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## “Grace of the Crocodiles”

Towards Deterritorialization of Culture in Robert Drewe’s *Grace*

IN AN ARTICLE ENTITLED “MINIMAL SELVES,” STUART HALL SUGGESTS that “identity is formed at the unstable point where the ‘unspeakable’ stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture.”<sup>1</sup> This essay is an attempt to explore just such an articulation of identity, as it crystallizes at the boundary between the private and the public in one of Robert Drewe’s most recent novels, *Grace* (2005). As we shall see, the very title of the book encodes this sense of the multi-layered construction of identity, and does so in a way which calls to mind its antonym *Disgrace* (1999), J.M. Coetzee’s arresting statement about the white-settler predicament in South Africa after apartheid. Whether or not the reference is deliberate, Drewe seems to be reversing the political pessimism of his South African colleague, gesturing in *Grace* towards the condition of goodwill and compassion between individuals and communities that might characterize the brave new world of the future in a place like Australia. While *Disgrace* traces the ramifications of the white South Africans’ fall from privilege and descent into abjection, thus allegorizing continuing white-settler presence in the country in terms of a compromise with the unacceptable,<sup>2</sup> *Grace* by contrast appears to be sketching a reverse itinerary, that of a slow recovery from anxiety and depression which may also have a more than personal dimension.

Interestingly for my purposes, Drewe’s utopianism involves the fraught project of relinquishing the territoriality that he nevertheless sees to be deeply

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, “Minimal Selves,” in *The Real Me: Postmodernism and the Question of Identity*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London: ICA, 1987): 44.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Elleke Boehmer, “Not Saying Sorry, Not Speaking Pain: Gender Implications in *Disgrace*,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 4.3 (2002): 342–51.

etched in the genes of the human animal<sup>3</sup> – apart from being a founding characteristic of Australia’s national culture – so that he ostensibly embraces a form of discourse which constantly runs the risk of pulling the rug from under its own feet. Indeed, it has been argued that “Australian culture’s provenance in landscape”<sup>4</sup> depended for its formation on a constitutive gesture of historical forgetfulness; and that visions of the Australian imagination in terms of “engagements with place”<sup>5</sup> would remain “seductive for Australians today so long as the relationship between national identifications and the violence on which they are premised can be elided or repressed.”<sup>6</sup> Drewe’s repudiation of place as a matrix of culture thus betokens his embarrassment about, and rejection of, the nation’s indigenous policies past and present; but at the same time it signifies a quixotic wish to inscribe his own discourse outside of the cultural and literary tradition with which he engages.<sup>7</sup> My aim in this essay is, then, to examine the fascinating moment of collapse which threatens a discursive position necessarily erected at the point of troubled intersection between the story of a liberal subjectivity intent upon the suppression of unjust boundaries, and a national narrative premised on the historical fact of exclusion and confiscation of land. In other words, it is my suggestion that there is an ambivalence about *Grace* which possibly confirms Theodor Adorno’s harrowing perception that “society is integral,” in that “its organization also embraces those at war with it by co-ordinating their consciousness to its own.”<sup>8</sup>

Drewe’s concern with the theme of border-crossing and its correlate, boundary-riding, points to his determination to interrogate “conceptions of a unitary national identity such as that projected by the Australian legend, with

<sup>3</sup> Robert Drewe, Interview with Ramona Koval, *ABC Radio National*, broadcast on 14 August 2005.

<sup>4</sup> A.L. McCann, “The Literature of Extinction,” *Meanjin: New Writing in Australia* 65.1 (2006): 50.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass & Lyn McCredden, *Intimate Horizons: The Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2009): 31.

<sup>6</sup> McCann, “The Literature of Extinction,” 50.

<sup>7</sup> A similar perception, that Drewe’s fiction works to decentre “the great explanatory codes of Western society” in general, and the “established record” of Australian historiography in particular, is articulated by Michael Ackland in “The Lesson of ‘The Yellow Sand’: Robert Drewe’s Dissection of ‘The Good Old Past’ in *The Drowner and Grace*,” *Westerly* 51 (November 2006): 89–91.

<sup>8</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, tr. E.F.N. Jephcott (*Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, 1951; London: Verso, 1997): 206.

its emphasis on the bush, mateship and Anglo-Celtic origins."<sup>9</sup> The wish to undermine received Australian mythologies can be felt ever since his fictional debut, *The Savage Crows* (1976), which provides an interesting 'take' on the extinction of Tasmania's Aborigines, especially if we consider it from our present perspective in the wake of the History Wars. Indeed, the author submits that the "genocide thesis" served as part of a "national cover-up" meant to facilitate "the construction of a monocultural version of Australian identity," in a way that calls for "a new historiography."<sup>10</sup> Naturally, the point in this case is not to deny, or even minimize, the extent of the colonial disaster but, rather, to insist on the fact of the First Tasmanians' survival through miscegenation, one that is evidenced in the emergence of "a whole new human population brought into being by hybridization"<sup>11</sup> – which throws into focus the neat simplicities of the standard historical narrative. The view that national identities are always complex and mingled – and, indeed, that they always *were* – is further pursued in a novel like *Fortune* (1986), which acknowledges a streak of Americanism at the heart of Australian culture,<sup>12</sup> or in its predecessor, *A Cry from the Jungle Bar* (1979), which evokes Darwinism to refer to the evolutionary potential available to Australians travelling in South-East Asia. Importantly, too, Drewe can be at times extremely self-conscious about the implications of one's participation in gestures of cultural mythologizing, which tend to repress as much as they buttress. This is clearest in *Our Sunshine* (1991), his imaginative appropriation of the legend of Ned Kelly, which contains a parodic dimension indexing his sensitivity not only to the exclusionary processes but also to the strategies of displacement implicit in an approach to commemoration that, by emphasizing the familiar Celtic subtext of the Kelly myth, ends up downplaying societal complexities and "maintaining neo-colonial relations of power"<sup>13</sup> in what has become a divided multi-ethnic country. *Grace*, the more recent novel, shows a similar impatience with

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<sup>9</sup> John Thieme, "Robert Drewe's Australias – With Particular Reference to *The Bodysurfers*," in *The Making of a Pluralist Australia 1950–1990*, ed. Werner Senn & Giovanna Capone (Bern & New York: Peter Lang, 1992): 49.

<sup>10</sup> Thieme, "Robert Drewe's Australias," 49.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Drewe, *The Savage Crows* (Sydney & London: Collins, 1976): 252.

<sup>12</sup> See Bruce Bennett, "Literature and Journalism: The Fiction of Robert Drewe," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 20.3 (July 1989): 9.

<sup>13</sup> Graham Huggan, "Cultural Memory in Postcolonial Fiction: The Uses and Abuses of Ned Kelly," *Australian Literary Studies* 20.3 (May 2002): 152.

reactionary invocations of iconic images of Australian experience,<sup>14</sup> while it also, again, points to the need to evolve, in true Darwinian fashion, beyond mythic identities fossilized around a core of embattled Anglo-Saxon features.

Thus the book takes as its satirical starting-point the discursive manipulations of bush lore attempted by the conservative immigration minister Philip Ruddock, who decided, as part of a scheme to discourage asylum seekers, to produce a film emphasizing the perils awaiting potential refugees, prime among them sharks, saltwater crocodiles, and venomous snakes, the further implication being that, “if Australia’s notorious wildlife didn’t kill the misguided asylum seekers, the grim detention centres in store for them in the desert would make them wish it had.”<sup>15</sup> The plan, both in the book and in reality, was to have the film distributed on video throughout the Middle East and Asia. In an interview, Drewe explains that, when he first heard about this eerie bit of anti-propaganda, he found it hard to accept that the newsreaders seemed to take it as a perfectly reasonable form of policy – “a unique but sensible plan to deter unwanted boatloads of dubious foreigners” – nor would the capital city columnists seize upon it as a suitable target for their satire. In the novel, Grace, the protagonist, is a cinema critic who, when exposed to this same infamous piece of footage, first misconstrues it as a spoof – “a comic anti-tourist promotion” – before realizing that she may be alone to confuse “political campaign with black comedy” (17). Intriguingly, however, her second move is then to become immersed in the myth, as it were, by entering the very nightmare described in the video, somehow subjecting herself to the experience normally reserved for illegal immigrants. As she puts this, “the croc-as-refugee-deterrent episode [...] determined her job choice” (17). Indeed, she travels from Sydney to the Kimberley region, where she takes up occupation as a farm-hand in a reptile park called Crocodile Gardens, soon to be promoted to the role of “Eco-Adventure Tour Guide” (37), after her employer saw the benefits of “expanding into ecotourism” (35). This can be seen as an attempt to transform from within the symbolism of the scary video, and while Grace – ever the cinema buff – remains in touch with her primal fears, identifying, when “up to her knees in [baby] crocodiles,” with “the female co-star in

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<sup>14</sup> Drewe’s misgivings about the Australian disposition towards nostalgia is further expressed in an essay, “Where the Yellow Sand Stops,” *Westerly* 47 (2002): 25–33. See also Ackland, “The Lesson of ‘The Yellow Sand,’” 88.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Drewe, *Grace* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005): 17. Further page references are in the main text.

an Indiana Jones movie" (30), at the same time she develops a new-found ecological awareness, over against her earlier city-dweller's prejudices concerning biteys of all hues.

In a sense, Grace's progression west amounts to an ambiguous act of border-patrolling, since she comes to inspect the symbolic padlock created by the government against potential invaders, but with a view to unlocking it after its deterring power has been defused. In this respect, Drewe's choice of setting is significant, as he clearly considers the west as the *limen* of the continent – indeed, as the spot where the world comes to Australia, either as refugees or as First People, since this would be where the Aborigines crossed over by the time when the place was still joined by land-bridge to New Guinea – not to mention the Dutch explorers in the seventeenth century, or the Japanese bombers in the Second World War.<sup>16</sup> This liminality creates a besieged feeling, already examined in *The Shark Net* (2000), Drewe's memoir of growing up in Perth which documents the local population's fear of a serial killer who stalked the suburbs in the late 1950s, and identifies this as a sense of having one's personal territory impinged upon – in a way that found an objective correlative in the menace represented by the sharks prowling in the bay. Obviously, the shark motif here anticipates that of the crocodile in *Grace*, especially since the protagonist in this novel also feels that her personal space is being violated, in this case by a maniac who has developed a mad erotic fixation upon her. On one level of reading, it may, then, seem ironic that Grace, in order to barricade her private space, elects to set up residence in that part of the country which is felt to provide such a porous boundary with the world beyond; unless the point is precisely that she must learn to revise her notions of what constitutes territorial integrity in both the private and the public acceptations of the phrase.

Clearly, it is relevant to the novel's revision of value that the image of the crocodile, a "prehistoric" creature emerging from "the swamps of myth" (26), should be allowed to evolve and be dislodged from its apparently untouchable position in human epistemology as the ultimate bogey of all times. Indeed, it can be argued that the man-eating monster has come to belong to that store of "fundamental ideas which we are apt to regard as original and intuitive," by virtue of having been "handed down for so many ages that the memory of those who built it up is lost," while it itself remains as an "unalterable posses-

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<sup>16</sup> Drewe, interview with Ramona Koval, 14 August 2005.

sion of [the] race.”<sup>17</sup> As the novel puts this, “we’re all born watching out for the Big Bad Six – lions, tigers, leopards, bears, sharks and crocs. If our ancestors hadn’t been shit-scared of them we wouldn’t be standing here today” (26). At the same time, the book is performing work on this ancient crocodile mythology in order to denaturalize it, with a view to inscribing it back into both history and the field of human cultural production. This is achieved by dint of the novel’s literalism, since it is, indeed, the vocation of the Crocodile Farm to breed the animal and thus recover technical control over its production. The extent of human regulation in this process is made clear with the remark that slight modifications in the temperature artificially maintained in the incubators will determine the gender of the embryos. However, manipulations of the crocodile as both object and myth turn out to be more extreme still when Grace, in what looks to her like “a *Star Wars* bar scene” or a sequence from the Burt Lancaster version of *The Island of Dr Moreau*, discovers mutant crocodiles concealed in a remote shed of the farm. These creatures strike her as the more “genuine monsters” (32):

These things could have come from another planet. The first creature to appear had an underslung lower jaw like a scoop, and no top jaw. The next one had the opposite: a long snout but no bottom jaw, giving it a comical, chinless, buck-toothed look. Corkscrewing along the ground towards them meanwhile was a third twisted creature with a kinked spine and curled tail. It was followed by a crocodile which would have been a huge specimen, easily five metres long, if only it had possessed a tail. However, its two-metre-long body ended at its back legs in a pair of oddly chubby, human-like buttocks. (32–33)

The anthropomorphic features evident in this description serve to familiarize the beasts, and somehow to tame them, after a fashion that is in keeping with definitions of the grotesque as “an attempt to control and exorcize the demonic elements in the world.”<sup>18</sup> A similar comic/horrifying ambivalence attaches to the evocation of yet another aberration, a Siamese crocodile possessing “one body with four legs, and a head at each end,” which is further said to be equipped with “two sets of sexual apparatus, a doodle and a tweedle,” unfor-

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<sup>17</sup> Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*; abridged edition in one volume (London: Macmillan, 1949): 264.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, tr. Ulrich Weisstein (*Das Grotteske: Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*, 1961; Bloomington IN: McGraw-Hill, 1963): 182.

tunately "not positioned so he can take advantage of them" (33–34). Again, the less than respectful attitude evident in these words undercuts the awesome quality otherwise usually ascribed to crocodiles, so that the myth is punctured or at least "rendered less harmful."<sup>19</sup> It can, then, be argued that Drewe's use of the grotesque in passages such as this serves a political purpose, working as a kind of disarming mechanism applied to the iconographic artillery deployed by the Australian authorities in their economic war of deterrence.

It is consistent with this demythologizing impulse of the book that, on the level of the plot, Grace adopts a critical stance towards Australia's immigration policy all through her stay in the Kimberleys. In particular, she takes a personal interest in the fate of an unnamed Middle Eastern adolescent whom she discovers in the bush after he escapes from one of those grim detention centres in the desert which the book sets out to denounce. Instead of reporting him to the authorities, she decides to give him clandestine shelter and to assist in his illegal entry, capitalizing for this purpose on the resources afforded by an underground network of human-rights activists, worldly-wise widows, and well-meaning nuns. However, in a rather uncharacteristic moment of relaxation of her tight surveillance of her private space, Grace allows herself to sleep with the boy, soon to regret her lapse from responsibility and yet cherish the consequence. Indeed, she finds herself to be pregnant towards the novel's close, in a final twist of the story-line which was possibly predictable in view of the book's thematization of "gene flow" (292) as the likely result of the conquests, invasions, and migrations of history. Thus Drewe gestures towards a "genetic blueprint" (183) for the descendants of today's Australians which makes mock of nationalist aspirations to racial or cultural purity. Clearly, this forms part of the author's long-standing Darwinian metaphor, whereby he points to the incredibly "complex history of the human race" (296), only to welcome the complications still to come. In the later novel, this concern with the quirks of evolution finds new expression in a fictional speculation about the origins of mankind, the implications of which need to be unravelled.

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<sup>19</sup> Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (New Accents; London: Methuen, 1972): 59. Thomson seizes on the above-mentioned aspect of Kayser's definition to suggest that, while the grotesque usually works as an alienating device meant to estrange the reader from accustomed ways of perceiving the world, "one can also describe this the other way round and say that [...] the grotesque does serve to bring the horrifying and disgusting aspects of existence to the surface, there to be rendered less harmful by the introduction of a comic perspective" (59).

Indeed, the novel sets up a dialectical relationship between past and future, perceptible in John Molloy's irrational feeling that "in her genes his daughter preceded as well as followed him" (175). In other words, the book sustains a sense that future directions are bound to depend upon reinterpretations of the past, and perhaps vice versa, which is crucial to its meaning and inseparable from the polysemy of its title. John, Grace's father, is a paleoanthropologist who named his daughter after his discovery of the cremated remains of an ancient skeleton on the western edge of the Great Sandy Desert. When assessing the skeleton's age at the time of death, he establishes that he is dealing with a young female hominid whose body presents the "exciting anomaly" of being "anatomically 'modern'," for, while "anthropology had taught him to expect the ancient skeletons on this continent to be robust rather than gracile," his find is characterized by her surprising, "petite ballerina's frame" (104). On account of these features, he gives this ancient human being the name of Grace, as he does also to his new-born child, fittingly so, as it turns out, since the latter will grow into a slender and athletic young woman. His impression that, "as well as his sole genetic link to the future, she was his only connection to the past" (174) thus appears to derive from an intuited bond between the two Graces, which creates a strange temporal loop whereby the quality of gracefulness emerges as one that "spanned the ages and races" (101).

What the two Graces have in common is, notably, a vestigial dimension which points to unsuspected ways of becoming liberated from the determinism at work in the genetic groove. For example, John wonders at the "total mystery" (174) presented by his daughter's remarkable gracility, which cannot be correlated with his own or her mother's hereditary stock, so that she comes to embody the vertiginous challenge implicit in a quantum leap, beyond atavism, towards utter freedom of self-definition. It is relevant to this ontological challenge that John himself is an orphan, deprived of precious identity-giving information about his own genealogy, so that he tends to rely even more on clues afforded by his daughter in order to solve the riddle of himself. Intriguingly in this respect, his orphanhood is presented in terms of an alternative, settler version of the trauma experienced by the Stolen Generation, as "thousands of children were denied their backgrounds" as a result of the diligence manifested by "a whole host of busybody, self-righteous organisations and individuals" – "churches, municipal councils, charities and governments" – to destroy "their orphans' birth records" (185). Quite evocatively, the point is made also that "the British Government had since apologized for such nineteenth-century colonial behaviour prevailing into the mid-



twentieth century" (185–86). In the face of such an identity-deficit, Australia itself is embraced as a unique opportunity for self-invention – indeed, as if the incentive towards evolution represented for the Aborigines by the Stolen Generation had to be exploited by the settlers as well.

At this juncture, it becomes apparent that, for all its aspirations towards imaginative and intellectual freedom, the 'graced' future of Drewe's utopia tends to remain problematically imbricated with some of the typical giveaway tendencies of today's settler identity politics in Australia, such as the search for exonerating symmetries or equivalences between white and Aboriginal traditions of experience. Surely the very suggestion that there may be a settler brand of suffering due to child removal policies, complete with a distinct but corresponding political apology, amounts to a failure of the postcolonial imagination in Australia, implicit in the attempt to fashion a tentative national identity after a model paradoxically provided by the disempowered Aborigines. This is the kind of "over-identification" that, as Gail Jones puts it, "seems to bring with it a kind of transferential gesture of victim surrogacy,"<sup>20</sup> and which lurks potentially in the current fashion for "the traumatic [...] vocabularies of our present critical moment" as they "enshroud, occlude and conflate categories of experience that ought properly to deserve strict and careful distinction."<sup>21</sup> Thus, John's orphanhood and the sort of allegorization to which it is subjected in the book constitute a first indication that the novel's attempt to transcend its own discursive universe, as it were, is only achieved partially, for the work continues to index the sort of indigenizing temptation that is such a key aspect of the territorial urge it had set out to outgrow.

As to the primordial Grace, this "ancient-yet-modern" human specimen (110), she, too, holds the deceptive promise of a complete conceptual overhaul of existing theories about the onward march of mankind. Because the technique of radiocarbon dating initially estimated her age at about 60,000 years, and because her gracile features unmistakably identify her as *Homo sapiens*, she represents a scientific discovery which brings "the Out of Africa theory into question" (199). Improved dating technologies will later set her age at 80,000 years, so that she reveals the oldest human DNA ever discovered,

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<sup>20</sup> Gail Jones, "Sorry-in-the-Sky: Empathetic Unsettlement, Mourning, and the Stolen Generations," in *Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New New World*, ed. Judith Ryan & Chris Wallace-Crabbe (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2004): 162.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, "Sorry-in-the-Sky," 167.

and she becomes not only the earliest “accurately dated prehistoric skeleton in the world” but also the remotest “dated point in Australia’s past” (286). Interestingly, the novel examines the consequences of this Copernican revolution for anthropology on two distinct yet related levels of conceptualization. On the one hand, quite simply, the discovery of the first modern woman in the Great Sandy Desert overturns every form of “scientific gospel” and calls into question “the accepted theory of human evolution,” substituting for it a “theory of human dispersement” (290) out of Australia and into Africa and the rest of the world. On the other hand, there is a sense in which the universal implications of the discovery make way for an appreciation of its regional consequences, in recognition of the fact that the first modern woman is also, and perhaps first and foremost, an Aborigine, “skeletal almost indistinguishable” (286) from some Aboriginal people still living in the area. In particular, one of the “wider repercussions” of the find has to do with the skull’s similarities to that of Java Man, suggesting that “people have been travelling from Asia to the island continent for much more than sixty thousand years” (290). Because immigration from Asia is also an aspect of the novel’s contemporary reality, *Grace* can be said to make strategic use of its own scientific fiction so as to vindicate the combative stance it takes in the vexed matter of Australia’s recent immigration policy.

So far so good; but here, too, the novel somehow overreaches itself. In a bid for thorough political correctness, Drewe further stages the subordination of scientific discourse to the political imperatives of postcolonial Australia, making the point that, by virtue of their cultural provenance, the relics of earliest humanity ought to be placed in Aboriginal custody for proper ritual cleansing and spiritual care-taking. This becomes urgent when, some twenty years after the first discovery, another skeleton, male this time, is found, and proves to be pre-modern and Aboriginal too. Not only is John now prevented from initiating excavations without due authorization from the appointed Aboriginal representatives, but he is persuaded to return the remains of Grace also, which he does in acceptance of the fact that “Aboriginal people now owned their past” (299). Therefore, of the two schemes of representation which struggle for prominence at this stage in the discursive economy of the book, it is the local one that is accorded the upper hand, as the anthropologist must come to terms with the proposition that his potential contribution to the understanding of the dawn of mankind was anyway already accounted for in the Dreamtime (see 302). In the last analysis, what the novel brings into play is no less than an epistemic surrender, which is presented as a gesture of

reconciliation on the part of the settlers, since the book concludes with a description of the formal ceremony of restitution, when the remains of Grace are handed over to traditional elders – in a moment of “overwhelming” symbolism meant to “bring white and black together” (396).

Arguably, this is the moment when Drewe’s political stance crumbles, as he starts gesturing towards a conception of Reconciliation which indirectly rehearses the now familiar strategies “through which a legitimate sense of [settler] belonging [...] may be restituted.”<sup>22</sup> In the last analysis, the quality of ‘grace’ advertised in the title may, then, be nothing else than such a condition of restored legitimacy – a fantasy of being in the nation which may be essentially self-interested. This would be in keeping with readings of Reconciliation which discern in the ‘sorry’ people’s expressions of condolence a false altruism, a semblance of “support for indigenous people mask[ing] an emotional self-support mechanism.”<sup>23</sup> While Drewe’s political pamphleteering had been unambiguous in its willingness to take up the cause of economic refugees and to examine points of connection with Aboriginal experience and history, the inclusiveness implicit in his aesthetic of identification ends up ascribing to the settler the genetic code of the dispossessed. This is apparent above all in the context of his scientific fiction concerning the beginnings of humanity, which seems gratuitous, since, before the book ends, it is made clear that John’s fantastic speculations had been unfounded, some other scientists having corrected previous estimates of the age of the first modern woman – setting it back at 40,000 years. One may therefore feel entitled to wonder what purpose is served by a piece of intellectual self-indulgence that is dismissed almost as soon as it is proposed. What is manifest in the text is the author’s willingness to pay his respects to Aboriginal culture, which is presented as ancient and venerable and possibly superior to settler culture in terms of its openness to foreign influences. By contrast, what is hardly made explicit, to the point of constituting a blind spot in the text, is the consequence for the settlers of Drewe’s revised theory of evolution. Clearly, if the first

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<sup>22</sup> Haydie Gooder & Jane M. Jacobs, “‘On the Border of the Unsayable’: The Apology in Postcolonizing Australia,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 2.2 (2000): 229.

<sup>23</sup> Tony Birch, “‘The First White Man Born’: Contesting the ‘Stolen Generation’ Narrative in Australia,” in *Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New World*, ed. Judith Ryan & Chris Wallace-Crabbe (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2004): 140.

humans were natives of the continent, then Aboriginality becomes a universal feature, present in all of humanity's 'gene flow' and incidentally available for those displaced Europeans currently undergoing a crisis of legitimacy in post-colonizing Australia. This is a case of indigenization writ large, though the fact is only primly acknowledged in the novel, through the suggestion that "Australia was always a recipient of many different people" (290). Perhaps it is an index of the severity of the settler predicament that even the most sincere assertions of solidarity, like the processes of identification which are after all an aspect of true compassion, cannot, in this context, avoid being read as self-interested strategies of appropriation, or of colonial penetration of the most banal sort.

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