

What the river remembers: Theatricality and embodied knowledge in performing *The Secret River*

Denise Varney, University of Melbourne

Abstract

This article considers the politics of remembering violence in relation to the contested matter of the Frontier Wars between Aboriginal people and settlers in 19th century colonial Australia. It argues that remembering violence is political when it is a question of whose memories constitute a dominant cultural memory and whose are left unspoken or subjected to doubt. If the dominant cultural memory of Australian settlement celebrates gold-diggers, explorers, squatters, pioneers, emancipists, convicts, bushrangers and exceptional white women, it disremembers the experience of Aboriginal people. Of late, works of Australian film, literature and drama have played a key role in challenging dominant cultural representations of nation-building. In this article, I analyze the 2013 theatrical adaptation and performance of Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River* (2005) by writer Andrew Bovell and the creative team at the Sydney Theatre Company, including directors Neil Armfield and Stephen Page.

Keywords: Theatre, violence, memory, colonialism

Introduction

This article considers the politics of remembering violence in relation to the contested matter of the Frontier Wars between Aboriginal people and settlers in colonial Australia. It offers a case study of the 2013 theatrical adaptation of Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River* (2005) by writer Andrew Bovell and the creative team at the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) to investigate how theatre might illuminate the complexity of cultural memory. The adaptation was commissioned by Andrew Upton and Cate Blanchett, who took up positions as artistic directors of the STC in 2008, and is suggestive of an intention to position the performance within contemporary debates about Australian history, many of which were re-ignited in response to Grenville's novel.

The article asks how the theatrical adaptation represents the politics of colonial violence in ways that are different from the novel, and asks whether if in doing so, it redresses the perceived limitations of the latter. This difference will hinge on key differences in form between the two media. Where the novel communicates in the literary mode to its readers, theatre is obliged to make live material representations of subject matter and add elements such as acting and directing, scenographic design and lighting, and be mindful of spectators whose energy and presence, as well as cognitive and affective faculties, come into play. The article will therefore stage a brief discussion of the historical and literary debates that frame the reception of the novel and the play. It will then analyse the theatrical performance mediated by digital and print-based archives and draw on critical commentary by Indigenous artists including Stephen Page and Wesley Enoch. To assist the analysis, the article engages with Slavoj Žižek's reflections on violence to consider the wider context of colonialism and

capitalism that underpins Australian settlement and continues to shape its symbolic system. Given the colonial setting for the play, and the postcolonial present in which it is performed, the article also draws on Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins' landmark study *Post-Colonial Drama* (1996) to theorise the representations of racialised bodies, space and language in the theatrical version. The analysis of the performance that follows interweaves these elements, but first I will briefly revise the politics of history and memory in the Australian postcolonial context.

The Frontier War and the Black Armband

While it is beyond the scope of this article to engage in detail with historical detail around Grenville's novel, I will offer a brief and hopefully not too reductive account. Interpretations of the encounter between settlers and the original inhabitants of Australia have generated decades of debate and controversy. Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clarke coined the term 'the history wars' to account for the conflicting versions of Australian colonial history that circulated in the approach to the millennium (Macintyre and Clarke 2004). Henry Reynolds's controversial history of the colonial period is concerned, he writes, 'with attitudes and the behavior of the settlers and their reaction to the blacks they were dispossessing' (1981; 1987, p. vii). Bruce Elder builds the case for lost innocence around accounts of the Myall Creek and Coniston Station Massacres as well as providing new material about unrecorded massacres and revenge killings around Botany Bay, the Hawkesbury River and New England that began soon after settlement in 1789 (2003, pp. 12-17). Robert Foster, Amanda Nettlebeck and Rick Hosking write of 'an undeclared and forgotten war' that also produced a 'culture of secrecy' (2001, p. 8).

Pushback against revisionism came in the early 1990s with Geoffrey Blainey's claim that 'the black armband version of Australian history' had taken hold. Using 'black armband' as a derogation of anything other than conservative views of colonial behaviour and the advantages of European nationhood, he claimed the following: 'there are those who gnaw away at our national self-respect, rewriting [our] history as centuries of unrelieved doom, oppression and failure—as days of hopelessness, not days of hope' (1993). *Quadrant Magazine* rejects Reynolds and others' negative accounts of colonial settlement, with Keith Windschuttle discrediting the idea of colonial violence altogether as 'the fabrication' of Aboriginal history (2001, p. 41) and 'the myth' of frontier massacre (2000, p. 8). Questioning the truth of claims about settler violence, he dismisses the use of oral history and story for the 'endemic' lack of detail and accuracy of the sources. He writes: 'when it is closely examined, much of the evidence for the claims about massacres, terrorism, and genocide turns out to be highly suspect' (2001, p. 43). Windschuttle and Blainey have stood their ground on the demand for factual evidence against memory and oral story. Pam Smith offered the following reflection:

Central to this debate about the level of violence on the Australian frontier is the accuracy of oral accounts, or oral histories, and the difficulty some historians have with endorsing testimonies which are not supported by historical documents written by white people, usually people in authority.

(2007, 10)

Lynch situates Grenville's *The Secret River* within the public debate about violence and cultural memory in the following way:

Grenville's fictionalising of settler events along the Hawkesbury River revives them in public imagination after years of silence, and thus transforms them during a period of Australian government when black armband-ism is strongly contested.

(2009)

In the context of these public debates, the question of the efficacy of Sydney Theatre Company's theatricalising of Grenville's novel is the focus of the remaining sections of this article.

From historical fiction to epic theatre

Grenville's multi award-winning novel, *The Secret River*, was published in 2005, and soon became the catalyst for the re-examination of contested narratives of Australian settlement, both fictional and historical. The first third of the novel centres on the fictional character of William Thornhill, whose story begins in an impoverished East London childhood at the end of the 18th century and moves on to his imprisonment for minor theft and transportation to Botany Bay in 1810, before continuing onto his establishment as a free man in the colony. The remaining two thirds of the novel are devoted to Thornhill and his young family's fortunes as they settle on the Hawkesbury River, New South Wales, in the belief that the land is theirs for the taking. The narrative perspective stays with Thornhill and his settler neighbours as their conflict with the Dharug people, the original inhabitants of the land they now occupy, escalates. When the Dharug people resist the occupation of their lands and react to acts of violence including sexual enslavement and poisoning, Thornhill takes part in a massacre that clinches the act of occupation. Wesley Enoch, playwright and artistic director of the Queensland Theatre Company and a Murri man from Stradbroke Island, reads the novel's fictional account of the events on Dharug country 'as generally applicable to all stories of early settlement in post colonial Australia' (Enoch 2014, np.). Yet, despite this endorsement of the novel's exposure of colonial violence, its reception opens up the conflicted field of Australian colonial history.

The story is loosely based on Grenville's research into her ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, who founded a ferry service along the Hawkesbury River in the early 19th century, and after whom the small town of Wisemans Ferry is named. There is no evidence that Solomon Wiseman was involved in anti-Aboriginal violence; Thornhill is a fictional character. Historian Mark McKenna is highly critical of the novel's 'fictive' approach to history (2006, p. 98). He argues that Grenville uses well-known accounts of the massacre at Waterloo Creek in 1838 'to inform her invention of a massacre on the Hawkesbury more than twenty years earlier' (McKenna 2006, p. 101). He goes on to argue that with Grenville's fictive history, 'we run the risk of surrendering our cultural memory to "dream history"' (p. 105). These remarks point to the climate of controversy that surrounded the publication and reception of Grenville's novel as historians objected to what they saw as the deliberate blurring of the lines between fiction and history, dream and memory. John Hirst dismisses Thornhill's story as a 'liberal fantasy' (2006, p. 84), and highly respected historian Inga Clendinnen laments the predictability of the novel by an otherwise 'fine' writer:

I flinched from what looked like opportunistic transpositions and elisions. I was also taken aback by the novel's portentous tone: this was not the Grenville I was used to. Worst, from the opening gambit (worthy fellow, trivial offence, transportation to Botany Bay) I was pretty sure I knew the plot; when the worthy fellow took up land on the Hawkesbury and saw those shadows flitting behind the trees, I was sure of it.

(2006, p. 16)

Added to the problem of the stereotypical representation of Indigenous people and settlers for Clendinnen is the way in which Grenville offers readers insights into the settlers' characters, while excluding any reference to the Aboriginal characters' inner thoughts. She finds this inconsistency to be part of a 'contemporary delicacy of mind' that prevents her speaking on behalf of the other, and part inconsistency and paranoia (2006, p. 19).

Literary scholars are less concerned with the border zone between the literary and historical than in the novel's achievement as a work of fiction. Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman agree with Clendinnen that the novel's 'attempt to address a national consciousness through an acknowledgement of the trauma of settler-indigenous conflict is compromised by the limits of its narrative point of view' (Gelder and Salzman 2009, p. 51). Hence, the reader is aligned with Thornhill, 'her conflicted, morally conscious and extremely sympathetic protagonist' in a way that appeals to a readership comprised of 'a monolithic white liberal consciousness' (Gelder and Salzman 2009, p. 52). The white liberal reader is positioned as the keeper of a cultural memory favourable to its kind. Sue Kossew suggests the novel is compromised by Grenville's desire to reconcile 'her own convict ancestor's implication in acts of Indigenous dispossession' with her 'acknowledgement of the strength and courage of such acts of settlement' (2007, p. 8). Odette Kelada acknowledges the novel's depiction of 'the violence and "dark" side of Australia's history as perpetrated by white colonists', but is critical of the 'troubling' aspects of its stereotypical representations of Aboriginal characters in particular, and the politics of the ending in which colonial mastery is upheld (Kelada 2010, np.). Like Clendinnen and Gelder and Salzman, she remarks on the novel's white colonial perspective.

Literary and historical critiques of the novel centre on its truth claims, its white perspective and its racial stereotypes in ways that overshadow its attempt to confront colonial violence. The theatrical performance, conversely, sets aside fictional realism for an epic performance mode, although it stays within the realm of conventional dramatic theatre. The metonymic system of the bare stage for literary descriptions of the land, and a pot and a fire for a hut, replaces Grenville's prose description with overt theatricality. Such an anti-realist epic mode shifts the question of the sympathetic character onto the grounds on which the social and historical encounter between representative settler and Aboriginal figurations take place. Indigenous perspectives and language are added as a prominent feature of the adaptation, as is the critical distancing device of the Indigenous narrator, who is also a witness to the massacre.

Categories of Violence

To analyse the play's particular representation of colonial violence, I turn to cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2009) is a study of violence in modern capitalist democracies that has much to offer towards a broader understanding of the way in which violence is systemically linked to the political regimes of 19th century capitalism and colonialism.

Žižek distinguishes different kinds of violence, from direct, physical violence such as murder to ideological violence such as racism, incitement and sexual discrimination, but argues that overall violence is 'inherent in a system', that is, it is rarely indiscriminate or random (2009, p. 8). Acts of violence fall into three main categories: subjective violence, which has a visible agent who harms a person or thing; symbolic violence, which is invisible and pertains to language as a symbolic system that imposes meaning, incites physical violence and uses speech as a mode of social domination; and systemic violence, which is also invisible and refers more broadly to the 'catastrophic consequences of the smooth

functioning of our economic and political systems' (2009, p. 1). The consequences of systemic violence are typically felt by marginalised and minority subjects. Žižek argues that the liberal capitalist democracies in which we live are sustained by the third part of the triumvirate, the invisible, systemic violence that withholds voice, language, citizenship, belonging and opportunity from those deemed to be Other. He makes a further distinction between subjective and systemic violence insofar as the former is experienced as a 'perturbation of the "normal", peaceful state of things' whereas the latter refers to the 'violence inherent to this "normal" state of things' (Žižek 2009, p. 2).

Thinking about the genres of representation, Žižek probes the paradox of how the 'overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims' has a disruptive and traumatising effect that prevents us from thinking about, for example, its systemic cause or from giving an ordered witness account. To be coldly dispassionate and theoretically rational is to be unaffected, or to appear to reproduce and participate in the horror. An iconic mimetic system such as realism, according to Žižek, fails to represent the truth of violence because its clarity denies the disruptive affects. If the memory of violence is selective, elliptical and fragmented, then interruption or disconnection within its mode of representation is closer to the truth of its affects, impact or impingements on a subject. Here Žižek echoes the insights of many theatre scholars that 'the truly social dimension of art is the form' and that the form of dramatic realism conjures, paradoxically, illusion and not social reality (Jürs-Munby et al. 2013, p. 3). This is the basis upon which the anti-realist epic stance of the theatrical version of *The Secret River* might stake its truth claims about the violence it represents.

As the play is rehearsed, the 'overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims' upsets and traumatises actors and audience. Andrew Bovell describes how actor Ursula Yovich, who as the narrator is on stage for almost the whole performance, broke down several times in rehearsal, as the effort to tell the story took its emotional toll (Bovell 2013, p. xxvi). He notes in an interview with the theatre critic Rosemary Neill that 'it's not comfortable material. It's not an easy story' (Neill 2012). The symbolic violence is ever-present in the language of settler incitements to violence: in epithets such as 'thieving black' (Bovell 2013, p. 15); in speech used to assert the domination of settlers over Aborigines, such as 'Tie him up like bait. Shoot the others when they come to get him' (Bovell 2013, p.78); and in the imposition of English names and alien meanings on the familiar landscape, such as the substitution of 'Hawkesbury River' for the Aboriginal name 'Dhirrumbin'. The systemic violence occurs under the regime of colonialism, whose smooth functioning is the background against which raised Aboriginal weapons appear as an obstacle to imperially sanctioned settlement.

Theatre, cultural memory and violence

The proposition that theatre and performance act as memorials to past events is linked to the idea of performance as embodied knowledge. Diana Taylor writes: 'Performance, for me, functions as an episteme, a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis' (2003, p. xvi). Historical events and their theatrical representation are imagined embodiments of historical or fictional characters. In operating as such, performance acts as an aesthetic assemblage of posited living memory. In the analysis that follows, I argue that the Sydney Theatre Company sets itself the task of re-telling Grenville's story—attending in its own words to 'the terrible silence' that covers the 'truth' about colonial violence—in a respectful and effective way (2013, p. 86). Although it positions itself as a counter-repository of cultural memory and a corrective to the problems of the novel, there are irreconcilable limitations on the extent to which it can achieve that aim. I consider these limitations while bearing in mind Taylor's argument: 'No matter who restages the colonial encounter from the West's perspective—the

novelist, the playwright, the discoverer, or the government official—it stars the same white male protagonist-subject and the same brown, found “object” (2003, p. 13).

Bovell’s adaptation of *The Secret River*, commissioned and produced by the Sydney Theatre Company for the Sydney Festival of the Arts in 2013, remediates Grenville’s narrative into script and then performance. Directed by Neil Armfield and choreographed by Bangarra (an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Performing Arts company) artistic director Stephen Page, the play is performed by a non-Indigenous and Indigenous cast and crew, creating the performative circumstances in which the ‘the same white male protagonist-subject’ is confronted by ‘the same brown, found “object”’ who is no longer absent (Taylor 2003, p. 12). Referring to the controversy over the novel, Page notes the following:

I think that was because it was written from a white perspective ... At that time you were known as a savage or a native. Those were the type of words that were used to describe the black clan. A lot of black peers want to find the strength to rekindle those stories and put a black perspective on them and help “close the gap of history”, so to speak. I was much more interested in that as well.

(Neill 2012)

The site for the aesthetic remediation of conflicting cultural memories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous pasts is the Sydney Theatre stage, which is presented neutrally to begin with as a bare proscenium floor framed by a painted scrim of tall white eucalypt trees. The initial stage picture sketches the pristine state of the traditional lands of the Dharug people along the banks of the river locally known as Dhurrumbin. The spectator watches as the stage comes to represent the contested space of colonial occupation and conflict. A campfire downstage left functions first as an Aboriginal cooking place and then an English hearth, yet its appearance remains the same: in the first scene, the narrator and a Dharug family gather around the campfire; in Scene Two, the settler family arrives. The stage is a crucial component of the *mise en scène* and of the theatre’s ‘potential to reconstitute the structural basis of historical conception, to make space/place a performer rather than a medium on and through which the pageant of history seems to merely unfold’ (Gilbert and Tomkins 1996, p. 146). The structural basis of colonialism and the reconstruction of place is made readable on stage as colonisation breaks the deep connections between land and the social and cultural life of a people. It is clear that the Frontier War is about the radical imposition of European farming techniques over Indigenous land use. While the time-scape is European, with the action occurring between September 1813 and April 1814, a ‘timelessness’ or ‘continual present’ (Gilbert & Tomkins 1996, p.137) is evoked in the bodies, song and dance of the Dharug people. The omnipresent voice of Dhurrumbin, the river, as the narrator, shifts the performance further into non-European time.

Official white history recalls the period of First Contact as the point at which Europeans, for whom the land is an open frontier, establish a colonial settlement that irrevocably changes the traditional way of life of the Indigenous inhabitants. For the Elder, Yalamundi, First Contact feels like a ‘pain in his chest’:

He saw the smoke from the nearby ridge. He knew what it meant. Someone was coming. They’d heard the stories passed down the river. Of strangers. And trouble. They’d seen the boats passing. This way and back. This way and back. And the old man, Yalamundi felt the pain in his chest. Because he knew something was about to change. And he didn’t know how to stop it. He wanted to. He wanted time to stand still.

(Bovell 2013, p.2)

Yalamanda's affective experience of First Contact prefigures Thornhill's gunshot and the devastating red blood that flows from the elder's mouth as he dies (Bovell 2013, p. 87). Around his body will lie the bodies of the men, women and children of his tribe. Before arriving at this point, Thornhill will strike a Dharug elder woman hard across the face and kick her, have her grandson's arm broken, repel an attack from her nephew and threaten to shoot the family to defend his stake. In the space of postcolonial theatre, these wounded bodies have an allegorical function in which 'the personal site of the body becomes a sign of the political fortunes of the collective culture' that 'must be actively reassigned to a more productive representation through embodiments on the post-colonial stage' (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996, p. 221). In this performance, the more productive aspect of the representation is found in the two Dharug people who survive the massacre, including the shattered warrior, Ngalamalum, whose final cry of 'No!' ends the play.

The acting introduces a heightened emotional and theatrical register that emanates in many ways from Nathaniel Dean's wide-eyed, emphatic and self-aggrandising Will Thornhill, whose impoverished childhood—as described in Grenville's novel—is condensed into brief allusions. Dean's performance reminds us, as Taylor notes, that 'Theatricality (like theatre) flaunts its artifice, its constructedness' (2003, p. 13). The effect is to reduce audience investment in the character's future. Instead, beginning with the moment when, as an ex-convict, he occupies a parcel of land on the Hawkesbury River, thinking it unoccupied and there for the taking, the performance foregrounds systemic colonialism rather than a personal story. Thornhill assures his sceptical wife that this is how the new country or system works: 'There's others done it. Grabbed a piece. Put in a crop to say it's theirs. Even give it their name.' (Bovell 2013, p. 6). The irreconcilability of the way of life of the two families radically displaces the possibility of a unified national identity. At first contact, the two embodied perspectives—the joy of the emancipated settler on the one hand and Aboriginal pain on the other—are brought into sharp relief across the same stage space, placing the forgotten past centre stage.

The conflict develops over the use of the mudflats where the Dharug gather yams, a dietary staple, and where the English plant corn. In Scene Three, the action shifts perspective to expose Thornhill as the imposter. He and his young sons prepare to dig a patch of what is believed by the settlers to be available until 'some other [white] bugger' plants his 'backside' there (Bovell 2013, p. 5). But to Thornhill's annoyance, he discovers that the land has been freshly dug, and there are daisy-like plants with thick roots strewn around on the dirt. The Dharug men, who advance with spears raised, elucidate the intrusive behaviour of the settlers as Yalamundi exclaims:

YALAMUNDI: Diya ngalaiumnurawarrawarra. NgayaBuruberongal. Ngalaiumbembal. Murray murraynura. DurubinNgayrimulbu. Ngyinanidiyanura. Ngangiyara? Wellamabami? [*This is our place. Our country. All around here. The river and beyond those ridges. We look after all these places. Who are you? Where are you from?*].

(Bovell 2013, p.13-14)

The excruciating effect of Thornhill's lack of respect for the Elder, 'bugger me, you are making no sense whatever' (Bovell 2013, p. 14), would hardly constitute symbolic violence were it not for his wilful determination to assume and defend what can only be understood as a race-based sense of righteous land cultivation and ownership. For Thornhill, the 'blacks' are Other; not neighbours (Bovell 2013, p. 13). The 'black buggers' are a threat to European modes of cultivation and farming, which Thornhill considers universal rather than cultural (Bovell 2013, p. 29). The spectator sees and hears the embodied knowledge that for the

Dharug men, the mudflats represent the micro level of food security within a period of invasion, settlement and dispossession. The translation in the script sees the Elder explaining about the yams:

YALAMUNDI: . . . [Don't dig up those yams. We come here for those. You take some, leave the rest for us.]

(Bovell 2013, p. 14)

Where Thornhill refuses to acknowledge an ethics of respect or an economy based on subsistence rather than accumulation, his son understands that 'they just don't want us digging up their taters, Da, that's all', but is ignored (Bovell 2013, p. 16). When the Dharug pick the corn and again threaten the settlers, the action escalates towards the massacre that takes place at the end of the performance. In the conclusion to *Frontier: Aborigines, settlers and land*, Reynolds cites the historian E.J. Hobsbawm's observation about the imperial conquests of the long 18th century: 'what happened to land determined the life and death of most human beings in the years 1789 to 1848' (Reynolds 1987, p. 193). The epic style of the performance emphasises the story of land, the struggle over which becomes the catalyst for the massacre of the Dharug, who refuse to capitulate to the loss despite their precarious position. Through the use of these dramatic means, the stage audience becomes less attached to a moral character and more able to see violence as an embodiment of a capitalist-colonial regime.

The occupation of the mudflats and the attempt to retake them is the crucial site of Žižek's categories of subjective, symbolic and systemic violence: these elements come together when the Governor makes a proclamation against the 'black natives' and offers judicial immunity for settlers who, deeming themselves under attack, take up arms against them. The massacre, however, is not represented as mimetic stage action. Instead the play's dramatic dialogue gives way to the choric mode in recognition, perhaps, that if enacted realistically on stage, violence is reduced to either a coldly dispassionate series of choreographed moves or a gratuitous spectacle. In the place of dialogue, we see a line of white men on a darkened stage advance towards the audience. They sing the nursery rhyme 'London Bridge is Falling Down', which has functioned as a nostalgic memory of home throughout the performance. Here, the cultural memory of home transforms into a song of war, drawing critical connections along an axis of loss of home (transportation), desire for landownership (social mobility) and imperial power (the authorising agent), at the same time as the sound of shooting fills the auditorium. As the volume, intensity, and intention push towards a violent encounter, the men pause downstage and the audience sees they are pointing imaginary rifles at an imaginary target at the back of the theatre. The settlers appear dramatic, but in the same moment the mask of superiority falls and they appear as a ragged band of reprobates, embodiments of dangerous bluster and inchoate rage. The act of rendering the men pantomimic, the latest in a series of mimicries of colonial power, signifies that the tragedy is not theirs, but that of the offstage victims they massacre. The perspectival shift re-centres the Dharug people whose deaths are recalled in a short scene set ten years later, in which Dhurrumbin narrates the events of the massacre, drawing on her memory to 'approximate the truth' of the horror.

Theatrical Interventions

The theatrical production is a significant departure from the novel and represents 'a more productive representation' (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996, p. 221) by refocusing the point of view of the white settlers onto Aboriginal characters. With Grenville's approval, Bovell's

script includes named Dharug characters and language that is not translated for spectators. Spectators experience the symbolic violence that characterises Aboriginal and settler relations in the early years of the colony, and the displacement that occurs when a common language is rendered strange and unfamiliar.

Bovell notes in the introduction to the published play that ‘building the Dharug presence in the play was fundamental to our approach and became one of the key differences between the play and the novel’ (2013, p. xvii). Ursula Yovich, who plays Dhurrumbin, along with artistic associate Stephen Page, and actors including Trevor Jamieson (Dharug man Ngalamalum) and Miranda Tapsell (the young mother, Gilyagan), among other actors including children, help release the story-telling from its dominant white perspective. More importantly, as Bovell also notes, the stage demands live embodiments of otherwise fictional characters. He emphasises the significance of this transformation in perspective when he says: ‘we simply couldn’t have silent black actors on stage being described from a distance. They needed a voice. They needed an attitude. They needed point of view. They needed a language’ (Bovell 2013, p. xviii). These points are rendered more than rhetorical when Dharug man, Richard Green, joins the creative team as a language consultant to translate the English language dialogue assigned to the Dharug characters into Dharug language and song. Enoch notes that the Dharug language invites the spectator to ‘watch the black actors more closely, listening for intention in intonation and body language’ (Enoch 2014, np.). Spectator inability to understand the language shifts attention to the intimate connections that link body and voice to the assertion of rights and the embodied knowledge of an oral culture.

The novel’s erasure of the proper names of Indigenous characters is similarly redressed: in addition to Dhurrumbin, named after the river, the Dharug Elder man, who had been given the insolent settler-name of ‘Whisker Harry’ is renamed Yalamundi, and ‘Polly’, an Elder woman, is restored to dignity through the name of Buryia. As Grenville notes, ‘they’ve taken the book and transformed it theatrically to give the ideas a whole new life and the collaboration with Aboriginal creative artists is going to give the play a dimension I was only able to gesture towards in the novel’ (2013). The effect is the shift from the novel’s focus on the morality of the settlers and intuited motivation to the representation of the symbolic violence of colonialism, of the taking away of language and names and their replacement with parody and insolence. As Gilbert and Tompkins note of the use of Indigenous languages in postcolonial drama more broadly, ‘Because these languages are performed rather than inscribed in writing, they proclaim radical alterity in a context where non-indigenous viewers can neither “look up” the meaning nor quite imagine how such words might be scripted’ (p. 170). The effect is a temporary but radical decentering of the imperial language and its non-Indigenous speakers. The spectator feels what it is like to be out of place in a gesture that builds empathy with the other.

The addition of Dhurrumbin, the narrator, who represents the Dharug people, further invites the audience to witness the performance as cultural memory from a bi-cultural perspective. Present on stage before, during and after the events of the play, the English and Indigenous language-speaking Dhurrumbin, dressed in 19th century European clothes, assumes the witness perspective. Readers of the print version of the play will note that the narrator figure is named for the Dharug word for the Hawkesbury River so that her voice is understood to be that of the river. In this metaphorically suggestive way, the river is a witness and a repository of cultural memory. When Dhurrumbin as the river speaks in this performance, she is gifted with the capacity to see the past, remember it and narrate it in the present. We can compare the voice of the river and its account of what took place on its banks with the silence in the official white records about the perpetration of massacre in the colony. Moreover, in choosing to use the river’s name for the Dharug narrator, the performance privileges the memories of Indigenous inhabitants on this stage, forging a temporary reestablishment of

traditional connection to land and to country. There is a glimpse of a radically alternative reality in the form of enduring Dharug culture. This temporary performative evocation of loss and living connection plays out as an elegy to both painful memory and cultural continuity.

So far, I have shown how the play demonstrates the three overlapping components of violence as set out by Žižek that highlight the violence inherent in systems despite the actions of the individual. The play distances itself from an uncritical performance of the novel through the presence on stage of Dhurrumbin, the narrator and voice of the river, the proper naming of the Dharug characters, and through the discarding of the London childhood narrative framework. These are significant gestures that intervene in generalised cultural memories of the colonial period that are inherently white.

A further theatrical gesture serves to map and then suppress an alternative pathway. In the lead-up to the massacre, and suspecting that the Aboriginal family might actually incorporate humanity, Thornhill's wife, Sal, 'walks' to the Dharug camp in a bush clearing beyond the Thornhill's land. This incident is narrated in the novel. In the performance, the scene plays out on stage in the space just next to her own hut. Sal mimes seeing and touching domestic objects that suggest to her that 'they' are not the absolute Other but neighbours, people like her. Recognising the Aboriginal family's prior belonging, she determines that her family must leave 'while we still got the chance' (Bovell 2013, p. 80). The woman is given the foreknowledge of the life she will lead and a glimpse of the life that she might have led that is not based on violence, denial and secrecy. When her husband returns from the massacre and announces that 'They've moved on for good now. No need for us to go nowhere' (Bovell 2013, p. 86), the call to disavow the truth is laid out in the silence that lies between the couple, and between Thornhill and his sons, one of whom leaves to find survivors. Žižek refers to forgetting as 'fetishist disavowal' in which the subject embodies the 'I know, but I don't want to know that I know, so I don't know' (Žižek 2009, p. 46). The act of forgetting is embodied as suppressed cultural memory while the eternal presence of Dhurrumbin, the river, looks on, waiting her turn to recall the events.

The recollection takes place in an epilogue that takes place in the 20th century, signified by the costume change of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters with the exception of the timeless Dhurrumbin. Where the novel sets the epilogue ten years after the massacre, the performance shifts the temporal zone closer to the present of the audience it addresses. Dhurrumbin narrates the massacre, in a way described by Enoch as 'a dispassionate and removed manner, which gives you a sense that Dhurrumbin has seen this history played out many times before' (Enoch 2014, np.). As she speaks, 'the Dharug enter . . . one by one . . . each throwing a handful of dirt over their shoulder as they fall' (Bovell 2013, p. 87). Narrating how the women and children were shot first, she then relates how each of the men dies. Finally we hear how Thornhill raises his gun and shoots the Elder, Yalamundi, and how it takes the group a day to burn the bodies before they return to their farms. Only one man survives his injuries to insist at the end: 'This is me . . . My place' (p. 89). The final vision is of the traditional man by the fire while the white man ponders what to do with the Indigenous man sitting centre stage. A mourning song sung by Dhurrumbin ends the play.

Remembering violence in the aftermath of Sorry

This article has considered the effectiveness of theatrical intervention into Australian cultural memory and asked the critical question of whether it is possible for Western theatre to restage the violent colonial encounter in a way that honours the memory of Indigenous Australians. In adapting *The Secret River* for the stage, inclusive of embodied Indigenous perspectives and language—and with the critical addition of the witness of the Indigenous narrator, who is not only closely aligned with the river, but occupies a trans-temporal position between past and present—the theatrical rendering goes some way towards addressing the cultural

dominance of the Western perspective in Australian theatre and cultural memory. The performance remains predominantly, however, in white hands and we should attend to Indigenous playwright Jane Harrison's claim that 'right now, at this point in our history, we need Aboriginal people to be in control of the message and the way the message is expressed' (Harrison 2012, p. 54). Given that structural or systemic theatrical framework, the effort by Indigenous artists to retell the story of colonisation and to represent the embodied violence of settlement should not be underestimated. Nor should be ignored the personal stake of the performer be separated from the artistic work, especially that of Yovich, playing the narrator and river, who is on stage for almost the entire performance. The stage version of *The Secret River* goes some way towards addressing 'the terrible silence' that covers the 'truth' about colonial violence. It might enhance Grenville's novel through the presentation of embodied knowledge, but there is still 'right now' so much more to be done to recover memories of violence.

References

- Blainey, G.A., (1993), "Drawing up a Balance Sheet of Our History", *Quadrant*, Vol. 37 No. 7-8 July-August, pp. 10-15.
- Bovell, A. (2013). *The Secret River, An adaptation for the stage*. Sydney: Currency Press.
- Clendinnen, I., (2006), "The History Question: Who Owns the Past?", *Quarterly Essay*, No. 23, pp. 1-72.
- Elder, B. (2003). *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians Since 1788*. French's Forest NSW: New Holland Press.
- Foster, R., Nettlebeck, A. and Hosking, R. (2001). *Fatal Collisions: The South Australian Frontier and the Violence of Memory*. Kent Town SA: Wakefield Press.
- Gelder, K. and Salzman, P. (2009). *After the Celebration: Australian Fiction 1989-2007*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Gilbert, H. and Tompkins, J. (1996). *Post-colonial drama: theory, practice, politics*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Grenville, K. (2013). Program, Sydney Theatre Company Archive. Archives Folder S42 P2013/2.
- Grenville, K. (2005). *The Secret River*. Melbourne: Text Publishing.
- Harrison, J., (2012), "Indig-Curious: Who can play Aboriginal roles?", *Platform Paper: Quarterly Essays on the Performing Arts*, No. 30 January.
- Hirst, J. (2006). *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History*. Melbourne: Black Inc.
- Kelada, O., (2010), "The Stolen River: Possession and Race Representation in Grenville's Colonial Narrative", *JASAL* Vol. 10, pp. 1-15.
- Kosew, S. (2007), "Voicing the 'Great Australian Silence': Kate Grenville's Narrative of Settlement in *The Secret River*", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 42 No. 2, pp. 7-18.
- Lynch, G.L., (2009), "Apocryphal stories in Kate Grenville's Searching for the Secret River", *Text*, Vol. 13 No. 1. Retrieved from <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april09/lynch.htm>[Accessed 24 April 2015].
- Macintyre, S and Clark, A. (2004). *The history wars*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- McKenna, M. (2006). Writing the Past. In D. Modjeska (Ed.), *Best Australian Essays* (pp. 96-110). Melbourne: Black Inc.
- Neill, R. (2012, December 22, 2012). Stage adaptation of Grenville's Secret River shows audiences the blood on the banks. *The Australian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/stage-adaptation-of-grenvilles-secret-river-show-audiences-the-blood-on-the-banks/story-fn9n8gph-1226540612000>

- Reynolds, H., (2013), “Review: ‘The Secret River’ Sydney Theatre Company production”, *The Monthly*, May.
- Reynolds, H. (1987). *Frontier: Aborigines, settlers and land*. St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Reynolds, H. (1981). *The Other Side of the Frontier*. Townsville, QLD: James Cook University History Dept.
- Smith, P., (2007), “Frontier conflict: Ways of Remembering Contested Landscapes”, *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 31 No. 91, pp. 9-23.
- Taylor, D. (2003). *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Windschuttle, K., (2000), “The Myths of Frontier Massacres in Australian History. Part 1: The Invention of Massacre Stories”, *Quadrant*, Vol. 44 No. 10 October, pp. 8-14.
- Windschuttle, K., (2000), “The Myths of Frontier Massacres in Australian History. Part 2: The Fabrication of the Aboriginal Death Toll”, *Quadrant*, Vol. 44 No. 11 November, pp. 17-24.
- Žižek, S. (2009). *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. London: Profile Books.