

**ESSAYS**

Martina Horáková

Memoirs of (Postcolonial) Belonging:  
Peter Read's *Belonging* and Mark McKenna's *Looking for Blackfella's Point*

For European scholars, the discourse surrounding the nature of relationships between Australian settlers and Indigenous population, particularly in relation to the legitimacy of belonging in the land, holds an intriguing aura. As cultural and spatial outsiders, we may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of some Australian public intellectuals' responses to what might be variously termed "spatial anxiety," "postcolonial/white guilt," or "disturbed" sense of belonging (Slater n.pag.). The period of the late 1990s and early 2000s in Australia certainly offered an interesting moment in which this intensity was particularly visible and vocal. In this moment, the consequences of various moves and tendencies conflated: the intervention of revisionist histories and Indigenous testimonies; the lasting impact of Mabo decision and Native Title; the sentiment of the *Bringing Them Home* report. Thus, in 1997 Tom Griffiths writes of "the need to rediscover a history of the white Australian conscience" and, drawing on the influential poet Judith Wright, who already in the 1950s agonized over the incompatibility of settler and Indigenous relation to land and belonging, proclaims Australia a "haunted country" (Griffiths 3); in their 1998 study, Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs theorize the "unsettled settlement" in Australia as leading to the state of the "postcolonial uncanny" (Gelder and Jacobs 23); in the early 2000s, women writers textualize their concerns about the fragility of settler belonging: Fiona Probyn describes it as the "crisis of settler belonging" (Probyn 76); Gail Jones uses the trope of intellectual mourning to diagnose the state of Australian national consciousness, arguing that "non-Aboriginal Australians, faced with traumatic revelation, [...] have entered a specific and unprecedented historical contract" (Jones 164); and Deborah Bird

Rose identifies the “ruptured alienation of settler societies,” as she calls for understanding “how we [Australians] may inscribe back into the world a moral presence for ourselves” (Bird Rose 6). The insistence that this moment in history be used for “inscribing back a moral presence” previews some of the ethical and philosophical dimensions of the debates on settler belonging in Australia. These dimensions have been closely examined, among others, by Linn Miller, who analyses the notion of settler belonging from a philosophical point of view and suggests that belonging in Australia is problematized by the settler Australians’ state of “conscious despair” (a term developed from Søren Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness Unto Death*), which prevents settlers from being in a “correct relation” to themselves and to the world (Miller 220).

In this article I examine in more detail two examples from a group of non-fiction narratives written by Australian public intellectuals around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century which thematize the ways of settler belonging. The two selected texts, Peter Read’s *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (2000) and Mark McKenna’s *Looking for Blackfella’s Point* (2002), are written by well-known, established historians with a strong public voice which they use to articulate their position as professional historians, as white settlers, but also as ‘ordinary’ Australians who keep searching for a non-appropriating and non-exploitative way of belonging in the space of settler colony. The two narratives are certainly different in the sense that *Looking for Blackfella’s Point* is a more conventional history of a place, while *Belonging* is more speculative and popularizing in covering a broader range of strategies to deal with the topic of settler belonging. However, they are also conspicuously similar in the way of integrating personal, autobiographical, at times even confessional, gestures that have particular effects on the readers. In Read’s account, this tone permeates most of his writing in the book, while in McKenna’s text it concerns only the longer introduction and conclusion which frame the historiographical chapters.

While such personal turn in various disciplines and/or modes of

writing is neither new nor unique in Australia, the two selected texts are illustrative of a larger group of narratives which is specifically Australian in their attempt to articulate one of the many versions of Reconciliation and perspectives on white settler guilt in relation to the dispossession of Indigenous people. As such, they can be more broadly contextualized within Australian whiteness studies; writing spatial history, as it was conceived by Paul Carter in his 1987 study *The Road to Botany Bay*; travel writing; or academic auto/biography. These narratives, which I call “memoirs of belonging,” encompass various streams of Australian public intellectuals’ personalized writing – the historiographical writing of Henry Reynolds and Anne Curthoys; ficto-critical writing of Stephen Muecke and Katrina Schlunke; anthropological and autoethnographical writing of Deborah Bird Rose; as well as feminist travel writing of, for example, Robyn Davidson, Kim Mahood and Margaret Somerville. Often, they do so through highly personal, autobiographical modes of academic/critical writing which draws both on the author’s professional expertise and on their subjective sense of belonging/non-belonging as educated, middle-class, liberal, white settler Australians. In addition, these narratives not only probe the intricacies of the white settler guilt but, as Kay Schaffer points out, they also “acknowledge that Indigenous people have very different understandings of white colonial history” (150). I would suggest that all these narratives are examples of hybrid texts that illustrate different ways of transcending (or the impossibility of it) what seems to be an impasse in searching for an ethically sound relationship to land and its first peoples.

The mode of writing described above demonstrates a level of self-reflection, doubt, questioning one’s ethical positions, internalizing complicity. On one level, these ‘acts of contrition’ in the critical writing of public intellectuals has overlapped, not surprisingly, with the emergence of whiteness studies in Australia. In “Writing Whiteness: The Personal Turn”, Anne Brewster examines Australian writing on “becoming” white in the context of, on the one hand, women’s personalized writing on critical race theory and postcoloniality, flourishing particularly in the genres of life writing

and personalized essay, and, on the other, of the continuous public visibility of Indigenous writing – testimony and life writing in particular (Brewster n.pag.). Indeed, the concurrence of the work done on the history of violent Indigenous dispossession, on the encounters between whiteness and Indigeneity, on the notions of resistance and complicity within the colonial and postcolonial studies, together with the tendency toward a more self-reflective style in academic writing, has resulted in a subgenre that Gillian Whitlock calls “intellectual memoir” (2004b: 13). One of the features of this kind of writing is the moment of recognition – recognition of one’s own boundaries and limits, recognition of one’s racial identity. For Brewster, who analyses Ruth Frankenberg’s interrogation of whiteness in her influential contribution to American critical race theory, this is an “experience of defamiliarization,” an “embodied moment of reversal, of apparent white minoritisation” (Brewster n.pag.). The textual features of such recognition may include, according to Whitlock, “confessions of estrangement and dislocation, feelings of complicity, shame and guilt, and expression of contrition and responsibility” (Whitlock 2004a: 238). There are also other generic markers of writing about whiteness, such as features of witnessing and testimony, which, according to Robyn Westcott, constitute a response to an acknowledgement of one’s racial identity:

Scholars interrogating the production of white identity have sought *testimony* – statement and account solicited through historical investigation, the ethnographic survey, ficto-critical narratives and personal reflection. (Westcott n.pag.)

Westcott goes on to identify two distinct “impulses” that she sees as evident in the so-called white writings: “a drive to achieve reconciliation (of self with other, or indeed self with self) and a desire to perform transformation (both subjective and textual)” (Westcott n.pag.). Indeed, both of these impulses are present in Read’s and McKenna’s narratives, as well as in other comparable accounts mentioned above.

Another perspective that allows for a broader contextualization of

the hybrid writing represented by Read's and McKenna's narratives is the genre of *ego-histoire*, coined and developed by French historians in the late 1980s. Pierre Nora, in his famous manifesto, with which he introduced the collection *Essais d'ego-histoire*, outlines the historian's new role in the following way: "A new personage emerges from the upsurge of history conceived as memory, one ready, unlike his predecessors, to acknowledge the close, intimate, personal liaison he maintains with his subject" (qtd. in Popkin 1996: 1141). In Nora's vision, the autobiographical reflection has been promoted as a tool for "re-vision[ing] the process of the production of historical knowledge" (qtd. in Popkin 1996: 1141). The stress on the personal/autobiographical is what French *ego-histoire* shares with Australian tradition of writing about whiteness which, according to Brewster, stems from an effort to conflate public and private memory, to "deconstruct the binaries between [...] 'objective' and 'subjective' modes of discourse and between specialized knowledges and everyday life" (Brewster n.pag.). The genre of *ego-histoire*, as defined by Luisa Passerini and Alexander Geppert, involves "thematiz[ing] the link between the history that one makes and the history that makes us", connecting "the practice of history with the philosophical and existential systems of thinking held by historians," and combining "both the individual and the collective" belonging (Passerini and Geppert 7-8). Interestingly enough, what might seem as exclusively tied to French historiographical context has recently been extended to Australian historiography. In his article "*Ego-histoire* Down Under," Jeremy Popkin claims that some of the recent Australian versions of *ego-histoire*, such as Henry Reynolds's *Why Weren't We Told?* (1999), "have told stories of how they came to question major elements of that national story, particularly the country's relationship to its Aboriginal population" (Popkin 2007: 107). In the recent ground-breaking publication *Ngapartji Ngapartji: Ego-Histoire and Indigenous Australia* that "weave[s] together professional and personal accounts of studies that have Australia and Indigeneity at their heart" (3), the editors make a claim that the genre of *ego-histoire* "can demonstrate ... both the close connection between individual and national identity and the inextricable intertwining of research methodology and outcomes, and subjective

data" (6). Indeed, in this sense the opening chapters to McKenna's *Looking for Blackfella's Point* could be perceived as a more contemporary version of *ego-histoire* manifesto, with its consistent reflection on how personal history and subjective sense of belonging in a particular place can re-figure the sense of national history. McKenna contemplates: "It occurred to me that my personal quest to discover more about the history of Blackfella's Point and my professional interest in understanding the politics of history in Australia were closely related" (McKenna 6). So the memoirs of belonging, I believe, may be also thought of as important interventions into the construction of Australian national history.

### **Asking questions and casting doubts**

Peter Read's *Belonging* is a contribution to the genre of intellectual memoir which, in spite of having provoked some critical responses, most notably those by Ken Gelder, Fiona Probyn and Gillian Whitlock (in "Becoming Migloo"), has generally been accepted as a popular, comprehensible and, in the end, optimistic and redemptive articulation of Australians' sense of belonging. The very first sentence of his Introduction, however, resonates with the many voices casting doubts on settler belonging: "How can we non-Indigenous Australians justify our continuous presence and our love for this country while the Indigenous people remain dispossessed and their history unacknowledged?" (Read 4). Not only does this question already preview the popularizing tone of Read's account through phrases such as "justify our presence" and "our love for this country," but it also conspicuously echoes the recurrent questions which a number of other Australian public intellectuals pose. Henry Reynolds, in his personal quest to provide reasons for historical amnesia in relation to Aboriginal history and Aboriginal-settler relationships, keeps asking: "Why were we never told? Why didn't we know?" (4). Deborah Bird Rose also asks questions about an alternative for the future: "We cannot help knowing that we are here through dispossession and death. What does this mean, for us and for our country? What alternatives exist for us, and what is asked of us?" (6). Mark McKenna also begins with questions as he looks over

his new property in rural New South Wales and reflects on the significance of local history and his chances to find a sense of belonging there:

The best way to begin is to ask the question I have asked myself many times when gazing across the river from my verandah. What was this land like before the Europeans arrived? Before the ships and the horses, before the sealers and the whalers, and before the squatters and the settlers? What can I glean of the indigenous past? (McKenna 11)

Brewster perceives these recurring variations of the same question as a specific trope and a “prominent rhetorical and methodological device in remedial writing about whiteness” (Brewster n.pag.). According to her, the “self-addressed question” forms an important moment in whiteness studies, interrogating the formation of the white subject. As such, ‘the question’ “perform[s] th[e] act of splitting and defamiliarisation,” as well as it describes a “moment of insufficiency, anxiety or puzzlement” (Brewster n.pag.). It is also, I argue, related to the moment of surprise and recognition which both Brewster and Whitlock identify in the whiteness writing and intellectual memoir, respectively. What is significant here is the implication that the answer to these questions is in gaining knowledge about history and understanding the complexities of it. It begins with a sense of puzzlement, doubts, ambivalence, and proceeds to coming to a certain realization, recognition, understanding – this becomes the starting point of many memoirs of belonging. In this sense, the genre of intellectual memoir and *ego-histoire* offers the space where inner anxieties about belonging/non-belonging are allowed to surface and shape the narrative. The mentioned accounts, I would suggest, are also the personal stories of revelation and of enlightenment which, in a moment of recognition, present both emotional and intellectual confrontation with the self. The following paragraphs demonstrate how Read and McKenna experience and textually construct this moment of recognition.

In order to resolve the dilemma posed at the beginning of this

narrative, Read sets out on a journey. This journey is both physical and metaphorical as Read begins by re-membering and re-tracing the familiar landscape of his childhood spent north of Sydney. These seemingly unproblematic, nostalgic reminiscences are, however, soon to be displaced by more disturbing and elusive traces of Aboriginal presence in the very same area: the remnants of an oyster shell midden, Aboriginal fishing camp, rock painting, sacred site. This moment is again a trope familiar from other intellectual memoirs. In *Looking for Blackfellas' Point*, McKenna starts his own academic insight into the history of a particular place in the far south-eastern tip of New South Wales with his purchase of a piece of land in this area. Similarly to Read, McKenna is disturbed by the haunting presence/absence of Aboriginal history when he discovers that the spot with a suggestive local name Blackfellas' Point (while the property itself is called, significantly, Eureka), has been an Aboriginal camping and meeting place, a place "for cooking, feasting and dancing" (McKenna 5). Again, this moment of revelation prompts McKenna to a journey which loosely follows that of Peter Read: "[...] like many other Australians, I feel I cannot understand the place in which I live without first understanding something of the history and culture of Aboriginal people, and their interaction with settler Australia" (McKenna 8). This recognition is the moment of coming to terms with how the subjects' whiteness is constructed in relation to Indigeneity. According to Whitlock, it poses a challenge for the writers to imagine the most familiar places and spaces of their everyday life (just like Read and McKenna do) from a very different perspective – it makes them see their personal history differently and therefore it makes them "reformulat[e] the way in which one's intellectual work is conducted" (Whitlock 2004a: 239).

### **Seeking advice**

In his attempt to articulate a legitimate sense of belonging devoid of doubts and ambivalences, Read decides to consult a number of interlocutors: first, he turns to prominent Australian poets, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, providing a selection of what he calls "belonging poems" (54). Commenting on the contemporary

Aboriginal poetry, Read is “struck with how almost all [poems] intimately involve the injustices Aboriginals have suffered at the hands of other Australians” (30), and he is disappointed that in their poems “the past is never shared” (34); it is, as Read regrets to say, “a time without Whites” (34). But in searching for settler Australian poets who would offer a more reconciliatory vision of the past, Read concedes that he doesn’t “find much help in the poets of [his] own grandparents’ generation” (34). In the end, he seems to appreciate most a poem by Geoff Page which, in Read’s view, epitomizes the ideal of reconciliation in which the past is put to rest:

They [non-Indigenous Australians in this poem] don’t commune with spirits in the landscape: they negotiate with real, self-confident Aboriginal people, and what they exchange is passion and knowledges and history and a love of the land. (56)

This passage, I think, reveals something about Read’s ideals of dealing with the crisis of settler belonging: it is a pragmatic approach, not so much interested in “talking to the ghosts,” to echo Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, but rather, it seems, in finally laying the ghosts of Aboriginal dispossession to rest and ‘moving on’ – an uncanny parallel to the phrase “move forward” used, peculiarly, by two former Prime Ministers from the very opposite camps, John Howard and Kevin Rudd.<sup>1</sup>

The second group that Read proposes to consult in order to provide answers to his questions are his fellow non-Aboriginal Australians (who also include people of non-Anglo-Celtic heritage). His ‘survey’ proclaims to map the ways in which people of different ages, occupations and social positions relate to land, or as the pastoralists and farmers say, to ‘their country.’ This strategy itself would seem to

---

<sup>1</sup> John Howard used the phrase in the context of his justification of his refusal to formally apologize to Stolen Generations: “If we acknowledge wrong and assess honestly and vigorously what needs to be done we can move forward, and move forward we must” (“Sorry” n.pag.). Paradoxically, Kevin Rudd used the phrase to “move forward” in his formal apology to the Stolen Generation but, contrary to Howard, he explicitly included Indigenous people in this process: “It is time to reconcile. It is time to recognise the injustices of the past. It is time to say sorry. It is time to move forward together” (Rudd 169).

be very appropriate as the social and institutional position seems to be of crucial importance here: Read himself admits that the role of education and a socially privileged position may be one of the determining factors in one's sense of (non)belonging. The author suggests: "Everyone I have quoted so far, so far as I know, is like me: university-educated, urban, middle-class and Anglo-Celtic. Perhaps it is only this group which feels itself to be trapped" (5). Indeed, the importance of intersection of class and ethnicity/race cannot be overlooked in any examination of settlers' narratives of belonging as it is predominantly white middle-class settlers who engage in the discourse of the crisis of settler belonging. Nevertheless, while Read's honesty in accounting for his own elitist position is certainly revealing, it also becomes evident that Read gradually excludes himself from this group that feels "trapped". He comes to criticize a certain group of intellectuals who in their work constantly problematize non-Indigenous people's sense of belonging in terms of their desire to feel a "spiritual" bond to land and therefore, according to Read, the desire to become Aboriginal. From the interviews that Read conducts, and from the comments he makes about them, it becomes clear that Read admires rural and country-based people who, according to him, have a "deeper" sense of belonging than urban dwellers.

In her critical comparative analysis of Read's *Belonging* and Margaret Somerville's *Body/Landscape Journals* (1999), Fiona Probyn comments on the use of the metaphor of depth, arguing that Aboriginal relationship to land is often identified with "depth," referring to its complexity and also spirituality, while non-Aboriginal relationship is therefore perceived as lacking this "depth". As a result, non-Aboriginal people, in their quest to belong in a "deeper" way, seek to identify with Aboriginality (Probyn 78-79). In the case of Read's *Belonging*, rather than providing a critical analysis of the pastoralists' complicity in the process of Indigenous dispossession, Read ends up empathizing with, if not admiring their supposedly "deep" anchoring in the land. So it remains to be questioned whether Read might be perpetuating the well-known dichotomy here, seeing the population in rural areas as more 'Australian' in

terms of national identity, because they belong more “deeply” than urban intellectuals.

McKenna is slightly different in this sense: he is, perhaps, more analytical (and critical) when reflecting on his ambivalent position: “my sense of belonging is divided, varied and unpredictable,” he says (8). Yet, it becomes clear that this openness towards a more unresolved and unsettled sense of belonging has its limits: McKenna admits one of his motivations for writing this spatial history was the purchase of a piece of land in the location he writes about, the land the aesthetics of which, he confesses, he fell in love with (4). So his privilege, embodied in his ability to buy the land, shape it by cultivating, and build a house on it, problematizes his endeavor in the book. In fact, the very first sentence in the introduction to the book reads: “In early 1993, I bought 8 acres of land on the far south coast of New South Wales” (2). A paragraph later, in which the natural beauties of the spot are praised and McKenna is “immediately entranced by the view,” he is “convinced it was [his] destiny to become the new owner” (2).

The relation between belonging and ownership has been convincingly theorized by Aileen Moreton-Robinson in “I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a White Postcolonizing Society,” where she argues that non-Indigenous sense of belonging is “derived from ownership as understood within the logic of capital; and it mobilizes the legend of the pioneer, ‘the battler’, in its self-legitimization” (Moreton-Robinson 23). Indeed, McKenna’s rhetoric does echo this argument, as he informs how “over the next three years, [...] [he] planted trees and shrubs, spent long nights making poor sketches of house plans” (2), invoking the settler claim to the right to live (and belong) in the land, the right deserved by hard work. However, this right, as Moreton-Robinson goes on to argue, is “one of the fundamental benefits white British migrants derived from dispossession” (25). Thus in this light McKenna’s sense of belonging gets compromised by linking his otherwise sympathetic project of local history writing to his economic investment in the land.

## Looking for guides

In the last part of the book, Read proposes yet another experiment that should help him assuage his troubled sense of belonging. On his journey to re-visit familiar places, he gets help from a guide who truly embodies the haunting past. This guide is Dennis Foley, a Gai-mariagal man from the Sydney area. Together, they revisit the places where they would have probably met as children if only Aboriginal presence in those places had been visible to settlers. In this passage, Read comments on various perspectives of both spatial and human histories, recognizing the primacy of the ancient culture. At the same time, however, it is hard to avoid sensing that by presenting Dennis Foley as his 'Aboriginal connection,' Read merely re-inscribes his privileged insight, his intellectualism, as he constructs himself as an informed historian who *knows* and *understands* Aboriginality, including the complexity of Aboriginal dispossession. Thus he seems to position himself as an expert in relation to both spatial history and Aboriginality. Ken Gelder identifies an interesting paradox here: "Made aware of the deep history of the place he [Read] occupied, as well as the extent of Aboriginal displacement from it, Read becomes closer to Foley (rather than estranged from him)" (Gelder n.pag.). This allows Read to refer to Dennis Foley as his "shadow brother," alluding, perhaps unconsciously, to the repressed and unequal nature of their relationship. Indeed, Dennis Foley becomes a specter, a ghost whose function in Read's narrative is to legitimize Read's, and by extension the settler belonging, rather than challenge it.

Gillian Whitlock makes a noteworthy comment about the figure of a "fellow traveler" or a guide that is employed for different purposes in the genre of intellectual memoir. This guide can be either Aboriginal, as in Read's case, or white, usually an early explorer, pioneer, settler or artist whose journals, diaries or artwork is taken up by the contemporary writers and critics (Whitlock 2004a: 250-51). It is well-known that the figure of Aboriginal guide is a significant trope in Australian context, not only in the positive sense of someone

having the skills to read the country and survive in the bush and the outback, (possessing the knowledge that is inaccessible to white settlers), but also in the negatively charged trope of a Black tracker who is complicit in colonial power (Langton 56). In his illuminating article "Guides and Explorers," Kim Scott outlines the story of his Noongar ancestor, Bob Roberts, who guided the expedition of Joe Septimus Roe, and explains how Noongar people, through their welcoming and accommodating gestures of hospitality to the first explorers, introducing them to the country, offered a vision of interaction that was later "betrayed and lost" (Scott 17). Scott demonstrates that in the early colonial times, at least in Western Australia, there was a cultural dialogue between Noongar people and early explorers and settlers, a dialogue which later vanished, building instead "insecurity, uncertainty, and doubt" as the "significant component of the psychological infrastructure of the nation" (19). Neither Read nor McKenna manage to re-enact that dialogue in their quest for a sound sense of settler belonging; rather, in the words of Kim Scott, they "minimise partnership, and work with a select, strategic few [sources or informants]" (18). In *Looking for Blackfella's Point*, McKenna, although enchanted by the natural beauty of the place that by now has become 'his', reflects on his hesitancy as to whether he can actually live permanently in such an isolated spot. Suddenly, he feels like "another colonist arriving in a distant land" (4) and there is no one to welcome him, no guide to introduce him to the country. While he is "still a stranger, still waiting to feel at home" (4), this void prompts his endeavor to "know something more of the Aboriginal societies that once thrived on the land [he] now own[s]" (5). Thus writing the history of the area is supposed to shape and affirm his sense of belonging.

### **Belonging as becoming ... indigenous?**

The problem with Read's memoir is that at the beginning it promises to articulate the issue of settler belonging in a way which is non-appropriating, independent of, and separate from, Aboriginality as he proclaims: "I'm not envious, nor do I wish to incorporate myself spiritually into Aboriginality. I want to feel I belong here while

respecting Aboriginality, neither appropriating it nor being absorbed by it" (Read 15). However, it seems that this is precisely what Read's memoir does in the end; his account is *continually* concerned with Aboriginality. This is a reading shared by both Probyn and Gelder: Probyn critiques Read's memoir as "recuperating settler belonging via an identification with Aboriginality" (78), while Gelder interprets the text as enacting "the fantasy of indigenizing the 'non-Aboriginal'" (Gelder n.pag). This fantasy is played out in the open when in the last, most personal chapter, Read walks with Dennis Foley through the land. Guided by Foley, Read acknowledges both physical and spiritual memorabilia of Aboriginal history but at the same time he seeks to transcend the difference between them in what he calls "belonging-in-parallel," which, as Read contemplates,

does not imply that the majority cultures pretend that the Aboriginals don't exist. A plaque commemorating the Narrabeen [Aboriginal camp] site, and its destruction, will remind the visitor that Aboriginality is around us and beside us. That's a step to mature belonging. Now Dennis and I, the one Indigenous, the other native-born, each respecting the past and present cultures of the other, are together traveling the northern beaches of Gai-mariagal lands in search of the proper country. (Read 210)

Read's desire to render Aboriginal displacement in "a plaque," which I read as a typically Western normative instrument of fixing history in time, reveals something important about his strategy to achieve a "mature belonging": for Read, 'mature belonging' seems to signify a qualitatively different way of belonging, different from 'immature belonging' which settlers were supposedly experiencing until now. It is the 'next stage' which is made possible precisely through the symbol of the plaque – a gesture of commemorating and remembering, not forgetting, Aboriginality "around us and beside us". But this logic also evokes a sense of progress which, in turn, mirrors again the familiar trope of laying the ghost to rest in order to 'move on and forward' towards the bright future built on reconciliation.

In this light it is not surprising then that Read's search for new ways of settler belonging ends in an optimistic, almost ecstatic tone:

During this chapter I've used for the first time the phrase 'native-born' about myself. [...] I've gained confidence. [...] I think now I'm almost ready to belong. [...] My sense of native-born has come – is coming. (222-23)

This passage, like the concept of "belonging-in-parallel," is problematic as it openly invokes the long history of cultural and spiritual appropriation of Aboriginality, so visible, for example, in the production of the so called Jindyworobak literary movement in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mitchell Rolls, exploring the history of cultural appropriation, claims that

the appropriation of Aboriginal cultural property not only instils within non-Aborigines a sense of belonging to the land, it enables a conceptual identification of self as becoming, in this respect, an Aborigine. This serves the two-fold function of uniting non-Aborigines with the landscape from which they are supposedly alienated, whilst at the same time negating Aboriginal claims for land based on a *unique* spirituality. (Rolls 124, original emphasis)

Aileen Moreton-Robinson also comments on the problematic vision of settler belonging that Read presents towards the end of his book:

For Read and others belonging is experienced as a profound attachment, one figured as *personal*. Personal sentiment is privileged in Read's account. This is problematic for a number of reasons, notably for its denial of the racialized structural power relations that have produced the legal conditions in which this sentiment is possible, enabled and inscribed. (Moreton-Robinson 27)

While McKenna also concludes his spatial history on a personal and reconciliatory note, he is much more sober and emotionally restrained: "my knowledge of the history of the frontier, and the way in which Aboriginal people were dispossessed of their land, leaves me feeling ambivalent about the land I own, and any attempt we might make to 'celebrate the nation'" (McKenna 221). Compared to Read's ultimately 'unproblematic' sense of belonging (there is a feeling that all anxieties and doubts related to settler belonging

posed at the beginning of his account are resolved at the end), McKenna's sense of belonging is different in the sense that it is *conditional*, clearly articulating the conditions under which settler belonging can be fully recognized as part of national identity: "Until Aboriginal people can be satisfied that they possess a greater sense of political, economic and social justice in Australia, my sense of ambivalence about the nation remains" (McKenna 221). This formulation echoes the prominent novelist Kate Grenville, who in her paratextual reflection "Unsettling the Settler", which complemented the publication of her extremely popular novel *The Secret River*, outlines her personal journey to belonging in Australia: "There's no doubt, I think, that non-indigenous Australians can and do 'belong' here. But I think that belonging has to be, in a way, earned. Part of the earning is the acknowledgement that it isn't our place" (Grenville n.pag.). I would argue that here McKenna and Grenville attempt to voice what Read fails to voice – that is, in the words of Moreton-Robinson, that

in the context of Australian postcolonizing relations, the power relations are themselves based on the denial of original dispossession. It is the foundation of the nation and its structures. Likewise it is the denial of original (and continuing) dispossession that forms the foundations for Read's belief that his personal sense of belonging is based on an equal partnership with Indigenous people. There can be no equal partnership while there is illegal dispossession. (Moreton-Robinson 27)

## Conclusion

So how should Read's and McKenna's attempts to capture the sense of settler belonging through their professional as well as personal engagement with Australian spatial histories be interpreted? Read certainly performs a good attempt to locate and identify the source of his own anxieties regarding belonging. However, in spite of creating an impression that his book *Belonging* is meant to outline both his personal journey and a dialogue with a wide variety of Australian voices which Read listens to and then represents (speaking, as if, *for* Australians), his narrative remains, nevertheless, fairly monologic: after all, Dennis Foley, his "shadow

brother," is not offered any significant space in Read's memoir, as opposed to Read's non-Indigenous interviewees who are, at least partially, given voice in the form of transcribed fragments from their interviews. McKenna, while remaining more cautious and ambivalent in his articulation of settler belonging, also, in the end, feels "connected" to the place where "the corroborees took place" (McKenna 228) but only through his knowledge of the local history. This 'connection' is also textually visible through a minor shift in the vocabulary they both subscribe to. The shift is foreshadowed by Whitlock who comments on the rise of the intellectual memoir in settler societies, claiming that "a new era of morality emerged across post-colonial landscapes in the 1990s, associated with self-examination, both individual and national, and a willingness to embrace guilt in the interests of building an interpretation of the past that all parties can share" (Whitlock 2004a: 240). Whitlock's use of the term "share", which can be understood, in phrases such as 'sharing the past,' 'sharing the country', as the 21<sup>st</sup>-century substitution for the term 'reconciliation', is indeed a leitmotif in both Read's and McKenna's narratives. Read insists on "sharing the country" and bringing both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people together (Read 223). McKenna uses the terms 'reconciliation' (6) and 'sharing' (11) as synonyms in more than one case. Yet again, the concept of sharing is proposed here only in one direction – for Indigenous people, 'sharing' may, and often does, take on very different meanings. So in this intellectual loop, while Read and McKenna parade their feelings of anxiety, unease and guilt at the beginning (and in McKenna's case also at the end) of their intellectual memoirs, in the end they remain, to use Ken Gelder's phrase, "national historians" and "nation-builders" (Gelder n.pag.), who want to create and 'share,' however one-sidedly, a revised national narrative, a new fantasy of settler Australians which is based on recognition of Indigenous dispossession, on knowing and understanding the unsettling aspects of Australian history, but freeing themselves from the burden of the white settler guilt. This is an aspect of both texts that can be read as potentially indicating a paradigmatic shift in writing about settler belonging from the perspective of a liberal humanist subject, a step towards 'mature

belonging'. On the other hand, however, while both texts do attempt to re-define settler belonging and envision new forms that would transcend the simple appropriation of Indigeneity, the close reading shows that in the end they rely on familiar tropes of reconciliation and 'moving on'. This becomes more obvious when compared to other narratives by non-Indigenous authors which address the "wounded spaces and the psychic legacies of frontier violence" (Schaffer 150). In this comparison, Read's and McKenna's narratives come across as surprisingly rigid, conservative and ... *masculine*. Indeed, they are shaped by gender as well as the discipline – it does matter that they are written by male historians who have significant power to intervene in public space and address large audiences. When juxtaposing them to the women's historiographic writing and intellectual memoirs, for example the collaborative writing of Aboriginal historian Jackie Huggins with Kay Saunders, or Somerville's and Schlunke's experimental/ficto-critical writing, it becomes clear that there is a wide range of narratives on settler belonging which offer a more ambivalent, unresolved and less pleasing mode of writing, one that will always find only a fraction of Read's and McKenna's audience but which exposes radically different ways of both physical and textual belonging.

### Works Cited

- Bird Rose, Deborah, 2004. *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonization*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Brewster, Anne, 2005. "Writing Whiteness: The Personal Turn". *Australian Humanities Review*, 35, n.pag. Web. Nov 7, 2015. <<http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-June-2005/brewster.html>>
- Carter, Paul, 2010 [1987]. *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Castejon, Vanessa, and Anna Cole, Oliver Haag, Karen Hughes, eds., 2014. *Ngapartji Ngapartji: In Turn, In Turn: Ego-histoire, Europe and Indigenous Australia*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Gelder, Ken, 2000. "The Imaginary Eco-(Pre-)Historian: Peter Read's *Belonging* as a Postcolonial 'Symptom'", *Australian Humanities Review*, 19, n.pag. Web. Nov 7, 2015. <<http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-September-2000/gelder.html>>

- Gelder, Ken, and Jane M. Jacobs, 1998. *Uncanny Australia. Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Grenville, Kate, 2006. "Unsettling the Settler". Lecture in the Australian Psychoanalytic Society's Annual Conference. *Kate Grenville – Official Website*. Web. Nov 7, 2015. <<http://kategrenville.com/node/73>>
- Grenville, Kate, 2005. *The Secret River*. Melbourne: Text Publishing.
- Griffiths, Tom, 1998. "A Haunted Country?" *Land and Identity: Proceedings of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature Conference in 1997*. ASAL, 1-12.
- Jones, Gail, 2004. "Sorry-In-The-Sky: Empathetic Unsettling, Mourning, and the Stolen Generations", in: Judith Ryan and Chris Wallace, eds., *Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New New World*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 159-171.
- Kierkegaard, Søren, 1946 [1849]. *The Sickness Unto Death*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Langton, Marcia, 2006. "Out from the Shadows". *Meanjin*, 65(1), 55-64.
- McKenna, Mark, 2002. *Looking for Blackfellas' Point: An Australian History of Place*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Miller, Linn, 2003. "Belonging to Country – A Philosophical Anthropology", in: Kelly McWilliam, Peta Stephenson, and Graham Thompson, eds., *Journal of Australian Studies: Voicing Dissent*. St Lucia: API Network and UQP, 215-258.
- Moreton-Robinson, Aileen, 2003. "I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a White Postcolonizing Society", in: Sara Ahmed, Anne-Marie Fortier Castaneda, and Mimi Sheller, eds., *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*. New York: Berg Publishers, 23-40.
- Nora, Pierre, 1987. *Essais d'ego-histoire*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Passerini, Luisa, and Alexander C. T. Geppert, 2001. "Historians in Flux: The Concept, Task and Challenge of Ego-histoire", *Historien*, 3, 7-17.
- Popkin, Jeremy D., 2007. "Ego-histoire Down Under", *Australian Historical Studies*, 38(129), 106-23.
- Popkin, Jeremy D., 1996. "Ego-Histoire and Beyond: Contemporary French Historian-Autobiographers", *French Historical Studies*, 19(4), 1139-1167.
- Probyn, Fiona, 2002. "How Does the Settler Belong?", *Westerly*, 47, 75-95.
- Read, Peter, 2000. *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reynolds, Henry, 1999. *Why Weren't We Told?: A Personal Search for the Truth About Our History*. Caberwell: Penguin.
- Rolls, Mitchell, 1999. "The Making of 'Our' Place", *Antithesis*, 10, 117-133.
- Rudd, Kevin, 2008. "Apology to Australia's Indigenous People". *Parliamentary Debates*. Nov 24, 2015. <[http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/2008-02-13/0003/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/2008-02-13/0003/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf)>

- Schaffer, Kay, 2014. "Wounded Spaces/Geographies of Connectivity: Stephen Muecke's *No Road (bitumen all the way)*, Margaret Somerville's *Body/Landscape Journals*, and Katrina Schlunke's *Bluff Rock: Autobiography of a Massacre*", in: Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer, eds., *Decolonizing the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 149-168.
- Scott, Kim, 2005. "Guides and Explorers: Australia's Cultural Identity Now", *New Literature Review*, 44, 15-31.
- Slater, Lisa, 2013. "Anxious Settler Belonging: Actualizing the Potential for Making Resilient Postcolonial Subjects", *M/C Journal*, 16(5), n.pag. Web. Nov 7, 2015.  
<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/705>
- "Sorry again the hardest word to stolen generation". *Sydney Morning Herald*. May 24, 2007. Nov 24, 2015.  
<<http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/sorry-again-the-hardest-word-to-stolen-generation/2007/05/24/1179601573467.html>>
- Westcott, Robyn, 2004. "Witnessing Whiteness: Articulating Race and the 'Politics of Style'", *Borderlands*, 3(2), n.pag. Web. Nov 7, 2015.  
<[http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2\\_2004/westcott\\_witnessing.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/westcott_witnessing.htm)>
- Whitlock, Gillian, 2004a. "Becoming Migloo", in: David Carter, ed., *The Ideas Market*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 236-258.
- Whitlock, Gillian, 2004b. "Consuming Passions: Reconciliation in Women's Intellectual Memoir", *Tulsa Studies in Woman's Literature*, 23(1), 13-28.