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Romancing theft

Abstract:

This article examines the legacy of Romanticism on Australian settlement, investigating how a public hungry for writing of all genres and schooled for centuries by the adventure tales of white heroes—'free', as Patrick Brantlinger notes, 'of the complexities of relations with white women'—came to authorise the theft of Aboriginal land and the violation of her people. Through close analysis of an account by one of Victoria's first settlers, Joseph Tice Gellibrand, this work seeks to unveil how word and action often belie one another, acting to legitimate what was in fact unlawful through what Foucault refers to as a 'hazardous play of dominations'. I examine how the perception of legitimacy continues to operate in the contemporary Australian milieu, seeking to make clear through anecdotal evidence the continuing power of imperial ideology, thus demonstrating how the written word has everything to do with property, ownership, and authority. In this way I conclude that it is through the written word, first and foremost, that we can help to bring about social change: through writing that seeks, as Jen Webb states, 'to make things visible', to 'provide a platform' from which to disrupt the cultural orthodoxy and the phenomenology of colonialism and thus unsettle notions of settlement and sovereignty.

Biographical note:

Harriet Gaffney is a PhD candidate in the School of Humanities at Griffith University, Australia, with Honours and Masters degrees in Professional and Creative Writing from Deakin University. Her research seeks to unsettle notions of place, sovereignty, and belonging in the post-colonial context. In 2015 Harriet was awarded the Varuna Eric Dark Fellowship to further this work. 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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With the rise and rise of the far right globally the need to find a way to create better understanding of the roots of division, to reach beyond the mind, slip beneath the skin and into the heart of humankind becomes crucial for the creative writer that seeks social change. Thus my research into the legacy of British Romanticism is not really concerned with providing unshakeable evidence that the period helped inculcate a denial of Aboriginal experience that continues in the Australia of today (although that is my belief)—rather it is concerned with what tools creative writers can employ to analyse the way the discourse of division was legitimated at settlement, in this way shedding light on how this continues to operate in the present.

In enacting a post-colonial reading of a sample of first settlement narrative I hope to illuminate how the theft of Aboriginal country was authorised; demonstrating how the overriding themes of the Romantic era—a prevailing anxiety with difference and otherness and a garrisoned ideal of national unity—manifest not only in the day-to-day actions of white settler narratives, but continue, to the detriment of human rights, in the nation state today.

The urgency of this analysis became apparent to me after reading the genesis of this paper—a sample of my short fiction, entitled ‘Compensation’, and the piece of colonial narrative that informed it—at a multidisciplinary academic symposium in Brisbane.

Thinking I might be questioned on my use of creative writing as method with which to investigate – unsettle – traditional Australian history I was surprised when the critique I received focused not on the genre I had chosen for my interrogation, but on my decision to avoid foregrounding the writer’s point of view.

The ‘facts’ of the episode I chose to probe are as follows:

In 1836, at a waterhole in the newly establishing colony of Port Phillip, a Wurundjeri woman was accosted by a shepherd and his dogs as she walked her traditional country on her way to visit her mother. She was, it is fair to suggest, beaten, before being tied and taken to a hut where at least one man raped her while the others watched. Held prisoner all night, the woman only managed to escape the next day. Yet for the former Attorney General of Van Diemen’s Land, Joseph Tice Gellibrand, who met with the clans demanding recompense and reported on the incident in his journal, the most pervasive issue was what was done to the woman on her return to her people where she was, allegedly, hit across the head by her husband.

Following Gellibrand’s lead, the most vocal of the academics in the room (white, female) were far more interested in the issue of the husband’s traditional payback than they were the kidnap and sexual assault the woman had suffered at the hands of three white shepherds in a wattle and daub hut.

It was, tragically, an ordinary year in Australia, with on average two women killed per week in violent attacks by the men closest to them, so I empathise with my questioners’ unease; but nonetheless the original discomfort I felt upon reading Gellibrand’s journal entry persists, for by emphasizing the difference and otherness of the culture that sought justice from him as commanding officer in the camp, Gellibrand succeeded in diverting attention from the issue at hand.

As I faced the heat of my critics I began to recognise that white Australia’s apprehension with

‘the other’, our tendency to *orientalise* by

... making statements about it, authorising views over it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it ... (Said 1979: 3).

continues in all sections of society, further entrenching ‘otherness’ as the foundation upon which white sovereignty rests—despite increasingly damning evidence about how this authority was won.

It is the optic so skillfully employed in accounts like Gellibrand’s that remains pre-eminent in Australia’s colonial narrative, leading me to ask: How had Gellibrand managed to so successfully ‘other’ this woman that what was remembered from his account was not the rape that brought her to his attention, but the ‘savagery’ of her husband? What is the political and moral agenda behind reports like his? And lastly, which writing genre might best bridge the divisive politics of difference?

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Anecdotal evidence such as this demonstrates the legacy of British Romanticism in the Australian cultural context. As Tim Fulford and Peter Kitson note:

... the Romantic period is a watershed in colonial history, witnessing a move from a protectionist colonial system, based upon mercantilist economic principles, to a free-trade empire with a political and moral agenda, proverbially described, after Kipling’s poem, as ‘the white man’s burden’ (2005: 3).

In reading the letters and diaries of many of Victoria’s ‘pioneers’ (see Bride, T, 1969) I saw that the defining characteristic was an awareness of the act of writing and its role in legitimating both the taking of land in the first place, and the defense of it once claimed. The ‘white man’s burden’ exalted by Kipling is borne heroically by these ‘founders’—brothers John and Henry Batman, John Pascoe Fawcner, the missionary George Langhorne, and, of course, Joseph Tice Gellibrand, amongst others, helping to institute a belief structure that continues to pervade the cultural consciousness today.

As Patrick Brantlinger explains, and in a point that bears direct relevance to the narrative that I explore in further detail soon, ‘the “benighted” regions of the world, occupied by mere natives, offer brilliantly charismatic realms of adventure for white heroes, usually free of the complexities of relations with white women’ (1988: 12).

National histories highlighting tales of hardship suffered by heroic settlers, triumphant explorers and rugged bushmen in this way obfuscate the realities of Aboriginal experience since invasion – narratives that continue to be staunchly defended by both the individual and the state; regardless of the significant minority agitating for change.

In this way white males writing themselves as central characters (and their own way of being as inherently ‘right’) remain the gatekeepers of Australian society, informing our understanding of who, what, where and when things of import happen and from what perspective we will view them. How, I found myself asking, had this belief system become so pervasive? Could further examination of Gellibrand’s account help clarify the affect of colonial attitudes towards

difference?

As Fulford and Kitson demonstrate, in Romantic literature:

... the other is always the ‘uncanny Other’ and othering is a process of alienation and epistemic violence (often a prelude to material force), whereby an exclusionary distinction is made between the white westerner and the colonized subject ... [P]eoples subject to Western colonial and imperial processes, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, underwent a process of estrangement, frequently being homogenized and often demonized. Imaginary borderlines were constructed on the bases of imputed savagery, cannibalism, and so on (2005: 9).

Gellibrand—known for his intellect (he was the legal brains behind the ‘treaty’ Batman used to claim ownership of vast tracts of Port Phillip’s most fertile land), his gentlemanly manner, his spirit of scientific enquiry and his social conscience—epitomises the Romantic figure, riding out across the unmapped territory of Port Phillip to bring his edifying light to unruly times. Pitted against the ‘savagery’ of natives and the brutish shepherd, he writes himself—and is written thus—as the civilising and ordering influence upon a yet to be tamed outpost, bastion of the best qualities of humankind.

From the opening line of his account Gellibrand establishes himself as the socially responsible administrator of the law:

... 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 (Bride 1969: 28).

Like a judge, ordering persons implicated to be brought down, he highlights his role in a narrative that could have come straight out of a Gothic novel or ‘Rescue’ opera, with its unlawful imprisonment of a victim of tyranny released after heroic exertions by the valiant white man:

... I found a young woman ... lying on the ground ... and suffering from a violent contusion on the back part of her head and which I understood had been inflicted upon her by her husband. It appeared that she was one of three wives ... (Bride 1969: 28).

Gellibrand continues as though an expert witness, scientific, informing the reader of not one but two alarming points—neither of which pertain to the rape itself. First, the ‘violent contusion’ inflicted upon the woman, supposedly by her husband, and second that it appears she is one of three wives.

Finally we reach the perpetrator of the assault, the point at which the white wig of the law court comes into full view. Gellibrand’s choice of the phrase ‘fell in’ immediately renders the woman complicit—and even today maintains the idea of acquiescence and poor judgment:

... this woman was proceeding towards the Settlement to see her mother and fell in with one of the Shepherds (28).

In fact the entire assault by the shepherd, thirty-one words out of the 500-odd detailing the account, is rendered as if almost innocuous:

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 ... (29).

The act of rape receives far less scrutiny than the ‘native jealousies’ that Gellibrand proceeds to describe, raising the spectre of the woman’s death at the hands of her clan significantly until this—and his own handling of the incident overall—become the most noteworthy aspects of the case:

... The Natives are particularly jealous respecting their women and they consider any intercourse of this kind as a contamination, and in every case punish the women, frequently even to death (29).

As a writer, what inspires me most about Gellibrand’s account is his chivalry. Prepared for his imperial destiny, the rape of the woman enables Gellibrand to make good the face of public policy in Port Phillip, inaugurating him in the yet-to-be-tamed settlement as the voice of reason, the sanctioned space of British law that comes riding in on horseback to save the day before dashing off to a ship. We can imagine him, cape thrown over his shoulder (sword in hand?), ready to stand against the perils of a violent, unsettled world; point of order in a storm:

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 ... (29).

There is a dualism at work in Gellibrand’s account, however, what Foucault defines as ‘a site of opposing strategies’ (in Hoeveler and Davies Cordova 2006: 13); a ‘hazardous play of dominations’ that seeks to create a coherent position amidst rapid social, historical and cultural transformation. ‘In every society’ Foucault reminds us, ‘the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a ... number of procedures’ (1981: 52).

He will ‘punish the white man’—but first he must gently chide the clans, admonishing that:

... we were not allowed to beat them as they had the woman, but would send them to their own country to be punished (Bride 1969: 29).

Turning, finally, to remonstrate with the perpetrators of the assault Gellibrand highlights the civility of his action as compared to what the natives *might* have done: how he has saved them as well, through recourse to British law—before proceeding to enact a legal system that had no sovereignty on that ground:

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 (29).

Like other ‘first settlers’ Gellibrand *makes* history with his writing: he ‘controls, selects, organises and redistributes’ information about events at Victorian settlement and in this way defines himself as the hero of the hour whilst simultaneously validating the superiority of the British approach, how *right* it is; unquestionable.



As explored by Sharee Makdisi (1998), the late eighteenth-century Orientalism that helped to inspire Romanticism was markedly different from that which preceded it. Increasingly concerned with knowledge of the Oriental ‘other’ for the purpose of imperial administration it was instrumental, purposeful and expedient; and, as he reveals in a point that makes plain the actions of Gellibrand et al half a century later, the Governor-General of Bengal, Warren Hastings, in the preface to the first English translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita* in 1785, ordered the extraction and circulation of Oriental knowledge expressly for the purpose of command, not mere entertainment:

“Every accumulation of knowledge, and especially such as is obtained by social Communication over whom we exercise a dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the state,” Hastings advised (Makdisi 2009: 40).

A policy that was followed with rigour from the very outset in the new colony of Port Phillip, ‘knowledge’ about the other—including much racist caricature like that shared by the first Governor of the colony, La Trobe, when, in a letter to friends in Britain, he described Aboriginal Victorians as more akin to Opossums than humans—fed directly into the growing cult of theories about natural selection and ‘survival of the fittest’. This led ultimately to the ‘Literature of Extinction’ examined by A.L. McCann (2006), in which the literature of the new colony—works published in the mid-nineteenth century such as ‘Victoria; or, Past and Present’ or essays of Henry Giles Turner—’trivialises the transformation [settlement] represents, and this trivialization acts as a form of misdirection in which the brute power of colonialism is rendered utterly matter-of-fact’ (2006: 49-50).

Gellibrand’s genial tone, his grandfatherly pronouncement of the ‘proper’ way to behave as the woman—naked, one assumes, in high summer and less than one year after first contact—stands battered and bleeding before him likewise acts to undermine and invalidate Aboriginal sovereignty. Every action is an act of belittlement—a parent teaching an indulged and errant child—before he takes from his neck what could only be, after the length of his ride in the preceding days, a sweat-stained and grimy (red) silk handkerchief and ties it around her throat. This, he deduces, ‘delighted her exceedingly’:

.... 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 [ship *Caledonia*] about six o clock (Bride 1969: 29).

With his carefully orchestrated text Gellibrand enables the reader to *bear witness* to the propriety of British imperialism, to the legality of settlement. Ostensibly, he rights a terrible wrong through recourse to British law: yet at the same time he renders the woman, whose name we never learn, invisible; shifts the lens from the true weight of the assault upon her and its wider implications, to the workings of her culture, their difference and otherness—and then he takes their land.

In *A Users Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Brian Massumi writes: ‘Meaning is not in the genesis of the thing, nor in the thought of that genesis, nor in the words written or spoken of it. It is in the process leading one from the other’ (1992: 15). This proved helpful for me when trying to gauge my unease at Gellibrand’s report. With this understanding I saw that the incident’s meaning is not to be found in the character of the shepherd who captured the woman, nor in the inaction (or otherwise) of the two other men. Nor is it found in the vainglorious exhibitionism of the protagonist himself.

The meaning lies, I realised, in the process that enabled a figure of British authority to take this episode and render it void in the annals of history, eradicating with extraordinary neatness not only the impact of what was done to the woman but simultaneously and quite masterfully eroding the rights of her people to be understood as agents of authority with a cultural paradigm worthy of respect: keepers of lore and land.

The Romantics, Martin Ross explains, ‘help teach the English to universalize the experience of ‘I... to organize the universe by celebrating the universal validity of parochial English values,’ (in Fulford & Kitson 2005: 8). Yet as I saw clearly on that day in Brisbane, in that universalized ‘I’ there is no room for ‘other’.

The meaning that has been passed down to us from that summer morning in 1836, then, lies in the process utilized by utilized by Gellibrand to invalidate those who fall outside his cultural norms. Infantilised by his swift administration, the Wurundjeri clan who brought the complaint and the woman herself have been dealt with and can, thus, be forgotten.

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Theodore Adorno argues that ‘history does not merely touch on language, but takes place in it’ (1978: 219). Characters like Gellibrand prevail in Australian history; constructing narratives of place that remake the social order of the world in which they have alighted into a model that serves the ideology and pragmatics of the British Empire.

In ‘Yamani Country’, Sandra Pannell discusses the work of Liisa Malkki, who:

writing of the mythico-historical narratives of Hutu refugees in Tanzania, identifies this narrative process as ‘worldmaking’ and suggests that ‘making’ the world through narrative and narration is sometimes an oppositional process concerned with ‘remaking’ “the moral order of the world” and ‘recasting’ identity and history. Malkki not only highlights the constitutive role of narrative in the formation of identities, histories and ‘nation-ness’, but she also points to how narratives represent “vital form[s] of social action” (Pannell 2006: 105).

Gellibrand is keenly alert to his role in the making of Port Phillip, and more, he is fully cognizant of the fact that this requires him to aid in the remaking of ‘the moral order of the world’ he wants to lay claim to; a world that had already confounded those who had come before him to New South Wales, where Aboriginal peoples’ apparent lack of materialism was exploited with devastating results.

Gellibrand, like so many other ‘first settlers’, records for posterity his movement into Aboriginal territory, recognising full well the ‘constitutive role of narrative in the formation of ... histories

and nation-ness...’ and defining with great affect British civility and righteousness—while simultaneously leveling, in a masterful sleight of hand, white action.

‘Communities,’ Stephen Muecke explains, ‘lie on the tracks and byways of experience, not on the national highways of myth and ideology’ (1997: 185). It is the continuing influence of the discourse of colonialism into the present, so ably aided and abetted by the Romantic era with its active othering of cultures outside its own, its idealization of the individual slashing through the barbarism of times past into a glory-filled present, that impacts so tragically on those that fall outside its norms—and it is this influence that I seek to unsettle through creative writing as a ‘vital form of social action’.



Don Watson asserts that ‘No one should be surprised when reality mocks the stated intentions of ambitious people’ (1984: ix), yet numerous well-known, powerful and influential Australians continue to deny the action perpetrated in the name of Empire to authorise the theft of Aboriginal land—regardless of movements in contemporary history.

As Bill Ashcroft explains: ‘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).

The spirit of almost scientific enquiry with which Gellibrand views the assault is typical of the writing of Empire in relation to native peoples and instigates a phenomenon the French philosopher Michel Serres refers to as ‘leveling’, effectively acting to eradicate perhaps that richest of human scope, feeling, from affecting the reader in historical accounts (2008: 239).

Watson maintains that ‘monuments honour deeds and end questions’ (1984: ix) and my research confirms his point. Lost to the obfuscations of imperial history, literature and language, the incidents I explore—such as the rape discussed here and examined with visceral detail in my short story ‘Spoils’—live only if I allow myself to get beneath the leveling Serres warns of: I have to ‘dwell’ in ‘the glories of our initial sensuous perception of the world’ (2008: xiii) so that I can feel what it is to be human, in that experience, now.

Once I have allowed myself to feel the landscape and the stories I discover in the liminal zones of Australian history, landscape and nomenclature, I utilise fiction to ‘provide a platform from which to make things visible’, as Jen Webb states, hoping to affect a dissonance in the reader regarding those acts and thus render incoherent that which is said to cohere.

What I find as I collect the fragments of experience that glisten in the traces of Victoria’s history and landscape is that although they differ, often, in terms of perpetrator and victim, location and witnesses, end results, in the end the stories all 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 nineteenth-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. As Henry Reynolds puts it in his introduction to Bill Gammage’s great book *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, ‘The obsession with Aboriginal backwardness was just too useful to be cast aside...’ (Gammage 2011: xxi).

Hence my work focuses firmly on the agency and mis-firings 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. My work does not seek to investigate Aboriginality: I am not interested in examining the ‘Aboriginal other’ with anthropological intent—my objective is to help ‘other’ the ideology of colonialism; the central authority of the settler experience in Australian history. 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).

Thus I utilise the themes of the Romantic era to understand how white settlement was legitimated. I employ what I have learnt to write fiction investigating what perspective tells us about the white authority to act, brokering the question of whether Gellibrand would have so neatly resolved this situation had it been a white woman raped by an Aboriginal man; white homes and food sources destroyed; white fathers and mothers and children murdered. Ultimately I hope to use fiction to shine light on why, almost two centuries later, these questions are still not being addressed.

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