to hints of narrative I unearth in the traces I find in landscape and cultural memory. I then render the sense I glean from this equation within a Flaubertian model of character and story. The drive to use this model was quite simple: I wanted as many people as possible to feel acts of settlement with such force, to see them so well-lit, they would be unable to turn away without experiencing some affect. After more than a century and a half of language and institution-based obfuscation of the historical record, I wanted to write clear, detailed accounts of some narratives I found and let action and, hence, ideology speak.

I term my method a ‘fictional mosaic’ because, although my work aims towards a novel, I am wary of silencing the proliferation of voices that speak to me from between the lines of historical and landscape texts in order to achieve a cohesive novel form. ‘Compensation’ is a story in itself – a little like the fragments of different tile used to make an entirely new work of art. I do not want to ‘level’ other subject positions in order to pursue one overarching narrative thread, nor do I wish to contrive relationships or use fictional tropes to tie all ends neatly together. I emulate the writing present in the records I draw on, in that the incidents appear in isolation, anomalous to the entirety of the scheme at hand. Instead of filling in the rest of the page with notes about pasture and weight of sheep, I draw my focus in tighter, and tighter still, watch rope rub against the soft skin of the neck and wrist, witness a woman’s wrath.

When I begin to lay the stories, I find out one by one, the framework that holds them together becomes, I hope, a sense of dismay and even despair. The weight the reader feels in their heart for what was done. For what has been lost. This approach provides the narrative arc necessary to make individual stories reveal themselves not as aberrant incidents enacted in isolation but as methodology and status quo. The same silent, belligerent status quo Adam Goodes continues to find himself battling as I write.

Compensation

The clansmen have marched across country to get there, their mission writ large upon their bodies for all to see. They walk into the settlement with none of the accustomed courtesies, a tight band of armed men, and, as expected, everything stops. Conversation dribbles to a halt, sacks cease their journey from hand to hand, hammers are arrested above pegs.

A horse whinnies and then one of the women, barely out of girlhood by the look of her, steps forward into a gap. She turns her head, eyes casting wide like a net, stops, looks direct at two of the shepherds caught mid stride and raises her arm, points, releases a string of words so vehement in their assault that every man there understands at once her full intent, her rage.

Buckley gets to his feet, makes his way forward hand to chest.

Gellibrand arrives just a moment before him, throws a look designed to keep the giant in his place. ‘What are they saying, man? Tell me.’ Unlike the rest of the men at camp Gellibrand is fully attired, his boots polished, coat buttoned up to the neck. ‘What is it that the lubra claims?’

Behind him the two shepherds begin a cautious retreat – only to find a young warrior at their back, spear standing straight up like a post.

It is early February. The heat sits like a furnace in the clearing and the scent of the eucalypts dotted along the river is sharp, searing.

Buckley greets the clansmen in the customary way and hears a story that has become too familiar: the woman gathering rushes at a spring; a man’s appearance, his growling dogs; the placing of a pistol to her head.

As Buckley speaks with the group more natives arrive from each direction, appear suddenly from amidst the trees, knots of men bearing weapons. Around the camp settlers and shepherds alike shift, shrink where they stand.

It is noon and a pot steams upon a fire, quietly begins to burn dry.

Gellibrand fidgets, looks nervously from group to group before demanding of Buckley: ‘What is it, man, what is going on? Surely they are not all here because of an act of aggression upon this woman?’

Buckley ignores Gellibrand and says a few words to the woman, reaches over as she inclines her head to show the rope burn around her neck, at her wrists.

An older man speaks then, gestures to the woman and then to the other clans who continue to arrive, touches his chest before sweeping his hand out, indicating them all. ‘This,’ he might be saying, ‘this business affects each one of us.’

As if finally awake, Gellibrand shakes himself and steps forward, inspects the wounds as though adding figures, tallying the cost to his account.

The woman breaks in now, jerks her shoulder away from Gellibrand’s touch, spits more words.

Buckley narrates the journey across the plains, the forced movement out of her traditional lands and into the country of other clans, the pistol butt striking her head. The rope.

The clearing has filled with people, yet all are silent, alert, focus firmly fixed on the scene at the centre. It is as if any person not yet implicated has been handed a role, given a script.

Gellibrand is restless, directs his head first to Buckley, then to the woman, then to the clans, still gathering, back again to Buckley. He has broken a sweat and swats impatiently at his face with a red handkerchief, wipes his neck.

‘He took her to a hut,’ Buckley reveals finally. ‘Tied her up and abused her person while the others watched.’

Gellibrand's face twitches, whilst in front of him the woman's immediate clansmen remain immobile, faces stern.

Buckley turns to one of the two men still fenced in by the warrior's spear. 'Is what they claim true?' The man looks back at him, meets the enquiry with a snort, a crossing of arms.

'I did naught,' he says, staring firm at Buckley's face. 'Know nothin'.' The man beside him is younger, eyes wide, mouth open.

'Tell us what happened' Gellibrand demands of the former. 'I order you, man.'

The woman and her clan watch the interaction between the white men.

The first shepherd repeats his innocence, and Buckley interprets again, this time for the clans. There is a murmur amongst the blacks, and several of the younger men raise their weapons in the air, shake them, shift their stance a little so they are suddenly on guard – about to strike.

The air, once so clear, so bright, has become thick set. A branch snaps, causes the younger shepherd to wince.

Gellibrand tut tuts as he tries to keep some semblance of order, clears his throat and stares down his nose as if to demonstrate control. Joseph Tice Gellibrand is not accustomed to feelings of inadequacy, of indecision, yet his every move at this time will determine the Port Phillip Association's future success. He knows this.

The selector looks up, surveys the scene. He is aware, suddenly, of the set of his legs, his arms, his brow furrowed and mouth drawn in. He wipes again at his face, pulls his shoulders back, begins to pace. All watch as a decision is made.

'Tell them, man,' he speaks loud, with resolve, to Buckley. 'Tell them of my determination to punish those at fault.' Gellibrand waits for Buckley to speak, watches the clansmen open to his promise, nods as they give him their faith.

'Another man?' Gellibrand turns back, questions the first shepherd. 'Who was the man involved?' The shepherd sneers again, shrugs a shoulder.

Gellibrand turns, looks as if just noticing the second man, demands: 'You! What's your name, lad? Who are you?'

The man's eyes dance wild from face to face as he summons his will, clears his throat. 'Jones, Sir, I travelled with your party on the *Norval*.'

The sun is breaking through the branches, dappling the younger man's face. From across the clearing Buckley watches him, notes the way his body seems to contract, turn in on itself.

'Ask the woman, Buckley,' Gellibrand orders. 'Were these the men involved?'

'I swear to you Sir, I did nothing!' the second interrupts. There is a rumble of discontent from the whites, a shaking of heads.

Buckley has already asked for more information, however, and with a flick of her wrist and a slight movement of the head the woman has pointed out another man, standing further back in the clearing, leaning against one of the huts. One of the warriors pushes him from behind, delivers him up to Gellibrand. Every man waits.

And then it is all action. Gellibrand is on firm ground now, looks about him, head held high and eyes bright. He begins to make proclamations, addresses all in the clearing in his most measured tone.

‘Any man involved in this appalling act of aggression will henceforth be removed from the settlement.’ He looks around, turns his head from side to side as though receiving applause, nods. ‘As soon as other shepherds can be found to take their place.’ He nods again, pleased with himself, continues: ‘This man, identified by the native woman as her aggressor, will be removed forthwith, and the terms of his Indentures terminated. You, Foster,’ Gellibrand gestures to one of his men, ‘make sure he is securely bound and held until arrangements can be made.’

In the air is the smell of sweat, heat. A bird calls from deep in the scrub. Gellibrand stands straight, shoulders back, looks slowly around at all those gathered under the trees. As if inspired he begins to smile, looks – a king upon his throne – at the young woman, nods again. He steps forward and, bowing, chivalrous, takes the red handkerchief he has used to wipe his face and reaches up, ties it around the woman’s neck. Her hand moves to her throat, touches silk. Gellibrand steps back, smiles, nods again, looks to the members of her clan and bows one last time. Then takes his leave, turns smart on his heel as though on parade and marches, military-like, back to his tent.

In the background the young man looks defeated, as though he wants to unburden himself, tell – but how to communicate the texture of it, the shape?

Buckley watches Gellibrand walk away, boots gleaming in the midday sun. He turns to look at the young man, watches him, sees the weight of shadow inside a turf hut, a smoking candle – and the woman, thrown around as though some carcass, a piece of meat.

Research Statement

Research Background

International developments in historiography have identified a lack of minority voices in traditional history, yet despite this mainstream Australia adheres to a version that obscures narratives disrupting the ‘fair go’ myth of national ideology. Can creative research methodologies such as historical fiction help reveal stories that might otherwise remain hidden, and in this way help develop narratives of place that allow room to explore the continuing effects of the past?

Research Contribution

The work ‘Compensation’ and the accompanying exegesis, ‘Nomad Fictions and Reinterpreting the Past’, address the affect of the forgotten stories of Australian settlement upon the nation-state. Acute investigation of landscape ‘traces’ and ‘glimpses’ in the historical record ‘unsettle’ the neat narratives of settlement with which mainstream Australia continues to identify. Thus the work deterritorialises traditional history and language by privileging the particulars of individual people and places over the general. This raises questions as to the validity of the ideology of colonisation and highlights its impacts in the present.

Research Significance

Awarded a Griffith University Postgraduate Research Scholarship in 2015 to undertake this study, the work’s significance lies in its interrogation of the meta-narrative of the history of colonisation. This raises questions not only of the ideology itself but also the way it is supported by disciplines such as traditional history and the State. Further, my research suggests a direct, causal link between the institutionalised obfuscation of aspects of settlement and the racism that continues to be experienced by Aboriginal people today.

The value of this creative research is attested to by the following indicators: selection of the short story cycle *Place* (from which ‘Compensation’ comes) as the winner of the 2015 Varuna Eric Dark Flagship Fellowship; Shortlisting of *Place* in the 215 Melbourne Lord Mayor’s Prize; Shortlisting of ‘Providence’, from the same collection, for the 2015 Faber Novel Writing Course Scholarship Award; Long listing of ‘Providence’ for the 2015 Elizabeth Jolley Award; selection of ‘Recognition’ (the first story in *Place*) as the winner of the 2014 Writers Victoria Regional Writers Award and the Shortlisting of ‘Spoils’, another of the stories from this cycle, for the 2014 Lane Cove Literary Award.

Endnotes

¹ Joseph Tice Gellibrand was the first Attorney-General of Van Diemen’s Land and one of the original members of John Batman’s *Port Phillip Association*: a group of businessmen and stock owners who saw the extraordinary potential of the rich pasture lands of the Kulin peoples and contrived a treaty in order to obtain the land to run sheep. The following extract is taken verbatim from his diary, and was found in TF Bride’s *Letters from Victorian Pioneers*. Note the ‘othering’ at work in the text and the ‘civility’ of Gellibrand’s response.

February 13th, 1836

Upon my arrival at the settlement I found about one hundred and fifty Natives and I learnt with much concern that an Act of aggression had been committed upon one of the women which required my immediate attention. Without waiting to refresh myself or refit I proceeded to the Native Huts and ordered the persons implicated to be brought down. I found a young woman, about two and twenty, lying on the ground covered over with a Kangaroo Rug It appeared that she was one of three wives and that the Tribe had lately been on the Salt water river and near the Shepherd’s hut on No. 10. That this woman was proceeding towards the Settlement to see her mother and fell in with one of the Shepherds who laid hold of her, brought her to the hut tied her hands behind her, and kept her there all night, and either that night or the next morning abused her person. When she reached the Settlement she communicated to her friends the

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injury she had sustained and they immediately apprized Buckley of it to obtain redress. The Natives are particularly jealous respecting their women and they consider any intercourse of this kind as a contamination.... The Natives, men women and children, assembled around me. I explained to them through Buckley our determination in every instance to punish the white man and to protect the Natives to the utmost of our power but we were not allowed to beat them ... but would send them to their own country to be punished. The woman was then raised up and the two men placed before her and Buckley asked her if either of those men had illtreated her person, she replied no, and I then enquired whether she had ever seen them before. She replied Yes they were in the hut when the other man brought her in with her hands tied. I then enquired of the overseer and found that a third man was at the huts but had not been brought down. I then explained to the two men the wickedness of their conduct and how justly they would be punished if the Natives had inflicted an injury upon them and gave orders that as soon as fresh Shepherds could be obtained they should be removed from the Settlement under the terms of their Indentures. I directed the other man to be immediately sent for and if the woman identified him as the aggressor that he should be removed from the Settlement by the first ship and by [her] publicly taken away as Prisoner. I directed Buckley to explain to the whole tribe the course which I had directed to be pursued and I could perceive by the expression of their countenances that they were highly satisfied. I then endeavoured to make the poor woman understand how much I commiserated with her situation and I tied round her neck a red silk handkerchief, which delighted her exceedingly. I then proceeded to the hut, and dressed myself, settled my accounts at Port Phillip ...and we all went to the Captain's Boat to the mouth of the River and reached the [Caledonia about six o'clock] (Bride, 1969: 28-9).

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