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"THE LAND REMEMBERS WHAT THE SETTLER FORGETS": ECOLOGICAL VIOLENCE AND SLOW WITNESS IN KATE GRENVILLE'S *SARAH THORNHILL*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex themes of environmental displacement and ecological violence in Kate Grenville's *Sarah Thornhill* (2011). Applying ecocritical and postcolonial viewpoints, it explores how British colonisation in early 19th-century Australia profoundly transformed the landscape and the cultural-spiritual connections Indigenous peoples maintained with Country. The article suggests that Grenville's novel connects environmental decline directly to Indigenous dispossession, illustrating how deforestation, farming practices, and river disruption symbolise ongoing slow violence that impacts future generations. By contrasting settler extractive activities with Dharug sustainable land use, the novel critiques the human-centred mindset that fuelled colonial growth and urges acknowledgement of settler colonialism's ecological legacy. *Sarah Thornhill*'s novel reflects how environmental harm and colonial violence intertwine in early 19th-century New South Wales. From ecocritical and postcolonial viewpoints, the novel shows that colonisation extended beyond land occupation, reshaping the environment through deforestation, damming, river pollution, and modification by extractive industries such as sheep grazing and farming. These changes are fundamental to dispossession. The article contends that deforestation, exploitation, and river disruption serve as slow violence, harms that develop gradually and often go unnoticed, building up over generations. This process separates the Dharug people from their land and spiritual ties that support their law and kinship. By contrasting settler practices with Dharug sustainable management, Grenville underscores the ideological gap between viewing land as a commodity and as a relational, living entity that needs care. The novel rejects the idea of peaceful settlement, emphasising that ecological and human costs are interconnected, and that reflection on Australia's history must recognise the enduring environmental harm done to both the land and Indigenous communities.

Keywords: *David Chariandy, Soucouyant, hauntology, memory, diaspora, postcolonialism, trauma, Caribbean folklore, Canadian multiculturalism, spectrality, archives, dementia, intergenerational*.

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INTRODUCTION

Kate Grenville's *Sarah Thornhill* (2011) is the final instalment in her trilogy of novels centred on the Thornhill family and their involvement with early colonial New South Wales. It returns to settler/Indigenous relations, a constant theme in her work (The Secret River in 2005 examined the initial act of dispossession; The Lieutenant in 2008 explored recognition). Sarah Thornhill is concerned with the legacy of colonisation throughout generations, with the way in which settler violence is concealed, passed on and lived with by those who are the beneficiaries of it. The novel's continuing preoccupation with the non-human environment has received less attention: the cleared forests, the altered rivers, and the degraded pastures are not just background. They are active participants and witnesses in the colonial process. This paper looks at that neglected environmental dimension and argues that Sarah Thornhill is as much an environmental text as it is a historical one. Through an ecocritical and postcolonial lens, it is clear that the novel presents environmental dispossession and ecological violence not as unfortunate byproducts of British expansion, but as core processes which enabled and underpinned the dispossession of the Indigenous people. This, in turn, supports the growing body of scholarship showing the interrelatedness of environmental and colonial critique in Australian literature. It is a case in point of the power of Grenville's narrative voice to demonstrate the slow, cumulative and intergenerational damage done to land and to communities.

THEORETIC FRAMEWORK: POSTCOLONIAL FRAMEWORK AND SLOW VIOLENCE

This analysis draws on a multidisciplinary framework that combines postcolonial theory with ecocriticism. At its heart is Rob Nixon's concept of 'slow violence', which he describes as 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction which is dispersed in time and space, an attritional violence which is typically not viewed as violence at all' (Nixon 2). Grenville's portrayal of the environmental destruction within Sarah *Thornhill* is a perfect example of this. The damage is not the result of an immediate, dramatic event but of the slow, incremental degradation of the land through deforestation, soil exhaustion, and the general disruption of rivers. The novel thus opposes the idea that violence is only immediate and visible; it highlights the violence of the slow and the attritional, which is no less violent for being so.

Val Plumwood's critique of anthropocentrism brings out the novel's ecological themes. She states that "the critique of anthropocentrism or human domination of nature is a new and, in my view, inestimably important contribution to our knowledge of Western society, its history, its current problems, and its structures of domination" (Plumwood 16). Grenville's narrative exposes this anthropocentric logic, showing how colonial land clearing and cultivation practices treated nature as a resource to conquer rather than a living system to respect. Together, Nixon and Plumwood offer a framework for seeing how the novel links the ideological belief in human mastery over nature to the material, degraded landscapes and displaced communities that dominance produces. *Sarah Thornhill* highlights that

ecological violence and colonial violence are intertwined histories of authority, with persistent legacies affecting Australia's environment and the ongoing process of historical reconciliation.

THE HAWKESBURY RIVER: SYMBOL OF ECOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL CONFLICT

The Hawkesbury River is both a physical location and a symbol at the heart of Sarah Thornhill. For the Thornhills, it's a source of wealth, a route to Sydney, and a water source for their expanding agricultural operation. Sarah is very aware of the family's wealth: "Thornhills was in a big way. Three hundred acres of good riverfront land and you had to go all the way, up the river to Windsor before you saw a house grand as ours" (Grenville 4). That wealth, of course, came from exploiting both land and people, and the novel is deeply concerned with the human and environmental cost of what the settlers call 'achievement'.

Angela Arthington's work on riverine ecology offers a framework for understanding the novel's depiction of environmental degradation. Arthington notes that "river degradation and loss of freshwater biodiversity have major implications for human water security, prosperity, health, and well-being because they threaten the provision of ecosystem services" (Arthington 2). In *Sarah Thornhill*, settlers' intensive farming practices and river manipulation disrupt the delicate ecological balance the Dharug people have maintained over millennia. The river, once a site of Indigenous spiritual significance and sustainable resource management, becomes a conduit for colonial extraction: its waters are redirected to irrigate pasture, its banks cleared of vegetation, and its rhythms subordinated to the demands of an agricultural economy oriented toward profit rather than stewardship. Arthington's ecological framework thus underscores what the novel dramatises: that the transformation of the Hawkesbury is not simply a change in land use but a rupture in a relational system that had sustained both human and nonhuman life for generations.

The novel contrasts settler and Indigenous relationships with the river through Jack Langland, a man of mixed Aboriginal and European heritage. Jack's deep connection to Country is very evident when he's shouting across the water to an Aboriginal woman:

> From the bow I heard a man calling, a long string run of words being launched sent out towards the land. It was Jack, right standing up at the bowsprit, his hands cupped to his mouth round his mouth, and it was no words I recognized knew. He stopped and a call came back from the group on the beach, the voice of a woman, very strong indeed but strong, a rope of human sound thrown flung out across the water" (Grenville 294).

This is a 'rope of human sound' which is the very essence of the relationship between the Aboriginal people and Country, a relationship which colonial violence could not in any way break. It's particularly potent in a novel so very much concerned with the river as a site of colonial commerce (the river as a resource for the settler). To the settler, it's a resource to be taken, but Jack and the woman on the beach are having a call-and-response across the water. In that scenario, the river is not a resource to be extracted from; it's a medium of connection. The 'rope of human sound' that runs across it is the very

antithesis of the fences, the dams and the property lines that colonialism has put up. Grenville presents a real alternative to the extractive model that underpins the Thornhill family's wealth. It's a model of relationality, of connection to Country, to kin, to the more than human world. It's a model of connection which is very much alive. It also reminds us that the river's history is not just one of colonial extraction.

DEFORESTATION AND AGRICULTURAL EXPLOITATION AS COLONIAL VIOLENCE

The novel depicts deforestation and the violence of imposing European farming practices on the land and Indigenous people. Nicole Graham observes that "agriculture, the pastoral industry and forestry all resulted in enormous degradation of land in all of Britain's Australian colonies. The clearing of land which was a necessary part of all these land uses... resulted in the depletion of soils, soil erosion and the loss of native flora and fauna in New South Wales" (Graham 128). Grenville makes the point through William Thornhill, who is utterly consumed by his desire to extend his farm. His desire is not simply a personal one, but it is a desire which is culturally sanctioned and which is part of the very fabric of the colonial mindset in which the land must be improved upon, subjugated and made productive.

Thornhill's attitude is perfectly summed up in Sarah's memory: "He cleared and burned, thinking of the acres he'd have under wheat one day. The stumps and ashes would be good manure, the plough would break the ground, and the seed would go in. There was no end to what a man could do" (Grenville 45). That's the colonial fantasy of limitless expansion and control. It completely ignores the ecological realities of the Australian landscape and the fact that the land had been managed for millennia by the Indigenous people. "There was no end to what a man could do" is the key phrase. That's the fantasy of infinite man-made potential that the novel systematically dismantles as not only environmentally destructive but morally abhorrent. Clearing and burning in that context isn't just a farming operation; it's an act of war against the land which had been tended to for thousands of years.

The environmental ramifications of this attitude are most starkly illustrated in the contrast between Dharug sustainable practices and the settlers' destructive ones. David A Keith points out that "prior to European settlement Aboriginal people lived in loosely organised tribal groups who were in effect in land holding clans (ancestral estates). The groups had responsibilities to maintain the resources which were necessary for survival" (Keith 89). These were responsibilities of controlled burning, seasonal hunting and sustainable foraging, which for thousands of years had preserved the balance of the ecosystem and were a form of land management the colonists simply didn't appreciate or understand. The colonists, by contrast, went in with monoculture farming, overgrazing, and poor water management, which resulted in massive erosion, biodiversity loss, and a complete transformation of the landscape. Grenville is not presenting a civilisation-versus-wilderness dichotomy (the classic settler-colonial narrative) but rather a clash between two very different ways of relating to the land: one based on reciprocity, responsibility, and long-term care; the other on extraction, accumulation, and the fantasy of endless growth.

The novel is not prepared to present this ecological transformation as simply the setting for the human story of settlement. The cleared forests, the eroded soils, the silted rivers are all positioned to witness the violence of the process. This is what Nixon calls 'slow violence', and it is a violence which is cumulative across generations, a violence whose full extent the settler cannot in any way comprehend in his own lifetime. Thornhill may not live to see the land he is exploiting exhausted, but his descendants will. They will inherit it just as they will inherit the moral debt of dispossession. In that sense, Grenville's portrayal of the process of agricultural exploitation is a critique not just of the colonial practice itself but of the anthropocentric ideology which underpinned it, an ideology which Plumwood sees as fundamental to the Western system of domination. The juxtaposition of the Dharug's relationship to Country as one of custodianship with the settlers' relationship to it as one of extraction is what makes *Thornhill* so adamant that the degradation of the Australian landscape is inextricably bound up with the dispossession of the First Peoples. It is one and the same form of violence.

INDIGENOUS DISPLACEMENT AND THE ERASURE OF ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

The novel makes it clear that environmental destruction is inextricably linked to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. As settlers cleared land and fenced it off, they did more than alter the physical landscape. They were severing the connection that the Indigenous peoples had with Country. Kristina Everett's notion of 'Dharuganora' (an Aboriginal term which is Dharug Land (Everett 2)) is that Country is not something that you own. For the Dharug, it is a living thing to which you belong. It is a whole network of relationships with the ancestors, the plants, the animals, the waterways and the sacred sites. To dispossess a people of their land is to do more than just take their land and their resources. It destroys the very foundation of their worldview, their law, their knowledge. Grenville's novel shows this as both a material and an epistemological violence. You have the clearing and fencing of the land, and you have the silencing of the knowledge systems that had underpinned that land for thousands of years.

Grenville makes this point through the very quiet, marginal presence of Dharug women throughout the novel. Sarah recalls: "At Windsor there'd be groups of them on the fringe of town, under the trees or sitting round a few smouldering sticks. So dark and still you'd have to look twice. Ma would grab our hands and rush us along" (Grenville 19). The Dharug are "dark and still" and you just have to look twice to see them. Ma's reaction to them is to "grab our hands and hurry us along", which is the very essence of the settler impulse to cut oneself off from the unfamiliar. It's that impulse which leads to the physical removal of the Aboriginal people and the psychological removal of their presence as well. The image of the Dharug women "sitting round a few smouldering sticks" is so potent. Fire in Dharug land management was a tool of care and renewal for the land, and here it's just a few smouldering sticks, a very small, marginal thing on the fringes of the settler town. The Dharug people's relationship with the land in which every hill, every waterhole, every rock is imbued with the presence of the ancestors is in direct contrast to the settler acts of fencing, clearing and renaming which imposed a new spatial and semantic order on a

landscape which had already been ordered by the Dharug.

Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist reading is illuminating: "Colonisation of the diverse peoples of the world at its very root was the subjugation of the ecological concepts of nature and of the Earth as the repository of all forms, latencies and powers of creation" (Shiva 41). Her formulation is crucial because it reframes colonisation not simply as taking land but as an epistemic form of violence: imposing a concept of nature as inert matter to be used up. The novel makes it clear that colonisation also meant subjugating the knowledge systems and worldviews that had underpinned the land's ecological balance for millennia. Grenville suggests that the colonists lose not just the land but a way of knowing and of being in the world, a form of ecological literacy which they themselves have no conception of. The novel thus argues that the dispossession of the Dharug from the land is inextricably linked to the dispossession of Dharug ecological knowledge, and that the loss of that knowledge, in turn, accelerates the land's degradation. To properly understand the environmental costs of settler colonialism, one has to also understand the epistemic violence that made those costs invisible and the continuing presence of the Dharug whose knowledge of and connection to Country is still there, despite every effort to erase them. Sarah Thornhill makes that point.

THE LAND AS WITNESS AND KEEPER OF MEMORY

Grenville presents the land as an active witness to colonial violence rather than merely a backdrop. Jutta Kehrer puts it thus: "every tree is a witness to history, an important keeper of memory, as well as a guardian of the land" (Kehrer 92). In *Sarah Thornhill's* The Rivers, the trees and the winds are vessels of memory that resist history's erasure. They carry a memory not subject to the colonial narrative that would leave the land blank, available, and forgetful. Grenville's writing directly challenges the settler idea that land is inert matter to be developed. The land is given a memorial function in the novel that is entirely its own and can exist independently of, or even in opposition to, the stories settlers are so keen to tell about themselves.

Sarah reflects on this: "Behind the house the line of the road up the other side of the valley was a mirror image of the one we were on... the strands of hair I pulled out must still be there, blowing about in the bushes" (Grenville 163). The land is a place that holds the memory of the body, of the hair that's been pulled out and is now blowing about in the bushes. It's a place that remembers. The land remembers just as much as the Indigenous people do, who have been through so much dispossession over the centuries and yet still hold on to their connection to Country. The land is a repository of memory, and damaging the land damages the community's memory.

The novel suggests that to understand the legacy of colonialism, you have to listen to the land. You have to look at the land's scars, the land's marks, the land's enduring relationships, and all of that, despite attempts to wipe it out. It's a call to re-think our very idea of space. What we tend to see as a blank, empty, wild space is actually full of stories, history, and memory. Grenville's ecological imaginary is a form of counter-mapping: where the colonial surveyor sees a blank space ready for development, the novel sees a Country with memory, duty, and history. It's not simply a critique of settler violence.

It's an alternative way of knowing a Country where memory is not just human and where the non-human is actively engaged in the process of reckoning.

CONCLUSION

Kate Grenville's Sarah Thornhill is a very thorough and perceptive examination of the intersection of environmental destruction and colonial violence in early 19th-century New South Wales. It's a study in postcolonial ecocriticism, using Rob Nixon's concept of 'slow violence' to show that changes to the Australian landscape (deforestation, soil erosion, damming of rivers, etc.) were not incidental but fundamental to settler colonialism. Environmental dispossession and Indigenous dispossession are shown to be forms of violence which go hand in hand. The former is the violence of a human-centred world that sees land as a blank canvas to be improved upon; the latter is the violence of silencing Dharug knowledge systems that, for millennia, cared for the land. The book draws a sharp contrast between William Thornhill's desire to exploit the land and the Dharug practices of controlled burning, seasonal hunting and land care. It's a book which shows that the so-called progress of settler colonialism (clearing, fencing, farming, naming) was in fact a war on the land and on the people. The violence is slow; it is insidious, and it extends far beyond the immediate horizon of the settler.

The land is a witness and a repository of memory. It holds on to what has been lost, what has been buried, what has been forgotten. It directly contradicts the colonial narrative of the land as empty, as available, as forgetful. Sarah's image of her hair still flapping in the bushes, of Jack Langland's 'rope of human sound' stretching across the water, of the Dharug women still present in the bush at the edge of Windsor, all point to the fact that the colonial attempt to efface these things has failed. They are still there. They are still in the land. They remain in the Aboriginal people's relationships to Country. Grenville's ecological perspective is in fact a form of counter-mapping. It is a different way of reading the land from the colonial surveyor who sees only empty acres. The land is full of memory, obligation, and meaning. The novel does more than criticise the coloniser's violence. It offers an alternative reading of the land in which memory is not just human and in which the non-human world is not simply a passive backdrop but an active participant in the process of reckoning.

Sarah Thornhill makes it clear that to understand Australia's colonial past, we must also understand its continuing environmental impacts. To confront dispossession is to confront degradation. To listen to the land is to hear what official history has chosen to ignore. The novel's contribution to Australian literary and environmental thought lies in its insistence that land and people are inextricably linked, that ecological and colonial violence are one and the same, and that the past is not just the past but continues to have an effect. By making these connections so central to the narrative, Grenville's novel goes a long way to deepening our understanding of the material and epistemic violence of settler colonialism. It also points towards a more appropriate way of living in the world, a way that is attentive, reciprocal and recognises that the land is still speaking to us. Sarah Thornhill's call for reckoning is environmental, historical, and moral. It calls us to see the damage on the land as evidence

and to hear the land's resilience as a plea for justice that has still not been met.

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