



History, Power, Text: Cultural Studies and Indigenous Studies

Timothy Neale, Crystal McKinnon and
Eve Vincent (eds)

History, Power, Text

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U T S
e P R E S S

Contents

- Acknowledgements 9
- Illustrations 9
- 1 Indigenous Cultural Studies: Intersections Between 11
Cultural Studies and Indigenous Studies
Eve Vincent, Timothy Neale and Crystal McKinnon
- I: History 37**
- 2 'I'm not sure how to begin it': The Welcome 39
Uncertainties of Doing History
Tony Birch
- 3 Experimental History? The 'Space' of History 50
in Recent Histories of Kimberley Colonialism
Stephen Muecke
- 4 Oral Histories of the Stolen Generation 64
Sonia Smallacombe
- 5 'All I know is history': Memory and Land Ownership 70
in the Dudley District, Kangaroo Island
Rebe Taylor
- 6 Fixing the Past: Modernity, Tradition 91
and Memory in Rural Australia
Heather Goodall
- 7 Indigenous Insurgency Against the Speaking 112
for Others
Wendy Brady
- 8 Pinjarra 1970: Shame and the Country Town 122
Robyn Ferrell

- 9 Knowing the Country 138
Eve Vincent
- 10 A Touching and Contagious Captain Cook: 153
Thinking History through Things
Stephen Muecke
- 11 In the Northern Territory Intervention, What is 167
Saved or Rescued and at What Cost?
Irene Watson
- II: Power 187**
- 12 Subduing Power: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters 189
Aileen Moreton-Robinson
- 13 The Last Refuge of the 'Un-Australian' 198
Tony Birch
- 14 Decolonising the Discourse of Environmental 208
Knowledge in Settler Societies
Deborah Bird Rose
- 15 Performing Aboriginality: The Politics and 229
Poetics of Citizenship in Everyday Life
Gillian Cowlshaw
- 16 A Benign Arithmetic: Taking up Facts 250
About Indigenous Health
Tess Lea
- 17 Antipodean Aesthetics, Public Policy and 271
the Museum: Te Papa, for Example
Ben Dibley
- 18 'There is nothing that identifies me to that place': 291
Indigenous Women's Perceptions of Health
Spaces and Places
Bronwyn Fredericks

- 19 Imagining the Good Indigenous Citizen: Race War 310
and the Pathology of Patriarchal White Sovereignty
Aileen Moreton-Robinson
- 20 From the 'Quiet Revolution' to 'Crisis' in 331
Australian Indigenous Affairs'
Virginia Watson
- 21 'Calling our spirits home': Indigenous Cultural 354
Festivals and the Making of a Good Life
Lisa Slater
- III: Text 369**
- 22 From Scar Trees to a 'Bouquet of Words': 371
Aboriginal Text is Everywhere
Crystal McKinnon
- 23 Hegemony or Hidden Transcripts? Aboriginal 384
Writings from Lake Condah, 1876-1907
Penny van Toorn
- 24 The Production of Whiteness: Revisiting 408
Roberta Sykes's *Snake Dreaming*
Alison Ravenscroft
- 25 Breasts, Bodies, Art: Central Desert Women's 425
Paintings and the Politics of the Aesthetic
Encounter
Jennifer L. Biddle
- 26 'Old Lady Mob' Interview 449
Kathleen Petyarre and Christine Nicholls
- 27 Relationscapes: How Contemporary Aboriginal 458
Art Moves Beyond the Map
Erin Manning

- 28 Gendering Aboriginalism: A Performative Gaze on Indigenous Australian Women 479
Katelyn Barney
- 29 Can You Anchor a Shimmering Nation State Via Regional Indigenous Roots? 502
Anne Brewster and Kim Scott
- 30 'Reading' the Leichhardt, Landsborough and Gregory Explorer Trees of Northern Australia 523
Richard J. Martin

IV: Reflection 545

- 31 Roundtable Discussion with Chris Healy, Stephen Muecke and Katrina Schlunke 547
Crystal McKinnon, Eve Vincent and Timothy Neale

Original Publication Details 562

Contributors 564

Illustrations

- 1 Kathleen Petyarre, *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming (After Sandstorm)*, 1998 445
- 2 Kathleen Petyarre, *Untitled*, 2004 446
- 3 Kathleen Petyarre, *Untitled*, 2004 447
- 4 Kathleen Petyarre, *Untitled*, 1990 448
(from Utopia print series)
- 5 Leichhardt tree in the Borroloola Museum 529
- 6 Landsborough tree site, showing replanted sapling alongside part of the destroyed tree 533
- 7 Ganggalida people inspecting the Landsborough tree display 537
- 8 Gregory tree 537

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Timothy Neale, Crystal McKinnon and Eve Vincent

Indigenous Cultural Studies: Intersections Between Cultural Studies and Indigenous Studies

Eve Vincent, Timothy Neale and
Crystal McKinnon

History, Power, Text collects together selected contributions on Indigenous themes published between 1996 and 2013 in the journal first known as *UTS Review* and now known as *Cultural Studies Review*. Since the journal's inception, successive editors have sought to open up a space for new kinds of politics, new styles of writing and new modes of interdisciplinary engagement. Like the journal it draws its material from, this collection has been conceived and assembled as an exercise in institution building beyond 'the Institution'. We call this institution, tentatively, 'Indigenous cultural studies' and see it as a disciplinary space that is built iteratively through events, single articles and books. We do not seek to prescribe or delimit this project but rather to give it density and energeise those working in the overlapping fields represented here.

Indigenous cultural studies is our name for the intersection of cultural studies and Indigenous studies, a crossing often expressed as, but certainly not limited to, cultural studies with Indigenous topics, Indigenous scholars doing cultural studies or Indigenous studies of culture and everyday life. Just as John Hartley describes cultural studies as 'a crossroads or bazaar for the exchange of ideas from many directions',¹ Indigenous cultural studies is the exchange—in the sense of both a transactional site and a transactional act—that occurs at the meeting point of these diverse undertakings. It is the site where the scholars republished here might form

and defend inquiries, and modes of inquiry, and where their 'discipline' is not primarily grounded in method or topic, but in their mutual textual presence. This collection seeks to (re) build this particular bazaar by identifying the conditions and fact of its existence and by revisiting some of the ideas and directions that have shaped the meeting of cultural studies and Indigenous studies.

The authors in this collection come from very different disciplinary backgrounds, yet they all found a home for their work in a cultural studies journal. Now, as we bring them into a new relationship with each other, they find themselves situated in a different institutional context again. While the journal itself was conceived by academics from within the discipline of cultural studies, few, if any, of the authors published here commonly label themselves as cultural studies scholars. They include individuals working in philosophy, cultural studies, literary studies, anthropology, education and law departments; people who were undergraduate students in the Humanities and postgraduate students in the Sciences; people who have always worked in the academy and people who have moved outside the academy. But despite all this disparity in disciplinary and institutional settings, these authors chose to place themselves in the same publishing context not once but twice. Why?

Some insight towards answering this question may be found in the history of the journal, its ethos and its inception. *UTS Review* was founded only a few years after the High Court's 1992 *Mabo* decision, which recognised the fact of Indigenous ownership of the Australian continent in 1788, and the 1993 drafting of the *Native Title Act*, which provided a mechanism for recognising Indigenous groups' rights in traditional lands. Suffice to say, the mid-1990s were characterised by an intense level of public conversations and contestations about the colonial past, the legacy of this past and the potential for *Mabo* to act as a rupture between the colonial past and an imagined postcolonial future in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia might be 'reconciled' and past injustices rectified. From the outset, *UTS Review* both played a part in these urgent conversations and offered critical perspectives on the terms of this public engagement with Indigenous

issues. Within the pages of this journal and in the composition of its editorial board—including, at its outset, Ian Anderson, Jackie Huggins, Mudrooroo and Phillip Morrissey—we see evidence of a commitment to politically and ethically engaged scholarship and to experimentation, the legacy of which might impel others.

In assembling a collection that republishes work from this journal, then, our aims are twofold. The first is to sketch a genealogy of the work contributing to the development of Indigenous cultural studies that has been undertaken within the journal. The second is to highlight the significance of an interdisciplinary space—a meeting point—that this journal played such a large part in instantiating. Here, for example, historians probed the limits of archival research methods, plumbing the silences in the archives and interweaving contemporary voices and perspectives on the past. Anthropologists, to cite another example, turned their attention to new subjects and new critiques, embracing, perhaps, the opportunity to publish work within a disciplinary frame not overshadowed by the colonial legacy in the same way that anthropology had been over this period. The journal certainly opened up a space for novel intersections, and in presenting this selection of essays from it we hope also to bring these pieces into an exciting new relationship with each other.

Graeme Turner recently asked ‘what’s become of cultural studies?’ As we surveyed the work published over nearly two decades in this journal, a crucial question for us emerged: ‘What’s become of cultural studies’ engagement with indigeneity?’ Just as Turner’s pressing concern is the global discipline’s attachment to ‘its original political, ethical and pedagogical mission’, cultural studies in Australia retains an uncertain link to one of its earliest and most important areas of inquiry.² Historically, the discipline has been defined by attempts to open up the Humanities and Social Sciences to neglected histories and modes of thinking—often, admittedly, while indicting them—a task that has been conditioned in specific ways within settler colonial and ‘postcolonial’ nations such as Australia. Cultural studies scholars have been critical of the production of nationalist and naturalising discourses within such a context, ineluctably leading these scholars

back to colonial dispossession and Indigenous histories and knowledges.

But has this interdisciplinary intellectual project faltered? Have its energies receded or been redistributed into other concerns? Alternatively, we might ask, does the work of cultural studies scholars in this space exhibit the tendencies that Turner parodies and holds responsible for the wider discipline's lassitude: 'clever readings' of contemporary popular culture, celebrations of new technologies and everyday 'resistance', applications of a 'fashionable theorist' to obscure texts, and so on?³ We would suggest that the situation is not one of regulated predictability and esotericism, as outlined by Turner, but of disparate commitment. That is, research and teaching in the field of Indigenous cultural studies remains reflexive, critical and political, but there is less of it and it is less dense and less coordinated. Moments and spaces of condensation exist—the *Blacklines* collection edited by Michele Grossman in 2003 and the 'Critical Indigenous Studies' issue of *Cultural Studies Review* edited by Moreton-Robinson in 2009, for instance—although they appear as events more than institutions.

Yet, over the same period that we detect fragmentation within cultural studies, Indigenous studies programs have emerged and solidified their place within Australian higher education institutions. Some of the earliest Indigenous studies programs were centred on critically examining contemporary Indigenous politics and histories, one such early example being Monash University's Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs, established by Colin Tatz in 1964.⁴ As Zane Ma Rhea and Lynette Russell point out, the subsequent rise of Indigenous studies programs coincided with the professionalisation of degrees in education, nursing, social work, policing, law and health. The 1970s and 1980s, in particular, saw a new emphasis on training programs for Aboriginal workers in education.⁵ Currently, many universities mandate some Indigenous studies content for all students in these fields, which is of the utmost importance, given that graduates are likely to be involved in providing services to Indigenous people and communities.⁶

The professionalisation of Indigenous studies was complemented in the 1990s by an emerging—or perhaps re-emerging—scholarly focus on Indigeneity. Though courses with an Indigenous focus were increasingly being taught within traditional Humanities disciplines, they were often being led by non-Indigenous academics. As Heidi Norman documents, Indigenous-themed courses, where Aboriginal scholars assumed ‘the role of teaching about “us”’, often had to be wrestled from anthropologists.⁷ Such programs, Dudgeon and Fielder suggest, became important Indigenous-directed spaces for Indigenous people to engage in and critique ‘discourses about themselves’ and privilege Indigenous knowledges.⁸ By 1999, Linda Tuhiwai Smith wrote about a ‘burgeoning international community of Indigenous scholars and researchers’ who were ‘talking more widely about Indigenous research, Indigenous research protocols and Indigenous methodologies’.⁹ As in cultural studies, the ultimate political potential of critiquing knowledges and epistemologies remains an open question. What is the relation between denaturalising dominant conceptual frameworks and political action? There are other crossovers with cultural studies that can be stated more positively—shared texts, shared methods, shared scholars, shared spaces—though we would emphasise their common ambivalences. What Indigenous studies is, its disciplinary frameworks, its knowledge(s), its limitations and its possibilities continue to be an important and ongoing debate, currently taken up, for the most part, by Indigenous academics both here in Australia and globally.¹⁰

Throughout this collection, certain concerns are raised and return. Among them are Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition; the exercise of sovereignty, both by the settler state and by Indigenous peoples; and the meaning of land or country. Certain moments are also the source of response and reflection for many authors, particularly the 1992 *Mabo* decision, which seemingly carved out a space for Indigenous sovereignty, and the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (‘the Intervention’), when, for many, Indigenous human rights, let alone sovereign rights, were denied and the land was stolen once again. Collectively, these attachments not only demonstrate one way in which works by these

scholars have been orientated towards issues affecting the lives and livelihoods of Indigenous people, but also how they are understood as significant for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike. It is through such scholarship that connections are forged between the page and real life, and between both Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics and Indigenous communities. While, as Lester-Irabinna Rigney informs us, 'Indigenous researchers are more accountable, not only to their institutions, but also to their communities',¹¹ it is increasingly more commonplace for these communities to both regulate and collaborate in research by non-Indigenous scholars also. Today, the disciplines of cultural studies and Indigenous studies are linked in many ways by common attempts to create tangible connections between academia, society and communities. We argue that these authors' works, situated at the intersection of Indigenous cultural studies, are seeking to create change, transcending borders within the community, and between people and institutions.

Articulated power

Unsurprisingly, the most frequent theoretical touchstone across this book is French historian Michel Foucault. The power/knowledge nexus so brilliantly identified by Foucault has been an indispensable critical tool to scholars concerned with the 'critique of colonial knowing'.¹² Everywhere in this collection we see the analysis of colonial and contemporary discourses about indigeneity. Aileen Moreton-Robison, for instance, utilises Foucault's genealogy of rights to resituate the settler-Indigenous relation as one dominated by patriarchal white sovereignty exercising its power through racialised rights.¹³ Many authors also turn their attention to what Foucault called 'subjugated knowledges',¹⁴ retrieved here through oral history, textual analysis and ethnography. These include the extensive body of knowledge held by Indigenous people about whitefellas' habits and cultural mores, evidenced on the streets of a country town in anthropologist Gillian Cowlshaw's work, for example, through subversive performances, mockery and delicious irony.

However, it is the depth of the influence of the late Stuart Hall that we find especially striking. Hall's death in early 2014

has occasioned much reflection on his intellectual project, and we have identified three specific aspects of his work (and his influential reading of Antonio Gramsci) that have shaped the engagement of cultural studies scholars with indigeneity. The first is a dialectical account of power, utilised by (but not unique to) Hall,¹⁵ which remains attentive to relationships of domination and subordination; relationships embodied and reified through institutions, languages, spatial practices and so on; and the reproduction of power relations through processes of incorporation and resistance. There is no power without resistance, a point that of course Foucault also acknowledged, even as he dedicated himself to the analysis and elaboration of disciplinary and bio-power rather than resistance to it. For Gramsci, the conditions of domination also generate conditions of potential affordance; new interventions by power elicit new occlusions from power.

The second, related, trace of Hall's influence is in scholars' refusal to identify determinate social structures. His 'articulation approach' accepts the determining effects of power relations while categorically denying the 'belongingness' or necessary quality of any element within a given situation. As Hall argues, a theory of 'articulation' is aimed at:

understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and ... how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects.¹⁶

This is best exemplified in Hall's account, after Gramsci, of the state as a complex intractably engaged in often-enigmatic struggles on multiple fronts with multiple publics. Penny van Toorn's contribution draws on the scholarship of the Subaltern Studies group to carefully consider the limits of Gramsci's distinction between civil society and the state, the former eliciting consent and conformity, the latter ensuring discipline 'through direct rule and physical coercion'.¹⁷ Acknowledging Ranajit Guha's rejection of this model as Eurocentric—Guha characterised the British colonial state in India as 'dominance without hegemony'—van Toorn argues that coercion outweighed hegemony on many Aboriginal

reserves and missions.¹⁸ The archival records of this period, the ‘public transcripts of powerless people’, are read as discursive performances of subordination, necessary to the survival of a coercive regime.¹⁹ But van Toorn also reads the ‘hidden transcripts’ of the Lake Condah community, revealing the things that could not be safely said publicly and which struggle for emergence in the state’s archive of itself.

Contradictory currents underpinned the state-based late nineteenth-century protectionist system that created these missions and reserves. The confident colonial teleology, shared by evolutionary anthropology—which assumed Indigenous decline and mutual protection through segregation—met anxious, moralising discourses of degradation and proliferation. For Tony Birch, the *Victorian Aborigines Protection Act 1886* remains central to understanding, first, the alienation of Victorian Kooris from their country, and second, contemporary struggles for Koori identity which take place on the terrain of the past. Significantly, Birch dismisses any appeal to theories of ‘agency’, emphasising the severity and ‘ruthless bureaucratic efficiency’ of coercive colonial state.²⁰ For others the act of enduring has come to represent the Indigenous capacity to elude state objectives over time. Tellingly, Irene Watson joins surviving with resisting in the reference to herself as a ‘resisting-survivor’.²¹ Further, the archived past left behind by colonial bureaucratic regimes has been used by Birch in the present as a creative resource as well as being more broadly used as a source of contemporary Koori identities.²²

Finally, the influential Gramscian account of ‘ideology’ is in evidence throughout the collection. Ideology, Hall explains, is not a set of directives from above. It is a fragmentary and ‘necessarily and inevitably’ contradictory formation of discourses, working to both elicit our consent and invite (contained) forms of resistance.²³ Gramsci’s non-reductive approach to questions of race and class, as well as his insights about the constitution of ‘subjects of ideology’ are, Hall insists, vitally useful to theorists of racialised subjectivities, the subaltern, colonialism and racisms (which must be discussed in their historical specificity).²⁴ The pre-given unified ideological subject is undone. Instead, we are invited to recognise:

the ‘plurality’ of selves or identities of which the so-called ‘subject’ of thought and ideas is composed. [Gramsci] argues that this multi-faceted nature of consciousness is not an individual but a collective phenomenon, a consequence of the relationship between the ‘self’ and the ideological discourses which compose the cultural terrain of a society.²⁵

These selves are of course composed in part by colonial thought. Hall’s work helps us grasp the ways ethnic and racial difference can be ‘constructed’, and we would add experienced, as a set of antagonisms *within* a class. For Hall, ideology is not the intervention of power but rather ‘the terrain on which [people] move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc’.²⁶ The spatial metaphor of ideology as a cultural ‘terrain’ has particular resonance in Australia, where the fiction that the continent was *terra nullius* (‘land belonging to no one’, or no one’s terrain) before European colonisation legitimated the British Crown’s assertion of sovereignty in 1788. Although this legal falsehood was overturned by the 1992 *Mabo* decision, its ideological effects have proved resilient. As Indigenous scholars such as Moreton-Robinson have argued, the nation’s legitimacy and territorial unity are the keystones of Australian ideology, premised on the displacement of Indigenous societies and their knowledges, languages, economies, geographies and sovereignty within the national culture.²⁷ In the Australian settler colony, the question of the ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial’ remains particularly vexed. There is, as Jane M. Jacobs suggests, a ‘fantastic optimism’ to the word,²⁸ containing within it a certain anticipation that is, at the same time, a certain forgetting of the present perpetuation of colonial relations.²⁹ For Deborah Bird Rose, the end goal must be negotiated, dialogical forms of ‘decolonisation’ worked out between peoples ‘whose lives have become entangled in the violence of colonisation’.³⁰ In this collection, attention is more often weighted towards scrutinising the ‘originary violence’ of *terra nullius* and to thinking through its consequences, symptoms and genealogies, remaining attentive to the strategies of recognition and denial used to contain indigeneity’s political potentials.

Yet, as is evident in this collection, Indigenous difference is articulated *within* the ideological ‘terrain’ of the state. At the same time that forms of social disciplining may devalue everyday Indigenous social practices as archaic and/or anachronistic, ‘cultural difference’ may be essentialised or fetishised through official recognition and market activity. It is too simple to state that the ideology of the nation state only involves the absolute negation of indigeneity, as there are evidently moments when difference is desired or demanded. Bird Rose and Heather Goodall each note how idealisations are integral to both the avowal and the denial of present day Indigenous realities. This is the ‘cunning of recognition’ identified elsewhere by Elizabeth Povinelli: difference is valued by the liberal multicultural state until the point it recoils from ‘radical alterity’ or too much difference, revealing its intolerance.³¹ Using Hall and Gramsci, we can see that ideology is not to be found in one strategy but in the attempt to maintain a monopoly on the right to define indigeneity.³² ‘Who we are’, writes Irene Watson, ‘is often navigated from a violent space within which Aboriginality is measured for its degree of authenticity, and where those who do the measuring are ignorant or deniers of the history of colonialism.’³³

Scholars writing in contexts outside Australia — such as Chris Andersen, Devleena Ghosh and Brendan Hokowhitu, among others — have been equally attentive to the movement of indigeneity between desire and denial. Ben Dibley considers this problem in light of the official biculturalism of Te Papa Tongarewa, the national museum of Aotearoa New Zealand, where Maori are simultaneously celebrated, monetised and depoliticised by their co-option into a narrative of national commensalism. What appeared to many as a progressive reconciliation of two peoples in a national institution — ‘Te Papa’ often being translated as ‘Our Place’ — is also a rearticulation of the value and meaning of Indigenous difference in a neoliberal register, positioned now as a commodity whose forms are reassessed as either economically valuable, and therefore worthy of reproduction, or not.³⁴ We should be careful, however, not to overemphasise the extent to which ‘authentic’ cultural difference is celebrated by the state and others. For Irene Watson, ‘equality’ is but a masquerade

and ‘annihilation’ remains the state’s key modality.³⁵ There is no shortage of sociological or anthropological evidence to demonstrate the interpersonal and institutional discrimination that continues to be experienced by Indigenous people in Australia and other settler-colonial states. In Cowlshaw’s work, the Murri residents of the shared social domain of a country town are explicitly introduced from infancy to the fact of being an ‘Aborigine’, a subjected state of being.³⁶ And Lisa Slater’s work in remote Indigenous communities indicates there is little sense that the adults and children at Indigenous cultural festivals feel that they or their practices are valued or prized by ‘the mainstream’ of the non-Indigenous nation.³⁷

The case of pathologised indigeneity requiring remediation is different again.³⁸ The points of articulation between state power, embodied difference and liberal desires are carefully plotted by Tess Lea. Her analysis of the institutionalised creation and circulation of health ‘facts’ about Indigenous people illustrates the potential to denaturalise techniques of power and knowledge within this critical framework. Under the precepts of liberal governmentality, a social phenomenon must be made legible before it can be made the object of technical intervention (or ‘policy’), and, just so, these ‘facts’ are produced under the sign of social justice to remediate Indigenous social disadvantage. What is compelling about Lea’s analysis is that it shows not only that the creation of ‘facts’ are themselves a depoliticised intercession—a politics that appears as neutral and technical—but that these ‘facts’ have a life of their own within the order of settler governance. Practically, the ‘Indigenous governance machine’, as Emma Kowal calls it, is occupied by the task of reproducing its specific textual forms.³⁹ Similarly, Virginia Watson argues that social ‘crises’ come to be naturalised as pre-existing their discovery through being textualised. In the case of the Howard government’s Intervention in 2007, this means being narrated and then mediatised. In the Intervention, Irene Watson sees a frightening instance of ideological and historical convergence, a moment, recognisable within a historical genealogy of state power, in which the state retains a ‘vested interest in maintaining the founding order of things’.⁴⁰

'Not a word' of history

In this collection, the questions of power we outline above are thickly entangled with questions of authority and method, eliciting experiments with the possibilities of writing, speech and voice. Many contributions exhibit an implicit or explicit understanding of both the institutional power of the academy, and recognition that the histories and knowledges at work are always potentially dominated or dominating, before the fact. Repeatedly, these contributors respond by drawing attention to their encounters with spaces and gaps, the limits and possibilities of the archives, the centrality of forgetting, and the potentially productive force of that which is not known but which 'might be something'. Doubt, reflexivity and dialogical exchange feature as these writers speak without assurance; in the 'postcolonial' moment it is assurance that is rendered 'strange'.⁴¹

As is well known, since the early 1980s the singular story of the 'settled' nation has been unsettled by Indigenous and non-Indigenous revisionist historians contesting the colonial and national historiography. Significantly, Henry Reynolds, a foremost non-Indigenous historian, published *The Other Side of the Frontier* in 1981 as an attempt to corroborate the oral histories of frontier violence that had long circulated in Queensland. Since these initial intercessions, Aboriginal experiences of and perspectives on invasion, violence and dispossession, previously excluded from a national narrative centred on modernity and progress, have been forcefully asserted and in some cases incorporated into public discourses, narratives and institutions.⁴² Nonetheless, while many contributors note *Mabo's* importance, for example, and the broader fact of these public contestations in the 1980s and 1990s, the focus here is firmly on these issues' corollary. In short, disruptions of settler certainties about the events of the colonial past have also involved disrupting any certainty surrounding how it is we come to know about that past.

The figure of Captain Cook provides a concrete example of the new possibilities for history within cultural studies; he is clearly 'good to think with', to use Levi-Strauss' felicitous phrase.⁴³ Across Aboriginal Australia, histories of Cook tell another story of invasion and the coming of a second law and

social order. These histories are a ‘vehicle for analysis’, says Rose, as in the former Kimberley stockman, ‘master storyteller and political analyst’ Hobbles Danayarri’s compelling narratives about Cook, which Rose reads as commentaries on the moral content of the colonial encounter.⁴⁴ Taking their cue from Danayarri, key cultural studies scholars in Australia such as Stephen Muecke, Chris Healy and Katrina Schlunke have ‘experimented’ with Cook as they engage in new forms of history-making within a field of disruption and openings. Rather than ‘making space’ for Indigenous ‘voices’ that might undergo translation into a transcript for incorporation, Muecke makes full use of recordings in Aboriginal English, relishing their distinctive cadence and narrative style. A textual and textualised difference is brought out onto the page. Equally, the two interviews in this collection work in a multivocal register: separate, disembodied voices meet, traffic in ideas, and take obvious pleasure in their talking, but the gaps and frictions of conversation are preserved within the text. Anne Brewster’s interview with author Kim Scott and Christine Nicholls’ talk with painter Kathleen Petyarre both probe the potential and limits of exchange through and about ‘the coloniser’s language’.⁴⁵ Petyarre ends by signalling that the conversation cannot go on without transgressing the border between sayable and secret realms. She is unable to say more. ‘Not a word.’⁴⁶

Sonia Smallacombe’s contribution also deals with the question of voice through her interrogation of the epistemology of the tape recorder. In an essay that foreshadows the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report on Aboriginal children ‘wrenched from their families’ and placed in forms of state administration,⁴⁷ Smallacombe draws attention to the narrative conventions and processes of selection associated with researchers’ attempts to elicit ‘oral histories’. Oral histories are associated with the exciting challenges posed to historical master narratives as feminist, working-class and other ‘histories from below’ gained ground in the 1960s and 1970s,⁴⁸ but they are also in themselves a kind of historical artefact which came to encode new norms. The opening question, for example, routinely becomes a ‘beginning’. Trauma, as the anthropologist Michael Jackson states, interrupts the capacity to tell stories,

but oral historians need whole narratives with beginnings and endings just as humans need stories to live by.⁴⁹ Arguing that histories are ‘cultural forms of knowledge’,⁵⁰ Smallacombe sets out to work against Western linear narratives, collecting oral histories of the trauma of removal that ascribe seasons and kin relations a more central mnemonic function than events. Disrupting disciplinary conventions demands self-reflexivity about the forms of history-making that are everywhere naturalised. As the authors in this collection aver, the archive has its own history and cannot be mistaken for a full account.

We note that both Irene Watson and Smallacombe are Indigenous scholars who acknowledge their ‘outsiders’ status as they research and write about specific Indigenous realities. This is a de-essentialising move, these scholars making clear that they do not automatically access transcendental knowledge about what it means to be Aboriginal nor do they position themselves as having a secure authority to speak about all things Aboriginal. As Rigney notes, ‘there is no cultural homogeneity among Indigenous Australians ... There is no automatic or natural rapport between Indigenous Australians.’⁵¹ Further, their reflections break down not just the overlay of insider/outsider onto the Indigenous/settler distinction but also break down the researching non-Indigenous subject/Indigenous object distinction that continues to structure many anthropological inquiries. By contrast, Bronwyn Fredericks suggests that as ‘another Aboriginal woman’ she was in a position to design research questions responsive to Aboriginal women’s interests, and on this basis was entrusted with Aboriginal women’s stories about their lived marginalisation.⁵² As Rigney suggests, for many it is ‘politically more appropriate that Indigenous Australians speak through Indigenous researchers’.⁵³

Rebe Taylor also takes the reader into another kind of possibility for the researcher–researched dynamic. Attentive to the complex power relations at play, Taylor addresses the exchange of information, theories, questions and feelings between herself and the Indigenous descendants of sealers and Tasmanian Aboriginal women taken far from their homes to Kangaroo Island, South Australia.⁵⁴ Wendy Brady says she is tired of the kinds of historical works written by

well-meaning scholars who do not make a connection with Aboriginal people for whom the experiences of the past are not ‘historical’ but everyday and lived;⁵⁵ on Kangaroo Island this problematic separation is sutured.

Taylor’s contribution concludes with a careful discussion of the ways *that which is not known* — the fact of being ‘deprived’ of one’s history — is both something missing and also something experienced. ‘Not knowing their history was in fact their inheritance’, and a sense of loss is incorporated into a sense of belonging.⁵⁶ That which is not known or not declared is also central to Alison Ravenscroft’s re-readings of Roberta Sykes’s autobiographical trilogy. Ravenscroft notes that the reader might seek from these works ‘full and certain knowledge’ about Sykes’s parentage,⁵⁷ hopes that the texts themselves refuse to fulfil. While Sykes’s mother maintains her secrecy over the identity of Sykes’s biological father, Ravenscroft employs a reading practice that probes Sykes’s mother’s secrecy about her own racial identity. Ravenscroft renders Sykes’s mother’s whiteness ambiguous, unfixed and uncertain. The indeterminacy of these hierarchised racial categories is made clear by Sykes’s mother’s efforts to accomplish the ‘making-white’ of her daughters, an objective which is only ever provisionally realised, and which is brutally undone when Sykes is raped.⁵⁸ The work of Taylor and Ravenscroft, like that of many others in this collection, make clear how cultural studies scholars have persistently remained committed to mapping the ambiguities and effects of historical production rather than producing a newer synthesised historical ‘truth’.

Counter-narratives and counter-texts

The above suggests that, for these scholars, histories and life stories are not only inseparable from the social and linguistic context of their emergence, but also from their specific textual expressions. In the Black Soil country of northwest New South Wales and southwest Queensland, Goodall identifies how narratives of ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ are solidified through textual production and reproduction. For non-Indigenous pastoralists, newsletters, oral histories of specific plants or the collected reflections of ‘pioneer’ families are all expressions

and evidence of belonging, reproofs against the incursion of large-scale irrigators. Alternatively, Goodall notes, Indigenous peoples' belonging has been irrevocably conditioned by the emphasis on both 'tradition' and the colonial archive as sources of legal legitimacy after *Mabo*. This emphasis, Goodall and others note, has been amplified by the finding in 1998 that some implacable 'tide of history' might 'wash away' these sources of recognition.⁵⁹ In Eve Vincent's contribution, counter-narratives that assert Indigenous belonging are produced and reproduced through oral, textual and spatial practices. The senior Aboriginal women of Kupa Piti (Cooper Pedy) travelled the country between 1998 and 2004, in protest against the decision to store nuclear waste in the traditional country. Like Danayarri's use of the Cook narratives, the Kungka Tjuta strategically recalled their past experiences of the British nuclear testing program in the 1950s as a means of analysing and also affecting the present.⁶⁰

While Vincent's piece argues that the colonial imagination produces the desert as an empty, blank dead space, in Fredericks's contribution the spatial organisation of institutional sites are dissected from the perspective of Aboriginal women. The women she interviewed about their experiences of Queensland health services confirm the interrelated nature of 'who women are' and 'where women are'.⁶¹ Fredericks's fine-grained analysis of Aboriginal women's experiences reveals the way relations of domination and subordination have a spatialised aspect. In a stark example, the Indigenous Health Program was for a time located at the back of a building, requiring an Indigenous patient to first gain permission from a non-Indigenous administrator before being directed to the service. The symbolic configuration of the relationship between the public entrance, the mediating role of the reception desk and the Indigenous service's location mirrored the colonial order, reinforcing the women's sense of alienation from a site that was, ironically, designed to be 'inclusive' of a range of specific, differentiated health services.

The theme of shame recurs across this collection. While many anthropologists discuss the social role of the intense shame that is part of many Indigenous lifeworlds,⁶² in this volume shame is produced through the colonial relation.

Slater comments, for instance, that remote Indigenous youth feel shame ‘in the mainstream’.⁶³ Robyn Ferrell’s essay is dedicated to exploring the white body as the site and source of postcolonial shame. Recalling the Western Australian country town of Pinjarra, circa 1970, Ferrell explains how white farmers’ children warned each other not to drink from the taps Aboriginal children had touched with their mouths, a parallel to the sensed contamination of the social body by the reserve on the edge of ‘town’. Contact between excluded black bodies and the town’s white bodies contaminated both realms, and ‘our common shame’ demoralised both.⁶⁴ Ferrell powerfully joins the shame of the self-conscious adolescent girl under the public gaze — ‘eating the gluey pie from the bakery even though “they made you fat” and it was “unladylike” to eat in the street’ — with the politicised shame of the postcolonial subject, who becomes aware she grew up upstream from a massacre site.⁶⁵

Ferrell’s work contrasts with Biddle’s arresting reading of Central Desert women’s bodies as canvas texts and canvasses as country. Where Ferrell’s awkward body is under the gaze, Biddle talks of an entirely different corporeality, an embodied way of being that is ‘otherwise at risk’.⁶⁶ In ritual performances, Biddle shows, Warlpiri women bear marks and designs that serve to highlight the size, weight, movement, and, specifically, the fall of the breast. These painted-up breasts repeat an initial ancestral imprinting of country, the Dreaming Ancestors’ secretions and remains forming the previously unmarked landscape. Biddle’s argument is that the work of Warlpiri women artists invites us to enter into the paintings, becoming ‘vulnerable to their sensibilities’.⁶⁷ In asking what these paintings do rather than mean, Biddle invites the dissolution of the boundaries between ‘perception’, sustained by an ocular engagement, and an affective, sensory experience of the materiality of these works. If such a painting is a ‘text’, then it is one that is far more than a site for ‘content’ or an object of discourse.

Looking across this collection, two major insights emerge regarding scholars’ engagement with texts, whether they are didactic or ‘open’ works, canonical or obscure, ostensibly colonial or explicitly resistant. The first is that even those

texts safely harboured amid a wealth of secondary literature or steeped in colonial mythos remain, at all times, subject to emergent social relations, and therefore each persists as an object within relationality. This is not a simple relativism but rather an attentiveness to sets of relations. Discussing the paintings of renowned Western Desert artist Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Erin Manning states that he explained his works in terms of his relation to country and the networks *within and between* countries. Having detailed these dynamics, Manning opens a question regarding their textual iterations: what is our *own* relation to Tjapaltjarri's 'relationscapes' as they grow in fame and travel across international art spaces? The second insight, as such, is that texts are always social and contemporary, and therefore always open to ongoing negotiation. In Katelyn Barney's essay, she returns to Diane Bell's 1983 book *Daughters of the Dreaming*, received on publication as a progressive challenge to established ideas about Aboriginal women, and then re-read a decade later by Indigenous scholars as fundamentally disempowering. Returning to these critiques, Barney raises a comparison between Bell and white male anthropologists who have reflexively presumed the authority of 'a knowledgeable expert'. Is this researcher-researched relation innately 'Aboriginalist'—essentialising Aboriginality as 'other'—and, if so, is this a matter of the text itself or its production?⁶⁸ How might we come to know Bell's text again in the future?

Richard Martin, the author of the most recent contribution republished here, is wary of the kinds of ideologically inflected certainties that some practices of narrating histories bring into being. While acknowledging its analytical importance, he suggests that it is flawed to solely follow an Althusserian logic of interpellation in relation to texts. Support for dominant ideological regimes—however explicit—is never the sole message, nor is it so simply received. Community museums, 'explorer trees' and other admiring commemorations of the settler-colonial project are always open to reappropriation, ambivalence and uncertainties. More specifically, Martin is interested in the ambivalences and contradictions Indigenous people express about living with these localised histories. Working with the literatures

of anthropology and cultural studies, he issues a challenge to the latter by suggesting that reading ‘without diligent ethnography’ carries risks of (re)producing ‘a politicised interpretation, captive to contemporary forms of radicalism’.⁶⁹ In this, we detect a welcome rapprochement between two disciplines which, despite a shared interest in everyday practice and shared methodologies have, in recent memory, been overly satisfied to deal in caricatures of one another. These caricatures — anthropology as unremittingly colonialist and cultural studies as methodologically shallow — are the product of critiques that are necessary but ultimately limited. We must always read, as Martin suggests, for ‘the suggestion of other divergent responses’.⁷⁰

Conclusion

We see the project of Indigenous cultural studies centring on clarifying and interrogating the production of histories, power and texts. We know, too well, that the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people within research and academia has been one where, historically, exploitation and unequal power relationships were common; all too often, non-Indigenous academics spoke for Indigenous people. Stuart Hall writes that what is significant in the development of critical intellectual work are the breaks ‘where old lines of thought are disrupted, older constellations displaced, and elements, old and new, are regrouped around a different set of premises and themes’.⁷¹ The convergence of cultural studies and Indigenous studies represents one of Hall’s breaks, and this break is filled with possibilities for new ways of engaging with Indigenous knowledges, places and people. The work contained in this collection problematises and disrupts these histories and seeks to create new questions and, from these premises, innovative scholarship. In this convergence, Indigenous academics are returning the gaze that historically was cast upon them and their communities, and non-Indigenous scholars are also striving to build work that reflects the challenges Indigenous people have made to the academic world.

Like the authors collected in this book, we, the editors, hail from differing disciplinary backgrounds, our work intersects

with Indigenous studies in different ways, we are Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, Australians and recent migrants to Australia. Timothy Neale is a pakeha — or white settler New Zealander — though, like many raised in Aotearoa New Zealand, he has extended family grounded in pakeha, migrant and Maori communities and histories. Having studied settler literature as an undergraduate, he studied cultural studies as a graduate in Melbourne, where his research took him to far north Queensland. He now works in a cultural research centre in Sydney. Eve Vincent is a fifth generation white settler Australian whose country upbringing directed her towards the study of colonial history as an undergraduate in Melbourne, as well as involvement in various Aboriginal rights and environmental campaigns. As a postgraduate student in Sydney she turned to ethnography, and now lectures in an anthropology department. Crystal McKinnon is an Amangu woman from the Yamatji nation, who studied Indigenous history and politics as an undergraduate in Melbourne. Her upbringing around Aboriginal artists and activists has informed her current research, which traces Indigenous histories of resistance in artistic practices. She lectures in Indigenous politics along with working in Aboriginal community organisations in Melbourne.

In collaborating on this book, we found ourselves necessarily staking out our own meeting point, not only creating a new text but also, we hope, (re)performing the gathering of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people engaged at the intersection we are calling ‘Indigenous cultural studies’. In collaboration with our authors, we edited many of the pieces collected here, allowing us to include a broad selection of short works within the one volume. We also invited three authors — Tony Birch, Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Crystal McKinnon — to each write a new essay reflecting on a given section, its concerns and the work presented within it. Between them these three essays present thoughts on historical method and the so-called ‘history wars’, Foucault and apparatuses of power, textuality and category of the ‘Aboriginal text’, rethinking the grounds that have been — and might yet be — charted by the authors here. The final piece we have included is the product of a literal gathering, a roundtable discussion between the

book's editors and three former and current editors of the journal—Chris Healy, Stephen Muecke and Katrina Schlunke. In piecing this collection together, and seeking authors and editors to reflect on their contributions, our task was not only to assemble what we saw as some of the best past offerings in this field, but also those which provide inspiration and direction to future scholarship.

In closing, we would like to return to the happy meeting of Gramsci, Hall and the field of Indigenous cultural studies we sketched earlier, as Hall's work also presents certain issues for scholars working at this intersection. On one account, Hall might seem to question the identitarian claims sometimes made in the name of indigeneity, suggesting that the positing of historically consistent subjectivities is always the work of interpellation and construction. Hall acknowledged the power of valorising a past that colonialism has denigrated, though he was clearly more interested in a model of cultural identity formed through the ruptures of the colonial experience: history has intervened, making all of us 'what we have become'. Cultural identity, for Hall, was 'a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being"'.⁷² This might present a dilemma to scholars committed to supporting Indigenous aspirations, who may well be deeply invested in essentialist frames of reference. At this juncture recent work by anthropologist James Clifford is particularly insightful, in its use of 'articulation' approaches to argue that 'the whole question of authenticity is secondary'; indigeneity and the 'truth' of difference, he suggests, is only a matter for non-Indigenous scholars in its performances and performativity and not in its being.⁷³ By thinking about difference in this way, it is possible to observe that the practices of Indigenous activism may indeed be 'implicated in colonial and neo-colonial (capitalist) structures' of recognition and expropriation while also insisting that they are not ultimately determined by them. Quoting Charles Hale, Clifford suggest that Indigenous politics is best understood as a practice of 'attempting to exercise rights granted by the neoliberal state, while at the same time eluding the constraints and dictates of those very concessions'; an undetermined and open-ended practice of 'becoming' Indigenous whose relation to state hegemony, at any one time, may be radically uncertain.⁷⁴

Clifford's chief ethical injunction to students and scholars, therefore, would seem to be to extend an inexhaustible hospitality to critical uncertainty. In republishing past offerings we hope to inspire others to take up this invitation to critically reflect on—and engage in—the contingent transactions of Indigenous cultural studies.

Notes

- 1 John Hartley, *A Short History of Cultural Studies*, Sage, London, 2003, p. 2.
- 2 Graeme Turner, *What's Become of Cultural Studies?*, Sage, London, 2012, p. 2.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 4 Zane Ma Rhea and Lynette Russell, 'The Invisible Hand of Pedagogy in Australian Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Education', *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2012, p. 19.
- 5 See Heidi Norman, 'Mapping More Than Aboriginal Studies: Pedagogy, Professional Practice and Knowledge', *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2014, p. 43.
- 6 Rhea and Russell, p. 20.
- 7 Norman, p. 42.
- 8 Pat Dudgeon and John Fielder, 'Third Spaces Within Tertiary Places: Indigenous Australian Studies', *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 16, no. 5, 2006.
- 9 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed., Zed Books, London, 2012, p. 4.
- 10 Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith, *Theorizing Native Studies*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014.
- 11 Lester-Irabinna Rigney, 'Internationalization of an Indigenous Anticolonial Cultural Critique of Research Methodologies: A Guide to Indigenist Research Methodology and its Principles', *Wicazo Sa Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1999, p. 118
- 12 See Ian Anderson, 'Introduction: The Aboriginal Critique of Colonial Knowing', in Michele Grossman (ed.), *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003, pp. 17-24.
- 13 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Imagining the Good Indigenous Citizen: Race War and the Pathology of Patriarchal White Sovereignty', in this volume, pp. 310-30.
- 14 Michel Foucault, 'Two Lectures', in Colin Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1980, pp. 81-1.
- 15 See Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, HarperCollins, London, 1976; Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, Holmes & Meier, New York, 1978.
- 16 Hall, 'On Postmodernism', p. 53.
- 17 Penny van Toorn, 'Hegemony or Hidden Transcripts? Aboriginal Writings from Lake Condah, 1876-1907', in this volume, pp. 384-407.
- 18 Van Toorn, pp. 387. See also Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1997.
- 19 Van Toorn, pp. 388.
- 20 Tony Birch, 'The Last Refuge of the "Un-Australian"', in this volume, p. 198.
- 21 Irene Watson, 'In the Northern Territory Intervention: What Is Saved or Rescued

- and at What Cost?', in this volume, pp. 167-86.
- 22 Tony Birch, 'Footnote to a History War: (archive box no.2)', in Margaret Bradstock (ed.), *Antipodes: Poetic Responses*, Phoenix Education, Sydney, 2011, p. 1.
 - 23 This account also owes a debt to Althusser's work on the 'lacunar' quality of ideology as the suggested and implied content of governing rules which are, as a whole, logically incoherent. Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in his *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, New Left Books, London, 1971.
 - 24 Gramsci, Hall reminded us, was born in Sardinia in 1891, a southern island 'which stood in a "colonial" relationship to the Italian mainland'. While the so-called 'southern question' remained of central concern to Gramsci, he did not 'analyse in depth the colonial experience or imperialism, out of which so many characteristically 'racist' experiences and relationships in the modern world have developed'. It was Hall who produced an account of how Gramsci might be used to analyse questions of race and colonialism (see Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1986, pp. 415-16).
 - 25 Hall, 'Gramsci's Relevance', p. 433.
 - 26 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1971, p. 377.
 - 27 See Aileen Moreton-Robinson (ed.), *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2007; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a White Postcolonizing Society', in Sara Ahmed (ed.), *Uprootings/Regroundings*, Bloomsbury, London, 2004; Irene Watson, 'Sovereign Spaces, Caring for Country, and the Homeless Position of Aboriginal Peoples', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 108, no. 1, 2009.
 - 28 Jane M. Jacobs, *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City*, Routledge, London, p. 24.
 - 29 Chris Healy, *Forgetting Aborigines*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2008. Some scholars address this problem by making a distinction between the use of the term post-colonial with a hyphen, and postcolonialism, without a hyphen. Those wishing to stress postcolonialism as a critical, theoretical, disciplinary and political project, rather than a temporal descriptor, use the latter term. This approach is exemplified by Robert Young who argues postcolonialism is best understood as a wide-ranging political project with transformative energies. Its objectives are 'to reconstruct Western knowledge formations, reorient ethical norms, turn the power structures of the world upside down, refashion the world from below'. In the radical inequalities of the globalised present, Young sees colonialism's historical reach, the 'ongoing life' of its 'residues, living remains, lingering legacies' (see Robert Young, 'Postcolonial Remains', *New Literary History*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2012, pp. 20-1). Stuart Hall proffered that the project of 'postcolonialism' only became possible at a certain time, after the 'high point' of colonial domination has passed. Hall argues: 'So, the postcolonial is not the end of colonisation. It is after a certain kind of colonialism, after a certain moment of high imperialism and colonial occupation — in the wake of it, in the shadow of it, infected by it — it is what it is because something else has happened before, but it is also something new' (Julie Drew, 'Cultural Composition: Stuart Hall on Ethnicity and the Discursive Turn', in Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham (eds), *Race, Rhetoric, and the Postcolonial*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1999, p. 230).
 - 30 Deborah Bird Rose, 'Decolonising the Discourse of Environmental Knowledge in Settler Societies', in this volume, pp.209.
 - 31 Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the*

- Making of Australian Multiculturalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2002.
- 32 Michael R. Griffiths, 'The White Gaze and Its Artifacts: Governmental Belonging and Non-Indigenous Evaluation in a (Post)-Settler Colony', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2012.
- 33 Watson, 'In the Northern Territory Intervention', p. 172.
- 34 Ben Dibley, 'Antipodean Aesthetics, Public Policy and the Museum: Te Papa, For Example', in this volume, pp. 271-90.
- 35 Watson, 'In the Northern Territory Intervention'.
- 36 Gillian Cowlshaw, 'Performing Aboriginality: The Politics and Poetics of Citizenship in Everyday Life', in this volume, pp. 229-49.
- 37 Lisa Slater, "'Calling Our Spirits Home": Indigenous Cultural Festivals and the Making of a Good Life', in this volume, pp. 354-67.
- 38 For analyses of pathologisation see Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Imagining the Good Indigenous Citizen: Race War and the Pathology of Patriarchal White Sovereignty', in this volume, pp. 310-30; Elizabeth Povinelli, 'The Part That Has No Part' in her *Economies of Abandonment*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2011, pp. 47-73; Timothy Neale, 'Staircases, Pyramids and Poisons: The Immunitary Paradigm in the Works of Noel Pearson and Peter Sutton', *Continuum*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2013.
- 39 Emma Kowal, 'Postcolonial Friction: The Indigenous Governance Machine', in Ghassan Hage and Emma Kowal (eds), *Force, Movement, Intensity*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2011.
- 40 Watson, 'In the Northern Territory Intervention', p. 167.
- 41 Stephen Muecke, 'Experimental History? The "Space" of History in Recent Histories of Kimberley Colonialism', in this volume, pp. 50-63.
- 42 S.G. Foster and Bain Attwood, *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2003.
- 43 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Garden City Press, London, 1966.
- 44 Deborah Bird Rose, 'The Saga of Captain Cook: Remembrance and Morality', in Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan (eds), *Telling Stories*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2001, p. 61.
- 45 Anne Brewster and Kim Scott, 'Can You Anchor a Shimmering Nation State via Regional Indigenous Roots?', in this volume, pp. 502-22; Kathleen Petyarre and Christine Nicholls, 'Old Lady Mob' Interview, in this volume, pp. 449-57.
- 46 Petyarre and Nicholls, p. 455.
- 47 Sonia Smallacombe, 'Oral Histories of the Stolen Generation', in this volume, pp. 64-9; Commonwealth Government Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), *Bringing Them Home: A Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 1997.
- 48 For example, see Wendy Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour: An Oral Record of the 1930s Depression in Australia*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1978.
- 49 Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity*, Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen, 2002.
- 50 Smallacombe, p. 67.
- 51 Rigney, p. 117.
- 52 Bronwyn Fredericks, "'There is nothing that identifies me to that place": Indigenous Women's Perceptions of Health Spaces and Places', in this volume, pp. 291-309.
- 53 Rigney, pp. 117-18.
- 54 Rebe Taylor, "'All I Know is History": Memory and Land Ownership in the Dudley District, Kangaroo Island', 1999 in this volume, pp. 70-90.
- 55 Wendy Brady, 'Indigenous Insurgency against the Speaking for Others', in this

- volume, pp. 120.
- 56 Taylor, p. 31.
- 57 Alison Ravenscroft, 'The Production of Whiteness: Revisiting Roberta Sykes's *Snake Dreaming*', in this volume, p. 409.
- 58 Ibid., p. 416.
- 59 Goodall, p. 35; David Ritter, 'The Judgement of the World: The Yorta Yorta Case and the "Tide of History"', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 35, no. 123, 2004.
- 60 Eve Vincent, 'Knowing the Country', in this volume, pp. 138-52.
- 61 Fredericks, p. 294.
- 62 See, for example, Jennifer Biddle, 'Shame', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 12, 1997, pp. 227-39.
- 63 Slater, p. 362.
- 64 Robyn Ferrell, 'Pinjarra 1970: Shame and the Country Town', in this volume, p. 130.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 Jennifer Biddle, 'Breasts, Bodies, Art: Central Desert Women's Paintings and the Politics of the Aesthetic Encounter', in this volume, p. 426.
- 67 Ibid., p. 425.
- 68 See Bain Attwood, 'Introduction: Power, Knowledge and Aborigines', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 35, 1992.
- 69 Richard J. Martin, "'Reading" the Leichhardt, Landsborough and Gregory Explorer Trees of Northern Australia', in this volume, p. 539.
- 70 Ibid., p. 540.
- 71 Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1980, p. 57.
- 72 Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity, Community, Cultural Difference*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1990, p. 225.
- 73 James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century*, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 2013, p. 61.
- 74 Clifford, pp. 301, 38; Charles Hale, 'Does Multiculturalism Menace? Governance, Cultural Rights and the Politics of Identity in Guatemala', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 34, 2002, p. 499.

I: History

'I'm not sure how to begin it': The Welcome Uncertainties of Doing History

Tony Birch

[White] Possession

If you don't mind I'd like to begin with a question. Does anyone remember the 'History War' of the late nineties and early years of the new century? Yes, I'm sure some of you do. Okay. Next question. How many of you remember who volunteered for the frontline in this war? I hope you don't mind if I also speculate a general response:

The History War in Australia was a battle between conservative forces, led by the then prime minister, John Howard, and his hardened foot soldiers such as the writer, Keith Windschuttle, supported by the armoured carrier, *Quadrant* magazine. On the other side of the trenches were Aboriginal people, outgunned and unable to fight for themselves. They came to rely on a band of mercenaries known collectively as the *professional historians*. And what was the war fought over? Well, it's a little complicated, but let's throw a net over this one and address Australia's colonial past and the reverberation of that past in contemporary society.

The answer to the second question is reasonably accurate, although it lacks specific detail. Unfortunately the answer to the first question is an act of camouflage. We all remember Keith Windschuttle as a suitable rightwing whipping boy for the Left. He was the Snidely Whiplash in a pantomime of smoke and mirrors. And John Howard? For sure, he had the clear intention in mind of shifting public debate in Australia, away from what he regarded as the unnecessary depth of the

mea culpa expressed by the then prime minister, Paul Keating, in his 1992 Redfern speech. In 1996 Howard produced an oration of his own when delivering the annual Thomas Playford Lecture in Adelaide. It was on that night that Howard attempted to take Australia back to the 1950s, presenting the view that Australians were entitled to hold a 'relaxed and comfortable' view of Australian history.

The History War was actually a turf war, waged between liberals and conservatives over who would control the discipline. Those on the Right were concerned that a dominant narrative doing the rounds at the time was *sympathetic* to Aboriginal people. Not only was control of the past at stake but land and the potential for reciprocity over past wrongs. When the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) released its *Bringing Them Home* report in 1997, dealing with the history and legacy of the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities, Australians were faced with sharp choices and important questions.¹

Did Australia possess the maturity to express genuine remorse for this violent and destructive history? I have no doubt that some white Australians did feel remorse. Whether it was a lasting expression is difficult to assess, although I suspect that with time, that remorse dissipated. Also, while many thousands of people registered testimonials in *Sorry Books* across the nation, and hundreds of thousands more marched in our major cities in 2000 in support of reconciliation, these acts of symbolism, on their own, rung hollow.

Beyond acts of symbolism and self-satisfaction it is inarguable that white Australia is capable of fully accepting responsibility for past wrongs against Aboriginal people. On this point the political and legal systems, along with the wider community, has failed miserably. The stories provided to the *Bringing Them Home* inquiry were heart-wrenching. A close friend of mine returned home to South Australia and, along with other women, gave her own testimony in-camera. The nature of the stories presented were so harrowing they were not released to the public. When the *Bringing Them Home* report was released to the public many non-Aboriginal people were

in tears, including the then opposition leader, Kim Beazley, who broke down in parliament. I have previously written that I have no doubt that the expression of grief by Beazley and others was genuine. Unfortunately, at the same time, many of those who broke down held the same view as conservatives, that Aboriginal people should not be entitled to compensation as a result of the crimes committed against them.

It's not about money, we heard many people comment at the time. An odd remark, in a country where people have the democratic and legal right to seek recompense in the civil court for pain and suffering. And after all, at the time and since, many people have rightly received monetary compensation for the abuse they suffered as children while in both government and privately operated institutions. (In most cases, victims have received monetary compensation without the trauma of a court case.) So, where's the connection? Well, firstly, and let's dispose of this quickly, I have no doubt that those who opposed the notion of monetary compensation for Aboriginal people held to the racist viewpoint that Aboriginal people do not have the level of sophistication to *handle* money of the amounts suggested. Also, in seeking compensation it was as if Aboriginal people were spoiling the purity of *white* grief.

There is nothing revelatory about this view. And nothing new. But what compensation would have resulted in was an *outcome*. Genuine reciprocity has the potential to produce a state of equity. And the last thing many Australians desire or can cope with is for Aboriginal people to experience a state of equity. Many wish to maintain the inequitable and patronising relationship of *pity*. It is the emotion that drives the relationship between conservative and liberal-minded Australians alike in their dealings with Aboriginal people. The reception of the *Bringing Them Home* report upheld this perverse notion. People could feel and express their sadness. They could take on Aboriginal grief as their own. And they could feel the 'sorrow and the pity' for those who had suffered with no cost.

Is this a harsh — even cruel — judgement on my part? Possibly. But not nearly as cruel as the outcome for the Aboriginal people who relived the horrors of their experience

at the *Bringing Them Home* hearings. And not nearly as cruel as the burden of national collective memory carried by Aboriginal people from childhood, through adulthood, often separated from family, to the grave. I know many Aboriginal Elders, most of them women, who can never afford to forget this past, even though they would occasionally prefer to, if for the briefest moment of relief. Is this not the most savage and violent irony in a country otherwise glued together by selective and collective amnesia? Collective responsibility lies within each of us. And yet we have failed miserably in applying it. Marching across the bridges of reconciliation was not an act of responsibility. It was an expression of self-congratulation. And, bizarrely, it had the effect of delivering Howard's 'relaxed and comfortable' mantra to the masses, with people going home at the end of the day carrying balloons and feeling good about themselves.

The second choice that Australian had available to them after the release of the *Bringing Home Report* was to deny its contents completely. The testimony and resulting report was another fiction, a lie concocted to sully Australia's colonial past; a story of the progress of European civilisation and capitalist development and growth across a wide brown land. Some Australians took up the denialist mantra with inherent ease. Others needed a little nudging and *leadership*. This is where conservatives came into their own, defending 'ordinary Australians' who had nothing to be ashamed about, people who were entitled to express pride about Australian history, people who need not cover the monuments of the nation in black cloth. This was John Howard at his best (and worst). Who better to lead a throwback narrative of the nation's story than a strategically astute throwback? *We* could feel pity for those we had 'conquered' with a clear sense of 'relaxation'.

There was, of course, for the mining and agriculture sector, big business and conservatives, something more immediately at stake: land. The various legal manifestations of the native title legislation that followed the High Court's *Mabo* decision in 1992, while offering very limited outcomes for Aboriginal people, did send fear through those who hold a short term and exploitative philosophy of land tenure. (Certainly, many exploited unrealised fears.) The debates over history were

more immediate with regard to native title specifically and land rights more generally. These were debates over the past that held the potential to be decided in the court. Pity and sorrow would play little part. These would be more hard-nosed debates, where *proof* and *evidence* would come into play. Hence the *privileging* of the footnote and the arrival of the *professional historian*.

The History War was a white war. It was a battle over control of a discipline. On one side were a group of populist mavericks who behaved crudely on occasion. While feigning the manners of the formal discipline of history, they didn't exactly abide by the Marquis of Queensberry rules established by the dons safely embedded behind the sandstone fortresses of Australia's older universities. Opposing them were the aristocrats of the discipline, disgusted that their lifework was being pissed on by a troupe of populist yobbos faking intellectualism. Aboriginal people were regarded as nothing more than a carcass of history. Rather than being the body protected by the history profession, we were picked over by opposing sides. Whoever won the battle would take what was left of the carcass home, back to the ivory tower, gentlemen's club or museum glass case, to be paraded like the colonial trophies of old.

The History War allowed some Australians to seep themselves in sepia. Many did, unfortunately. With hope in mind, this period in Australia's intellectual life (or lack of it), also provided those interested in a more sophisticated articulation of Australia's past with the opportunity to produce new narratives, based on ethical thinking, experimentation and humility. Thankfully, some of these *ways of seeing* and writing were able to cut through the bullshit, and they subsequently had a welcome and profound impact on my own thinking. I, *we*, are indebted to these writers.

[White] Dispossession

UTS *Review* and its reincarnation, *Cultural Studies Review*, has always done the thinking and writing about history a little differently; no doubt influenced by the fact that many of the writers appearing in the journal who have tussled or danced with history are not members of the professional historian's

club. They are a suspect bunch. If not Edward Said's *amateurs*, they have been, at a minimum, meddling polymorphic intellectuals stepping outside their own discipline with the audacious idea that they have something to say about history. During the History War, cultural studies *types* were whipped around the ears with a feather by liberal-minded aristocrats as often as conservative historians were. And they were perhaps more dangerous. Looking back over some of the work published in the last twenty years or so by the journal it is important to remind ourselves that the ways in which we remember, document and deal with the past in Australia has been articulated with creative and intellectual ingenuity by particular thinkers.

Writing for *UTS Review* in 2001, Wendy Brady rightly took on those intellectuals who, armed with the undoubted confidence in their sense of entitlement, felt that they could write about whoever they wished and when. The Aboriginal *Other* of the 1990s were regarded as a troublesome nuisance when it came to matters academic. We were, to the greater extent, well outside the tent. And when we did enter we behaved badly, demanding the right to speak for ourselves, and occasionally asking those who could talk under academic wet cement to shut up. It was not uncommon to go to conferences when all the speakers on a panel talking about *the aborigines* were non-Aboriginal, as were most members of the audience. When an Aboriginal hand went up, anytime a blackfella got to her feet demanding to be heard, audience members would sink into their seats, while those behind the microphones would offer a half-arsed apology or defence. Afterwards, over the tea and biscuits (which were never good) the quiet collective mutterings about 'the rudeness of *those* people' would build to a crescendo of hysteria. (I kid you not, I was there).

Brady's essay, 'Indigenous Insurgency Against The Speaking For Others',² was written at a time when prominent historians, including Henry Reynolds, Ann McGrath and Bain Attwood, had been anointed as the most highly regarded experts on Aboriginal history. It should go without saying that each of these historians had done and continue to produce significant and influential scholarship. And yet among scholars involved in the debate about Australia's past there were

no Aboriginal voices beyond the token warm-up act before a conference, forever welcoming people to country, or an 'open mic' at the end of a conference session. Reading Brady's essay years later I still sense her anger and frustration. Importantly, she does not only demand that Aboriginal people be given the respect and space to speak for ourselves. She also pleads with non-Aboriginal scholars to give some thought to doing things differently.

And perhaps with a combination of humility and creativity? Enter one Stephen Muecke. Muecke had caused much excitement among scholars following the co-authorship of *Reading the Country* with Aboriginal Elder, Paddy Roe, and the artist, Krim Benterrak, in 1984.³ The project was genuinely democratic, patient and captivating. The book was also a milestone in Muecke's intellectual development. The time he spent with Paddy Roe and his community exposed Muecke to an Aboriginal way of making sense of the world—an Aboriginal philosophy—and freed him of the restraints of academic thinking without having to forgo the institution completely. His 1996 essay was an exercise in giving up the traditional authority of the Western academic, and if not fully satisfying Brady's call to stepping out of the way, it at least met with her desire for non-Aboriginal intellectuals to reconsider their position of privilege.⁴ Muecke's experiment was not so radical on face value. He was, as he put it, asking us to think differently about how we engage with the past, to challenge traditional modes of research and narrative documentation, and, as he put it, *to test things out* (Muecke's italics). He did not want to turn the academic house upside down, aware of the potential 'irresponsibility' of such an act. But he did want to shake it up.

With the exception of a handful of young historians who had enjoyed the pleasure of sitting at the mischievous table of the late and great Professor Greg Denning, few took up Muecke's lead or challenge. Muecke simply shrugged his nonchalant shoulders and ploughed on, becoming simultaneously an intellectual trickster and a deeply moral thinker. His 2008 *Cultural Studies Review* essay was a timely reminder of the value of his project and the potential of its objective.⁵ Rather than narrowly viewing Captain James Cook

as an imperial hero, Muecke's idea (shared with the scholars Chris Healy and Katrina Schlunke) was to engage with Cook as 'an enduring icon, a huge network of narratives, images and ceremonies'. There was no disrespect sought in such an approach. Taking his lead from Aboriginal narratives of Cook, Muecke explained that the 'new chapters on Aboriginal history to the Australian story has not had the effect of wiping out Captain Cook, it has simply added something compelling as a story and as an argument'.⁶

Another innovative scholar appearing in the journal around the same time was the respected historian, Heather Goodall. Goodall cut her political and intellectual teeth in the urban land rights protest scene of the early 1970s. Her pathway to intellectual thought was, not surprisingly, like Muecke's heavily influenced by regular socialisation with Aboriginal people. She did not become involved with Aboriginal people to study us. Her involvement, I suspect, was an act of political urgency mixed with the determination of being a young activist. While political activism is a hard and sometimes unrewarding slog, the education and insight it provides cannot be found in any textbook. Knowledge is experienced through both the heart and the head. It is at times a visceral experience. Those who go through it, and learn from it, not only challenge their own thinking. They often become the mentors to those who decide to follow in their footsteps.

It is not surprising then that the echoes of Goodall's *UTS Review* essay can be found in a later *Cultural Studies Review* essay by Eve Vincent.⁷ The Goodall essay, similar to Muecke's work, was another attempt at inclusion. Through a discussion of storytelling and how it operates in rural communities, Goodall provided an insight into the complexity of narrative, politics and memory when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people compete over the same land. With oral documentation taking on greater significance as one outcome of native title legislation, Goodall was aware of the ramifications for the privileging of particular stories over others. The essay is a sad one, in that, purposefully or not, it highlights some of the commonalities of experience shared by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in rural and regional Australia: experiences of loss and disadvantage. They are often the people city-based

politicians use as a wedge to enhance their own political standing.

Eve Vincent, now an anthropologist, tells the story of her travels to Coober Pedy and her meetings with the Aboriginal women of the Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta (a council of senior Aboriginal women based in Coober Pedy). It is a piece of writing immersed in respect and necessary self-reflection and examination. My response to reading the article may sound a little hippy. Please don't be mistaken. Vincent begins her essay with the honest assessment, 'I'm not sure how to begin it.' (And maybe she doesn't). But what she does know is that she must tread a little lightly on land that does not belong to her. And what she also knows is that the Aboriginal women she engages with are running the show, and that if her trip and subsequent 'research outcomes' are to meet with success, she must listen to, observe and learn from these women. I have no idea if Vincent was aware of these ethical and intellectual guiding stars before embarking on her trips to outback South Australia. Or if she discovered them as an act of *doing*. (I suspect it would most likely be a bit both, with an emphasis on the latter.) The essay is a quiet, observational cameo, which befits a scholar never ashamed to admit she doesn't know it all.

Vincent's work, along with the scholarship delivered by Muecke, Goodall and other non-Aboriginal scholars has often delivered me a sense of hope. They are writers and thinkers dissatisfied with a pervading sense of the colonial *status quo* that some in Australia desperately cling to. But the inroads of such thinkers are sadly limited. The project of shallow nationalism and petty hero worship is hard to shift in this country. (The current commemorations of the one hundredth anniversary of the beginning of World War I are indicative of this eternal flag-waving exercise.) And all the while that we remember a war on the other side of the planet, we continue to go to war at home against some of our own citizens. Recent revelations that the New South Wales police removed Aboriginal children from their homes in riot gear and at gunpoint is indicative of wider and systemic practices of a twenty-first-century manifestation of colonial violence.⁸

With this in mind, Irene Watson's analysis of the Commonwealth government's state intervention in the

Northern Territory in 2009 was a reminder that despite the rhetoric of progress with which the nation dresses itself, many Aboriginal people continue to live in circumstances approaching a police state.⁹ She correctly likens the use of the military by the Commonwealth to occupy Aboriginal land as an act of state aggression and desperation. Watson reminded us that government strategies to deal with issues of poverty, an absence of a functioning education and health system, and the related problems of abuse and domestic violence, were only made possible by removing rights from Aboriginal women. Her assessment that the Northern Territory intervention 'is more a comment upon the Australian government's management of the colonial project than it is about the culture of perpetrators' is a damning and accurate conclusion to one of the most articulate, informed and powerful pieces of writing produced around state policy and Aboriginal communities in the twenty-first century.¹⁰

From its beginnings, *UTS Review* and *Cultural Studies Review* has attempted to shift debate in Australia with vigour, cheek and boldness. Without the interjection of the journal into Australian intellectual life, and its analysis and commentary on the history and culture of this country, we would have asked far fewer questions of ourselves. And we don't like asking questions in this country, particularly when we feel unease over the answers. But what we need, now more than ever, is unease and discomfort, rather than the opposite. To make this possible we require the shape-shifting provocations presented by writers such as those I have mentioned.

Notes

- 1 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), *Bringing Them Home: A Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 1997.
- 2 Wendy Brady, 'Indigenous Insurgency Against the Speaking for Others', in this volume, pp. 112-21.
- 3 Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: An Introduction to Nomadology*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1984.
- 4 Stephen Muecke, 'Experimental History? The "Space" of History in Recent Histories of Kimberley Colonialism', in this volume, pp. 50-63.
- 5 Stephen Muecke, 'A Touching and Contagious Captain Cook: Thinking History through Things', in this volume, pp. 153-66.

- 6 Ibid., pp.157.
- 7 Heather Goodall, "Fixing" The Past: Modernity, Tradition and Memory in Rural Australia', in this volume, pp. 91-111; Eve Vincent, 'Knowing the Country', in this volume, pp. 138-52.
- 8 See, 'Police in riot gear removing Aboriginal children at "gunpoint"', <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2014/09/12/police-riot-gear-removing-aboriginal-children-gunpoint>.
- 9 Irene Watson, 'In the Northern Territory Intervention: What is Saved or Rescued and at What Cost?', in this volume, pp. 167-85.
- 10 Ibid., p. 181.

Experimental History?

The 'Space' of History in Recent Kimberley Colonial Histories

Stephen Muecke

Experimentation involves using simple or complex investigative procedures, with a particular aim in mind, to vary or modify natural phenomena and make them appear in circumstances or under conditions which nature does not provide for them.¹

Groucho Marx, on becoming a hotel manager, orders the room numbers to be changed. Someone protests, 'But think of the confusion!' Groucho: 'But think of the fun!'²

The debates about that space will be endless. Will it be a vaginal slash in the earth? Will it be stiff and erect? Will it be black or white? Whose names will be upon it?³

In 1991 Daniel S Milo and his friends in Paris, constituting a working group in 'experimental history', published a volume of essays entitled *Alter Histoire*.⁴ Their obsession was to:

liberate the imagination of the historian, admire the force of the possible, intervene in order to spread disorder. This libertarian attitude carried with it certain polemics: a refusal of history as reenactment and the dogma of the opacity of the past, and a distrust of systems of description and explanation.⁵

Their method? The *practice* of an experimental history which

would systematically defamiliarise and displace historical objects.

The ‘experimental’ has different senses across the two domains of science and art.⁶ Science has been experimental ever since Galileo, and the experimental in art would seem to have a shorter history. We talk freely of experimental writing as if its effects were harmless because they are sequestered in aesthetic domains, and in laboratories scientists pursue the testing of their hypotheses with experimental methods so well-established they furnish few surprises. The aspect of the experimental that I would like to borrow from science is that which would have us *test things out*, which would not only mean comparing and contrasting, juxtaposing conflicting accounts and testing them against facts (and on new equipment), but also, in a human discipline like history, against the end product of historical work which is the audiences constituted as part of historical formations, for history will only be history if it is read and made sense of.

The experimental in the creative arts draws more closely on the libertarianism of Milo and co. or the Dada connections of Groucho Marx. Here one has to be a little more cautious since one is playing on the edge of irresponsibility. In order not to be totally haphazard, this play has to make some kind of sense. For instance, a ‘safe’ disregard for patriarchal histories could lead one into fertile territory occupied by those hungry for women’s and postcolonial histories (Tunisian proverb: *Take advice from the elders, then do the opposite*). At the same time, it would seem that making sense of history means to keep non-sense in view at the horizon of one’s thought and practice. Experimental history implies a gap between what has made sense in the past, and what no longer makes sense, whether it is past events or new ones demanding to be gathered into the fold of meaning.

These events as historical events are not always presented and re-presented to us in a perfectly clear historical frame. There is a bleeding of signification across literary, cultural and historical domains, as some of the other pieces in this issue also show. In schools in Australia, cinema might be used in history classrooms as a memory device, as if Peter Weir’s *Gallipoli* were somehow a close enough representation of the

ANZAAC legend, yet would these same teachers consider using *Number 96* episodes to examine the sixties? Probably not, but the importance of the audio-visual archive and the part it plays in fabricating historical memory is certainly underestimated at the moment.

In the case of Aboriginal history in Australia, the 'discovery' of spaces beyond the frontier and pre-1788 forced a radical reconceptualisation of national histories. The gap between sense of what 'we always knew' and non-sense of Aborigines as historical is most often elided in accounts which proceed step by step, from one certainty to the next. To the extent that histories are considered 'creative' they allow for the temporal or spatial gap between the established and the new, the mundane and the wondrous. They concede that the process of 'making sense' depends on it, and that there is a surplus or a dimension of excess in every object.⁷ History will then operate with uncertainty as much as certainty, holding that every act of memory is also an act of forgetting. For what is forgotten is not the unfortunate down-side of memory, the lack; it is as systematic as the processes of memory.⁸

Jorge Luis Borges helps, as always, by providing us with an intellectual limit case, the case of Funes the Memorious who could forget nothing:

He remembered the shapes of the clouds in the south at dawn on the 30th of April of 1882, and he could compare them in his recollection with the marbled grain in the design of a leather-bound book which he had seen only once, and with the lines in the spray which an oar raised in the Rio Negro on the eve of the battle of Quebracho.⁹

Living in a world intolerably replete with particulars, he was incapable of generalisation. Therefore, as the narrator says, he was incapable of thought: 'To think is to forget a difference, to generalise, to abstract.' Writing history then, would also be a way of thinking. And since we only know what is thought through inscription, then experiments with historiography become all-important.

For some time now, as Curthoys and Docker, historians have conceded that the medium for the transmission of

historical knowledge is not neutral in relation to that information: it narrativises it, stages it theatrically, and gives it points of view.¹⁰ No doubt an ‘experimental history for beginners’ would start with a simple point of view exercise: a spatial intervention in the chronological tradition: Describe a series of events from one side of the room, then from the other; now from a woman’s point of view, now from the other side of the frontier, and so on.¹¹

For Aboriginal history the mode of inscription is highly significant, as oral histories compete for space with the alphabetic writings of historians. I have discussed this elsewhere,¹² but the point is underscored by Mary Carruthers as cited by John Frow:

anything that encodes information in order to stimulate the memory to store or retrieve information is ‘writing’, whether it be alphabet, hieroglyph, ideogram American Indian picture writing, or Inca knot writing.¹³

Significantly, for the Kimberley histories I discuss below, the medieval notion of the locus of memory as discussed by Carruthers and Frow is that writing is not an external support for memory, but a mode of memorisation practised in specific places. Similarly Aboriginal ‘histories’ are encoded in places, writing and reading them involves travelling through the country as if the country itself were the text of history. Frow, most importantly, concludes:

it is only by working out the implications or “writing” (in these senses) for memory that we can avoid the nostalgic essentialism that affirms the reality of an origin by proclaiming its loss.¹⁴

One of the greatest ‘experiments’ in recent Australian history is no doubt the recovery of pre-invasion events as part of national history: a whole new domain of positivity is forged under the slogan ‘Australia has an Aboriginal Past’. I think we should take Frow’s lesson to heart and say that this is a positivity, rather than morally declaiming the loss of a history that was ‘always there’.¹⁵ Relieved of the negative drag of nostalgia,

this positivity opens a whole new space and brings with it additions to method (for example, the use of ‘myth’ or oral sources). And it challenges established authority, highlighting the erstwhile neutral domain for the production and consumption of historical truth, which ‘they’ are calling ‘Academic History.’ A modesty, a shrinkage of the range of truth, has been forced on these practitioners in ways described by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his review of *Telling the Truth about History*.

Was this creation of Aboriginal History revisionism? Perhaps. But those who cast the stone of revisionism will have to deal with all the critiques of the Hegelian dictum that certain non-European societies ‘lacked historicity’.¹⁶ History has been both demanded by and delivered to Aboriginal Australia in ways that are massively significant for the emergent redefinition of the nation under republicanism.¹⁷ The consequences for the introduction of temporality in a set of societies traditionally basing their ontologies on space has fascinating implications which have been traced by Tony Swain.¹⁸ Meanwhile experiments go on, for instance with Klaus Neuman, who in ‘A Postcolonial Writing of Aboriginal History,’ employs a textual device as he sarcastically challenges conventional historiography:

The following is a comprehensive, concise, chronological account of black-white relations in Australia between 1 January 1980 and 31 May 1989. The exactness of the dates has been established by extensive research carried out between 1987 and 1991 by a team of specialists competent in a diverse range of fields of knowledge, including sociology, law, pathology and history:

Karen Lee O’Rourke, 11 February 1980.
 Peter Leonard Campbell, 12 February 1980.
 Darryl Horace Garlett, 26 May 1980.
 Jambajimba, 16 June 1980.
 Wayne John Dooler, 19 June 1980.
 Gordon Michael Semmens 23 July 1980.
 Jabanardi, 29 July 1980.
 Christine Lesley Ann Jones, 18 October 1980.
 (...)¹⁹

And this list of recent Aboriginal deaths in custody continues for some four pages; I should not have abridged it. The historical technique of the chronology is strikingly non-Aboriginal and underscores Neuman's point about the arbitrary generation of truth effects by the *sine qua non* of historical writing: no dates; no history.²⁰ It resembles the recitations of royal succession or the lives of famous men. More significantly, it resembles the lists on monuments to the 'glorious' war dead, placed in thousands of country towns which have 'forgotten' the Aboriginal wars; the wars which this list proclaims are still going on. What mode of inscription 'best' remembers the past? What space and form should the memorial have?, Greg Denning asks. It seems a formal violence will have to be done to a history covering up material violences; the experiments may take the form of metaphors which defamiliarise the objects of history, new ways of telling stories, non-alphabetic representations, new technologies, as in the multimedia experiments of Heather Goodall, juxtapositions of competing accounts, sensitivity to rhetoric and audiences, and the fragmentation of national histories into regional ones.²¹

Jandamarra vs Nyibayarri

Two recent books about Kimberley history can conveniently be contrasted to develop my argument that history has spatial as much as temporal coordinates.²² Both are 'colonial' histories in that they work to recover periods of rapid colonial expansion in the central Kimberley areas from late last century into the twentieth century. They are about conflict over the land as both Jandamarra and Nyibayarri were implicated in the battles over occupation of country, the former man working initially for the police and later against them, and the latter coming a generation later, but consistently working as a police tracker at Fitzroy Crossing. Jandamarra (Pigeon) is celebrated as a hero of the Bunaba and Nyibayarri (Jack Bohemia) would be a countryman of his, being from the Gooniyandi, a closely related Bunaban group.

The two books are written by white men, though in partnership with the custodians or narrators of the stories. Bill McGregor is a linguist, and his book 'comes out of' Canberra, and, it seems to me, the kinds of metropolitan ways

that knowledge is shaped in the South East of the continent. Pederson works for the Kimberley Land Council, and has published with a local press in Broome. Magabala Press's involvement in the revival of Kimberley politics and culture parallels that of the KLC. A sense of regionalism pervades the *Jandamarra* book which cannot be matched by the academic 'distance' in the construction of the *Nyibayarri* one. The conflation of the political with the historical emerges most strikingly for me at this point in *Jandamarra*:

In early 1992, less than one hundred years after Jandamarra's death, the Bunaba took back Leopold Downs station following its purchase by the Federal Government. The country was handed back without fanfare, or any public recognition that hundreds of Bunaba had died in its defence only a few generations earlier. ... The Bunaba renamed the station Yaranggi and now conduct it as one of the most successful cattle operations in the Kimberley. For the first time in nearly forty years young boys now go through the ceremonies of induction to Bunaba law in the country of Jandamarra. Life and culture has returned to the land.²³

It is no accident that the grandson of a Bunaba woman, Peter Yu, is chair of the KLC and is working closely with Pederson and Woorunmurra. For twenty years he has worked not only on land issues but also on various cultural ones, including a possible feature movie of the *Jandamarra* story. There is a sense that this recent work has introduced *history* for Aboriginal people into a region where aboriginality was bracketed out of time and out of history. The colonial history of settlement has now been unsettled by a different possible destiny as the colonial industries — pastoral, pearling, mining — are running out of steam.

Yu, against the fierce pressure of Richard Court's conservative state government, has been pushing for regional autonomy, 'a form of Aboriginal self-government' on a ticket of 'resource management' of a wide range of services for a part of the country half the size of New South Wales where at least half of the 23,000 people are Aboriginal.²⁴ Should Yu be

successful, the Bunaba victory will be complete. Aboriginal people will be back in control of their resources after only one hundred years or so of colonial administration. However, it cannot be a *return* to traditional cultures in the sense of the immutable law of ‘the dreaming’. A time line has been introduced which makes Aboriginal politics engage with the forms and functions of broader Australian life. His organisation has its political opponents, and a plurality of expectations and explanations is now part of Kimberley cultural life.

So there are different accounts of the famous Jandamarra. His representation as ‘rebel’ or guerilla fighter has been challenged by McGregor, who says that some historians have constructed the actions of Aborigines killing cattle or white people on the frontier as those of:

brigands or resistance fighters of the likes of Robin Hood and Che Guevara.²⁵ However none of these works put forward compelling arguments that resistance or rebellion are appropriate designations. Aborigines may have killed whites and their stock for a variety of reasons — acknowledged by Reynolds himself (1981, 69–70) — including misunderstandings, sacrilege, revenge, kidnapping of women, and so on, and even to hazard a guess would necessitate that ethnographic considerations, not to say detailed consideration of each individual case, be taken into account.²⁶

McGregor is no doubt right that ‘resistance’ is a kind of macro term used to explain a situation politically, where other aspects of the more general situation enter the picture, like the ‘cooperation’ of the subject of his own biographical work: Jack Bohemia as Police Tracker (McGregor is nervous about his book being seen as ‘ideologically unsound’). Strangely though, McGregor goes on to list, above, a series of reasons why ‘resistance’ might not be too bad a summary term (and later Bohemia offers a motivation for Pigeon killing the policeman Richardson, the appropriation of his wife: ‘*roowoo moorninynga* [shit:he:fucked:her] “he fucked the shit out of her”’).²⁷

Nineteenth-century Aborigines, having not yet heard

of Che Guevara, did not construct themselves as resistance fighters either, so their reactions to the intolerability of the situations arising were coded in their own terms, as I learnt from another narrator of the Pigeon story:

the following example ... is another account of Pigeon, this time giving us a clue as to the reason why he killed a white settler:

(...)

Well him bin come out la [there]: ‘Oh Gooday boss’—
‘Gooday’ him bin tell-im—

‘Gooday’—

he never have-im rifle like this, him bin come up [with]
nothing—

Him bin leave-im rifle that way him bin gone out—

‘Ah—

I think you better give me one flour’ him bin tell-im—

‘No well, not mine this ‘un, he longa [belongs to] white
people, you can’t cut-im [separate] flour—

yeah—

I can give you lil’ bit flour, yeah, mine one.’—

Alright, him bin give-it-im—

him bin go back—

him bin go right up longa creek—

him bin get that rifle—

him bin come up belonga that, what name, him bin
jump up longa sharp—

I dunno, something he bin fix-im—

him bin give-it-im [shoot him] straight here—

Finish—

(...)²⁸

Had the settler obeyed the Aboriginal legal code, he would have shared his cart-load of flour *equally* with Pigeon instead of giving him a derisory amount (‘lil’ bit’). So Pigeon ‘inflicts the death penalty’ (...) Pigeon and his gang seemed to be campaigning against the European ‘invasion’. But since the concept of invasion was not coded as an infraction of Aboriginal law, the narrative now justifies the killing in terms of *not sharing food properly*. Greed, or

failure to share property, is an element which articulates stories throughout Aboriginal Australia, forming a major element of Aboriginal ideology and standing directly in opposition to English common law which gives priority to the possessor of property.²⁹

Another point needs to be picked up from McGregor above: his call for 'ethnographic considerations... detailed consideration of each case' to work out the truth of the matter. It has to be pointed out that to anthropologise difference, or to empirically determine situations is to have recourse to other master codes, in this case the social sciences, where the master code of history may be in doubt. In the Pigeon case, other modes of knowing may be uppermost in the minds (and practice) of Aboriginal subjects: spirituality and magic are consistently evoked in stories about him. McGregor does not take these concepts or 'cultural operators' seriously but they are folded into Pederson's narrative. This is where McGregor's linguistic/social scientific interests fail him in the pursuit of history: he is not interested in *what* his subjects say, only how they say it. A more sensitive ethnography, such as that of Favret-Saada, takes seriously the terms in which the subjects articulate their experience and attributes them with the power of explanation.³⁰ So we would have to listen, in the case of Jandamarra, to the consistency of the accounts which say that Jandamarra could only be defeated when his spiritual power was matched by that of Roebourne Mick, a tracker brought in for the purpose of subduing the Kimberley blacks when the settlers were at their wits' end.

It was no doubt unwise to set these two books up against each other. Each has its virtues and its failings. That is, in the case of *Jandamarra*, if it is a failing or a virtue to compromise 'Aboriginal' understandings of events by opting for a racy narrative style which commits all the sins of using non-Aboriginal discourse features which Bohemia and Aboriginal narrators generally do not use: the development of psychological motivations for characters, setting descriptive scenes, orientation in time rather than place. The result is that *Jandamarra*, without seriously compromising historical fact, is more readable for a general audience than *Nyibayarri* is. It is a 'regional' history,

the most complete account the Jandamarra story to date, sympathetic to the political concerns of Kimberley Aboriginal people, past and present, and narrated by Pederson who is a great storyteller in his own right.

Nyibayarri is a more complex work, replete with historical, linguistic and anthropological detail. It is a valuable contribution to the assessment of the role of trackers in Aboriginal history, but only hangs together as a book because of the unifying force of the (self)-portrait of Jack Bohemia. McGregor speaks with that strange assurance — becoming stranger in these ‘postcolonial’ times — with which the discourses of the social sciences provide him. While postcolonial and cultural studies have tools for seriously critiquing his approach, they will also recognise, I think, that there is a lot of useful work there which will contribute to further ‘experiments’ in Australian history.

Reflection

When I wrote this piece 18 years ago it was with a more adversarial attitude than I was to have later with the ‘Captain Cook’ essay (also in this volume). Keith Windschuttle’s polemical *The Killing of History* had come out in 1994, railing against postmodernism and ‘theory’, setting up his more detailed *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (2002). I’m glad I used that key word ‘fabricating’ positively in this piece: (‘the importance of the audio-visual archive and the part it plays in fabricating historical memory is certainly underestimated at the moment’) because that is the main point I want to elaborate in this reflection.

Facts are indeed ‘fabricated’ and we have learned from Bruno Latour that a useful line of inquiry might be to think of them as well or badly fabricated,³¹ in this particular case according to the protocols and methods of historical research. The crucial shift here is away from thinking of them as simply sitting out there waiting to be collected. If we accept that historical facts are carefully constructed, they must also be nurtured to stay alive (which was my point about the film *Gallipoli*’s role in teaching). Without institutional support, facts and methods can easily disappear, but with new methods and new concerns, different sets of facts appear (anathema to Windschuttle types!). At the University of Technology, Sydney, conversations with Paula Hamilton were happening at the time, and her *Memory and History in Twentieth*

Century Australia had come out in 1994. The concerns of history were expanding into popular memory, and Hamilton's book made very good sense to me as it debated and then put into place the kinds of historical material that was in the popular press and popular memory. The notion of the experimental continued from the experimental history issue of the *UTS Review* into the pages of the *Cultural Studies Review* (vol. 14, no. 1, 2008), when it joined the interests Tara Forrest had in Frankfurt School experimentalism, for where would all this be without Walter Benjamin at the start, and then, for Tara's work, Kracauer and Kluge?

For those who want to follow up more of the connections to Kimberley history, which, by the way, is largely yet to be written, could look at Mitch Torres' film *Jandamarra's War* (2011), which benefitted a lot from the ground-breaking historical work of Howard Pedersen (with Banjo Woorunmurra), *Jandamarra and the Bunuba Resistance* (1995).³² Real blood was spilt in those real historical wars, wars that could have been forgotten were it not for the elaboration of historical methods that could hear popular and oral accounts, that could embrace technologies like the tape recorder, and that were not in thrall to the official written document. In the twentieth century 'history', 'culture' and 'science' wars only time, energy and printers' ink were wasted. Wasted? Perhaps. What I find interesting now is that polemicists like Sokal and Windschuttle ambushed the enemy. I am sure if Windschuttle had talked to a few Aboriginal public intellectuals his tune might have changed. Or if he had engaged debate at our seminars with Dipesh Chakrabarty, it would not have been the case of keeping his powder dry before later going into battle with the support of the Howard government and the *Australian* newspaper. This desire to go straight to war, avoiding that other great and now diminished institution of diplomacy is, for me at least, not unconnected to the Tory enthusiasm for war and an education system which treats wars as major historical drivers (as opposed to the 40-hour working week, the suffragettes, etc.).

So what I would like to propose now is experiments in diplomacy in culture and history wars, again drawing on Latour. Skilled diplomats will be given a brief to negotiate on behalf of the disputing parties. The negotiation will not be between the veracity of facts and the distortions of ideology; peace will never be achieved along that pathway. The negotiations have to be

conducted respectfully, and diplomats know how to talk to people in their own discourses. They will talk until they find out what are the most cherished values that are supporting the manufacture and maintenance of the historical facts that are serving both (or all the different) sides. The diplomats' intervention involves listening to what it is the parties hold most dear, and then negotiating what each is prepared to relinquish to achieve a workable peace. This would be disappointing for the newspapers who so enjoy reporting a good fight; they might have to imagine new pleasures on behalf of their readers. These might be akin to the excitement of discovery that accompanies scientific experimentation. In that way a new idea in the humanities—a well-fabricated one!—might be set shining before the public, rather than being shipped straight out to be mutilated in its prime.

Notes

- 1 Thanks to Benno Wagner for showing me the copy of *Alter Histoire*, and to Meaghan Morris for comments on an earlier version of this paper. Daniel S. Milo and Alain Boureau (eds), *Alter Histoire: Essais d'histoire expérimentale Les Belles Lettres*, Paris, 1991. The manifesto essay by Milo is called 'Pour une histoire expérimentale, ou le gai savoir' (pp. 9-55) and has proved a useful basis for this introduction. Claude Bernard, *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale*, Flammarion Paris, 1985 [1865], p. 45, cited in Milo and Boureau, p. 13.
- 2 *A Night in Casablanca*, cited in Milo and Boureau, p. 9
- 3 Greg Dening, 'Deep Narratives in Cultural Encounters', in Emma Greenwood, Klaus Neumann and Andrew Sartori (eds), *Work in Flux*, University of Melbourne History Department, Melbourne, 1995.
- 4 Milo and Boureau.
- 5 Milo and Boureau, *Alter Histoire*, back cover.
- 6 'Experience', 'experiment' and 'expert' are all cognates, deriving from the Latin *experiri*, 'to try thoroughly'.
- 7 Dipesh Chakrabarty puts this point another way. The political-ethical task of the historian is to attend to 'the fractures in the semiotic field called "history" so that what is unrepresentable is at least allowed to make visible the laws and limits of a system of representation'. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Marx after Marxism: History, Subalternity, and Difference', in *positions*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1994, p. 461.
- 8 John Frow, 'Toute la Mémoire du Monde: Repetition and Forgetting', in his *Time and Commodity Culture*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997.
- 9 'Funes the Memorious', in Jorge Luis Borges, *Fictions*, John Calder, London, 1965, p. 102, as cited by Frow in 'Toute la Mémoire du Monde.'
- 10 Ann Curthoys and John Docker, 'Is History Fiction?', *UTS Review*, vol. 2, no.1, 1996, pp. 12-37.
- 11 Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, James Cook University, Townsville, 1981.
- 12 Stephen Muecke, 'Always Already Writing', in Krim Benterrak and Stephen Muecke, *Reading the Country*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1984;

- Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies*, University of NSW Press, Sydney, 1992, pp. 6-9; and in Jack Davis, Mudroodroo Narogin, Stephen Muecke and Adam Shoemaker (eds), *Paperbark: A Collection of Black Australian Writings*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1990, pp. 1-4.
- 13 Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Mediaeval Culture*, Cambridge Studies in Mediaeval Literature 10, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 31-2.
 - 14 Frow, p. 8.
 - 15 See also Chakrabarty, 'it is always possible to discover "history" (say after European contact) even if you were not aware of its existence in the past' (p. 459).
 - 16 Elaborated in Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing, History and the West*, Routledge, London, 1990, pp. 2-3.
 - 17 See Stephen Muecke and Anne Curthoys, 'Australia, For Example', in W. Hudson and D. Carter (eds), *The Republicanism Debate*, University of NSW Press, Kensington, 1993.
 - 18 Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1993.
 - 19 Klaus Neumann, 'A Postcolonial Writing of Aboriginal History', *Meanjin*, no. 2, 1992, p. 277.
 - 20 Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'History and Dialectic', in *The Savage Mind*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1972, p. 258.
 - 21 Heather Goodall, 'Working with History: Experiments in Aboriginal History and Hypermedia', *UTS Review*, vol. 2, no.1, pp. 43-57.
 - 22 Howard Pedersen and Banjo Woorunmurra, *Jandamarra and the Bunaba Resistance*, Magabala Books, Broome, 1995; Jack Bohemia and Bill McGregor, *Nyibayarri, Kimberley Tracker*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1995.
 - 23 Pedersen and Woorunmurra, p. 199.
 - 24 Greg Crough, 'Out of the Crocodile Hole: Towards a Regional Agreement in the Kimberley Region of Western Australia', *Arena Magazine*, August-September 1995, pp. 35-8.
 - 25 McGregor in Bohemia and McGregor, p. 42. He refers, among other examples, to Henry Reynolds's *The Other Side of the Frontier* and an earlier version of Pederson's work on Pigeon.
 - 26 Bohemia and McGregor, p. 42.
 - 27 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
 - 28 Jack Roe, recorded by Stephen Muecke at Fitzroy Crossing, 1977.
 - 29 Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, pp. 155-6.
 - 30 Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*, trans. Catherine Cullen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980 [Les mots, la mort, les sorts, 1977].
 - 31 Bruno Latour, 'An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto"', *New Literary History*, vol. 41, p. 474.
 - 32 Pedersen and Woorunmurra.

Oral Histories of the Stolen Generation

Sonia Smallacombe

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures were, and continue to be, transmitted through the oral tradition. Oral knowledge was, and continues to be, transmitted face to face, person to person through story telling and drama. It has only been in the past two hundred years in this country that written culture has dominated the way in which knowledge is passed on. The Australian colonisers have relied on written sources and most written sources give the view of the past ‘from above’, that is, from the view of the powerful.¹ Therefore, written sources do not give the views of people who are not in positions of power such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewpoints are largely excluded from this country’s history, motivated me to commence a project involving the recording of oral histories of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory who were removed as children from their parents in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s and placed in a Catholic Mission called Garden Point on Melville Island. This particular mission has significance for me personally as my mother, who passed away in 1982, was also placed at Garden Point. This mission no longer exists as the Catholic Church’s lease on Garden Point expired in the 1970s. Under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976*, the land was returned to the original owners—the Tiwi people—and the mission reverted to its original Tiwi name, Pularumpi.²

The abduction of Aboriginal children from their families took place throughout Australia as part of the aggressive assimilationist policies that were implemented by state and

federal governments from the nineteenth century until the 1970s. Almost every Aboriginal person in this country has been affected in some way; either they had relatives placed in institutions or they themselves were removed from their families. These people were wrenched from their families and their traditional lands as children and small babies and spent most of their childhood and often some of their adulthood in church and government institutions. Through no fault of their own, these people were cut off from the lands of their ancestors for the purpose of assimilation into white society, a society that had no intention of accepting them.

As an Indigenous researcher, I realised my work was addressing very sensitive issues and therefore it was essential that my research practices adhered to the protocol and etiquette that already existed in the community. This involved negotiating the research project so that it would be of benefit to the people themselves. It was important that the people volunteered to participate in the project, to shape the stories in the way that was comfortable for them and to feel a sense of ownership of the project. Consultation, negotiation and ownership of research projects involving Indigenous peoples have always been major issues. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have become highly critical and cynical of research practices that are intrusive, exploitative and of no real value to our communities. There is a growing interest in self-empowerment among Indigenous peoples in regard to research conducted in our communities about our cultures and people.³

As an Indigenous researcher I was aware that a form of continuum exists in oral stories and, therefore, the stories may not have a 'beginning' or an 'end' to them. I was faced with the dilemma of having to introduce a 'beginning' to the stories and made the decision to begin with the question: 'What do you remember of being taken from your family?' This enabled the participant to frame their response in a way that was suitable and comfortable for them. For example, they might begin to describe what they remember of being taken by police or welfare officers from their families, or comment that they were too young to remember as many were small babies removed from their mother either at, or soon after their birth. Others

would have no memory of that traumatic day—therefore their memories had been repressed.

The stories could take any direction from this ‘starting point’. For example, the people would talk about growing up on the mission or, depending on their age, would have memories of living with their families before being taken to the mission. Many remember the boat trip to Garden Point, of the rough seas, of being violently ill and huddling on the deck and crying because they were scared and being comforted by the Aboriginal crewmen— not the missionaries who were also on the boat. However, the stories were continually framed around thoughts of home, about their families, especially their mother. They also included relationships formed with other children on the mission who were incorporated as part of their family. For many, being with other children on the mission was the only family life they experienced.

The issue of inserting a ‘beginning’ and ‘ending’ to the oral narrative left me wondering whether it would have been better to let the participant begin their own story. The attachment to land and kinship ties are significant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, especially for those Stolen Generation people who have been able to find out about their kin and country. This is often demonstrated when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people meet each other for the first time. They will often ask ‘Where are you from?’ or ‘Who are your mob/people?’ Therefore, most people begin their stories or introduction by talking about their kin and their ancestral lands. They often describe how they came to be a part of the land through their ancestors— for example, great, great grandmothers or great, great grandfathers. Although they may not have personally met this person, they know about them through the stories that have been handed down through the generations. Likewise, where does the story end? In the research project, the stories would end when the tape in the cassette recorder ran out. Therefore, the stories would seem to be incomplete, however, it does provide the opportunity for the participants to add to the stories if they wish to do so. Also, the stories did not end when the participant left the mission. It seemed important for the participants to talk about their survival and the way in which they continue to grapple with

the despair, heartaches and pains that has become a constant reminder of their past.

Recording Aboriginal oral histories has the advantage of providing an important insight into cultural forms of knowledge. The stories are not necessarily shaped by western forms of linear historical ‘progression’. The Working Party of Aboriginal Historians formed for the Bicentennial History in the early 1980s point out in their article titled ‘Preparing Black History’ that Aboriginal chronology takes many forms, particularly a cyclical or spiralling one that locates certain periods according to the seasons.⁴ These aspects were evident in the stories told to me. They talked about the seasons when referring to times of the year such as the ‘dry season’ or the ‘wet season’. In respect of dates, many of the Stolen Generation were given birth dates by the missionaries and it appears that these dates were based on the appearance of the physical features of the child—for example, the child looked eight years old or fifteen years old. Therefore, when describing an event the participant would say ‘My sister Mary was the baby, so I must have been six years old as there is a six years difference between me and Mary’.

As an Indigenous researcher I am aware of the need to communicate the work of the project and its outcomes in language that is accessible to community members. Too often research reports are written about us in a language that appeals only to a small, (western) educated elite group. Indigenous researchers are critical of research that is controlled by European language, structures and concepts which inevitably distort the truths of Indigenous peoples. Also, for far too long, Indigenous peoples have not had the power to choose what is being said, how it is to be expressed and how our words should be written.⁵ It is for these reasons that the oral histories were recorded in the speaker’s language. It was felt that to translate the words of the people into ‘academic’ English would not only be an injustice to the people but the interviews would lose their meaning.

During my undergraduate years at university, I was often involved in heated debates with my lecturers over the issue of using documentary records versus oral histories. From my experience, many white academics make the claim that oral

narratives are subjective and therefore are considered to be an unreliable source, while the use of documentary records are considered to be objective and, therefore, reliable. I believe one only has to read the newspaper to refute this argument. Another argument is that oral narratives are based on selective memory and is therefore limited in producing the full record of events. I would argue that most written sources do not produce the full record of events.

An example of the limitations of documentary records is outlined in *Telling It Like It Is* (1992) by Penny Taylor where an Aboriginal historian, Paul Brehrendt, went through every copy of a local newspaper printed in a New South Wales town over a three-year period in the 1930s. He wrote in 1986: 'The only mention of the Aboriginal population was in the police and court reports. There were no references to any achievements, any opinions, or indeed any complaints' (34). For this reason, he did extensive interviews in the same area and found out that Aboriginal people were the unsung backbone of the rural industry. There was hardly a property that did not employ Aboriginal workers on either a casual or permanent basis at that time. Yet, the written records failed to acknowledge the economic contribution of Aboriginal people in the area (35).

The recording of the stories of Aboriginal people who were removed from their families as children was a difficult and traumatic process as they re-lived their experiences. To their credit, many people agreed to tell their stories because they believed it to be an important record of their lives that can be passed on to their children and grandchildren. They also believed that it is important that the Australian population know about the experiences of Aboriginal people.

Writing and recording oral histories does not replace storytelling. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to tell stories around the campfire, at home or at community functions. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people prefer to keep stories in the oral tradition and therefore, do not wish to write them down. The stories remain the property of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and it stays close to the old ways of passing on knowledge (14). Oral histories can be used to emphasise self-empowerment as it enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to

tell their stories in their own voice. This has been extremely important for the members of the Stolen Generation who were prevented by missionaries and government policies from openly maintaining and passing on their cultural heritage.

In reclaiming Indigenous history and Indigenous culture and taking responsibility for passing it on to future generations, oral narratives are also part of the political struggle.

Notes

- 1 Penny Taylor, *Telling It Like It Is*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, 1992, p. 34. Further references will be included within the text.
- 2 Br. John Pye, 'Early Days at the Mission at Garden Point' in Thecla Brogan (ed.), *The Garden Point Mob*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 1990, p. 1.
- 3 Anne-Marie Tupuola, 'Is There Room for Non-exploitative Methodology in the Academic World?' (Paper presented at the World Indigenous People's Education Conference, Wollongong, 11-17 December 1993),
- 4 p. 12.
- 5 'Preparing Black History' by The Working Party of Aboriginal Historians for the Bicentennial History 1788-1988 in Marji Hill and Alex Barlow, *Black Australia 2*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1985, pp. 7-8.
- 6 Tupuola, p. 4.

'All I know is history': Memory And Land Ownership In The Dudley District, Kangaroo Island

Rebe Taylor

Three moments of discovery

1.

One day in July 1954, Joan Maves was at home in Kingscote, Kangaroo Island, reading a copy of the popular magazine *Walkabout*.¹ There she found an article titled 'Last of the Tasmanians'. Under the heading she saw a photograph of her Grandfather Joe and her Aunt Mary.

Joan was shocked. But she was also confused, for the caption claimed the photo was of Tom Simpson, the 'well known ... last Tasmanian half-caste of Kangaroo Island' and his daughter. Joan did not know that Tom Simpson was her late great-uncle, but she remembered Grandpa Joe and Auntie Mary well. It must have been a mistake. She put it aside and did nothing about it.

2.

Four years later Joan's ten-year-old son, James Maves, was reading the *Australian Junior Encyclopaedia* when he came across an entry titled 'The Old Sealing Days'. It gave a brief history of the sealing industry in the Bass Strait and on Kangaroo Island. But what really interested James was this statement:

It has been claimed that the last full-blooded Tasmanian aborigine was not Trucanini, who died in Hobart in 1876, but Mrs. Seymour, who died at Hogg Bay, Kangaroo Island, at a great age in 1906.²

James was intrigued: not only was Kangaroo Island mentioned but Seymour was his grandmother's maiden name. He asked his grandmother if they were descended from Mrs Seymour. She told him that they were, but she told him no more.

3.

Two years later, in 1960, Richard Tyler was in Adelaide reading the *Chronicle* newspaper when he came across a letter from an Edward Barnes [pseudonym] of Kangaroo Island.³ Barnes was responding to an earlier article in the *Chronicle* claiming that Mary Seymour had been the 'last Tasmanian full-blood ... to die'. Barnes wrote that Mrs Mary Seymour had in fact been a 'half-caste' Tasmanian Aborigine. He gave a brief history of Mary's family, beginning with her parents and concluding with a tribute to the youngest of her nephews, 'Tiger' Simpson, who had died in 1955. The name 'Tiger' brought an unexpected jolt of recognition for Richard. Tiger was his much-loved and well-remembered uncle; was he really of Tasmanian Aboriginal descent? Another connection was made.

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There had been no Indigenous population on Kangaroo Island, but sealers had been visiting since Matthew Flinders officially discovered it in 1802. An estimated five hundred individuals visited there before the South Australian Company arrived in 1836.⁴ By the mid-1820s, around forty people remained living on Kangaroo Island, made up largely of Aboriginal women from Tasmania and the adjacent mainland, and former sealers.⁵ It was not until the early 1980s that James Maves and David Tyler, acting independently, began to research their family histories in the archives and the libraries. There they found out that they were descended from Betty, a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman taken to Kangaroo Island by sealers in

about 1819, and Nathaniel Walles (Nat) Thomas, an English sailor who jumped ship on the island in 1824.

I came to learn about this history as a child. Shortly after my family arrived in Adelaide from London, my parents met a couple who invited us to stay on their sheep farm at the southern end of Antechamber Bay, in the District (or Hundred) of Dudley, Kangaroo Island.⁶ We found the place wonderful, and returned every summer holiday.

Their farm had been the home of Nat Thomas; indeed their house, the oldest occupied house in South Australia, had been built by him. The farming family had been there since the 1950s, but their neighbours had been there since the 1850s. So they could tell us stories about Nat, about the Aboriginal women and about Betty's daughters, Hannah and Mary. These stories were recalled by places on the farm with special names: places such as Old Joe's Grave, Wab's Gully and Lubra Creek. We would walk to these places and remember the stories as we went.

The Lubra Creek crossing is my favourite place. It has a soft white sand floor that dips under a canopy of melaleucas. However blustery, it is always still and quiet. The light filtered by the trees' narrow leaves is soft but remarkably clear. The farmer told us Lubra Creek had been a stone tool factory of the Aboriginal occupants of Kangaroo Island from thousands of years ago. We often found Aboriginal flint stones turned up by the sheep in the sand. We were also told it had been the gathering place for the Aboriginal Tasmanian women of Dudley. But an uglier story loomed at Lubra Creek: an Aboriginal woman had tried to swim from the creek's mouth across Backstairs Passage to escape home. On realising she couldn't make it, she turned back. There she was caught by Nat Thomas and beaten 'for her troubles'.⁷ These words have echoed through the generations of telling. Their brutality could turn the serenity at Lubra Creek into an eerie silence.

With these stories in my mind, I chose this history as the topic for my Masters thesis in 1993. In a local history of Kangaroo Island, I read Joan Maves was living in Kingscote, and could be contacted care of the Kingscote Post Office.⁸

Joan Maves was happy to see me when I arrived a few months later at her home. With my dictaphone turned on, I

began to ask Joan my questions. Did she know the same stories that I heard as a child? Did she know the farm at Antechamber Bay well? Had she inherited any Tasmanian Aboriginal language or traditional culture? I was insensitive with curiosity. Joan knew none of these. She told me of her discovery of her ancestry in 1954 and showed me the pile of books, and archival references that James had found for her. James told me his own story when we met in Adelaide a few days later. A year later, when I met Richard Tyler and his son David in Adelaide, I found a similar scenario: Richard's story of discovery and their wealth of researched information, mostly collected by David.

An obvious question arose from these encounters with the Maveses and Tylers: why had they known nothing of their ancestry? Joan and Richard shared similar responses: their parents had never told them, nor ever discussed their history, because (they supposed) of a sense of shame and fear. Joan and Richard had themselves, they told me, never experienced racism or exclusion first hand. They considered their parents' feelings as having been generic to the times in which they lived. Nonetheless, I wondered if there had been something more specific that had inspired the fear.

I also wondered how the Maveses and Tylers had been deprived of their history, while I had come to know about (some of) it as a child. To answer these questions, I returned to Antechamber Bay, to find out how the stories there had remained in currency long after the descendants of the stories' protagonists had lost all knowledge of them. I needed to find out why the descendants of Nat Thomas and Betty were no longer there.

The Maveses, Tylers and I all knew from reading his will that when Nat Thomas died in 1879 he left fifty-one acres of freehold land to his grandson, Nathaniel Simpson, the eldest of Hannah and Thomas Simpson's six sons (they also had three daughters).⁹ To find out what then happened to this holding, I sought out land records in Adelaide and on Kangaroo Island.

I learnt that from 1881 Nat Simpson and his brothers increased their holdings so that by 1904, a year after their father died, they owned the lease to almost 12,300 acres. They

were among the top three farming families in the Dudley district.¹⁰

In 1907 Nat Simpson was listed in the *Cyclopaedia of South Australia* alongside other successful South Australian gentlemen. His biography describes him as ‘agriculturist and grazier’ and a Justice of the Peace for the past six years who had served two terms for the Dudley District Council.¹¹ His brothers Thomas and William too had served as district councillors.¹² A photograph in the local museum shows three of the Simpson brothers in suits and boaters as members of the local cricket team. The Simpsons, it seems, were an established, successful farming family.

But in the twenty years after 1910, the Simpsons lost almost all their land. They sold it to other farmers in Dudley. I could not work out why. There had not been a general slump in this period. Indeed, the other substantial landowners in Dudley—six large families who settled in the district between the 1850s and the 1890s—continue to own and farm land today. When they showed me their genealogies, I also found these families were all intricately linked by marriage over five generations. Only the Simpson family is missing from all the genealogies and is no longer farming there today.

When I went to Dudley and asked members of these six colonial families why the Simpsons had lost their land, I was told: ‘They were Aboriginal. They fell out of the social connection and didn’t marry easily.’¹³ In everyday interaction the Simpsons were accepted, but when it came to marriage the racial line was clearly drawn. ‘No one would make a fuss’, I was told, ‘until you start to talk of marrying one.’¹⁴ That was the sticking point, and the source of several personal tragedies. When I spoke to these colonial descendants, the stories unfolded: the Marshal parents who forbade two of their daughters to marry Simpson boys¹⁵ and the Simpson girl who was jilted by her fiancé, the schoolteacher, after locals warned him off.¹⁶ ‘Stay white—keep away from any colour!’, one informant warned me.¹⁷ Another explained that there had been a real fear of the ‘throwback’ in her parents’ time. ‘It was commonly believed ... that any children could come back quite black.’¹⁸ Some of Nat and Betty’s grandchildren married, but to people with small landholdings or no land at all.¹⁹ Also

significant is the timing; by the time the elder Simpson sons might have been able to recruit the support of nephews, they were in their late middle age and thus without the crucial extended family support that the rest of the farming community depended upon.

The Simpsons became swaggies, dependent on their former peers and neighbours to give them seasonal work. 'Old Nat', as an elderly colonial descendant remembered Nat Simpson, was a 'rather pathetic ... poor, haggard old man'. He and his brother William were, she told me, 'sort of bushmen', who occasionally came into town carrying swags. Another descendant said that the whole family 'went to the dogs'.

Their admissions of marital exclusion did not prevent the colonial descendants from claiming that the Simpsons lost their land because of poor management and alcoholism. 'The Abo ... never gave much for land holding', a colonial descendant reflected. They were, according to another descendant, a 'de-tribalised people' for whom it was 'foreign ... alien ... to work on the land'. 'The Simpson family', one colonial descendant told me, 'wasted their inheritance through drinking.' Others agreed. 'They were drinkers', I was told over again. 'That's where their money went', said one informant. Poverty, failure and finally absence have come to define the Thomas descendants' Aboriginality, and contradictorily, to justify their exclusion and land loss.

By the 1960s there were no Thomas descendants living in Dudley. Joan, her mother and her aunt remained on the island, in Kingscote, as did two of Richard's uncles. Most of the Thomas descendants had gone to Adelaide and some to other parts of Australia. When they moved out of the Dudley district, they took the opportunity not to tell their children about their Aboriginal ancestry and indeed very little, if anything, about their history on Kangaroo Island.

The history of the Thomas descendants is one of loss: of loss of land, of dislocation, and loss of history. And even when they began to regain their history from the early 1980s, they were unable to regain a historical memory comparable to that retained by the colonial descendants in Dudley.

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The six Dudley colonial families (pseudonyms):

Walker
Niven
Marshal
Cornelly
Barnes
Richards

For a Dudley colonial descendant a name can ring up a five-generation genealogy as fast as a cash register. Their genealogies collectively encompass the history of the pioneering days and of land settlement, so that family history becomes community history.

The colonial families own almost all the farming land in Dudley, but they are numerically a minority within the present population. Margaret Southlyn, née Niven, explained to me that there are two groups within Dudley, the 'locals' and the 'local locals': those who live in Dudley and those who have 'always' lived in Dudley. Margaret admitted that, for mere locals, the local locals are a difficult group to penetrate.²⁰ Without the history (or the land that contains the history) the locals do not have the language to be able to converse and celebrate the local locals' 'collective memory' in the sense that Maurice Halbwachs has defined it, where the act of remembering is a social phenomenon structured by group identities.²¹

But while the locals are excluded because they have not 'always' lived there, the Thomas descendants are excluded because they have 'always' lived there but did not know it. Their exclusion is essential to the local locals' self-definition. If the Thomas descendants do not register in Margaret Southlyn's binary definition of the Dudley community, it is because their history has been absorbed, or more accurately appropriated. Knowledge of 'the Aboriginal history', of the sealing days and of the descendants of Nat Thomas, is a fundamental part of the colonial descendants' exclusive memory, which is passed on by an oral tradition from generation to generation. Even knowledge of how to set a wallaby snare, a skill brought to the island by the Aboriginal women, is understood as part of colonial 'tradition'.²² In the absence of a 'real' frontier,

that essential ingredient of any pioneering narrative, the pre-settlement islanders have become the Dudley colonial descendants' 'own' prehistory. Even the closeted story of the Simpsons' land loss plays an essential part in defining colonial legitimacy and success.

The ethnologist Roger Bastide argues that collective memory is not merely collective consciousness, analogous to Jung's collective subconscious, but is defined and structured by the group's power relations.²³ The colonial descendants can sustain an identity in part defined by the Thomas descendants' exclusion because their history is rooted in the land that they predominantly own. Even if the land is sold to another colonial descendant, the history remains within the group. The island's Aboriginal history has come into colonial ownership with the transfer of property. To those who know, the creeks, gullies and flats bespeak the people and events of the island's history. And, because those who know are colonial descendants, the places that bespeak pre-colonial history have become symbols appropriate to a narrative of colonial legitimacy and success.

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On a cold winter's day in 1993 I met Brian Barnes in the house his grandfather built on a steep hill over looking Penneshaw. Brian told me a wealth of names, personalities and incidents that covered the Dudley district dating since his childhood. And, delving back further, he took out the exercise book in which he had recorded the stories his grandfather told him.

Pig's Head Flat

In the pre-1836 days, when Kangaroo Island was inhabited by all sorts of runaway sailors and escaped convicts with their Aboriginal wives, George Bates and Nat Thomas were living at Antechamber Bay. They had heard that a ship was anchored in Nepean Bay ... so it was decided that George would walk to where Kingscote now stands and trade for ... tobacco and nails. George had done his trading and was well on his way home ... when he remembered he had not bought Nat's tobacco. He knew Nat, who could be a bit violent at times,

would be very nasty if he didn't get his tobacco, so he decided to leave the nails under a tree on the flat which he marked with an old pig's skull which he found there. After walking all the way back for the tobacco, he searched ... for the nails and was never able to find them, but the spot from that time on was always called Pig's Head Flat.

The Barnes family has owned the land near Pig's Head Flat for four generations. Brian's grandfather was the land's first owner, and, Brian told me, he had personally known Nat Thomas. The story is also well known by the other colonial descendants, and the council has put up a sign near the flat with the name 'Pig's Head Corner'. The story is part of the colonial descendants' collective memory. It offers them the opportunity to demonstrate their exclusive knowledge through storytelling.

As the land's owner, however, Brian is the story's primary curator, and he considers it particularly his own. Only he can give it validity. Not only has Brian written the story down, using as many of his grandfather's words as he can remember, but he has material evidence to prove the story's authenticity. After reading me the story, he took me to his shed where a couple of rusted hand-made nails were hanging on display. One of them had a paper tag attached stating that these were the nails of pre-colonial settler George Bates. Brian explained that he and his father had been digging a post-strainer hole on the flat when they found a 'mass of rusty iron', in which were preserved 'the remains of George's lost nails'.

Literally earthed in the land, the buried nails of the Pig's Head Flat story ratify the notion that land secretes memory. Finding the nails brought the story back to life. On a broader level, working on land owned for four generations brings the history of the colonial descendants back to life; the reality of work meets the mythology of the past, the mundane blends with the memorial. Pierre Nora talks of history being the death of memory. Where history is critical and reconstructed, memory is spontaneous and unconscious. Working their ancestors' land is for the colonial descendants predominantly an unconscious interaction with the past. In that context they are living, as Nora defines it, 'within memory'. If such an existence were total, then:

Each gesture, down to the most everyday, would be experienced as the ritual repetition of a timeless practice in a primordial identification of act and meaning. With the appearance of the trace ... of distance, we are not in the realm of true memory but of history.²⁴

For Brian Barnes, going into his shed is an act of 'true memory', but telling me about it is not. While Brian must go in there daily without thinking about his ancestors, my presence as visiting student historian introduces a distancing 'trace'. Similarly, the colonial descendants must drive past Pig's Head Corner without considering its history, but at one stage they decided to memorialise its story by erecting a signpost. Could it be that, left totally 'alone', without visiting historians, tourists or even 'locals', the colonial descendants would be a 'people of memory', similar to Nora's example of the Jews?²⁵

The question is immaterial. While Pig's Head Flat is contained within colonial descendants' land, it has a pre-colonial history. It is reminiscent of the same 'savage' as Lubra Creek—Nat Thomas. This process of appropriation distances the colonial descendants from their memory. They cannot live totally within memory because their history must not only remain in the past, memorialised by the signpost and by the nails with their paper tags, but must simultaneously reinforce their narrative of continual habitation. They strike a balance between the two by the semi-conscious/unconscious relationship that they sustain with their past through their land. Pig's Head Flat is both a historical site and farming land: it has a non-physical as well as a physical use. This means the colonial descendants are not totally 'within memory', nor are they totally 'within history'. They can consciously maintain the myth of pre-colonial history, but their unconscious maintenance of the land creates the honest belief that that history has become theirs to tell. It is, in essence, a Lockean appropriation of history: the colonial descendants invest the labour, and therefore claim the harvest of 'true memory', even if that memory is based on a history that is not their own.

So the colonial descendants must walk in both worlds: the world of constructed linear history, of signposts and museums, and the world of digging post-strainer holes on their ancestors'

land. As long as they remain on the land, they can justify and sustain that contradiction. If the Barneses were to sell their land and leave the area, ultimately they would have only their history, which, as Nora points out ‘belongs to everyone and no one’; a mere share in a public asset. Memory, on the other hand, Nora explains, ‘is blind to all but the group it binds’.²⁶

The colonial descendants are aware—consciously or not—of the role land plays in sustaining this balance between history and memory. This awareness is demonstrated in the history of the Barnes family produced by Brian Barnes’ niece-in-law, Julie Barnes. Julie endeavoured to write ‘not a history of the people’, but a history of ‘the land the family have farmed since first arriving at Hog Bay’. The people only appear because their lives ‘have been interwoven with the land’. Julie writes:

I hope to make the reader of these pages, particularly my children, appreciate the land. The value is not its financial worth, or the amount of production it is capable of, but the fact that five generations of the same family have survived because of it ... It is the only enduring link we have with our forebears. It gives us a sense of belonging and continuity.²⁷

Thus the land provides history—the ‘enduring link’, the narrative of progress, of pioneering hardships and success—but it also provides memory, the ‘sense of belonging and continuity’. It provides the pre-colonial myth that demonstrates the success of that ‘enduring link’. Therefore, with land as the buffer, the polarities of history and memory can coexist. Memory can indeed ‘crystallise’, as Nora calls it, into history, but it can also exist in a fluid, dynamic form. The buried nails of Pig’s Head Flat are a crystallised memory in so far as they are part of a myth, but their material presence brings the memory to life. As the land is living and growing, so too is the identity of the colonial descendants.

Land, not blood, secretes memory. So little of the Thomas descendants’ history has entered museums, books and archives. So much has entered into the annals of colonial memory in Dudley. Theirs is a history of exclusion exclusively remembered.

'The start of everything'

When James Maves found out that his great-great-grandmother was described as the 'Last Tasmanian', he thought that she 'must have been a princess'. But when he went to look for evidence of his exotic ancestry, he 'couldn't find anything'. His grandmother had told him some stories, but in time they have become mixed up and abstracted:

I still can't recall ... if [my grandmother] was talking about her father or her grandfather; someone who went to the mainland in a boat ... came back and was carrying a keg of nails and must of had a heart attack in the sand dunes.²⁸

Here is the keg of nails from Pig's Head Flat confused with the sudden death of William (Joe) Seymour in the sand dunes of Antechamber Bay. I had been told, as a child, that Joe had been buried where he fell. Fiona Marshal explained to me that on hearing the news, Mary Seymour had merely said: 'Trust the old bugger to die there!'²⁹ James imagined Mary as a 'princess', but the colonial descendants speak of sardonic humour. They know James' ancestors as they know their land. While his history informs their identity, for James discovering his ancestry was:

no different to finding out your great-great-great-grandmother was Welsh or Finnish or whatever else, except to the extent that it does make me feel a little closer to where I live. If I was to find out that she was a North American Indian, I would probably feel closer to Arizona than I do right now.

If James felt abstracted from his past, he said that his mother felt 'less secure'. She had, after all, remained silent about the *Walkabout* article for thirty years. It seemed to me that Joan only really felt secure relating to her ancestry as marking the beginning of Kangaroo Island history. Discovering this interpretation was a turning point for Joan:

We was out on a picnic ... and we met some new people ... and they started to talk about it ... and they said 'Oh,

you're going to be famous ... you've come down from the first child born on Kangaroo Island', and ... I thought; 'Oh, gee, I am somebody', and from then on I went on talking about it, and I wasn't ashamed of it, or it didn't worry me.³⁰

With her newfound confidence, Joan Maves joined the Kangaroo Island Pioneers Association (KIPA), an Adelaide-based organisation established with the aim to gain recognition of Kangaroo Island as South Australia's first settlement. They made Joan their first patron. The honour was reported in the local paper. One local was inspired to create a headstone for Mary Seymour's unmarked grave, which described her as 'the first white girl born on K Is. Daughter of Nat Thomas and Betsy [*sic*], a Tasmanian full blood Aboriginal.'

Remembering Mary as a 'white girl' seemed a positive attempt to welcome Joan into the progressive, celebrated island history. This was something Joan accepted eagerly. 'My ancestor ... was the first child born on Kangaroo Island', Joan told me, 'that's the start of everything, isn't it?'³¹

In 1986, Joan met Richard Tylor, when he too joined the KIPA. With David, they wanted to do more than recognise Kangaroo Island as the state's first settlement, they wanted to assert their ancestors as the first South Australians. 'We go back to the very beginning', Richard told me, 'Nat Thomas was there in 1827 ... [and] Betty ... in about 1819 ... They were some of the earliest ... pioneers on the island.'³²

By 1991, the KIPA had agreed to erect plaques to remember Nat Thomas in Penneshaw and at Antechamber Bay. Two years later, David approached the Division of State Aboriginal Affairs to fund a memorial to honour Betty near her unmarked grave. The inscription remembers Nat and Betty as 'early settlers' who had the 'first documented' child in South Australia, as well as the Aboriginal woman's 'significant contribution to the early development of the island'.

This important memorial brings to public light a history remembered almost exclusively by colonial descendants. But here, at their seemingly most challenging point, the complexity and extent of the Thomas descendants' exclusion is still evident. The words 'first', 'settlers' and 'development' suggest an attempt to squeeze into the right side of the beginning

marker to qualify within linear progress. But the point of one's exclusion can't become the point of one's inclusion. David, Richard and Joan want what Jonathan Boyarin claims is the impossible: for the past to affect the present while reconstructed into a single arrow moving unidirectionally through a disconnected space.³³ This model of history does not, as Paul Carter describes it, offer the opportunity of 'going back'; it treats space as dead.³⁴ To bring space to life is to recognise how it has been reconstructed into *place*.³⁵ But the Thomas descendants cannot see how spaces become places within colonial memory; they have been excluded from such knowledge. As a result their model of time and space is, to use Boyarin's terminology, 'politically ineffective'.³⁶

Historical priority is not a concern for Dudley colonial descendants, so they are not challenged by another's claim for it. Claiming historical primacy is not necessary for 'local locals'. It is the inability to see this marker of exclusion that ensures that the Thomas descendants' legacy of dispossession continues. Their historicisation of their ancestry is therefore an Aboriginal experience of a particular kind.

It is analogous to Sally Morgan's finding out about her Aboriginal ancestry in her adult life, and then writing about her journey to understand it, in her well-known book *My Place*. While her story has been widely celebrated, Bain Attwood finds Morgan's Aboriginality 'inherently problematic'.³⁷ This is not because it is constructed, but because Morgan claims it is essential and spiritual. Attwood also criticises Morgan for trying to reconcile her own life with the experiences of previous generations when there is 'no real dialectic' between them. While they have 'suffered a particular form of oppression ... this does not hold true for Morgan'.

But Attwood's criticism misses the point: it does not acknowledge that the reason Sally Morgan did not know her history was that it was an Aboriginal history. If her family's testimonies represent, as Attwood claims, 'a foreign county which Morgan cannot readily understand', they do explain the historical silence she grew up with.³⁸ Not knowing, and having to construct a narrative in order to understand, was part of her Aboriginal experience.

In 1991, the *Adelaide Advertiser* asked Joan if they could photograph and interview her at Antechamber Bay. Standing near the Hills hoist on the back lawn of the farmer's house, Joan was asked her how she 'felt' to be standing so close to the 'burial site' of her ancestor. 'I felt nothing', Joan told me. 'Nothing.'

But Joan went back to Antechamber Bay several times and over time, could not 'help but feel an affiliation with the land'. Joan's affiliation had to be learned. She did not inherit it along with generations of storytelling.

'Didn't she know she had Aboriginal blood? Oh goodness me!' Mary Niven said to me, before finally reasoning: 'I suppose it never hit her.' Other colonial descendants drew a similar conclusion. So it is that ignorance becomes the measure of acceptance. But Joan sought to be accepted, to continue a longer history in which her family, as she told me, had 'joined in with everything exactly the same as everybody else; there was nothing different about them'.

But at one point in our conversations, Joan mentioned to me something James had uncovered from Aboriginal Protection Board records. As a result of being deemed a 'half-caste' by the Dudley council, Mary Seymour been forced to hand her house over to the Crown in return for basic rations when she was in need. '[Mary] wasn't helped as much as she should have been', Joan insisted. Indeed, Joan remembered her mother and aunt discussing how the Penneshaw store-keeper had ripped Mary off. But Joan would not let me record his name, for fear of upsetting his living Penneshaw relatives.

For Joan to remind the Dudley community of her history of exclusion, or to assert an Aboriginality, would have pushed the limits of acceptance within the colonial-descendant community. One Dudley resident told me that 'anyone less than a half-caste' had 'no right to call themselves an Aborigine'.³⁹ Instead, Joan accepted her history as others had packaged it for her, in the way they had found acceptable and unchallenging. For if Joan did not inherit generations of storytelling, she did inherit her family's silence.

Epilogue

When I visited Kangaroo Island in April 1998, David Tyler,

by then president of the KIPA, invited me around to his cottage for lunch. He had read a draft of this article and at first thought I had ‘missed the point’: ‘I see myself ... as a showman ... being a bit mischievous ... with the history.’ ‘But’, he continued, ‘then I thought, you’ve probably made quite a valid interpretation in many ways.’ I asked if he still thought it was important to ‘squeeze on the right side of the historical marker’. He answered that it ‘doesn’t matter who was here first’.⁴⁰ I laughed. Was this yet another demonstration of his mischievousness?

The next day we went together to Lubra Creek. He was awestruck by the place, by the Aboriginal flint stones, the stories and most of all the sense of peace he felt there.⁴¹

But his political mischievousness was still alive and well. A few days later, when he gave me a lift to Penneshaw, he asked me, as KIPA president, if I would address this year’s annual dinner. ‘Are you sure?’ I asked.

On 27 July 1998 I presented the above story to the members of the KIPA. Several of the other Thomas descendants attended, along with many Dudley colonial family members. I don’t think I have ever been so nervous. At the end of my talk one of the Dudley colonial descendants stood up and in a forthright manner said: ‘My grandmother used to walk up that hill to where [Joan’s mother] used to live and play bridge with them. And they did that in the 1930s!’⁴²

Then Richard stood up. He told everyone how, as a boy, he used to visit his Auntie Annie, Joan Maves’ mother. There he often used to see ‘this dark lady’. He had never known that she was his Auntie Mary, let alone played cards with her.⁴³

Several months before the KIPA dinner I had sent a draft of this article to Richard. In response he wrote, ‘You make a big thing of memory or the loss of memory, but to me it doesn’t mean a thing. All I know is history.’⁴⁴

Richard’s words inspired my title. But when we met again in April 1998 he said the notion of ‘losing memory’ was still not clear. So I asked him what he knew of the land at Antechamber Bay and when he said he knew little more than where the plaque was erected in front of Nat’s house, I told him that this is what I meant by having lost memory. He said:

If they had been accepted, then ... it would have been like the colonial [descendants] ... they talk about their ancestors ... well, had they been accepted they may have talked about their ancestors too.⁴⁵

I redrafted this essay in September 1998 and emailed it to David Tyler. The next day he responded that for a while now he and his father had thought about ‘proclaim[ing]’ their Aboriginal ‘heritage’. But he said that in the current climate of ‘overt racism’ people might look at their ‘apparent’ whiteness and assume they were trying to claim benefits. He told me there were KIPA members disturbed by my talk and that he had tried to explain to them the differences between overt and covert racism, and that the latter had caused his family’s exclusion. Finally he told me, ‘you have to say [this story] is important and [that] it must be told. The same story must exist across Australia ... but for those [who are] the subject of the story it can be difficult to do the telling. It must come from the outside.’⁴⁶

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‘What is the unconscious (or conscious) problem that belief in her Aboriginality solves for Morgan’, asks Attwood, ‘or what wishes or desires does this belief satisfy?’⁴⁷ Assuming it is as simple as ‘wishes and desires’ Attwood thus discounts Sally Morgan’s Aboriginality.

But when Sally Morgan and Richard and David Tyler discovered their Aboriginal ancestry it was not as simple as Attwood assumes. Not knowing their history was in fact their inheritance — the result of a history of Aboriginal exclusion. Their resulting ‘constructions’ cannot be abstracted from this legacy. David’s words that, ‘it has to come from the outside’ is an acknowledgement of how much is lost, so much that its hard to begin how to tell the narrative of how it came to be that way.

But David, standing under the melaleucas at Lubra Creek crossing taught me that a sense of loss could not alone define his Aboriginality; it is not sustainable. David needed to find that same ‘sense of belonging’ that Julie Barnes, a white

colonial descendant, claims she has. David's ancestors' land is also being used to form his identity, but, unlike Julie, he had to learn where it was. Unlike Julie, David's sense of loss is incorporated into his sense of belonging.

Reflection

It is an honour to be asked to republish older work, especially as this was my first publication. I was proud and excited in 1999 by the opportunity to feature in a refereed journal, especially as Stephen Muecke and Meaghan Morris had asked me to write it. Their interest in my work was an important validation of my attempt to write a local history and of, as it seemed to me at the time, my bold and forthright theoretical approach to understanding the identities constructed by those for whom an Aboriginal ancestry was a revelatory discovery.

My research for this article included carrying out interviews on Kangaroo Island and Adelaide in 1993 and 1994. This was not long after Bain Attwood's critique of Sally Morgan's *My Place* appeared, the controversial nature of which inspired several responses including this one. I argued that the very act of having to 'construct' an identity—of having to come to terms with the loss of memory caused by a family's silence and shame—was a particular Aboriginal experience. While I remained faithful to this idea, the final paragraphs of this paper are testimony to what I had begun to reconsider: that 'loss alone cannot define Aboriginality'.

By the time this article was reworked in the book *Unearthed* in 2002 I concluded: 'Memory lost, a history unearthed. In the freshly turned earth, new memories are seeded. And the roots grow deep.'⁴⁸ By then I believed it was possible to forge new, valid, Aboriginal identities where there had been only silence. Since *Unearthed*, I learned that the Aboriginal community in Tasmania have never forgotten the women and their descendants who lived on Kangaroo Island. If this history had been silenced by a generation of descendants from Kangaroo Island, it is important to acknowledge that their history remained a living part of a wider Tasmanian Aboriginal memory.

Lastly, this article now includes two considerable changes. Since all but one of the families who appear here were happy to have their real names used in the 2008 edition of *Unearthed*, then it seems logical to use them here rather than the pseudonyms I

used in 1999. Secondly, the 1999 article was nearly twice as long as this version. The section ‘The start of everything’ is a new heading, under which several sections have been reduced. This editing has been done with an effort to retain the essential information and ideas.

This article was later reworked and appears in *Unearthed: The Aboriginal Tasmanians of Kangaroo Island* published by Wakefield Press. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the help Jenny Lee, Tom Griffiths and Ann Curthoys gave me in preparing this article, and the help Patrick Wolfe gave me when it was part of my MA thesis. I would also like to thank the South Australian Ministry of Arts whose funding for my book also helped me to write this article.

Notes

- 1 Ernestine Hill, ‘Last of the Tasmanians’, *Walkabout*, 1 July 1954, p. 20.
- 2 Thomas Dunabin, ‘The Old Sealing Days’ in *The Australian Junior Encyclopaedia*, Charles Barrett (ed.), 3 vols, The Australian Educational Foundation, Sydney, 1959, vol. 1, pp. 304-6.
- 3 Letter from Edward Barnes [pseudonym], *Chronicle*, 22 September 1960.
- 4 J. S. Cumpston, *Kangaroo Island, 1800-1836*, Roebuck Society Publication, Canberra, 1970, p. v.
- 5 Philip A. Clarke, ‘Early European Interaction with Aboriginal Hunters and Gatherers on Kangaroo Island, South Australia’, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 20, 1996, pp. 51-81.
- 6 The Dudley District, also the Hundred of Dudley, incorporates Antechamber Bay and Penneshaw within its boundaries. The Hundred of Dudley is a peninsula attached to the western end of Kangaroo Island by a narrow neck of land.
- 7 Clarke also lists several other stories of Aboriginal women escaping from Kangaroo Island by swimming in ‘The Aboriginal Presence on Kangaroo Island, South Australia’ in Jane Simpson and Luise Hercus (eds), ‘Histories in Portraits: Biographies of Nineteenth Century South Australian Aboriginal People’, special edition of *Aboriginal History*, Monograph 6, Southwood Press, Sydney, 1998, pp. 24-8.
- 8 Jean Nunn, *This Southern Land: A Social History of Kangaroo Island 1800-1890*, Investigator Press, Adelaide, 1989, p. 57.
- 9 Nathaniel Walles Thomas’ Last Will and Testament, 29 July 1879, Penneshaw Folk Museum, Kangaroo Island.
- 10 Assessment Records of the District of Dudley, Dudley Council Chambers, Kangaroo Island, 1888-1889.
- 11 H.T. Burgess (ed.), *The Cyclopaedia of South Australia*, Cyclopaedia Company, Adelaide, 1907-09, 2 vols, vol. II, p. 1021.
- 12 Minutes of the Dudley Council, Dudley Council Chambers, Kangaroo Island, 1889-1902.
- 13 Personal interview with Brian Barnes, Penneshaw, 28 June 1993.
- 14 Brian Barnes, 1993.
- 15 Personal interview with Agnes Marshal, Penneshaw, 27 August 1994.
- 16 Personal interview with Agnes Walker, near Kingscote, 4 September 1994.

- 17 Personal interview with John Niven, Penneshaw, 26 August 1994.
 18 Agnes Marshal, 27 August 1994.
 19 The one exception was a fourth-generation Thomas descendant who had become a deep-sea captain. His position was seen as an anomaly for his Aboriginal ancestry. But the fact he had 'worked himself up', as his position was described (and the fact he and his wife lived in Port Adelaide) made the marriage somehow more acceptable.
 20 Personal interview with Keith and Margaret Southlyn, Antechamber Bay, 2 September 1994.
 21 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. F.J. Ditter and V.Y. Ditter, Harper and Row, New York, 1980. In the introduction, Ditter and Ditter discuss the 'impassable barrier' between people who do not share enough of the same collective memories, pp. 21-5. See also Paula Hamilton, 'The Knife Edge; Debates About History and Memory' in Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 19.
 22 Brian Barnes, 1993.
 23 Hamilton, pp. 19-20.
 24 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, vol. 26, 1989, p. 8.
 25 Ibid., p. 8.
 26 Here Nora is quoting Halbwachs' notion (p. 22) that there are as many memories as there are groups.
 27 Julie Barnes [pseudonym], History of the [Barnes] Family (in the possession of Julie Barnes: unpublished, c. 1990), p. 1.
 28 Personal interview with James Maves, Reynella, South Australia, 19 June 1993.
 29 Personal interview with Robin and Fiona Marshal, Antechamber Bay, 27 June 1993.
 30 Personal interview with Joan Maves, Kingscote, Kangaroo Island, 26 June 1993.
 31 Joan Maves, 2 September 1994. Further references to this interview will be given after quotations in the text.
 32 Richard and David Tyler, Adelaide, 15 August 1994.
 33 Jonathan Boyarin, 'Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory' in Jonathan Boyarin (ed.), *Remapping Memory and the Politics of TimeSpace*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1994, p. 2.
 34 Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, Faber and Faber, London, 1987, p. 294.
 35 Carter discusses how space becomes place through the process of naming, pp. xiii-xxv.
 36 Boyarin claims that when we talk of the 'politics of memory' we are 'really referring to rhetoric about the past mobilized for political purposes'. It is from this premise he argues that if the past is politically effective in the present, than the model of timespace must be complicated to accommodate this assumption [my italics], Boyarin, p. 2.
 37 Bain Attwood, 'Portrait of an Aboriginal as an Artist: Sally Morgan and the Construction of Aboriginality', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 25, no. 99, 1992, p. 303. Directly relevant responses to Attwood by Jackie Huggins, Tony Birch, Isabel Tarrago and Tim Rowse were printed in *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 25, no. 100, 1993.
 38 Attwood, pp. 303-6, 313-4.
 39 Personal conversation with the curator of the Penneshaw Folk Museum.
 40 Personal interview with David Tyler, Kingscote, Kangaroo Island, 13 April 1998.
 41 Audio recording of the trip from Kingscote to Antechamber Bay with David Tyler and others, 14 April 1998.

HISTORY, POWER, TEXT

- 42 Audio and visual recordings of my address to the KIPA annual dinner, Adelaide, 17 July 1998.
- 43 My address to the KIPA dinner, 1998.
- 44 Letter from Richard Tyler of Hawthorn, Adelaide, 14 January 1998.
- 45 Richard Tyler, 18 April 1998.
- 46 Email from David Tyler, 29 September 1998.
- 47 Attwood, p. 303.
- 48 Rebe Taylor, *Unearthed: The Aboriginal Tasmanians of Kangaroo Island*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2002, p. 5.

'Fixing' the Past: Modernity, Tradition and Memory in Rural Australia

Heather Goodall

The photograph is a quintessentially modern artefact. A captured instant of sight, frozen by non-human technology, with the illusion of objectivity. As a photograph is developed, the image comes hazily into sight, and is then caught, made static and permanent by a chemical 'fixer'. Yet 'fixing' has other meanings. To 'fix' may mean to repair and correct, or it may mean to fraudulently ensure a particular outcome, as when 'fixing' a race. Each of these three meanings is relevant to an exploration of the way rural Australians are dealing with their relationships to the past and to modernity.

A characteristic of societies moving into 'modernity' has been a shift in people's relationship to their pasts.¹ The past may be seen to embody prized values and to hold the power to authorise current practices and structures. So there is strong pressure and ample opportunity to fictionalise a past, to 'invent a tradition' in Hobsbawm's memorable phrase, which will serve the purposes of a current group, whether to legitimate power or to support an argument for 'restoration' of rights or values.² When interpretations of the past are contested, a particular account may be called up to *correct* alleged misapprehensions or distortions in existing understandings. As Hobsbawm suggests, the 'correction' may involve a conscious or unconscious 'fixing' or deception in which the story told is shaped to privilege the interests of the group telling it. Memories, as such, are never transparent glimpses of the past but are always created in a narrative process that is shaped by questions and concerns of the narrator's present.³ So memory

and its retelling are fertile sites for ‘fixing’ in the senses of ‘correcting’ or ‘defrauding’.

But the photographic sense of ‘fixing’ is also important. There has been much recent discussion, after Hobsbawm, about the invention of ‘tradition’, but less about the ways in which ‘modernity’ is just as much a cultural construction which can be used to claim authority and to justify power.⁴ The invention of ‘tradition’ is invariably an argument about what ‘modernity’ is said to constitute and the relationship between ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’. Both ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ can be seen to be concepts created, mobilised and artificially opposed to meet shifting needs for authority.

This essay explores examples from rural Australia in which memories, in their retellings and representations, are sites for the uneasy negotiation of what is ‘traditional’ and what is ‘modern’. It will be seen that narration of memories is not by any means a clear-cut process of laying out the constructed polarity between the traditional and the modern. Not only are these memories often mobilised to ‘fix’ the past in the photographic sense as well as the other meanings, but their retellings in form and content often mask the presence of the ‘modern’ within what is being set up as ‘the past’ or the ‘traditional’.

The situations examined here are not simple; there are at least two layers of cultural and political interaction which complicate the picture. One is that these examples are drawn from a rural area, the Black Soil country—the northern floodplain of the Darling River, straddling north-western New South Wales and south-western Queensland. In this area, the very idea of the ‘rural’ is also being constituted daily, as groups locked into a number of economic and environmental conflicts align themselves to claim the authority of being the ‘really’ local people and so the ‘real’ voice of rural Australia. An even deeper complicating factor is the ongoing colonial nature of relations in the area, which shapes the way in which the ‘community’ is understood. The colonised Indigenous society, Aboriginal people who call themselves Murrri, continue to live close to their traditional lands, which were overrun during the British invasion by the pastoral industry. Sheep and cattle graziers now find themselves facing an invasion, as intensive

irrigated agriculture is rapidly undermining their previously secure land and political tenure. Unresolved conflicts between Aborigines and pastoralists are now compounded and complicated by the new disputes over land, water and political dominance between the two forms of western agriculture.

The realities of colonialism are starkly evident here. There is a high surviving Aboriginal colonised population. Some have faced a history of enforced or work-related movement, but many of these Aboriginal people were able to work on or near their own land. The contestation between Aborigines and non-Aborigines continues to focus on land. The tenure of graziers in the New South Wales section of the study area is pastoral lease. Although graziers have acted and thought of this tenure as if it were freehold, the rental nature of the arrangement of these leases of Crown land has been the subject of reconsideration. In 1992 the High Court recognised the continuing existence of traditional native title to property where the sovereign colonising power has not alienated the land. This affects only minimal areas in most states, but the subsequent *Wik* judgement in 1996 indicated that native title might also continue to exist on land under grazing lease. Now pastoralists, whether affected by any native title claims or not, are arguing that Aboriginal claims to land have interrupted their legitimate development plans. Their insecurity also arises from attempts to protect the environment with legislation. Finally, the invasion they face in both states of highly capitalised irrigated farming for cotton and intensive beef lot production has exposed the weaknesses in the grazing industry. Populations are declining, land values are destabilised and political establishments are being challenged in the confrontations over economic and civic power.

Colonialism in rural Australia and the grazing industry itself have been major sites for the exercise of modern technology and capitalist innovation in Australia. Modernity is often assumed to be an urban phenomenon, which then slowly spreads to rural areas. The rural in Europe can be imagined, however inaccurately, as an archive of residual pre-capitalist practices and knowledge. It has been drawn on in this sense as if it were a source of 'essential' national characteristics. In areas like Australia where colonisation began after the processes

of European 'modernisation' had taken hold, the impact of modernity is as much rural as urban. In a settler colony, the pre-capitalist land use and culture is that of the colonised. And in order to justify invasion, colonised people and their culture have until very recently been denied and ignored. The ruthless violence with which the colonised peoples were supplanted is masked in Australia by an origin mythology among whites of a 'peaceful settlement'. But masked also is the degree to which pastoral expansion exemplified, not an imagined pre-modern rural pastoral, but the modern itself, in its repeated application of new technologies to the landscape, its rapid embrace of 'labour-saving' innovations and the continuing expectation that engineering approaches will solve resource problems, whether those of scarcity or over-abundance.

From the 1840s, new technologies like the breech-loading rifle and the telegraph and railway supported the relentless innovation required to meet the demands of the global market for wool, beef and grain products. This involved equally relentless displacement and often destruction of the existing traditions of the land, that of the Indigenous people who were being colonised. The grazing industry then survived only by being able to apply new technologies, and after World War II there was a rapid increase in the use of fossil-fuelled equipment such as trucks for droving, heavy harvesting equipment, motorbikes and later helicopters for mustering. Most recently, the introduction of intensive irrigated crops have brought the use of ever-more sophisticated computer and satellite technology, offering a promise (seldom fulfilled) of a level of control over the environment for cotton farmers of which graziers could only ever dream. This has intensified the romantic dream of achieving heightened power through technology. Even graziers, whose water and livelihood are threatened by water-hungry cotton farms upstream, will frequently become wistful as they describe the excitement of the scale and sophistication of the cotton growers' technological control over their crop and land.

Apart from the impact on the physical environment, this process has had profound human costs, as the need for labour has declined dramatically since the rise in use of fossil-fuelled machinery after 1945. Workers have found there is no longer

work for them in the stockyards, as drovers, or even as shearers, as new 'wide blade' shears were introduced. The network of families and relationships, which are, in themselves, what so many longer-term residents define as 'the country', has been altered and then broken up over the last two decades as more and more small-holding families have left the district.

This had led to a phenomenon often described as characteristic of post-modernity. Jameson's descriptions of this phenomenon were directed to the 'post-modern' city, in which the landmarks of a familiar social world are effaced by the homogeneity of urban modernity. The familiar signs of the social network by which people oriented themselves have been removed, causing disorientation. Ching and Creed have argued that this is just as likely to occur in rural settings, and certainly in rural Australia this is what people describe.⁵ In the case of non-Aboriginal country people, for whom the natural environment holds few meaningful signs, it is elements of the built environment like letterboxes along the roadside which are grieved over as they disappear.

Yet there has been a strong tendency among urban Australians to see the Australian rural experience not as 'post-modern' but as 'pre-modern', in terms of the European romantic concepts of pre-industrial cultural and economic conservatism. There has been as well a simplistic urban adoption of the tropes of 'rusticity' to denigrate non-urban communities, practices and individuals.⁶ At times, official presentations of the rural have fostered this view of the rural as national essentialism and given an impression of rural stasis. In many instances, rural people, or, as they recently demanded to be called, 'bush families', have fought against the denigration of rusticity, and have insisted that their past and present embrace of modernist technology and ideologies be recognised. Yet there are processes working against such recognition among rural people themselves, some deliberately mobilised but some apparently less conscious. Instead, there are contrary trends, which either obscure the modernity of the Australian rural experience or seek to supplant it with a mythology of rural 'tradition' which sets it apart from the 'modern' present and which draws on the pre-industrial pastoral of European rural myth rather than on any experience of

either settler or colonised in Australia.

The particular self-contradiction within the agrarian myth as it has been used in settler-colonies like the United States is that it looks both backwards and forwards, denigrating modernity as it romanticises settlers' withdrawal from corrupting cities, yet at the same time celebrating modernising 'progress' as it triumphs over 'primitive' peoples and 'wasted' country.⁷ We can see very similar ambivalences in Australian situations, although the ways in which modernity and tradition are constructed differ markedly between settler and Aboriginal uses. I will discuss two examples: one from settler and one from Aboriginal experiences. In each situation, a constructed sense of 'tradition' to seek authority for interpretations is in use, at the same time as an uneasy alignment with 'modernity'. In each, however, the tropes and tools of modernity are often the means to obscure the actual processes of modernisation in either technological or social dimensions. And in each, the past is 'fixed' in memory from a particular vantage point, which isolates the 'past' from the 'modern' present, making continuing dynamic processes into fixed, static 'traditions', and masking the deep interactions between the processes of the traditional and the modern.

1. 'Battling the land': woody weeds

A deeply disturbing occurrence for graziers in the western districts of New South Wales and Queensland is the rapid spread of native saplings which have been dubbed 'woody weeds'. These are immature forms of well-known eucalypts, such as Coolibah on black soil and Buddah bush and Turpentine on red soil. The woody weeds do not appear as single, free-standing plants like the known and often admired mature trees, but instead are growing in dense thickets, with thin, often multiple stems, blocking sunlight, obstructing vision and transforming the once open plains into impenetrable forests. The ways in which grazing managers describe their memories of the emergence of woody weeds have many common characteristics.⁸

Women take a major role in the work of a pastoral business, but less often in its management.⁹ It is men, typically, who tell the story of how the woody weeds got out of hand. There

are few stock workers remaining in western areas since the mechanisation of the 1960s, so it is generally leaseholders and managers who narrate a history of their decision-making and explain that the regrowth started after the big floods of 1950 and 1956. There is intense debate among graziers about whether flooding stimulates or impedes native pasture regrowth, a debate which demonstrates that direct observation does not produce any consensual 'local knowledge'. Most, however, see floods as having a role in causing the dense 'weed' shrubs and saplings to emerge. Whatever the details of the initiating event, the regrowth is attributed to some external and usually unavoidable 'natural' cause. The plants are described as inherently vigorous and difficult to control, and as malevolently herbicidal: killing grass and other plant growth all around them. The sequence for the graziers is clearly that the woody weeds invade grassland and then kill the pasture. Some admit that they did not notice the saplings in their early growth phases, while others simply describe the rapid march of the plants across the plains as having been out of their control to anticipate or prevent. Many plead: 'We just want to get back to what it was before' (without any question of what 'before' might mean).

In frequently expressed, affectionate descriptions of childhoods playing and riding across open, sunny plains, shaded with scattered large gums, graziers call on a widely shared vision of the 'essential' nature of the Australian landscape, the 'open, sunlit plains' of many poems and paintings. They invoke a long-standing image of national emplacement for urban perhaps even more than for rural Australians, as close to a tradition as the settler society has yet achieved, but one which has been losing currency since the mid century as Australians' work and leisure experiences shifted to the lush coast or the dramatic and remote desert interior.

There have been increasing restrictions on clearing in New South Wales for some years now. In Queensland there have been none until recently, so that what is euphemistically called 'stick-picking' has been a yearlong occupation. Now the newly established Labor government in Queensland has foreshadowed regulations to limit clearing and as a result the last months of 1999 have seen such a wave of panic clearing

by landholders that it has alarmed even fellow graziers in the area. In New South Wales, the National Parks Service staff (who administer regulations protecting native flora and fauna outside national parks as well as within them) and increasingly the Western Lands staff (who were once reliable advocates for the grazing industry) are both now seen as under the influence of 'The Greens'. The villains in many of the graziers' stories are consistently the anonymous 'Greens' of the cities, who are seen as ignorant of rural conditions but as vindictively dominating political processes and controlling the rural officials. The heroes are the graziers themselves, seeking now to restore the sunlit, open plains.

Another narrative could be constructed, however, and the differences in the two accounts suggest the omissions in and shaping of the graziers' story. The major environmental impact of grazing was in the 1870s and 1880s and led to dramatic soil change and the virtual extinction of many species of plants and animals. Aboriginal fire management of the grasslands was stopped around the same time, and the rabbit plague added to the destructive collapse of grazing lands in the 1890s. Since the resulting reduction in grazing pressure, the effects have been much slower and less obvious. The dramatic changes are now beyond living memory, but the impact has nevertheless continued to undermine the diversity of native pastures, depleting ground cover. Most scientific observers agree that the regrowth occurred *after* the pasture was destroyed: the saplings increase to 'fill a vacuum' on effectively denuded land.¹⁰ This is diametrically opposed to the causal relation established in the grazier narrative, and demands that grazing itself accept the major responsibility for the sapling advance.

One of the reasons the sequence of events is disputed is because of the advent of technological modernity onto the grazing lands. With accelerated mechanisation after World War II, as the wool boom profits were turned into motorbikes, planes and helicopters, the number of boundary riders and stock workers rapidly declined. There was also, perhaps as a generational change, an ethnic shift in rural populations, with fewer of the Chinese men who had formed so many of the scrub-cutting and ring-barking gangs of the pre-war years.

With less employment, there was no further need for resident Aboriginal labourers. The Aboriginal workers' camps on the large properties were finally broken up and their residents forced away to the region's small towns. The overall effect was that there were fewer people, fewer eyes, to see the early stages of the regrowth until the saplings had taken a strong hold and grown too large to be readily removed by hand or boot. The rapid break up of larger properties into small-scale selections after the war exacerbated the problem, disrupting the flow of experienced information and individualising the observation process, leaving small-scale family farmers with few workers and no senior staff for advice and to share decision-making. There were at the same time fewer rabbits, thanks to the modern scientific strategy of the deliberate introduction of myxomatosis, and so pressure on the young plants was rapidly reduced just when there were fewer people there to watch them spring away.

The style of first person narration, the autobiographical form of individual testimony, is a literary and oratorical genre which is associated with the individualism of modernist literature and the individualism said to be characteristic of modernity itself. This is the form of narrative which grazing landholders and managers always use to describe their knowledge of their land. It conveys an impression of unchanging personal supervision of land conditions, consistent with both the intensely individualistic rhetoric of all contemporary rural business people in Australia and the masculine ideal of a responsible individual head of family. Yet early pastoral concerns were run with massive workforces, and the managers and graziers depended on the information they were given regularly by workers on all levels. That close, personal observation all disappeared with mechanisation, or was disrupted and truncated with selection. But this major shift is masked in grazier narratives which suggest continuous sole, personal knowledge of the land and of decision-making.

The 1970s saw the rapid development of environmental consciousness in urban areas, and a slow shift in the attitudes of personnel in land supervision roles. As public pressure increased for measures to protect the environment, the members of land management bureaucracies began to see themselves

responsible to a wider constituency (often expressed as ‘the public’ or ‘the future’) rather than to rural primary producers. At the same time as economic rationalism held sway in both conservative and centre-left governments, leading to a deregulation of tariffs and industry protection, agriculture has faced a rising number of regulations relating to land management. The combination of shifting regulations and growing reluctance of officials to condone local transgressions of the new restrictions led to a dramatic slowdown in New South Wales in approvals to clear land of any vegetation. Grazier frustration was intensified as economic conditions declined, cyclic drought set in and growing anxiety about increasing intensive irrigation and clearing for cotton slowed approvals of clearing licences down to a dead stop. In this situation the Wik debate appears like a god-send: now these constraints can be blamed on Aboriginal Native Title claimants and the rural representatives in parliament can be lobbied to remove all obstructions in one go.

In seeking a solution to this impasse, some graziers are re-narrating their history. For the first time, they are acknowledging not only Aboriginal presence before the invasion, but recognising the value of fire management of grasslands.¹¹ They are appealing to a new view of Aboriginal traditional land management as active, and they are portraying themselves as the inheritors of these techniques and of a custodial, conservationist approach to land. Some are doing this opportunistically, with no consultation with or role at all for local Aboriginal owners, while others are more sensitive to the need, even in cosmetic terms, for collaboration with continuing Aboriginal populations.

This realignment is a major shift in political relations in the region, born out of two crises, the shared opposition to cotton irrigation and the perceived biological threat of woody weed. For most pastoralists, however, their accounts of the rise of the woody weed crisis give them a framework within which to define their enemies, but few clues about how to address the problem in an achievable way. Their memories of the past environment as having an ‘essential’ and timeless norm of open paddocks and sunlit plains allow no insight into the way the very modernity of their own methods

and economic choices have contributed to environmental changes.

2. Traditional owners and native title

Aboriginal people in the Black Soil country have had different but no less complex engagements with both tradition and modernity. The invasion by the British in this pastoral area from the 1830s was extremely brutal until the early 1850s, causing major depopulation. Then the gold rushes drew European labour away from the pastoral industry so dramatically that Aboriginal people found themselves encouraged back onto their own lands by the very squatters who had been chasing them so violently away only the year before. This shift in conditions allowed Aborigines to establish themselves in most grazing areas as a permanent minority of the pastoral labour force until the mechanisation of the 1950s and 1960s.¹²

The slow rebuilding of social relations between surviving Aborigines during the mid nineteenth century was undertaken in the conditions imposed by the modernising pastoral industry. Yet the retention of links to traditional country allowed people to draw on the remaining formal oral traditions about their land. Perhaps even more importantly, however, what continued was the practice of 'tradition' as process. By this I mean that the 'traditional' influences on Aboriginal people in this radically different and modernising context were not simply the conserving of discrete stories and items of information about laws and the meaning of sites, but the *continuation of the expectation that land would be meaningful* and that this would, in turn, foster reciprocal and sustaining relations between people. This understanding of tradition as process is quite different from the frequent definition of 'tradition' as a fixed body of knowledge or a set of unchanging closed narratives, separated from the present. I have argued that this continuing practice of traditional expectations has been strongly evident in New South Wales throughout the period under colonialism.¹³

It has been conclusively and repeatedly demonstrated that Aboriginal cultural tradition is subject to change and creative reinterpretation, precisely because it has the vitality of any living culture in being able to engage with changing

conditions.¹⁴ Hobsbawm calls this 'custom', distinguishing it from the 'invented' 'tradition' which is necessarily inflexible to act as an anchor against change. 'Custom', he writes:

does not preclude innovation or change up to a point, though the requirement that it must appear compatible or even identical with precedent imposes substantial limitations on it.¹⁵

Nevertheless, it is also clear that Aboriginal cultures have sustained an ideological conviction that knowledge about land and the relations between people and land were eternal truths, handed down from the distant (as well as coexistent) dreaming/creation time, and were not and never had been open to change by human creativity or agency. This 'naturalisation' of the permanence of cultural constructs, despite the fact that they can be conclusively shown to be subject to change, is one source of confusion about the degree to which 'tradition' may be malleable. There have, however, been pressures arising from the conditions of a modernising colonialism which may have resulted in an even stronger emphasis by Aboriginal people on the permanence of Aboriginal tradition.

One may have been the invasion itself, which occurred with what must have seemed at times to be such implacable force. Stories of traditional powers and beings continue to be widespread throughout the many Aboriginal communities in New South Wales, and they were recorded in their colloquial, everyday retelling by observers like writer Roland Robinson during the 1930s.¹⁶ While these stories have obviously been a sustaining element in Aboriginal identity over two centuries, my impression has been that the New South Wales stories, when compared to those in areas like the Western Desert where the impact of invasion was later and less devastating, are notably focused on compelling narratives of overwhelming, retributive power. The underlying boast of the British that they embodied change and innovation may have prompted Aboriginal people to emphasise their culture as unchanging in a defiant assertion of difference and a claim for great authority. Since the early twentieth century, however, there has been a rising desire among settler Australians to seek an 'other'

which offers apparent permanence and assured truths, as well as immemorially established relations with invaded land. This has led European Australians to a reevaluation of indigenous 'tradition', which includes a pressure to assume the most rigid and static nature of that 'tradition'.¹⁷

Yet, through the whole period of colonisation, Aborigines have unavoidably worked within and had to negotiate modernising economic and social and cultural processes. This has seldom involved an unconditional acceptance of British practices or values, and one of the most hated impositions has long been the way in which state administrative bodies like the Protection Board and the Education Department used distinctions based on skin colour and assumed biological descent to categorise and govern Aborigines. These hated 'caste' hierarchies were used for decades to decide which children would have access to 'public' schooling; which people could live with their families on land defined by the state as 'reserve' or which were to be hunted off with expulsion orders; and which people were most eligible for 'dog tags' or certificates exempting them from the restrictions of the Aborigines Protection Act. This desire by settler bureaucracies to classify and order Aboriginal people by biological characteristics was a widely used practice deriving from the instrumental rationality which Weber and others have identified as characteristic of western modernity.¹⁸ Time and again, Aborigines asserted the broader and more encompassing nature of traditional kinship and many battles were fought out to reaffirm this in practice, with people sharing houses in defiance of Board restrictions; families visiting kin, sharing money and other resources, rather than build up the bank accounts on which the Board insisted; leaving work to attend funerals. In many ways, Aborigines in New South Wales have challenged the colonial bureaucracy's attempt to impose a narrow, biologically based system of placing and ordering people.

The strong continuities in Aboriginal practice around kin is suggested in the ways family stories are told, and in the ways these differ from the approaches of other local histories. There have now been a number of Aboriginal family stories published in written form from the northwest, all chronicling the links between (extended) families and places and the

movement between them.¹⁹ These stories often show supra-local identification, with connections traced to other speakers of the same language or those with shared political affiliations across a region and Australia wide. At the same time, they each demonstrate an intense localism, with the particulars of land and place inevitable elements of the most simply told tale. This way of telling stories can be compared with the way Aboriginal and other families are presented in the local history volumes, where land and place figure only as obstacles or possessions, where people are defined by their jobs and their adherence to particular behaviours, and where connections more lateral than the nuclear family are seldom emphasised.

Now a new situation has arisen which has complicated still further the negotiation between tradition and modernity, between past and present, for Aboriginal people. Largely as a result of continuous Aboriginal campaigning over many decades, the prior rights of Aboriginal people to property in land as well as to many forms of cultural expression have been formally recognised by mainstream Australian legal and political systems. This has been expressed in the term 'traditional owners', which, like its variant, 'native title holders', has not yet been even loosely defined by anyone. It is, however, being applied to an increasing number of bureaucratic processes, from the management of national parks to negotiations over intellectual property to the settling of claims to land under native title. While many Aboriginal people feel confident of the appropriateness of these terms in the general sense, they are increasingly being forced to offer detailed and authoritative 'proofs' of 'traditional ownership' in terms that satisfy these varied bureaucratic and legal contexts. Where Northern Territory Aboriginal people were forced to justify their claims to land in the courts, they insisted on appearing in person to sing the songs of their country. This forced the courts to accept, as at least partial proof, their *performance* of the knowledge which only owners can come to possess, having fulfilled obligations towards the country by participating in the requisite ceremonial tasks.

As Merlan and others have pointed out, this has precluded much of the contemporary Aboriginal understanding of the significance of place which have derived from the *continued*

workings of tradition as process under colonised conditions of pastoral and town life.²⁰ These continually reinterpreted perceptions of significance are the result of the same cultural processes as those of more 'traditional' appearance, but their association with the material life and chronology of the European occupation makes them less acceptable to the court as 'proof' of tradition. As colonisation in the Northern Territory has been relatively recent and there has been so heavy a dependence on tradition-oriented Aboriginal labour, much cultural knowledge remains about pre-invasion practices and so at least some Aboriginal owners have been able to satisfy the courts as to their 'traditional' credentials.

In New South Wales, however, colonisation began with so much brutality and has been underway for so long, that the processes of traditional life have been significantly reshaped in the conditions of modern living in rural, pastoral life. There are authoritative cultural expressions which allow performance of the evolving 'traditional', but they are not easily recognised by Europeans (demanding and yearning for a fixed and 'primitive' Indigenous tradition) as separate from a present-day, 'modern' lifestyle. Such practices include, for example, the tending of cemeteries and burial sites as a means of passing on collective, extended family histories and the many but often subtle differences in content and structure in the telling of family and community stories. Rather than being acknowledged as the outcome of vital, growing cultures, such contemporary Aboriginal knowledge has been labelled as 'not enough' to allow proof of the maintenance of tradition.

The outcome of the Yorta Yorta Native Title case is a good example of the rejection of contemporary and post-invasion knowledge as authoritative. In that case, an extraordinarily well-identified and articulate community, which had made over twenty attempts since the 1870s to have their rights to ownership of and access to what they had always understood to be their lands, found their claims to the Barmah State Forest on the Murray River dismissed because it was said that:

the tide of history has indeed washed away any real acknowledgement of their traditional laws and any real observance of their traditional customs.²¹

The increasing demands made by the structures set up to recognise Aboriginal rights have been for 'proof' which can be 'fixed' in the past and given the authority of a closed 'tradition' deriving from a pre-invasion time. Then the claimants must demonstrate that they have a link and increasingly the grounds for proving such a link have been narrowed to being only a link by linear, biological descent to the individuals confirmed to have participated in this distant, traditionalised past. Consequently, more and more Aboriginal communities are turning to the available European documentation to search for traces of continued traditional practices and for evidence of family lines which can be traced from the nineteenth century to the present claimants.

For some decades now, Aboriginal community historians have been using just such historical resources for community histories. But such sources have been used as supplements to the remembered accounts of life stories. Archival documentation has seldom been privileged over memory where recording and compiling Aboriginal community history has been the intention. Now, however, the structures for recognising Aboriginal traditional rights have reversed this process. Life stories and contemporary understandings are now seen as lacking necessary links to the distant 'traditional' past which falls far outside the reach of living memory. So contemporary knowledge must be secondary to 'real proof' of the nature of that acceptable, authoritative 'tradition' authenticated by evidence from archival documents.

The documents being used have many strengths, but also have considerable limitations. All are the products of their colonial context and each carries its perspectives and limitations. The records of pastoral labour forces, for example, can give strong testimony to the general association over generations of families of Aboriginal people with tracts of land. But these records associate Aboriginal names with the boundaries of leases and selections. Aboriginal people were able to sustain continuing contact with their own country by living and working on pastoral properties, but their actual usage of some particular areas of the land rather than others, their movements over lease boundaries and the incongruity between traditional meanings for land and those surveyed

lines demarking leaseholders' boundaries, do not find any record in the old wages books. The reality of recruitment to the pastoral labour force arose from more than Aboriginal choice. Networks of relationship between pastoral employers made it more likely that the people known to a pastoral manager's friends or relations would get jobs. And Aboriginal men from a clan group which gained early familiarity with stock work could gain an advantage, becoming the more readily employed workers across a wider district while less experienced traditional owners were overlooked. Such complexities of the historical process of adjusting to the colonising industry mean that the industry's archives cannot be read off as a transparent record of the underlying pre-colonial relationships, however they may have been shaped by the earlier culture. Instead, if these colonial records are preferred they will distort the understanding of 'traditional' lands into conformity with the run-holders' fence lines.²²

Another similarly limited source now frequently being used are the genealogies drawn up by anthropologists like Norman Tindale in the late 1930s.²³ Tindale's survey is important because of its wide geographic cover and its recording of the location of many people, along with photographs of them, at a particular time. It was, literally, a snapshot of the Aboriginal population in 1938. The Tindale 'family trees', however, were constructed entirely in terms of biological descent, in a time when much anthropological interest continued to be on 'caste'—that is, on biological descent, however speculative that may have been. While there are occasional interesting details about language affiliation of the people recorded and photographed, the sparse accompanying documentation gives few clues to the ways in which the Aboriginal people concerned may have thought of 'traditional' kin relationships, for this field survey aimed for breadth of geographical cover rather than depth of cultural observation. Nor was there any attempt to trace the realities of 'adoptive' or 'rearing up' relationships in which kin other than biological parents raised children. The complexities of actual family and land relationships under the conditions of a traditional practice shaped within colonial pastoralism and agriculture are not even acknowledged in these genealogies, let alone recorded.

What is recorded is reported biological descent. A third major source, the Aborigines Protection Board records, is even more limited, equipped only to trace biological descent rather than any broader kin affiliation and land relation processes.

So the outcome of the bureaucratic and legal demands for 'proof' of traditional ownership have increasingly been to privilege the evidence of European-authored archives to glean evidence of 'tradition' as past product, over the process of present enactment of traditional influence. Just as important, these demands have privileged biological descent over anything else. It is a great irony that the use of one of the most hated aspects of state control has been fostered by the structure set up, after decades of Aboriginal political struggle, to ensure the recognition of Aboriginal culture and rights.

A number of Aboriginal communities have tried to protect themselves by asserting the authority of memory and of community-generated modes of identifying 'traditional owners', such as developing histories of movement patterns from community memories as well as documents (Mutawintji) and deepening research into the family histories of people known to have been buried in Aboriginal cemeteries, thus identifying the families who have called these places 'home' (Collarenebri). But for many communities the demands for proof resting on archival documentation have undermined confidence in community members, who are no longer said to be authoritative 'enough' to secure a claim. The research process even within Aboriginal communities has shifted from recording memories first and seeking archival evidence later to one of putting primary energy into archival research and only later seeking corroboration in the memories of community members. The triumph of 'tradition', conceived as a fixed product in the past and authenticated primarily from within the documentation of the colonisers, has been turned against the faithful interpreters of tradition in a culture living with modernity.

Conclusion

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are engaged in contestations over what is 'traditional' and what is 'modern' in their experience. In a context where each of the concepts

of 'modernity' and 'tradition' has such powerful political force, there are some benefits for the groups in defining and mobilising a definition of a fixed 'tradition', but there are problems too. None of the rhetorical positions which oppose a 'fixed' 'tradition' to a changing 'modern' offers an adequate representation of a complex present. In each situation, the mode of storytelling is implicated in the goal of 'fixing' the past into a static tradition, and in constructing the oppositions which are being created to give authority and legitimacy to those composing the story. As the threads of each story are drawn apart, and the complexities, contradictions and ironies become apparent, a remaining commonality is that each reveals the deep interpenetration of 'tradition' and 'modernity' in rural Australia.

Reflection

This essay was written in 1999, four years after the beginning of what looked at first like a routine cyclical drought where these two examples are set, in western New South Wales. Although the underlying theme of both examples was environmental fragility, the enormity of the drought had not hit home. The invasive emergence of 'woody weed' reflected the damage done by European pastoralism over a century, despite the attempt to blame it on 'nature'. Less obviously, but still environmentally based, the rising demand for documents and biology to authorise native title claims had emerged from the long competition over scarce resources in meaningful places, which had typified the invasion of Australia.

Were this essay then to be written today, there would be no avoiding the urgency of environmental crisis. The drought, which looked routine in 1999, had become a disaster after the east of Australia endured eleven years in its grip. Crops and stock were dying, farming enterprises were falling into bankruptcy and farmers themselves were suiciding. Then, from 2010, extraordinary rains provoked more crises. Flood after flood followed until 2012, when flooding spread along the eastern half of the continent. And now, in 2014, drought is threatening again in western New South Wales and Queensland.

From the early days of settler observation, it was clear that the Australian environment was not predictable in any sense. The problem for settlers was the variability of Australia's climate,

which meant that Dorothea Mackellar's 'land of droughts and flooding rains' has seemed to be a stable—if inconvenient—truth. Now, with the threat of climate change, the increasing probability is not of cycles of even partially predictable droughts and rains, but of rising levels of catastrophic disasters as the scale of the weather extremes escalates.

This article draws from conflicts over the fragility of what can seem like a tough continent, where settler narratives have emphasised the 'battle' with an implacable nature. Now it is the continent itself, with the planet, which seems vulnerable. Despite a widespread resistance to recognising climate change, the damage in grasslands has shaken everyone's confidence. Discussions about 'El Nino' are heard more frequently around the pubs and stores in the bush today, and uneasy questions about how to hold climate change at bay—or compensate for its effects—lurk beneath most conversations. Both the settler and Aboriginal strategies for 'fixing' the past seem even more futile than they did fifteen years ago.

Notes

- 1 Alan O'Shea, 'The English Subjects of Modernity' in Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea (eds), *Modern Times*, Routledge, London, 1996, pp. 7-37.
- 2 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions' in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 1-14. Hobsbawm and Ranger's distinctions between 'tradition' and 'custom' are valuable (if sometimes internally contradictory) but are not consistent with the current uses of the word 'traditional' in the Australian context. So here I continue to use 'tradition' to refer to both ever-changing 'custom' and to the inflexible forms of 'invented' tradition.
- 3 Paula Hamilton, 'The Knife Edge: Debates about Memory and History' in Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 9-32; Heather Goodall, 'Aboriginal History and the Politics of Information Control' in Richard White and Penny Russell (eds), *Memories and Dreams: Reflections on Twentieth Century Australia*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996, pp. 77-96.
- 4 For a discussion of the need to explore the construction of 'modernity' rather than 'tradition', see Ralph A. Litzinger, 'Memory Work: Reconstituting the Ethnic in Post-Mao China', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1998, pp. 224-55.
- 5 Frederic Jameson, *Post-Modernity, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1991; Gerald W. Creed and Barbara Ching, 'Recognising Rusticity' in Gerald W. Creed and Barbara Ching (eds), *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy*, Routledge, New York and London, 1997.
- 6 Raymond Williams, *The City and the Country*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1973; Creed and Ching, 'Recognising Rusticity'.
- 7 Donald Worster, 'Beyond the Agrarian Myth' in his *Under Western Skies: Nature*

- and *History in the American West*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, pp. 3-18.
- 8 Heather Goodall, 'Telling Country: Memory, Modernity and Narratives in Rural Australia', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 47, 1999.
 - 9 Margaret Alston, *Women on the Land: The Hidden Heart of Rural Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1995.
 - 10 N. C. W. Beadle, *The Vegetation and Pastures of Western New South Wales, with special reference to soil erosion*, NSW Department of Conservation, Government Printer, Sydney, 1948; A. D. Wilson, 'The Effects of Grazing on Australia's Ecosystems', *Proceedings of the Ecological Society of Australia*, vol. 16, 1990, pp. 235-44; A. D. Robson, 'The Effects of Grazing Exclusion and Blade Ploughing on Semi-arid Woodland Vegetation in North-western New South Wales over 30 Months', *Rangelands Journal*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1995, pp. 111-27.
 - 11 D. Lucas, 'Growing a "Useful" History: Narrative, Ecology and Resource Management', *Public History Review*, vol. 5/6, 1996/7, pp. 200-10.
 - 12 Jeremy Beckett, 'George Dutton's Country: Portrait of an Aboriginal Drover', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 2, 1978, pp. 2-31; Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in NSW, 1770 to 1972*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney and BlackBooks, Sydney, 1996; Barry Morris, *Domesticating Resistance: The Dhan-gati Aborigines and the Australian State*, Berg, Oxford, 1989.
 - 13 Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, pp. 1-19; 98-103. Francesca Merlan has analysed the relation to 'tradition' of Aboriginal people in Katherine in the Northern Territory in a similar way in her *Caging the Rainbow*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, pp. 235.
 - 14 E. Kolig, 'Noah's Ark Revisited', *Oceania*, vol. 53, 1983, pp. 118-32; Fred Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*, Smithsonian, Washington and AIAS, Canberra, 1986; Deborah Bird Rose, *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill Stations*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1991; Merlan.
 - 15 Hobsbawm, p. 2.
 - 16 In, for example, Roland Robinson, *The Man Who Sold His Dreaming*, Currawong Publishing Co. Sydney, 1965 and Roland Robinson, *Black Fella, White Fella*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1958.
 - 17 Merlan, pp. 232, 235.
 - 18 See discussion in O'Shea, pp. 8-17.
 - 19 Janet Mathews (ed.), *The Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker*, AIAS, Canberra, 1977; Evelyn Crawford, *Over My Tracks*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1993; Joe Hirst, *Welcome to Brewarrina* (Photographic Exhibition, 1989). See parallels with life stories from other areas in New South Wales and Queensland: Margaret Sommerville, Marie Dundas, May Mead, Janet Robinson and Maureen Sulter, *The Sun Dancin'*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1994; Jeanie Bell, *Talking about Celia: Community and Family Memories of Celia Smith*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1997 and Phillip Pepper (with Tess de Araugo), *You Are What You Make Yourself To Be*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1980.
 - 20 Merlan, pp. 209-28.
 - 21 Justice Olney, Federal Court of Australia, 1998, cited in AIATSIS Native Title Unit, *Native Title Newsletter*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1999.
 - 22 This issue can be seen emerging in the disputes over the Indigenous Land Corporation's purchase of Eurool property, near Collarenebri, during the mid 1990s.
 - 23 Held in the Museum of South Australia and now widely used by many Aboriginal claimant groups to try to identify biological links

Indigenous Insurgency Against the Speaking for Others

Wendy Brady

We produce cultural criticism in the context of white supremacy. At times, even the most progressive and well-meaning white folks, who are friends and allies, may not understand why a black writer has to say something in a certain way, or why we may not want to explain what has been said as though the first people we must always be addressing are privileged white readers.¹

The writing of history is assumed to have validity through the act of writing, whereas for Indigenous peoples, history is worn in the body and in the connection between memory and practice. The debates that currently consume most historians as to who has the right to speak and for whom, as well as to the accuracy of historical writing often leaves me at a loss. As Indigenous people we are dragged and seduced into engaging in the debate as if to justify the very act of declaring and articulating our history. Non-Aboriginal historians such as Henry Reynolds, Ann McGrath and Bain Attwood have been referred to as experts in the field of Indigenous history writing but most often the confirmation of authority resides with those in the non-Aboriginal community and some Aboriginal people.²

Apart from a few exceptions our history is filtered through white minds, language and worldviews. We are required to fit the pattern of historical recollection as understood by the dominant culture. To put it quite simply non-Aboriginal historians believe they are engaged in an act of translation to communicate to the broader population (of white people) whereas we are translating in order for those individuals to

comprehend our historical reality and methods of recording. Mudrooroo Narogin is often regarded among dominant culture analysts as a black interpreter for Indigenous Australians and he speaks of being 'educated in the conqueror's way', which brings us into contact with 'others in the same predicament'.³ Yes, it does and has for me but the ability to communicate with others in similar circumstances does not alter my understanding of my identity nor does it invalidate my identity.

However, some white writers consider that we are somehow less Aboriginal by the act of writing theory, presenting our history, or critiquing dominant history. This ignites in me a simmering anger. For somehow, if we become multi-lingual and multi-skilled in the ways of the dominant culture our identity as Indigenous people no longer holds. This of course was required of us from first contact due to the inability of Europeans (British) to learn the complexities of Indigenous forms of communication. Non-Aboriginal writers who produce works about us are assumed to have attained some particular skill through their ability to interpret and translate history; this is then extended into an assumption of being able to produce Indigenous history. It becomes in effect a confirmation of their status as a white historian because they are able to write about 'others'.

The idea that to be able to be heard requires of us to speak in the 'master or mistresses voice' in order to be understood is too simplistic. Even though we may be perfectly able to articulate our history cogently and ably it is still deemed necessary to have white mentors, patrons or interpreters. At literary awards in New South Wales an Aboriginal author who produces his works in partnership with a non-Aboriginal writer was given two major awards. One of the most annoying, but expected responses was the paternalism with which both the author and the book were treated. The media were keen to find non-Aboriginal 'experts', who were asked to comment on the awards and the air was filled with praise and the word 'reconciliation' was constantly linked to both authors and their book. You see even their accomplishment required all people not to forget that it was a great achievement to succeed in the white man's (and woman's) world.

When we write Aboriginal history we also fall into the trap of trying to justify our history. The conflicts that Indigenous people have are put down to our inability to cope with non-Aboriginal society and culture. These conflicts, however, are often over the white understandings and recordings of our history. One only has to look at the dispute over whose land we now stand upon when exchanging knowledge in Sydney. Is it Gadigal, Eora or Dharug? The boundaries are false: they are connections required in order to prove our Aboriginal connections to this land so that non-Aboriginal people are able to confirm for themselves the existence of set borders around the lands of the Indigenous ancestors of this region. We fight while their words and their constructions are writ upon the land.

Who are they? No longer can we see it as between black and white. Waves and waves of immigrants have stepped onto our lands. We have ancestry that includes the different waves of immigrants, Maccassan, Afghan, Japanese, Irish, English, European, Indian, Pacific Islander and many more. The subaltern serves multiple roles: that of master while also being the second lieutenant to the dominant culture. Immigrant relationships, in the minds of the Indigenous, are based on the sense of that immigrant being yet another coloniser of the land. When put under the microscope that is the tragedy behind the events in Fiji in 2000, a conflict which was waged around the issue of Indigenous people's rights vs. non-Indigenous citizenship rights. This is a situation where the subaltern is not Indigenous, where the Indigenous can also be subaltern (the leader of the conflict) and where the majority are in conflict over the rights of first nation and the rights of the settler groups. Where does history and the writing of history stand in relation to formulating new groupings, different understandings and a vision of the future?

Consideration should be given to Dipesh Chakrabarty's position in relation to the history of Indigenous peoples and to the applicability of subaltern theory in the Australian context. He speaks of the role of the subaltern as writing or speaking on behalf of those who are unable to, and the subaltern thus writes the identity of those who are subject to the subaltern. There is the question of writing history and

writing identity, and writing identity into history. We have the classic situation here in Australia where we have numerous writers writing our identity, and I say 'our' in this situation as meaning Indigenous Australians. We have historians who are writing the identity of different cultural groups even though they might not be members of those cultural groups and that's quite common, particularly in relation to migration. I read a number of books about two years ago, which were written about Asian Australians and from those only two were actually by people who are Asian Australians. For me this represents the continuing practice of colonisation, some would call it assimilation but I think it's a process of historians' writing in the identity of others within their histories. It occurs most often in relation to Indigenous Australians. There is a sense that through the writing in of identity colonialist acts are covert but continue to be reproduced. In contrast to much of that writing I actually don't see us as a conquered people, I see us as a people who are invaded and have had to form innovative and often what I would call self-destructive ways of resisting. I'm not talking here about things such as alcohol and drug abuse, but I mean self-destructive in the way that we've had to self-destruct publicly sometimes in order to be able to retreat and reconfirm our identity.

The main way in which we have been able to write our history is to go into the area of autobiography. Aboriginal autobiography is an area for many Indigenous people to write our history. Of course much of what has been written about oral history having the 'conflict of memory contained within' is an assumption, the assumption being that oral history is more conflicted by memory than archival materials and others who write the history. When I'm teaching students one of the debates we engage in is the validity of oral history, particularly in relation to Aboriginal autobiography. The evidence they resort to for devaluing the authenticity of oral history is Heather Goodall's comment in *Invasion to Embassy* that Aboriginal people in some areas of New South Wales thought that Queen Victoria gave the reserve lands to their families. Although she does explain that it is derived from the attempt by New South Wales Commissioners of Crown Lands in the 1850s to construe the setting aside of reserves for use by

Aboriginal people as coming from the Queen as a ‘benefactor’ and owner of all ‘Crown Land’. Heather does point out that such ‘readings severely underestimate the factual knowledge held by Aboriginal people in the period, and the symbolic power of their account’.⁴ Aboriginal people understood the power relationship to Queen Victoria. It was one of the Queen as a senior woman with acknowledged authority in relation to all of Australia and the land. Yet, many non-Aboriginal people would say, ‘well Aboriginal people obviously did not understand the situation’.

I was reminded of this view when Dipesh was talking about our understanding of the relationship between capitalism and government. He declared that there is some confusion about the role of capital, private property and Western political structures by some groups. And that the documentation (archives) of those structures carries with it the opportunity to assess the history of that relationship. We did and do understand the relationship between western concepts of property, ownership, authority and government. It’s really quite clear to me that we understood that relationship—which is why I’m so much of a Republican. I think that in terms of their (the students’) doubts about the validity of oral history, the response is to say, how valid then are government records? Students are really quite confident about the accuracy of government records, when they are released after fifty or thirty years. I ask them the question: how accurate do you think the Hansard records of parliamentary debates are? I then explain to them that Hansard is actually changed. Someone might get up in the house and make a statement with general references and then that is given back to the Member of Parliament who confirms the accuracy of the record. Students are quite stunned by that, because they have this belief that the documentation that’s contained in the archives somehow represents truth. And that truth can be investigated and analysed, because you base your analysis on the truth that is there. Yet they feel able to question the accuracy of Aboriginal people in autobiography and oral history. In one case a student referred to a quote from Jackie Huggins’ biography, *Auntie Rita*, as an example of a work where there is an element of doubt because it relies on memory and experience and that outweighs *truth*.⁵

I think that goes back to the writing of history on behalf of others. Many historians, and I'm not saying all, who write on Aboriginal history use it to reinforce an unspoken or unacknowledged position of power in terms of control over truth. It is as if those historians are more able to accurately delve into it and find truth, whereas we as Indigenous people are much more suspect in our writing of history.

Questions and doubts about truth and our ability to be able to voice our history came out in the debate about the Stolen Generations. The *Bringing Them Home* report was questioned.⁶ During the public hearings the statements made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who had been removed were said by some to be flawed, because of the reliance on people's memories. There was and is a continuing debate about the accuracy of the statements and whether they constitute historical truth. The statements are put up against government records, which happened during the Northern Territory case. Debates such as that between Windschuttle, Reynolds and others convey to the general population a questioning of the truthfulness of both Indigenous reporting of their experiences of the past and inherited historical knowledge.⁷ In that debate over the accuracy of the number of Aboriginal people who have been massacred in Australia we have people trying to undermine the evidence of the past, while others are trying to support the validity of the Aboriginal experience. It is ultimately not about the numbers of Indigenous people who were massacred, but about the practice of state endorsed murder in order to oppress a people. And this is where I think that even those historians who are attempting to write much more representatively of Aboriginal history are still caught up in the exercise of the colonialist power structure of who has the ability to disengage and seek truth. I think that is quite problematic.

The release of the *Bringing Them Home* report saw a number of people producing books about the Stolen Generations. I was quite disturbed by this wave of historical writing on Indigenous Australians. It was a case of not allowing the authority of that history to still reside with people who had the lived experience of it. Memory may be flawed, for example, in the court case in the Northern Territory, where one of the

witnesses was interrogated about the actual date and the experience of her removal. The government's legal representative was reported as claiming it could not have happened like that. The person's memory was deemed inconsistent, because the records and memories of others held more conviction. What was ignored here was that it was the experience which was the historical import. Not the actual detail of the removal, what day, where and how and so on.

The assumption then was that in the case of legal understandings of history and utilising history, our legal system is founded on that colonial structure and so the right to own the history is expected to reside with the dominant culture. It also is then influenced by that nineteenth century approach to history and race. There is the added problem of educating the legal profession and the judiciary. That has been undertaken with varying degrees of success. However, the overriding difficulty is the approach of government either state or federal which continually reinforces the colonial structure of the state. Thus even if the judge wants to rule differently there are other barriers to that, this is apparent in mandatory sentencing or in this instance cases in relation to the Stolen Generation. This is a situation where the plaintiff may exhibit flawed memory in finite detail, but the truth of the lived experience is argued against on the grounds that it does not stand up in the court. High profile Aboriginal people came out in support of the plaintiffs, as did the majority of Aboriginal people across communities, and so did non-Aboriginal people who wanted to effect a socio-cultural change in the dominant culture. The colonial-born structure mediated against this change. I think that this is an example where the subaltern speaks, in unison with those who are supposed to be unable to speak against the dominant culture and have support from a broad section of the population but are confined by structural determinations that aim to ensure inequitable outcomes.

When I was an apprenticed historian it was considered to norm to read E. P. Thompson and E. Carr. But I was dissatisfied with them, not only in the language of those books, but also in the actual practice of writing history. I could not apply their approaches because it kept contradicting what was supposed to be the practice. I think that is very much the case

in the current practice of certain historians. As a student I was taught by historians, who fundamentally believed that there would be a truth that one could uncover, without resorting to lived experience or inherited history. Luckily I also had the opportunity to learn from a few with different understandings of historical research practice. Still others believed oral history was something that you just did when you wanted to feel a sense of community. That was why it was uncomfortable learning experience for me because you cannot disconnect from the past or from people's experiences of it, and when you do you fail as an historian.

I agree that historians such as Reynolds have changed the way many people understand the relationship between Aboriginal Australia and non-Aboriginal Australia. The difficulty remaining for me is that these historians provide opportunities for people to connect with the past, but the dominant voice is not Aboriginal. The majority of the Australian population believe that one opens the book and there is history, you close the book and that is where it ends. The difficulty for historians is that they have to not only rethink their practice but also their role in contemporary society. Historians are in a bit of an upheaval at the moment and this is a good thing. Indigenous people have had to deal with that upheaval and with constantly having our past being portrayed in ways that bear very little connection to what the lived experience is or what we know of our past. Alternatively, sometimes it bears a substantial resemblance to our experience and understanding of the past, usually when the Indigenous voice is at the forefront of the writing.

I just wanted to give you some sense of that. Many historians seek to have access to records that are archived from the various protection boards that have been in place in Australia. Those historians demand this access on the basis that they should have the right to investigate and to record this past because of the social responsibilities historians have in disseminating the past. I know that more and more historians are getting access to these records, which concerns me. I know I will be criticised for this, because it is about people having the ability to be able to seek information and knowledge and create new knowledge. But the whole sense of this being

available because one is seeking to create a shared history is not acceptable. Because what is contained in those records is not something that was shared. It was something that was imposed upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders by the invading society. These acts and records document what was practiced in an effort to define our identity in a way that was about our genocide. I think we have the right to privacy on that. We have sufficient data available to actually give the broad historical view of people who are being colonised. We have the right to stand up in our history and in our present and say this is no longer acceptable. I think some of the historians who have been writing about us have to turn around and start actually working with us. It is also not acceptable that some of those people have turned around and used those connections with us to advance careers or to create markets for their own writing. Indigenous people should now have the authority about access to the writing of history; learning from others about we can best go about that (whether they are Indigenous Australians or not) and be understood as the dominant voice in the writing of Indigenous history.

I will accept criticism on this position in relation to the role and rights of the historian, but I don't care to be honest with you. We have our right to write our own history, and when we chose to write that history to decide how we share with others. This is not about declaring all Indigenous writers will be free of dominant culture values or practices in the writing of history, but we do need to be acknowledged as the main recipients of our history of the past, as well as having the lived experience of colonisation in practice. I think there are Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who are doing that and in a way that we find appropriate. I am tired of reading about us by people who are concerned about creating a new picture of Australia's past, yet are unable to make the connection with those of us who have experienced it.

Notes

- 1 bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, South End Press, Boston, 1990.
- 2 Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told*, Viking Press, Melbourne, 1999; Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering In Our Hearts*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998; Ann

- McGrath, *Contested Ground*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995; Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999.
- 3 Mudrooroo, *Us Mob*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1995.
- 4 Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996.
- 5 Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins, *Auntie Rita*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1994.
- 6 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1997.
- 7 Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 1994; Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told*; Reynolds, *This Whispering In Our Hearts*.

Pinjarra 1970: Shame and the Country Town

Robyn Ferrell

In 1970, I was a kid living in Pinjarra, a country town in Western Australia. There was a strange flatness to life, as lived in that town. The main street, interpreted by the Department of Main Roads photographs taken that year, was distinguished only by the make and model of each vehicle parked against the kerb. Images show the detail of the town to be unspectacular, prosaic to the point of banality, without ambition.

Was it the locale—low-lying river flats, sometimes becoming marsh? Or the flinty light? The extreme Western Australian sun, even in winter, screens out rich colours. Or something less tangible, like a fate that had befallen it, a curse on its aspiration, of which the town was all the same unaware? Or simply bad conscience from an unacknowledged crime? From whatever combination, Pinjarra took a perverse pride in the ordinary.

And yet, unbeknown to it, Pinjarra in 1970 lay on an extraordinary cusp. It lagged along a fault line between one order and another; or rather, it squatted at a precipice, over which its cherished values had already been dashed to pieces. In 1967, Aboriginal people were at last, by national referendum, counted in the Australian census. In 1969, Alcoa began to prepare the site in the hills behind Pinjarra for the open cut mining of the largest bauxite deposit so far discovered in the world.

The past met the future, and they didn't recognise each other.

I remember now the feelings of exclusion that were in that town an inescapable emotional reality. I notice now the contradictions that made it seem unremarkable at the time for

Aboriginal men to lie drunk and ignored in the park outside the pub, for Aboriginal kids to slide into the playground and be driven off at ‘playtime’. The kids from the old farming families never doubted that they were the first settlers in the area. But before European settlement, Pinjarra was called Bindjareb and had been a locus of the wandering lives of the several Murray tribes for generations without number.

The boys off the school bus greeted the Aboriginal kids with jeers, when they occasionally ventured to school as the law required them to. Maitland Howard was in our class. He came to school in school shorts but no shoes, and his feet looked like they never wore shoes. He wiped a perpetually running nose on an unravelling sleeve of an old school jumper, but he frequently had no shirt. I can see him stealing a drink at the taps in the playground, before running away from school again, before he could hear the other children warning each other which tap he had drunk from.

I was not myself at the top of the social scale at the local primary school. I wore glasses and I didn’t have long, fair hair done up with ribbons. I used words of several syllables, like ‘fascinating’. I didn’t live on a farm—I was shamefully afraid of horses and cows. I was no athlete, and I did well at tests. At school in 1970, I learned that our history began in 1829 when the Swan River colony was founded by Governor Stirling, who had a highway named after him. I learned that ‘the town of Pinjarra lies on the banks of the Murray River, about twelve miles inland of the inlet named for Thomas Peel, who held the original land grant in the area’. I copied this rigorously into my social studies project on ‘The Region’.

My best friend and I used to keep to ourselves at lunchtime. In the shade of the pump house, we read English school stories to each other and transformed ourselves into girls in the Upper Fourth at Mallory Towers, where tea was taken, and snow fell in the winter term, and good marks were admired.

That ambivalence also coloured the first school social we ever attended, which was held that year in the dusty, little hall let by the Country Women’s Association. There was a new English girl at school that term; her parents were among many colonials who surrendered their posts as administrators in Tanganyika or Rhodesia, and made for Australia, in the wake of

independence for British colonies there.

Her mother was perhaps more used to the social life of the British in Africa — parties, balls and Government House — than the compulsory ordinariness of the Western Australian scene. She sent her daughter to the dance in her cut-down wedding dress, while we all wore hot pants, and squirmed for her shame. I still feel uneasy picturing her, sitting all night on the benches around the wall, the classic wallflower trapped in someone else's colonial past.

That year, the new civic centre was opened, and the Murray Music and Drama group was formed. I was recruited to the cast of *The King and I* because a mob of kids was needed to be the King's children.

I was affronted to be designated as a Siamese twin with Lynn Gledhill, a girl I didn't like but who was the same height. We wore harem pants made out of old curtain material, and stained our skin with brown, and dyed our hair black, in order to make the transformation. But we were concerned to discover that even the King's children in Siam apparently wore no shoes, and had to sit on their heels for stretches of time that put our feet to sleep.

As well as being the director, Mrs Meares played the role of Anna and swooped imperiously across the stage in a ball gown with a hoop in it. We were captivated. Mrs Meares was from one of the oldest families in the district and the premier of the state came to the opening night. What a tale of exotic delights and unrequited desire! The Murray Music and Drama production was imbued with the crushing nostalgia of a colonial love of England, even though the details of the plot carried all the ambivalence of the colonised.

The King and I was a double parable of colonialism, since, while a story of British influence in South-East Asia, it was in fact a product of the American imaginary, a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical transferred to the screen in 1956, starring Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr.

The story was freely adapted from the true account of Anna Leonowens, an English widow who went to the court of Siam as governess to the King's many children in the 1860s. The account had been popularised in the 1940s by

a novel by Margaret Landon, and had already been made into a film before Gertrude Lawrence put it before Rodgers and Hammerstein. But it was surely the greatest of its many ironies that it should become a musical—and one of the most successful of their successful career.

When Hollywood had finished with it, the sexual tension between Anna and the King eclipsed the sometimes traumatic meeting of East and West that is documented in Mrs Leonowens' own memoir. The traditional tyranny of the absolute monarch clashed with the more subtle but ascendant tyranny of colonialism, and by inviting the English governess to court King Mokmut appeared to appreciate (better than Broadway?) that this clash was a necessary evil for which his children needed to be prepared.

The musical raised the questions of slavery and inequality in the stories of the slave girl Tuptim and the King's relation to Anna, but it did so as figments of an American imaginary, which sought clues in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the possibility of romance. Decidedly un-American (and incomprehensible) elements—such as the sexual order that created the harem, and the hierarchical power that promoted the violence of everyday life—were ignored. And especially, above all, what was ignored was the precarious position of the Victorian Englishwoman in such a setting, nights spent in fear of her life and days in heartbreaking labour on behalf of values such as justice and humanity, which had no translation in the context in which she worked.

The film and the musical marvel at the strength of Anna's character, but they do so with an assumption of triumph given by hindsight. Her strength must have been much more remarkable than that—when one reflects on her situation, one can only conclude that her persistence betrays an almost insane conviction of the principles of her imperial age, despite being faced daily with their repudiation. Her strength, which was also a kind of blindness, is an iconic expression of the British imperialism she stood for.

But the American candifying of her story, the jolly 'getting to know you' of the musical rendition, is an even truer expression of the American imperialism that colonised *her*

colonialism, making something quite different from it. And so, in the funny unconscious fashion of things in Pinjarra, *The King and I* became the only possible testament to the events of 1970, and Mrs Meares the more-than-faithful repetition of the convictions of Anna Leonowens. When she whisked across the stage in the crinoline ‘which was itself a character in the play’, her own inhabiting of the role showed it to be a myth that was explaining, for other purposes, another colonial scene.

I didn’t learn of the event known locally as ‘the Battle of Pinjarra’ at school, although I heard it mentioned. Details were sketchy, but it was said to have happened down at the river. Certain names—Stirling, Peel and ‘the battle of Pinjarra’—the Murray River Aboriginal Association are now requesting be changed out of respect for the dead. They want it renamed the Pinjarra massacre, as a record of the violence visited on the tribal ancestors.

Pinjarra had been a ‘frontline’ of colonial settlement, because it offered the best farming land south of the Swan River colony itself. It was in 1834 that Governor Stirling, Thomas Peel and some military men (among them Captain Meares) ambushed a group of about seventy of the Murray River tribe on the banks of the river at Pinjarra. It was the time of the year when the tribe was known to gather for ceremonials in the area. That morning it seems many of the warriors of the tribe were over at another camp on Peel Inlet for male initiation ceremonies. The group who were left at the river were mostly the elderly, women and children. They were fired on as they tried to flee.

Official reports put the number shot at fifteen to twenty. Other eye-witness accounts, and those in the oral history of the Aboriginal people, put the number at conservatively twice that. The consequences of so many deaths were that many more of the tribe died in the subsequent year, of starvation, because the food taboos arising from various totems prohibited the food supply. Some of the settlers congratulated the governor for having put an end to ‘the native threat’. It is true that land grants in the area were able to be taken up in the wake of the ambush and the area ‘opened up’, as historians say.

But why was the governor of the colony, newly formed only five years earlier, firing on unarmed people whom his colonial

policy obliged him specifically to 'protect'? With hindsight, we might attribute the attack to the violence of colonisation, which despite its pious dressing as an attempt to extend the gift of civilisation to the savages, was, in fact, an act of conquest.

To the first colonists, the resistance provided by the Aboriginal tribes of the region had been an unwelcome surprise. While today the appropriation of the Aboriginal lands by a superior force may seem to have been a foregone conclusion of European 'settlement', it was the efficacy of the guerrilla tactics of the Aborigines in protecting their land that was more evident at the time. It produced the massacre as a heavy-handed response.

Some misconceptions — fatal for the Aboriginal people — had restrained the tribes from expelling the settlers right at the beginning, as they would have any group of invading Aborigines. The tribes are reported to have extended respect to the Europeans in the belief they were returned ancestors. They were also inclined to view the flour rations, which they were doled out by the Europeans, as a payment for the forced resumption of hunting lands for farming. But the Europeans, thinking it was charity, cut the ration when food in the colony became short.

The massacre was preceded, and justified at the time, by the killing of two soldiers in a raid made by the Aborigines on a mill at South Perth. What the Aborigines might have imagined was exercising their lien, the Europeans called theft, and murder. The homily that Governor Stirling claims to have delivered to the survivors of the massacre describes it as a 'punishment', and warns them that 'the white man never forgets murder'.

But of course he has, many times, in the tarnished history of European settlement. The 1998 report on the massacre pressed to have the site of the Pinjarra massacre declared a heritage site, not on the grounds that it was a unique event in Western Australian history, but on the grounds that events like it were shamefully common. What distinguishes this massacre from many other scenes of unwarranted violence by settlers that contradicted British official policy was the leading role played in it by so high a British official as the colony's

governor, and the fact that, because of him, it was written down.

European settlement became colonial government in time. Western Australia grew prosperous on wheat and sheep, and on mineral finds such as gold and iron ore. Colonialism gave way to globalisation. Enormous deposits of bauxite were uncovered in the ranges around the town, and new settlers arrived, this time from Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, to build executive air-conditioned homes with Alcoa mining money.

The air-conditioning said it all. West Australians had lived whole lifetimes suffering the heat, but it had never occurred to people before 1970 to install air-conditioning. Climate control was beyond the town, and in fact was an ontological challenge to it.

The head executive's wife further shocked us by producing from the pantry chocolate dog biscuits for her poodle. No one had ever contemplated such indulgence of dogs before; it was unclear whether anyone had even kept a poodle in Pinjarra before this second wave of colonialism — there were only ever kelpies, cattle dogs and mongrels. No one had put down white carpet in their home before these people, either — these affectations were impressive, but we felt somehow slighted by them, too, and so we ridiculed them.

Mining interest in the area began in the 1950s when a small Australian company called Western Mining, which was at that time mining gold in Kalgoorlie among other interests, discovered the extent of the bauxite deposits in the Darling Range. But the venture took off after the involvement of the American mining giant in 1961. In the four years from 1968 to 1971, a total of \$241 million was spent on construction for the enterprise. By the early 1990s, Alcoa of Australia would produce nearly one sixth of the world's alumina. The biography of its success, a company history titled *White Gold*, was written by Geoffrey Blainey, who had an altogether more ambivalent claim to fame in Australian history circles as a latter-day advocate of 'white Australia' policies.

Western Mining, whose principals had developed the bauxite project from exploration, was unable to raise Australian finance to carry through the project of mining and refining the aluminium alone. This fact by itself explained

the new colonialism that, in consequence of this opportunity and others, opened up Western Australia to American influence. The east coast, especially Sydney, had had contact with American cultural imperialism almost continuously since World War II, and admired many things American. But Western Australia had preserved a steadfast British identification that was offended by the frankness of the American sensibility.

In the small world of Pinjarra, the influx of American prosperity was resented in a way that may have taken the new settlers aback. But although myopic and bigoted, this resistance had some grasp of the economic reality it faced; despite the appearance of generosity, the American interests intended to take away more than they put in. The locals certainly recognised as familiar the class distinction of Alcoa's arrangements; they brought out their own executives to live in the new houses by the river while the ordinary work force were set up on an industrial reserve on the outskirts of the town. But, accustomed as the town was to class distinction, the locals spent as much time currying favour with the new overlords as they did in running them down. The opening up of mining saw merely a double entrenchment of colonialism—American on British—and reinforced the convictions of caste that structured the town.

The Aboriginal people were living, as they had been for decades, in 'native' reserves on the edge of the town, but by 1970 they were about to encounter *postcolonialism*, the beginning of the present. In 1972, responsibility for their affairs would be transferred from the domestic abuse of the state government to the 'international responsibility' of the federal.

Europeans believe the massacre 'finished off' the Murray River tribes, but the reserve still existed outside the town as an eyesore into the 1970s, for anyone who cared to look. As an elder has said: 'We didn't have the privilege to express our views until the 1970s.' And another descendant has said, in response to the comment that the battle has only recently been viewed as a massacre: 'I don't think they [the Ngunyar] had time to worry about things like the Massacre. They were too busy surviving from day to day.'

The administration of Western Australian Aboriginal people had been a continuing shame. The massacre at Pinjarra provoked a kind of 'surrender' by the tribes, who sought a meeting with Governor Stirling following it, at which they reportedly pledged loyalty to the British Crown. But in the century that followed, the Crown hardly returned this loyalty, exposing the 'native' population to the dangers of dispossession, drink, disease and miscegenation.

The tribes suffered the forced removal of children, curfew and banishment from towns: 'During these years, it was not uncommon for Aboriginal people to be thrown into jail for answering back to a policeman, or if they were found on the streets after dark'. 'Native' reserves in Western Australia had no houses on them, no toilets and no running water until the 1960s. They were often located outside the town, next to the rubbish dump. The neglect on reserves, and the squalor, was not lessened by censorship—Europeans were not permitted on them without a permit, nor were photographs permitted to be taken. The councils opposed, in many cases, Aboriginal applications to build on land they owned within the town limits, and the improvement of living conditions was not given suitable funding by a succession of government administrations. But however the council might try to remove the contamination, of the townspeople by Aboriginal people, of the Aborigines by the town, our common shame demoralised both, and compromised the making of community.

The banality of any country town afternoon. Dragging home from school on the gravel; past the school oval which peters out in scrub; past the council depot where the graders lie asleep; the smell of tar; a little brick building without windows or any known use; the milk bar with its plastic flystrips slapping; the highway, along which the trucks thunder, anxious to be gone. Scuffing along the shoulder of the highway in the afternoon heat. *The insult*. Feeling left behind, by those trucks, feeling abandoned.

Eyes dropped, so as not to see the Aboriginal men lying dead drunk on the grass in front of the Premier Hotel, 150 metres and 150 years upstream from the massacre, which tragedy they echoed, only so quietly and self-effacingly that they weren't heard. Guilty and sinning, dragging down the

main street eating a gluey pie from the bakery even though ‘they made you fat’ and it was ‘unladylike’ to eat in the street. Feeling awful, feeling the eyes of others judging. It made you walk funny ...

The only cure for this self-consciousness was speeding through the bush tracks on the bike, or riding down to the river, there to screw up courage and swing out over the water on the gazinta. Dropping into the slow, viscous river water, which was warm for the first two feet as though someone had pissed in it and freezing cold when you duck-dived. The water was completely opaque. Straggling to the bank, swimming shallowly in case you caught a snag, scrambling out before the leeches could get you. Sometimes we came upon the Aboriginal kids playing there, on a hot day. We didn’t want to join them, and they didn’t welcome us. We wandered disappointed up the bank, and back home to play under the sprinkler instead.

Today, Nyungar people are tracing their family back to the group at the massacre. And as part of making history they are emphasising other, more positive exchanges, with settler families—the bush medicine provided, the hardship settlers and Nyungars shared. Because exactly who and what was colonised? The despair of the ordinary colonial—camped on the beach with the flies for company in the first year of life in the colony, or clearing the jarrah trees from his land in the boiling sun before he could build, much less farm—was poignantly rediscovered by Western Australians in the 1970s, when they found an appetite for local and oral histories.

In the wake of contemporary calls to European Australia to apologise to Aboriginal Australians for the brutality of colonisation, including the Stolen Generations, I need to go back to the ‘country town’. It is a form of community remote from my adult life, but one which I remember vividly, with my whole body, in everyday abjection and shame.

The country town, in its abjection of Indigenous people and the various others it regarded as outsiders, offered a concrete experience of shame, as the affect of the social. Shame is brought on by other people. More abstractly, shame is instituted by community to effect an indifference to others. ‘Don’t stare, it’s rude.’

Shame is a source of political community, in that it is the experience of binding and bonding between members of a community, in the ambivalent sense that these words suggest. They are bound by their feelings about themselves and the world. Shame describes and proscribes an affective community, before law, before strategy, scheme, plan, program and legislation — a spontaneous and unavoidable bond that comes about just in virtue of being in proximity. Shame calls you into its community, there to suffer under the same yoke as everyone else. ‘We’re all in the same boat.’ The ‘we’ of this community is not an assumption of collective goals but a constraint on the individual, through which he must find his expression.

At its most technical, shame is described by the psychoanalyst Silvan Tomkins as that affect which is the experience of interrupted enjoyment or interest. It can name an experience in which we are momentarily halted in our enthusiastic greeting by the coolness of the visitor; it can name an experience in which we prevent ourselves from looking at someone, despite desiring to, because it would be ‘rude’; it can name the experience of being rebuked for our present being, as in when we are told ‘no need to cry’.

Recognition is the social act it interrupts, and recognition between people is subtle and pervasive. The flows of shame, and the threat of it, modulate our interactions with others through what Tomkins terms ‘shame theories’. These are generalisations or summaries from past experience that each person uses to guide present response. The experiences of shame are intense in childhood, but gradually ease as we grow and invent these ‘shame theories’ to protect ourselves from experiencing the feeling itself.

Tomkins calls them theories because they explicitly work to predict and control the level of experience of uncomfortable feelings. But they are also theories in a more technical sense; that is, they are the products of reflection and are open to revision. Tomkins characterises shame as the most reflective of affects; conversely, contempt is the least reflective. Contempt betrays no self-evaluation at all and not a minute’s self-reflection, whereas shame is *the* affect of reflection, the feeling that we have when we become aware of ourselves in

the light of others. It is thereby the feeling of self-formation, and, seen in this light, a founding experience of oneself, and of social life.

This makes shame a wide-ranging affect—from the mildness of dropping eyes in modesty (where nevertheless there may even be some thrill in the possibility of seeing and being seen), to the raging humiliation of a defeat in front of others whose respect is cherished and whose negative judgement is made visible.

It is also, by its nature, the fundamental social affect, because it is the feeling of being in relation to others, and of being aware of it, whether that self is rewarded or repudiated in the eyes of others. Because of the mimetic nature of the human, we see ourselves in each others' eyes; but we would never become aware of ourselves as individual if not for the reflection set in motion by another's judgment, and the corresponding self-reflection of shame. Before this, one exists in an empathic continuum with the feelings of the other, assuming her feelings to be his and vice versa. This infant state, however, is hypothetical, even in the happiest and most loving childhood, disturbed by the inescapable intrusion of the feelings our own actions inspire in others.

Tomkins thus draws a straight line out of the intimacies of the familial bond to the socialisation of shame, without any heavy oedipal machinery: interruption of the flow of affect between the child and another is experienced as a jolt into self-reflection. The child's feelings are passionate and unguarded about the contingencies of a childish life, which are so often frustrating. Whether the parents' reactions to these feelings are themselves harsh with judgement ('Don't be a silly boy!') or whether they are empathic ('There there dear, did you get a fright?'), they have the effect of drawing to the child's attention his own feelings of self and his correlative separateness from others.

The country town is an exemplary affective community, in that the unavoidable nature of its calling to one is what engenders also the sense of defeat and abjection. It may seem odd to describe a town like Pinjarra as an *affective* community, while at the same time saying that it is known for the flatness of the affect it engenders. But boredom—which is the affect

of flatness — is a powerful feeling, and a complicated one. Boredom is a complex in which anger, shame and fear are contained by a fierce effort of withdrawal of interest. Boredom is an affect founded on frustration, because there is nothing — or nothing safe enough — in which to invest one's desire.

Pinjarra in 1970 was an experience of community from which the affect had been leached out, and had become lifeless and dull. This belied the terrific strength of the restraining of affect, which gave rise to its flatness, and which was embedded in the denial: *Nothing ever happens here.*

For the truth was far different; indeed, the founding deceit of this flatness, whose surface was seemingly so baked-on and enamelled, was the suppressed horror: *Something once happened here.*

The Pinjarra massacre stands as a literal event of colonialism, one which forced denial on all of its subjects, European and Indigenous, from the governor down, and bound them together in their shame. What else was colonialism but a kind of cheating and of theft, covered up with lies — the cheating that took what it wanted with force, this theft of land and life from the Indigenous people but also of hope and dreams and labour from the settlers, and the lies that were told about Empire and *common law* and civilisation to deny it?

But deep down, that is, unconsciously, it didn't fool people, and so it produced the impossibility of community, the blocking of that affective bond which could take pride in country, or feel passion for a culture, or feel real communion with fellows, or feel anything more than shame for membership of it. Under the weight of shame, the colony began the habit of living elsewhere from its inception. First it was 'home', and the 'mother country', then by degrees it became the city (Perth), or the 'Eastern states', Pittsburgh and Hollywood and New York — all places we went in our minds where things were paradoxically more real to us. We knew their histories, we knew their current events; we valued their styles and opinions far above our own.

This was a failure to inhabit built on the original deceit which founded the colony, and which makes Pinjarra representative of a general colonial dejection. Postcolonially this is not cured, because there are still centres and margins, and especially there are centres and margins, in the strange

parochialism of the global village.

Pinjarra residents tried in self-conscious ways to invent at the surface what was prohibited deep down — this was the motivation of the Murray Music Group. But the prohibition was also why it was a group desiring to perform musicals about colonial-sexual nostalgia and misgiving, like *The King and I*, rather than a group writing the history of the place, called ‘Murray’ in one language, but which had known many others. The latter group had to wait until 1998 to see their report published. And still the librarian kept it under the desk in the library, for fear it was salacious and might ignite other curiosity, perhaps. ‘I don’t know if you’re allowed to see that’, she said to me when I inquired. ‘But it’s a public document!’ I exclaimed, amazed at the tenacity of the shame.

Thinking about shame Tomkins’ way explains how the intimacy of feelings, especially childhood feelings, might be integral to the political field and indeed conjure it as *experience* in individual lives. In Pinjarra, the parade of oneself walking down the main street was a scene set by shame and lived in that way, if one was at all given to reflection. For some, the experience of shame would have been more intensely supported by the contempt of others. But even a European schoolgirl felt it powerfully containing, and at the same time, constraining her.

Canberra 1975. Many Australians cried ‘Shame Fraser Shame’ in outrage at the dismissal of a progressive government through an instrument of colonial anachronism. They were calling this affect political then, but today Fraser’s then deputy and our current prime minister, John Howard, refuses to apologise for the shame of Aboriginal dispossession on the grounds that it is a matter of conscience, not of law. Yet Pinjarra shows that conscience is law. Conscience is the affect of that which law is the principle.

What shames Australians today about the Prime Minister refusing this shame is its *shamelessness*. Indigenous, refugee, migrant and all, thrown back against the community of shame from which ‘multiculturalism’ for all its faults, attempted to release us.

Ironically, Fraser is today a vocal critic of the shame of racism and the treatment of Indigenous people. In his work

against apartheid and now in his criticisms, he puts the Howard government to shame. But Howard still lives in the Pinjarra of 1970, shoring up the banality of middle Australia by counselling denial and withdrawing into boredom. The possibility of reconciliation between Aboriginal and European Australians is predicated on being ‘sorry’ and saying it—and if this sounds like the logic of childhood, it is because abjection infantilises the whole group. Pinjarra 1970 is a case study, in order to put the hard question: *How today can this ‘sorry’ be addressed?*

Reflection

Writing ‘Pinjarra 1970’ brought together two threads that I continue to follow in the decade since its publication: working in creative nonfiction, and researching Indigenous issues. I was able to explore both at greater length in *Sacred Exchanges: Images in Global Context* (Columbia University Press, 2012). In that book, I wrote about the question of how Aboriginal acrylic painting captured a global moment because of its abstract ‘look’. The book looked at the paradox of painting that is both so old—the oldest continuing tradition of sacred art—and so new—a vivacious visuality apparently extending the abstract expressionist brief. I found it stirring to write about the surface effects of the work alongside the deeper conflicts of the context, including the unjust conditions in which Aboriginal artists live and the fickle transformations of the culture market.

I shared an ARC grant to research and write *Sacred Exchanges*, which made possible fieldwork both to the desert art centres in the Northern Territory and the Kimberley and to the international museums like Musée du quai Branly in Paris. I recently recorded the experience of scholarship in this troubled area in a creative nonfiction style as in ‘Pinjarra 1970’ in a piece, ‘Whitefella Worship’, published in *Text* (Special Issue 17, 2013).

The great strength of creative nonfiction for me has always been its capacity to mobilise affect as part of its discursive frame. This still strikes me as particularly necessary in subjects like Indigenous Studies, where feelings are a key part of its material. In ‘Whitefella Worship’, the ironies of the Aboriginal art market, and the place of white women scholars like myself in its research, seemed to impel me to this kind of writing, where I could register

both the beauty of the work and the pain of ambivalence about the circumstances in which it comes about.

Although a great deal has happened to challenge white complacency since I began work on 'Pinjarra 1970', the contradictions still seem immense. And with greater exposure has come new challenges; in particular, for those writing Indigenous studies to tackle the questions of the 'power to say'—who has it and who is silenced, including within the hegemony of the increasingly corporate university. I want to congratulate the journal, and in particular the energetic editorship of Katrina Schlunke, for opening a space for creative nonfiction and more generally for 'new writing in the humanities'. Without this forum, I would have struggled to give shape to these ambitions for writing about culture in a way that brings affect onto the same page as effect.

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Knowing the Country

Eve Vincent

Between 2000 and 2005 I travelled from Melbourne to South Australian outback opal mining town Coober Pedy many times. Sometimes I went by bus, sometimes by car. I got to know the road. We passed salt lakes, sparse scrub, lines of trees that signified creek. The bitumen's edge met grass, then grey dirt, then grainy red sand, then white dust. 'Strong stories change the way people think', says anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose.¹ I have road-tripped thousands of kilometres because of this story. I'm not sure how to begin it. And I'll never get sick of the ending.

July 2004: damper, jam and cream

On 14 July 2004 Prime Minister John Howard announced that the national low-level nuclear waste dump planned for South Australia had been scrapped. Outmanoeuvred by Mike Rann's anti-dump state Labor government at every turn, Howard caved in after realising that he could not continue to ignore sustained public opposition. Howard was evidently pissed off, but marginal Adelaide seats were at stake in the 2004 Federal Election.

In late July I visited Coober Pedy at the same time as Rann passed through for a series of community meetings. At present Rann is associated with enthusiastic policy initiatives that aim to expand uranium mining in his mineral-rich state, and with an internal push to see Labor's anti-uranium mine position overturned. That sunny, winter morning in 2004 Rann came to Umoona Aboriginal Aged Care Centre for celebratory damper, jam and cream. Rann's a smooth talker, but I had to believe him when he said that throughout the protracted waste dump battle he treasured the letters of support he received from the Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta, a council of senior

Aboriginal women based in Coober Pedy.

After all, how many letters to the premier sign off with the intensity of Mrs Eileen Unkari Crombie, ‘One of the Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta who always sticks up for a man like you til the end of the world’? Mrs Crombie wrote to Rann after seeing him on the TV:

Keep fighting! Don’t give up and we won’t give up. Keep fighting because kids want to grow up and see the country when we leave them, when we pass on. They’ll take it on. Hope they’ll fight like we fellas for the country. We don’t want to see the *irati*—poison, come back this way. We’re not going to give up.²

The Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta (KPKT) is a council comprising senior Anangu (Aboriginal) women from Antikarinya, Yankunytjatjara and Kokatha countries. Kupa Piti, according to some local versions, is Yankunytjatjara for ‘white men’s holes’; the non-Indigenous place name ‘Coober Pedy’ is based on the transliteration of this description.³ *Kungka* means woman, and *tjuta* means many. The Kungka Tjuta came together in Coober Pedy in the early 1990s to revive traditional women’s culture: to ensure the transmission of stories and knowledge; the continuation of cultural practices; and the maintenance of their responsibilities to country. The old women were worried that their kids and grandkids were growing up in town, whereas they had grown up travelling the country, and learning the country. They say that they wanted to give their ‘children and grandchildren something more than video games, drinking and drugs, and walking the street’.⁴

In early 1998 the federal government announced it planned to build a radioactive waste repository within an arid region of South Australia, which encompassed the traditional countries of Antikarinya, Yankunytjatjara and Kokatha people. The Kungkas responded with an announcement of their own. This ‘statement of opposition’ became a sort of mission statement for their six-year-long anti-dump campaign, which they called *Irati Wanti*—the poison, leave it. The Kungkas’ letters and statements are now collected in a book published by the campaign office, *Talking Straight Out: Stories from the*

Irati Wanti Campaign. The statement of opposition reads:

We are the Aboriginal Women. Yankunytjatjara, Antikarinya and Kokatha. We know the country. The poison the Government is talking about will poison the land. We say, 'No radioactive dump in our *ngura*—in our country.' It's strictly poison, we don't want it. ... We were born on the earth, not in the hospital. We were born in the sand ... We really know the land. From a baby we grow up on the land. Never mind our country is the desert, that's where we belong. And we love where we belong, the whole land. We know the stories for the land.

I became involved in a small greenie support group for the Kungkas, undertaking awareness- and fund-raising for them in cities, where campaigns are won and lost. A good friend moved to Coober Pedy to coordinate things from there and I visited every winter.

To a history student like me this statement, and subsequent ones, captured my imagination. It continued:

All of us were living when the Government used the country for the Bomb ... The smoke was funny and everything looked hazy. Everybody got sick ... The Government thought they knew what they were doing then. Now, again they are coming along and telling us poor blackfellas, 'Oh, there's nothing that's going to happen, nothing is going to kill you.' And that will still happen like that Bomb over there.

The 'Bomb' referred to is Totem One, detonated by the British Government on 15 October 1953 at Emu Fields, a flat claypan 280 kilometres north of Coober Pedy. Totem One was the first mainland test carried out by the British, with the support of the Australian Government and the involvement of Australian Army personnel, as part of an atomic weapons testing program undertaken between 1952 and 1963 at three separate Australian locations—Monte Bello Islands, Emu Fields and the better known Maralinga Range. On the morning of 15 October a dense radioactive cloud travelled over Anangu

communities and pastoral stations in the Coober Pedy region.⁵ The eerie, deadly ‘black mist’ it produced was investigated by the 1984 Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia, as a result of Yankunytjatjara elder Yami Lester’s insistence.

In the early 1980s Lester, who attributes his blindness to exposure to radioactive fallout, contacted Adelaide newspaper *The Advertiser* with his story and the Pitjantjatjara Council joined atomic ex-servicepersons, many of whom were dying of cancer, to call for a royal commission.⁶ In a front-page article, Lester told *Advertiser* journalist Robert Ball that the Yankunytjatjara camp at Wallatina was enveloped by a ‘black mist’ that rolled through the mulga scrub and ‘brought death’.⁷ Within forty-eight hours of hearing an explosion in the south ‘everyone in the camp was debilitated by uncontrollable vomiting and diarrhoea’. A skin rash broke out, and healthy children started going blind; some partially recovered their sight, others did not.⁸

Kungka Tjuta member Mrs Eileen Kampakuta Brown describes what she saw:

The smoke caught us. We got up in the morning from the tent ... everyone had red eyes. The smoke caught us—it came over us. We tried to open our eyes in the morning but we couldn’t open them. We had red eyes and tongues and our coughing was getting worse. We were wondering what sort of sickness we had. There were no doctors, only the station bosses. All day we sat in the tent with our eyes closed. Our eyes were sore, red and shut. We couldn’t open them ... All people got sick right up to Oodnadatta ... we all got sick.⁹

Angelina Wonga, another Kungka Tjuta member was camped at Wantjapita with her family. She was ‘sitting down’. She describes:

We seen a bomb went out from the South. And said, eh? What’s that? And then we see the wind blowing it to where we were sitting down. That was the finish of mother and father. They all passed away through that. I was the only

one left. We'd been travelling on camels. I let all the camels go ... I lost everything.¹⁰

The Royal Commission found that Ernest Titterton, who was responsible for the safety of the Australian public, assured Prime Minister Menzies that 'no habitations or living beings will suffer injury to health from the effects of the atomic explosions proposed for the Totem trials'.¹¹ Both Totem tests were delayed owing to easterly winds that would have contaminated the Emu 'campsite', by then a temporary town supporting four hundred inhabitants.¹² Totem One was eventually detonated a week late under unusual meteorological conditions. The day had no wind shear, exactly the kind of conditions highlighted as dangerous by a preparatory report.¹³ The Totem One cloud rose to a height of fifteen thousand feet after three minutes and drifted northwest without its radioactive particles dispersing. It was still clearly visible twenty-four hours after detonation.¹⁴ The Report of the Royal Commission concluded: 'Totem One was carried out under wind conditions that the [preparatory] report had shown would produce unacceptable levels of fall-out', a decision that 'failed to take into account the existence of people at Wallatina and Welbourne Hill'.¹⁵ These people's 'existence' was known to the testing team via Long Range Weapons Organisation (LRWO) employee Walter MacDougall's patrols. Lester summarises: 'We don't know the times and the days. We had no clocks or calendars in the bush. But the Royal Commission found that the weather was not right that day, too dangerous, and the scientists should have known.'¹⁶ Explaining the decision to detonate, Heather Goodall, researcher for the Pitjantjatjara Council during the Royal Commission, notes that the British team was under pressure from their government to demonstrate the 'dramatic success' of Britain's nuclear weapons capability. During the Cold War arms race 'a risk to the health of a small number of Aboriginal people seemed a small price to pay for British pride'.¹⁷

The Royal Commission, Graeme Turner says, 'represented the completion of a ritual of separation [from Britain] which had to be performed if Australia was finally to be in its own place'.¹⁸ Turner critiques the popular meaning the Royal

Commission gave the atomic testing program: the story of the British-Australian colonial relationship, between the centre of Empire and a peripheral, anglophile Australian Government. Intent on exposing 'the devastating material effects of colonial domination', the Royal Commission grossly 'misrepresented the Australian Government's degree of culpability'.¹⁹ The colonial relationship between Indigenous people and the Australian Government was 'submerged under the weight of another story'.²⁰

I contend that, in eliding this other story, which would necessarily tell of an ongoing relationship between the Australian state and Indigenous people, the Royal Commission enacted another ritual of separation, that of the past from the present. When the Kungka Tjuta 'testify', the past is recalled, analysed and related for the purpose of *affecting* the present. The remembering and re-telling of 'Bomb testimonies' remained a priority throughout the Irati Wanti campaign; I was drawn to investigate this insistent movement between past and present.

July 2002: straight roads

We go out with some of the Kungkas to help pick a strong-smelling spindly plant, *irmangka irmangka*, bush medicine that we greenies will later bottle, market and sell in Melbourne. 'Grandmothers been making 'em since a long long time ago', reads the label. Its base is goanna fat or more often margarine. The Kungkas opt to travel in the 'flash car' and three of us tail them in my battered ute. The landscape blurs out the open window. At one point our convoy pulls over suddenly and I ask the Kungkas in the other car 'how much further?' 'Not far' assures Mrs Austin. 'Long way' mutters Mrs Crombie.

That night, sunburnt and dusty, feeling queasy after my first taste of roasted *maku* (witchetty grub), I ask the others what was talked about in the 'flash car'. Most of the conversation was in language, but the Kungkas also spoke in English in order to teach things to the greenies. Repeatedly, they pointed out where the new Stuart Highway, paved in 1980, crossed the route of the old, which meandered from station to station. Occasionally they'd sigh and complain, 'This road. Long,

straight road. Boring road.'

Throughout colonial history, the desert has been thought of, and treated as, a remote wasteland. In Roslyn Haynes's *Seeking the Centre* she depicts the arid interior as an exemplary 'blank space', restlessly reconstituted by colonial fears and fascinations, as alternately nightmarish and utopian.²¹ Early explorers' accounts depicted the desert as a vast, geographically uniform and featureless wilderness. Haynes notes: 'The changelessness ascribed to the desert was also attributed to its Indigenous inhabitants; both were seen as primitive, obdurate and inimical to civilisation.'²² This point becomes important when we consider that, for Australia, the atomic testing program represented a distinctly modern experience, a moment of post-war national maturation.

Comparing Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings of place and space, Stephen Muecke focuses on the role of naming in the re-spatialisation of the continent. Muecke contends that Indigenous people charted the country in as much detail as a city street directory provides: 'the number of Aboriginal place-names still exceeds the number of names bestowed by the colonisers'. According to Muecke 'parts of the sandy deserts of the centre, which we tend to call "unsettled" areas are still just as densely named as other parts of Australia'.²³

Contemporary road maps of the centre owe much to the work of the surveyor Len Beadell, whose popular memoirs provide a particularly rich source of colonising spatial narratives.²⁴ Beadell 'blazed' the east-west road across the centre, the Gunbarrel highway, named after Beadell's Gunbarrel Road Construction Party, who 'liked [their] roads straight'.²⁵ His memoirs repeatedly evoke the desert as 'limitless', 'lonely', 'desolate', 'unexplored', a 'vast wasteland' and 'virgin bush'.

In 1947, when Beadell was approached by the LRWO about the potential for a rocket range, which included a diagonal corridor across one and a half thousand miles of country between Woomera and Broome, he replied 'I know a million square miles of nothing.'²⁶ Beadell went on to survey and identify appropriate detonation sites for the British atomic testing program. He constructed a network of access roads

through central Australia, many of which he named after his kids. Reflecting on his life's work, Beadell has said that he is proud to have 'opened up' four thousand square miles 'that hadn't been touched by anyone since the world began'.²⁷

I see Beadell as a kind of nuclear-age nomad, methodically recording longitude and latitude readings and making topographical notes, his travelogue guided by modern spatial technology—the compass and the Land Rover's trip speedo. Of course, Beadell's reconnaissance missions brought him into contact with numerous Indigenous communities. His name often appears on photo credits of Anangu family groups and individuals in books about his time period.²⁸ Yet Beadell interprets signs of Indigenous ceremonial and social life as objects of primitive interest, 'mysterious' remnants discarded in a pre-historic landscape.²⁹

In *Blast the Bush*, Beadell's story reaches an 'atomic climax', which marks the beginning of 'historic' time in the desert. Blink and you'd miss it—in a microsecond Totem One vaporised the hundred-foot-high steel bomb tower. With his back to the detonation, Beadell observed a 'blinding flash' that lit the horizon line, and felt a wave of intense heat. He then turned to the mushroom cloud when a spontaneous joke was played on the gathered media. Someone pointed to the cloud's shape and exclaimed 'a perfect portrait of a myall blackfeller written in the atomic dust; the new and the old have come together today'.³⁰ While Beadell recounts this scene enthusiastically, other recollections of the Totem One blast are disturbing. In a submission to the Royal Commission ex-serviceman Jim Balcombe described 'a searing flash of light which came through from behind me, through the back of my head, it felt as if my eyeballs had been thrown out in front of my body'. Balcombe was instructed to run, but he was picked up by the bomb and thrown thirty-five feet sideways.³¹

As Beadell determines, marks, bulldozes and names a grid of straight lines across the desert, he conjoins the practice of re-spatialisation with another kind of overlaying. A country 'empty' of history 'makes history'. Today of course, thanks to Len, the desert is 'known' rather than 'the unknown', 'mapped' rather than 'blank'. But how was the desert already known, already mapped?

Oral histories from the Western Desert are densely saturated with place names, relate long journeys and refer to constant travelling. Anangu people used to ‘walk everywhere ... walk to one place and then to another’.³² This walking was done barefoot and linked an extensive network of water sources. Jessie Lennon remembers her parents: ‘travelling all the time, walking from one rock-hole to another, visiting people. They did not know anything about whitefellas.’³³ Similarly, Kungka Tjuta member Ivy Makinti Stewart remembers ‘living at Ernabella ... There were no bores, no store, we would get water from the creek and eat bush food. My father would go out hunting with spears, no rifle then.’ Mrs Stewart and her family ‘travelled every way through that country, walking and carrying our swags’.³⁴

As an adult Mrs Lennon—who grew up with Kungka Tjuta member Mrs Eileen Wani Wingfield—moved not from ‘camp to camp’ as her parents did, but between bush camp and ceremonial life, pastoral stations, missions and ration depots. Rations in the northwest were most commonly issued in exchange for work by doggers and station owners. Lester’s childhood reminiscences also demonstrate that movement was no longer done just by *tjina*:

After a while (living traditional way) we came back to the station, and Kantji [Lester’s father] got a job, looking after cattle and shepherding sheep ... Kantji walked the sheep, while we rode on wagons pulled by camels. From Wentinna we moved down to Mt. Willoughby where Kantji worked for a while, then southeast to Evelyn Downs. From Evelyn Downs we travelled to Arckaringa where Kantji did some shearing ... From Arckaringa we’d ride back on the trucks to Wentinna and from there we’d walk to Wallatina, south of Granite Downs. We’d follow the creek up to the hills and walk across the bush, where our people knew the places and were able to find water in the rock-holes, claypans and swamps.³⁵

Lester’s narrative connects a series of known places and captures constant movement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous economies.

Collecting dingo scalps for itinerant non-Indigenous ‘doggers’ was a common type of casual work for Indigenous people in the north of South Australia from the 1930s and provided an ease of mobility between Indigenous and non-Indigenous economies. Dingoes were taking sheep and calves on pastoral properties, and the South Australian Government purchased the scalps. Kungka Tjuta member, Mrs Emily Munyungka Austin, ‘used to move around a lot when Dad was buying dingo skins’.³⁶ Mrs Austin’s father, Jim Lennon, was Irish and made a living by trading skins for tea, sugar, flour and clothes, with Indigenous scalp collectors. Lennon sold the skins to the police, who then burnt them.

I came to think of movement as a tactical spatial practice, which allowed for the maintenance of relationships between places along what Muecke calls ‘the deep Indigenous narrative lines’, which have been overlaid with ‘another grid of lines’.³⁷ In the contemporary setting, Anangu people continue to move — hitching, in dodgy cars, in the church bus, in Toyota troopies on bush trips — with an energy and frequency that is astounding, considering the age of the people I know. They move across the country to visit people and maintain relationships. And the Kungka Tjuta travelled the whole country, to Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, in order to stand up for country.

When the federal government designated the South Australian desert as a site for waste in 1998 it revived, or perhaps more accurately relied on, a powerful discursive formation — that of the desert as empty, dead and disused space. The colonial imagination constructed the desert as a remote wasteland. This dominant understanding of the desert obfuscates another. To the Anangu who inhabit the desert, this ‘dead space’ is a network of known places. It is life sustaining, and full of meaning — crisscrossed with everyday, historic and personal stories, as well as dreaming tracks.

Deborah Rose and Heather Goodall have shown that Indigenous histories make sense out of colonial experiences by presenting very different versions to the dominant account of the past. Historical events as they are recalled in community memory may be both sequenced in a way other than is usually demanded by narrative history, and interpreted in a way that

undermines the meanings drawn from the dominant interpretation of that history. For Rose, the differences are ‘irrelevant in a fundamental sense’. The Yarralin people’s Captain Cook stories, for example, are a ‘vehicle for analysis’; they are a succinct summation of colonial relationships structured by domination and destruction.³⁸

The Kungkas’ statements and letters do not represent past experiences in a way that upsets, or contradicts, the accepted chronology of historical events. Their claims about the effects of the Totem One bomb are substantiated by non-Indigenous accounts of the past. But, like the Yarralin, the Kungka Tjuta present a powerful case study in remembrance. The Kungka Tjuta employ a particular narrative device, drawing the past into the present, for the purpose of affecting the future. The Captain Cook ‘moral saga’ has a pedagogical function: it is a dialogue between two moral systems. According to Rose the moral system of Cook, which is shared by the non-Indigenous colonisers, represents immoral law.³⁹ It is a law of domination and destruction, contrasting with Yarralin law, which is ‘directed toward life, towards the maintenance of living systems’.⁴⁰ The Irati Wanti campaign evidences the Kungkas’ desire to maintain their part of the world, the South Australian desert, as a life-giving system. The Kungkas’ letters and statements demonstrate a world-view that is directed toward life. They venerate water, which is life sustaining, and warn of the destructive capabilities of the *irati*, the poison.

The Kungkas’ statements and letters also provide an interpretation of the relationship between ‘the Government’ and Anangu people, as structured by domination, destruction and, importantly, resistance. Within the Yarralin history of Cook the term ‘government’ is conceptualised as ‘something inflicted upon [Yarralin people] from the outside, which they [have been] powerless either to change or evade’.⁴¹ Within the Kungka Tjuta’s statements and letters ‘the Government’ is also conceptualised as the locus of destructive power and a profoundly frustrating source of ignorance. In the Kungkas’ letters and statements capital G ‘Government’ is a shorthand reference for past and present regimes. I also understand it to conflate actual structures of power with powerful ideas. As the campaign continued and the Kungkas became more involved

in bureaucratic processes, such as environmental assessments, they were more likely to note specificities, criticising particular politicians and responding to their statements. The current federal government was chastised for eliding the responsibilities that come with power, such as listening and responding.

The Kungka Tjuta did not accept they were powerless to change the course of the waste repository project 'the Government' planned to impose on them. Talking and travelling became methods of articulating counter-narratives, which radically disrupted the federal government's unconvincing story. These counter-narratives resonated with many non-Indigenous Australians and forced an epistemological contest between different ways of knowing the country. And, out of that contest, the Kungkas emerged: 'Happy now — Kungka winners. We are winners because of what's in our hearts, not what's on paper.' They get the last word:

People said that you can't win against the Government. Just a few women. We just kept talking and telling them to get their ears out of their pockets and listen. We never said we were going to give up. We told Howard you should look after us, not try and kill us. Straight out. We always talk straight out. In the end he didn't have the power, we did.⁴²

Reflection

This essay is based on my Honours thesis, which was written in the Department of History at the University of Melbourne and based on my involvement in an environmental campaign. The KPKT sought a relationship with environmental organisations and actors, whose resources would augment their own vocal opposition to the proposed nuclear waste dump. The Kungkas travelled to Melbourne to forge such an alliance in 1998 and I became aware of them soon after, first travelling to Coober Pedy in 2000. A series of serendipitous events led me to Ten Mile Creek, a camp consisting of humpies and a rudimentary shed just out of town. Here I met several of the Kungkas for the first time, camping and making cups of hot black tea, stirring in the powered milk.

I see now that this encounter shaped the future direction of my work in two specific ways. First, this initial trip dispelled any

images I might have then held about extant, discrete, culturally different Aboriginal worlds in Australia's deserts. This trip taught me about the mutual constitution and imbrication of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal lives, economies, histories, images and ideas. For example: I spent an afternoon squeezing yellow acrylic paint out of a tube, carefully coating quandong seeds to string as necklaces sold in Coober Pedy as traditional objects, with the Kungkas heaped under blankets, napping beside us. Who, exactly, was engaged in the task of cultural reproduction? Moments like these were commonplace: greenies' desires to experience this difference seemed, to me, to be constantly disappointed. A friend adopted a camp dog and wanted the Kungkas to bestow its name. She wished for it to be indigenised. The Kungkas were adamant it be called 'Lassie'.

And yet, these were women who 'knew the stories' and songs for specific *jukurra* (dreaming) sites. Some spoke English only reluctantly. Some signed their (sometimes imploring, sometimes caustic) letters with carefully made crosses. I struggled to form friendships across radically different ways of being within the many trips I made out there. The colonial relation, the distance and time inhibited these relations. So, second, when I later returned to academic study I gravitated towards anthropology, with its powerful invitation to commit *time* to the development of deeper relationships, and which ultimately offered the experience of being personally transformed by this commitment.

'Born in the bush' in around 1932, Mrs Eileen Kampakuta Brown, that gentle woman, passed away in Coober Pedy in 2012. Mrs Eileen Unkari Crombie, born in 1935, also passed away in 2012. Mrs Angelina Wonga is 'finished' now too. Mrs Eileen Wani Wingfield passed away at home in Port Augusta in August 2014. A stalwart of the Kungka Tjuta council, she had lain in front of bulldozers in the early 1980s to protest the construction of the gargantuan Olympic Dam copper and uranium mine at Roxby Downs.

I last saw Mrs Emily Austin in Port Augusta in July 2014. I was travelling with a friend from those earlier days. 'Kundi!' (Aunty) we called out to her as the kids and the two of us spilled onto her gravel front yard. 'Good to see you fellas again,' she said, squeezing us tight. We ate her sweet biscuits, sitting in the full sun outside, admiring the bright flowers she grew in pots. For many years now my travels and research have taken me west from Port Augusta. On that day I sat with my tea, sensing all that lay beyond the northern

edges of town: the gibber plains, the silky desert peas, the shell-pink apparitions that turned to salt, and *that* road, that well-travelled road, shooting north.

Notes

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- 2 Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta, *Talking Straight Out: Stories from the Irati Wanti Campaign*, Alapalajja Press, Coober Pedy, 2005, p. 68.
- 3 Jessie Lennon, *I'm the One that Know this Country!: The Story of Jessie Lennon and Coober Pedy*, compiled and edited by Michele Madigan, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2000, p. 47.
- 4 *Talking Straight Out*, p. 6.
- 5 'Operation Totem', in *The Report of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia*, vol. 1, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1985, 6.4.1-16, pp. 174-94.
- 6 The Pitjantjatjara council at this time represented Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara and Ngaanyatjara peoples. Anti-bases Campaign, *Weapons in the Wilderness: The Exploitation of the North-west of South Australia, Anti-bases Campaign—South Australia*, Adelaide, 1991, p. 19.
- 7 Robert Ball, David English and Peter de Ionno, 'A "Black Mist" that Brought Death', *The Advertiser*, 3 May 1980, p. 1.
- 8 Ball, English and de Ionno, p. 1. See also Robert Ball, 'A "Devil Spirit" That Didn't Go', *The Advertiser*, 3 May 1980, p. 1.
- 9 *Talking Straight Out*, p. 92.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 11 *Report of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia*, 6.1.15, pp. 144-5.
- 12 *Report of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia*, 6.1.20, p. 146.
- 13 *Report of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia*, 6.1.17, p. 146.
- 14 *Report of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia*, 6.1.22, p. 146.
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- 18 Graeme Turner, 'Semiotic Victories: Media Constructions of the Maralinga Royal Commission', in John Frow and Meaghan Morris (eds), *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993, p. 188.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- 21 Roslyn Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 66-7.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 23 Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies*, New South

HISTORY, POWER, TEXT

- Wales University Press, Sydney, 1992, pp. 5-6.
- 24 See, in particular, Len Beadell, *Bush Bashers*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1971, which deals with the construction of highways in central Australian and Len Beadell, *Blast the Bush*, Griffith Press, Adelaide, 1967, which is about the site selection and preparation for the atomic testing program.
- 25 Beadell, *Bush Bashers*, pp. 1-2.
- 26 Address by Len Beadell to the Annual Conference of Rotary District 982, Shepparton Rotary Club, Shepparton, Victoria, 2 March 1991, J. D. Somerville Oral History Collection, State Library of South Australia.
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- 29 Beadell, *Blast the Bush*, pp. 172.
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- 36 'Emily Austin', in Skewes, p. 31.
- 37 Stephen Muecke, *No Road*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1997, p. 192.
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- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
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- 42 *Talking Straight Out*, p. 116.

A Touching and Contagious Captain Cook: Thinking History through Things

Stephen Muecke

For how long can history, as it is conceived in ‘the West’, continue to attach itself to an exhausted humanism, where ‘man’ is central and all the natural and inanimate objects surrounding humans (and linked intimately to human activity) are relegated to the function of support act?

This essay argues from anthropological theory that there are fundamentally different sorts of relationships that humans can entertain with non-humans, and that these relationships can have a magical force. When a monument is placed at the spot where an explorer first touched the land, does this impart a contiguous magic? On the other hand, where the stuff of history seems animated, and spreading out without clear connection to impart some small part of the aura to a doll representing the historical figure, are we not dealing with a sympathetic, contagious magic? This essay will experiment with these nonrepresentational forms of energy as they are transferred in domains associated with the figure of Lt James Cook.

What, then, is Cook when he is displaced from ‘Western’ history and spread around cultures like a virus? How precarious or robust, then, are the historical certainties associated with Cook-monumentalised Kurnell and its place in time as ‘the birthplace of modern Australia’?

The French philosopher Albert Camus was born in 1913, Jonathan Rée tells us:

to an illiterate, fatherless family on a working class estate in eastern Algeria. 'I was poised mid-way between poverty and sunshine', [Camus] wrote, and it wasn't until he went to Paris and saw what it was like to live in a cold climate that he understood social injustice. Poverty was proof that history is unfair: the sun was a reminder that 'history is not everything'.¹

History produces perceptions of unfairness, it also produces its own unfairnesses. Here, under this antipodean sun, ancient philosophy reminds us that history is not everything, and also that history was only a recent blow-in and sometimes a crude technology for triumphantly putting dates on things, like monuments and inventions, and allowing this world to be infected with the virus of modernity to ensure that the so-called ancients, the indigenous peoples, remain ontologically prior.

In Australian history, Captain Cook has become a pivot for these false perceptions of 'ancient' and 'modern'. This is perhaps why, as a sense of historical injustice drove people in the 1960s to do the work of assembling Aboriginal histories, the revisionist backlash that followed it in the 1990s centred on Cook as a necessary and heroic redeemer of white centrality, if not superiority. So in order to experiment with history, and to gain a metahistorical foothold, I want to look at history, and the figure of Cook, from the vantage point of culture.

In his work on social memory, Chris Healy set out the parameters for the kind of experimental study my colleague Katrina Schlunke and I have undertaken, not 'Captain Cook, a name which refers us not to an actual historical figure', but Cook as 'an enduring icon, a huge network of narratives, images and ceremonies' as he goes on usefully to contrast the building up of the whitefella nationalist mythology (Cook as origin, as hero of science and exploration, and even as a lower-class battler) with the recent disruption by Aboriginal stories of Cook as thief and violator.²

History, like many other things, is 'constructed'. It is the product of all the hard work of observers, opinion-makers, teachers, writers, artists of various sorts, archivists and the builders of monuments, museums, texts, databases

and commemorative events. These various activities are simultaneous and interlinked, spreading out over the country, opening the archive onto past materials and ideas, as well as projecting some of those, as political hopes, into the future. This ‘assemblage’ of history is a construction of a different nature to the notion of construction of history as a set of representations, which tends to derive from a linear model of subject—text—object, a ‘correlationist’ model according to which the world appears to consciousness via the filters of culturally specific restrictions of language. This post-Kantian model holds that we can neither conceive of humans without an exterior world, nor of world without humans, but must base all philosophy in a correlation between the two.³

Correlationism is orthodox among those continental philosophers for whom the critique of the subject-object dualism and of representation is now a conditioned reflex. So their philosophical limit is that the world has to be represented *to* humankind, the final arbiter of their own earthly destiny: what matters to ‘man’ is ‘himself’. Having abandoned the knowability of the world to the sole medium of language, with all its slipperiness, these narcissistic humanists are left ‘to celebrate the irreducible wonder of human subjectivity’.⁴ And indeed, the subject of history is a certain type of person: morally righteous (often), omniscient (usually), dislocated from the places where things are happening, and wearing tweed, if we think, perhaps, of the English invention of the ‘History Men’.

Taking language out of the equation, and decentering the human subject, does not join forces with those conservative positions which rely on the transparency of the objective fact. Ultimately, they are running on the same correlationist philosophy, but, not yet having arrived at the critique of representation, they merely assume that the correct arrangements of facts will lead to a singular history they are happy to call the truth. In my model, taking language out and decentering the subject does not eliminate them either, it puts them on the same surface as all the other stuff that might be concerned with history-making. ‘Concern’ is a key Latourian term here, for what *matters* to history-makers, the injection of values, is also part of the overall assemblage. History does

not make itself without the continual participation of values of a philosophical origin or social availability. They are there, overjoyed, at the birth of every new fact, they are there sternly interrogating new claims of evidence.

Let's conceive of history-making as occurring within a political ecology. What that hopes to achieve, as a model and as a research practice, is the continuation of anti-foundationalism (there are no 'basic concepts', only concepts that practically work), the elimination of metaphor in the architecture of the model (for example: 'depth'), and the observation of actual relations among objects, concepts, humans and other living things. This is a living and growing system where 'actual relations' refers to things that are articulated for all sorts of purposes that further the continuation of the system.

A political ecology of a field like history will ultimately influence historiography because it will allow all sorts of agents to participate in history-making: technologies, animals, even elusive concepts like 'atmosphere' or 'mood'. We might ask, what kind of 'atmosphere' also contributed to a renewed interest in Captain Cook in Australia in the 1990s? We might thus experiment with the elements of a living ecology to see what ingredients cause the system to thrive, or not. This approach to history-making is quite at odds with a dialectical model based on the work of negative critique, where humans, with their special cultural attributes (like language), are locked in a to-and-fro debate with 'the world' with its supposedly objective attributes.

As an example of moving the terms of debate, let me tell the story of my argument with John Howard. After he asserted the importance of learning dates at a national summit on the teaching of history, I wrote a response in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'Experimental history won't change the Battle of Hastings', thus called because Howard's insistence was that students are failing to learn significant facts, and that this is the fault of 'postmodern relativism'.

I pleaded that it would be difficult to find adherents of 'postmodern relativism', and that if one did, they would have no problem with facts. I might have suggested, though, that postmodernism was useful for interrogating some of the certainties of European modernity, but that that period was

rich in experimental thought, not only cultural pluralism, but also Einstein was there ‘messaging with reality’ in the form of the theory of relativity. I suggested that Howard’s dogmatic insistence on facts was uninspiring and anti-intellectual—nothing unusual there. I argued that what I would like to call ‘experimental history’ is not experimental in the artistic sense—like the writers’ workshop—but radically empirical *à la* William James, not excluding anything as a possible actor in a virtual situation, giving rise to an event. So experimental thinking opens up new domains of facts. ‘What if there were such a thing as women’s history?’, someone once asked—and a new subject was born. It is a question of adopting a new perspective, as Henry Reynolds said, as he, too, opened up the new field of Aboriginal history, making him one of the most influential public intellectuals of the last couple of decades.

His critics make him out to be controversial and politically correct. But adding new chapters on Aboriginal history to the Australian story has not had the effect of wiping out Captain Cook, it has simply added something compelling as a story and an argument. Its politics is motivated by justice and inclusion, democratic ideas people generally agree with.

Reynolds’ new perspective tells us that Australian history did not just begin with Cook or the First Fleet. ‘What was happening on the other side of the frontier?’ he asked. While he was working in the document archives turning up neglected materials on early colonial life, including massacres, archaeologists also came up with facts that added new first chapters to the human history of the continent, uncovering the stories written in the sands of Lake Mungo, and in thousands of camp sites and shell middens.⁵

The experiments also were inflected by new methods and new technology, like tape recordings, which gave us ways of valuing and interpreting the living traditions of oral history. An experimental thought that highlights a virtual field like women’s history or labour history will go nowhere unless the archive and the evidence is there to be assembled and allow the field to actualise and thrive. So I should reiterate that this is not the textual ‘constructionism’ of the kind a Windschuttle might like to fuse with ‘fabrication’, but construction as an assemblage of lots of real *things*.

Things, however, are strange, and human's relations with things have a range of traditionally ascribed magical properties. These take us to anthropology to help us to understand something about the popularity of Captain Cook, about his synchronic 'spread' rather than his diachronic links. The structure of the most pervasive myths about Cook relate to him as an historical figure, so the experiment that Katrina Schlunke and I have carried out, consisted, in one of our first moves, in taking him out of history, at least as we talked about the subject, in our preliminary analysis.

For indeed, despite the way official and popular histories talk about him, Cook has had one foot, as it were, well and truly out of history for a long time, and has spread far and wide in the spaces of culture. When you encounter him metonymically as an Endeavour in the name of a high school in the Sydney suburb of Rockdale, or as a miniature *Endeavour* in a bottle, or as the name of a convenience store, history is not the narrative that first springs to mind. It is something more cultural like a sense of identity or belonging. In fact, as Greg Denning has demonstrated in relation to Bligh,⁶ one of the best ways to make one's way into history is via popular cultural consumption, hence, *The Death of Captain Cook; A Grand Serious-Pantomimic-Ballet, in Three Parts. As now Exhibiting in Paris with uncommon Applause, with The original French Music, New Scenery, Machinery and Other Decorations.*⁷ This must be an English celebratory 'corroboree', no cold one-dimensional text here; it has all the hall-marks of ritual. There is simultaneous multiple-coding in poetry, melody, repetition and choreography, all the elements to make the affective body thrill in sympathy—and remember.

We are touched. And this brings us to the anthropological classification of human societies, as proposed by Philippe Descola, giving us another way of thinking about the ecology of history-making sites without having time as a founding methodological concept.⁸ Contiguity is one of the ways humans organise their relationships with things, and in the process, and in the relationship, attribute things with magical power.⁹ But I am putting this badly, for it is only modern western culture that has the habit of classifying the things of the world into Nature on the one side and Culture on the

other, where nature has its 'laws' accessible only to Science, and cultures on the other side are charmingly diverse and vary by mere convention. In the face of Science, they don't *matter* for knowledge (but they matter for social arrangements, that is why so much blood has been spilt over religious differences, and over history). What I should say is that there are continuities along nature-culture dimensions, and there are different practices for expressing relationships in those dimensions. So when an Indigenous person says that a certain picture of a sacred tree 'is' me, or it 'carries my power', she is not saying 'it is something (out there in the world, out in Nature) which *represents* me'. Far from expressing the image of some kind of spiritual harmony with Nature, she is not working with a concept of Nature at all. Such a generality, in the singular, is completely irrelevant to her practice. So when she expresses a particular relationship it is significant precisely because it does not 'bridge' anything. This is what anthropology calls totemism, a moral and material continuity running between humans and non-humans.

In his major 2005 book, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Descola distinguished four broad ontological cultural types on a world scale: *totemism*, *animism*, *analogism* and *naturalism*. Totemism (characterising Australian Indigenous societies, for instance) sees the same internal stuff running through the person and their totem, and they resemble each other on the outside.¹⁰ Animism attributes non-humans with the same interiority as humans, but they are physically different. This more anthropomorphic category sees a person in a relation to a plant or animal as if that thing were animated by the same spirit. The metonymy of a voodoo doll is an example. Analogism and naturalism will not serve us here, suffice to say that the former describes a social ontology based on 'cosmic' systems of correspondences as in many Eastern cultures (astrology for example). Naturalism is based on the Western nature-culture divide, where humans and non-humans are composed of the same basic natural stuff (for example atoms), but the humans are radically separated from the rest because of their cultural capacities, like consciousness and motivation.

Let us now take this apparatus into the field to experiment with taking Cook out of history. I want to go to three Cook

sites: Kurnell, Cairns and my own little *wunderkammer* in my office at work.

Kurnell, readers need not be reminded, is an iconic Australian site: 'the birthplace of modern Australia', because Cook first set foot on the continent here, and because the slogans of Sutherland City Council keep reminding us. There is a lot to be said about the contested meanings of this place, but I want to use it as a site for two little experimental moves.¹¹ The first is about contiguity and totemism. Like many Cook sites it is marked with a monument, sited only metres from the supposed actual landing spot. Visitors can thus go unerringly to the *very spot itself*. Putting aside the spurious observation that the monument rises vertically in stereotypical 'totem-pole' fashion, the monument remains totemistic in the sense I described because 'the same stuff run[s] through the person and their totem, and they resemble each other'. This 'Cook spirit' runs in that sense through all the sites marked totemically across the world, mostly following his travels. This is not the kind of totem, as in Aboriginal Australia, which marks continuity in a natural-cultural space, where a clan or person 'is' also the bandicoot totem, it is a weaker version because it is a 'totemic marker' a kind of 'representation', but it does much more than signify, its presence is ergative (to borrow a term from the linguistics of Aboriginal languages), it does work because the social vectors converging in it make it event-like.

Another title for this essay could have been 'History as an ergative language', because that emphasis would be useful for my conceptual purposes. Indo-European languages are often classified as Nominative-Accusative languages. That means that the subjects of both transitive and intransitive verbs are marked in the same way, while the object of a transitive verb has a special ending (the accusative). In ergative languages (many Aboriginal languages, Basque and Tibetan), it is the agent of a transitive verb which is marked differently. The object of an action and the subject of an intransitive verb are treated the same. The point is that the agent of the transitive verb is seen to 'work', the event-creating transitive verbs have a specially marked subject. R.M.W. Dixon, in his *Ergativity*, makes the point that such grammatical differences are arbitrary, and need not inscribe differing world-views.¹² Maybe so,

my point is rather more heuristic, a focus on the performative work of language leads us away from subject-object as the primary conceptual relation of representation.

There can be no claim that such totemism might integrate Cook into a viable local totemic system, it hasn't happened.¹³ Rather this mode of marking Cook's presence is overlaid with Western semiotics (the icon represents the subject), but the stronger magical connections people are wont to make, I would argue, lie in the contiguity of the site, and the same contiguity is repeated in every trace that has come down to us: Cook's drinking mug, articles of clothing, artefacts he collected, even a louse collected from an albatross on a Cook voyage labelled under Cook's name in the McLeay Museum at the University of Sydney.

In June 2006, Katrina enjoyed taking me back—because she had been there before—to the Captain Cook Motel in Cairns where there is a huge ferro-cement statue of Cook, still standing there amid the rubble of the now-demolished motel. It is an impressively tawdry example of those Australian gargantuan region-markers: this would be The Big Cook. His right hand, extending out and slightly raised, is opening up imperial space and time, the gesture derived as it is from the famous Phillips-Fox painting about the first landing. Now, since Cook had never been to Cairns, this is no claim to contiguity, that magical connection lies further up the coast at Cook Town, rather, I would argue, it is a case of contagion or 'spread'. Cookiness here is manifest in a different guise. The statue looks like him, enough to make the representation clear, but like so many of the tourist trinkets, or the more diffuse allusions (as in the name of a street or of a convenience store chain), the resemblance is not the issue, it is that the object contains something of the spirit of Cook. We value it for this tokenistic reason, not because it was in a contiguous relationship with him. Objects infected by contagion are animistic in the double sense of the sacred: things named 'Captain Cook' project an aura of protection from desecration, and at the same time contain a vulnerable essence. As far as I know the Big Cook still stands there in Cairns, after many debates about what is to be done with this objectively worthless but culturally powerful object. I have another little Cook vehicle, brought as

a present from Whitby by Katrina, an *Endeavour* in a bottle. I wonder now about its miniature power as it sits in my cabinet of curiosities in my office.

To return to Kurnell for the second historical experiment, I would like to see if there is evidence for proposing that Kurnell is not the ‘birthplace of modern Australia’. When an evening tabloid in Sydney reported something of the atmosphere of defending of a white sacred site under the banner KURNELL’S EUROPEAN SYMBOLS FACING AXE, Malcolm Kerr, Liberal MP for Cronulla, reacted by saying that some proposed changes to the site would be ‘an example of “political correctness” ... I think they are downgrading Cook, and there should be a bit of equity in relation to history’. Then Mr Kerr added, using the key phrase: ‘Let’s have more credit for Cook’s achievements in a place that is the birthplace of modern Australian culture.’¹⁴

It packs a lot in, this phrase about the confluence of *place* and *time*, the first place and the first time. Knowing that the Indigenous people were here first, the word modern becomes a pivotal concept, making everything that Cook stood for the bearer of modernity, science and rationality. But could he be sure he was ‘absolutely modern’? Can we be sure that we, today, are similarly the bearers of an unsullied modernity, derived from Europe, the origin of everything that is civilised and superior? To the extent we have doubts about this, that we can be convinced that there are ‘alternative modernities’ in the world, then we have to doubt that Kurnell is such a firm pivot in the arrival of modernity in Australia. Perhaps also the modernisation process has not gone to completion for settler Australians, perhaps it never will.¹⁵ We still have ancient European rituals, and are we not barbarous or primitive from time to time, with violence on the beaches, reminding us of Cook travelling the world firing his guns at people across the sands in the heat of the sun?

And the Aborigines, on what grounds are they excluded from their own versions of modernism, which I have defined as inventive and rapid adaptation to changes?¹⁶ A culture is not modern simply because it has been through an industrial revolution, or because it has large permanent buildings, firearms, enclosed land and monocultural agriculture, or a

centralised government. In the scale of world history, are these such great things? Nothing at Kurnell suggests that Aborigines were stuck in the Stone Age and not always changing and adapting to circumstance, and the records of encounter and the subsequent history provide ample evidence for this. But the key concept, the modern, especially in its pivotal role at Kurnell, continues on its mission to do nothing much more than divide the achievements of colonial Australia from the riches of Indigenous civilisation.

As long as history has Man central stage and things (animate, inanimate, natural) as a support act, the kinds of continuities and necessary dependencies among them will be obscured. 'We' have always thought and acted in conjunction with things: telescopes and stars, falling apples, boomerangs and platypuses. So what kind of subject of history might replace that of the figure of the human with a progressive modernist destiny? I have suggested, in a Latourian manner, that matters of concern might lead us to a parliament organised as an ecological assemblage, where questions of *what is most urgently at stake*—how do all of us decide the ranking of problems?—displace the disinterested pursuit of objectivity. Our new historian is a consummate negotiator in a heterogeneous environment where the historical is often treated as political and as personal, where no amount of objectivity seems to be able to douse enflamed passions. Our new subject of history has found that the power driving history-making is dispersed and multiple, that is, the situation is rarely a clear case of the Self vs the World, or of Left vs. Right, but one of multiple human and non-human stakeholders putting their arguments. The historical world we build is not therefore one consisting primarily of 'constructed' representations, it is a negotiable world of heterogeneities.

What unites the miniature *Endeavour* in the bottle with the real ship, or the ferro-cement statue with a real human being called James Cook? It is not simply the operation of magic or a leap of faith across the gap that representational philosophies mysteriously construct. That would be lazy as well as magical thinking. It is, in fact, the hard and repetitive work of arguing for, and constructing, the successive stages of equivalence. People do this each time they are prepared to say X is 'the

same as 'X. This is the kind of work performed by historians when they say that the man Cook and the boat at Poverty Bay in Aotearoa are 'equivalent to' the man and the boat that later sailed into Botany Bay. Of course they are the same, you may say, despite minor changes, like the man Cook might be a little more wary about using his guns. Without such continuities where would history be? Indeed, history would reside in the narration of the slight differences, and that is what happens in cultural analysis too when its knowledge acquisition follows real and explicit chains of association.

Reflection

At the time of writing this, people were getting a feeling for 'affect theory'. But with my 'culture of history' concerns, my affective subject exfoliated into the world, rather than being a repressed subject of psychoanalytic derivation, waiting for individual emancipation. There's no interior to be repressed into; it was only a metaphor. What was really going on, I thought, was affect being transmitted along lines that I would later call pathways for the acquisition of affect.¹⁷ Affective exteriors are so much more fertile, I was thinking, here Cook and feelings about Cook can run wild, or be institutionally captures and redirected, as they are.

That said—I failed to elaborate empirically on the kinds of feelings that the various Cooks might have engendered, though there were mentions of enthusiasms of a pop culture nature and later passions of an ideological one. Rather than a survey of public feelings (as opposed to 'public thoughts') which the article could have been about, I opted for a broader anthropological classification: contiguity and contagion. These were theoretical tools that I wanted to actualise within the conjuncture that was the on-going debate on Aboriginal history and Cook's pivotal role in this. It was Schlunke's wonderful idea to take up this topic. I was roped into it, and next thing I found myself as a working 'sailor' on the replica Endeavour off the east coast of Tasmania climbing the rigging and sleeping uncomfortably in a hammock below decks.

It was in that hammock that I came up with the formula I felt most comfortable with for writing cultural studies: conjuncture + description + workable concepts. Conjuncture is the Marxian concept we have inherited through Stuart Hall, and today I am equally happy with the Latourian version—matters of concern—which is

actually more legible and is explicit about ranking them. If the collective has to decide the ranking of these matters through political negotiation, this means the argument has to be cogent as to why X is more urgent than Y. Descriptive work can be ethnographic or anecdotal as in this piece, or in more a storytelling mode. It's not easy, this goes without saying, and the more thorough the description gets, the more it expands to need the short-cuts of abstraction, concepts that do the heavy lifting.

Because I was reading Latour, and Harman on Latour, and he had introduced me to Quentin Meillassoux before making Speculative Realism and Object Oriented Ontology ricochet around the globe, I was interested in how objects could become articulate. The 'objective world' was, of course, a western invention as a product of its 'bifurcation', as Whitehead puts it: 'us' on one side and all the nature and dead stuff on the other. But, what, I was thinking, if things are all active in their own ways, rather than all being dead in the same way? One of the ways that scientific doxa kills things to the imagination is to say 'everything is composed of atoms'. True, but not true. Let's just briefly imagine, to conclude, how Captain Cook, still standing in Cairns I think, continues to act upon the rest of the world. He is composed of mute iron and cement molecules to be sure, but he continues to put the argument that with him Modern time was introduced to Australia, indexed by his arm upraised in the direction of future development, and history must forever more turn around him. And he is saying so much more, eliciting all sorts of responses. He is such a brutally eloquent thing!

Notes

- 1 Thanks to my dear friends and colleagues Tara Forrest, Jan Idle and Katrina Schlunke for help with this essay, as well as the kind and constructive comments of *Cultural Studies Review's* anonymous reviewer.
- 2 Jonathan Rée, 'Bound to be in the Wrong', *London Review of Books*, 20 January 2005, p. 20.
- 3 Chris Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997, p. 11.
- 4 Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la Finitude: Essai sur la Nécessité de la Contingence*, Seuil, Paris 2005, pp. 18-24.
- 5 Isabelle Stengers, *Penser avec Whitehead: Une libre et sauvage creation de concepts*, Seuil, Paris 2002, p. 22.
- 6 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 January 2006, p. 11.
- 7 Greg Denning, *Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty*,

- Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992.
- 8 At the Theatre-Royal, Covent Garden, T. Cadell, (printer), London, 1789.
- 9 Phillipe Descola begins his *Par-delà nature et culture* (Gallimard, Paris, 2005, p. 9) citing Montaigne on a unifying nature and then stating: ‘a few decades after Montaigne’s death ... nature stopped being a way of unifying the most disparate of things to become a domain of objects governed by autonomous laws against the background of which a diversity of human activities could indulge their charming displays. A new cosmology was just born, a prodigious collective invention which offered an unprecedented framework for the development of scientific thought and of which we continue to be, at this beginning of the twenty-first century, the slightly distracted guardians.’
- 10 I am adapting the famous model of Sir James Frazer. He had sympathetic magic as a general category, with homeopathic (the ‘Law of similarity’) and contagious magic as subcategories. In wishing to make the distinction between the contiguous and the contagious (which he does not do), I have had to align contagion with practices of an animistic sort. See: J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Limited Editions Club, New York, 1970, p. 18.
- 11 Descola, p. 176.
- 12 Maria Nugent, *Botany Bay: Where Histories Meet*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005.
- 13 R. M. W. Dixon, *Ergativity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 214-15.
- 14 But see Maria Nugent’s interesting analysis of the comings and goings of Aboriginal figures in the finding and marking of whitefella sites. Far from keeping the blackfellas at bay, she demonstrates that on many occasions they are brought back or come back to the sites for continued interaction and participation in history-making. From the Aboriginal point of view, could their participation be part of an attempt to integrate the whitefella? ‘Historical Encounters: Aboriginal Testimony and Colonial Forms of Commemoration’, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 30, 2006, pp. 33-47.
- 15 As quoted in Stephen Muecke, *Ancient & Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2004, pp. 6-7.
- 16 Muecke, *Ancient & Modern*; see also Stephen Muecke, “‘I don’t think they invented the wheel’: The Case for Aboriginal Modernity”, *Angelaki*, vol. 9, no. 2, August 2004, pp. 155-65.
- 17 Muecke, *Ancient & Modern*, pp. 5-6.
- 18 ‘Public Thinking, Public Feeling: Research Tools for Creative Writing’, *TEXT*, vol. 14, no. 1, April 2010, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/>.

In the Northern Territory Intervention, What is Saved or Rescued and at What Cost?

Irene Watson

The foundation of the Australian colonial project lies within an 'originary violence', in which the state retains a vested interest in maintaining the founding order of things. Inequalities and iniquities are maintained for the purpose of sustaining the life and continuity of the state.¹ The Australian state, founder of a violent (dis)order is called upon by the international community to conform and uphold 'human rights', but what does this call to conformity require, particularly when the call comes from states which are also founded upon colonial violence? It is my argument that very little is required beyond the masquerade that 'equality' for Aboriginal peoples is an ongoing project of the state. So for what purpose does the masquerade continue? The masquerade of equality is essential to the notion of foundation and state legitimacy even though inside the colonial state 'equality' is never a possibility. The bare minimum notion of 'rights' is allowed, in what Jacques Rancière suggests is a space which is diminishing daily, until 'rights' appear empty and devoid of use.² Rancière compares the idea of rights of the oppressed to the charitable giving of second-hand clothes to the poor, or the sending of aid abroad to 'deprived peoples'.

Australia does not have to look overseas to extend the 'charity' of human rights; the colonisation of Aboriginal people's lives and territories has been an ongoing project in the maintenance of inequality— inequality between Aboriginal life and a privileged colonial settler society. The

standing inequality between the Aboriginal and settler societies provides fertile ground for human rights interventions. In June 2007 the Howard government announced it would lead an Intervention into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory as a response to the findings of the *Little Children are Sacred* report, which reported on high levels of community violence against Aboriginal children and women.³ Without negotiating with Aboriginal communities the federal government announced its own strategy to intervene in the 'crisis' within Northern Territory Aboriginal communities, and enacted the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill (Cth) 2007.⁴

Soon after the announcement the Intervention commenced and was led, like those in Iraq and Afghanistan, by the Australian military. According to the Australian Government the Intervention will save and transform the lives of Aboriginal peoples living on Aboriginal lands that have been recognised since 1975. The Howard government argued that its emergency intervention was a 'just' and 'humanitarian' act, while the incoming Labor government fully supports its opponent's intervention laws. But are they just? Derrida argues that the mere application of a rule 'without a spirit of justice' might be protected to stand as 'law' but it would not be 'just'.⁵ In this instance the Australian Government stands protected by law, a law that continues to play out and re-enact its own unjust foundational position, one which took root in innumerable acts of colonial violence and continues today as violent re-enactments. But these violent re-enactments are not seen as violence, because the violence is normalised. The intervention, read by some as a contemporary invasion of Aboriginal lands, was read by the Australian public as a humanitarian intervention, as a lawful process of the Australian state.⁶

I understand the contemporary colonial project as one which has continued unabated from the time of the landing and invasion by the British in 1788. It is from this foundational 'originary violence' that the Australian state retains a vested interest in the inequalities and iniquities that are maintained against Aboriginal peoples, for the purpose of maintaining the life and continuity of the state.⁷ A question the Australian

state is yet to resolve is its own illegitimate foundation and transformation into an edifice deemed lawful. Within this unanswered questionable structure the Australian state parades as one which has repressed its 'illegitimate' origins into 'a timeless past',⁸ while the survivors of this founding violence ask the state: by what lawful process do you come to occupy our lands?

The Commonwealth's Intervention is focused only on the Northern Territory — it is only the Northern Territory that has a federal Aboriginal land rights regime — but the Northern Territory is also earmarked for the opening of a number of new uranium mines. Coincidentally, a new railway line is routed from Adelaide to Darwin and crosses Aboriginal lands in the Northern Territory to provide easy access to shipping routes.⁹ Clearly none of these facts have been cited as being relevant or having any connection to the new emergency laws — the media and public focus is solely upon child sexual abuse and the possibility of its prevention and protection — but they are certainly coincidental. Wendy Brown, writing on humanitarian intervention, suggests the state's intervention in crisis events is probably more about a 'particular form of political power carrying a particular image of justice'.¹⁰ In Australia, that image of justice enables the violent foundations of colonialism to continue to hold territory and transform the life of Aboriginal peoples. It is a violent act which masquerades as being beneficial but that boils down to the legitimising of the right to invasion of Aboriginal lands and lives.¹¹

Across colonial history, Australian law and society held and continues to hold definitional power, a position which has resulted in translations and constructions of Aboriginal law and culture as being inherently violent against women and children. This position has allowed an opening for crusaders or 'white men to come to the rescue of brown women from brown men', as Spivak suggested when commenting on the dynamics of colonial India and the 'rescue' by white men of Indian women from the 'barbaric practice' of widow sacrifice.¹² The position of crusader is held up as the 'proper' solution to violence. But in this universalised order whose concept of human rights and equality applies? And will the 'originary violence' be transformed into a law-full act which obliterates

its own past? It is my argument that the current emergency response laws are the contemporary representation of earlier colonial laws and protectionist policies of the Aborigines Acts, and that these (now repealed) laws were in their time of operation also characterised as being of benefit to Aboriginal peoples.¹³

Across time, from the moment of the original violence of foundation to this time now, the same question can be asked: what was it that Aboriginal people are being protected from? In the past the black frontier experience was one of physical violence: white settlers effected massacres, murders and kidnappings, and as a result of their pressure, starvation and disease were also rife. Often official protection was ineffective. On the white side of the frontier, however, it was and still is strongly contested that any frontier violence had occurred at all. It is now claimed that under the recently imposed Intervention laws Aboriginal individuals, particularly women and children, would be protected from the violence of Aboriginal male members of their communities. Women and children would be protected from a 'failed Indigenous experiment' in respect of which the Howard government, Marcia Langton states, 'would no longer stomach a policy regime whose many failings resulted in endemic poverty, alienation and disadvantage, and sickening levels of abuse of Aboriginal women and children ... a new order swept in'.¹⁴ Langton's support for the Intervention fails to acknowledge the Howard government's complicity; that is, during the previous decade the Howard government held power to intervene in Aboriginal community endemic poverty, alienation, disadvantage and community violence, but chose instead to do nothing, chose to sit back and observe like the vulture state it was and to swoop in upon communities at the point of implosion. So why did the state fail to intervene or act earlier? The implosion of communities was well represented by the Australian media but in their representation they failed to provide a critical commentary of the Howard government's failure to engage with Aboriginal community development.

The white settler frontiersman of the past has been transformed by the Northern Territory intervention into the crusader of the present, rescuing Aboriginal women

from Aboriginal men. The question to be asked is: what has happened in the intervening two hundred years and why does the violence continue to occur inter-generationally in this changed and inverted context?

In coming to these questions it is important to distinguish the nature and character of violence in Aboriginal communities. Early colonial frontier violence was pitched against first peoples' laws and cultures, a foundational violence which established a colonial sovereignty. However, contemporary violence is more complex; it is characterised by violence of Aboriginal against Aboriginal, but the violence of the state also retains its original character against Aboriginal peoples' laws and cultures. It is a colonial violence which re-enacts itself to support its claim to legitimate foundation, and the Howard government emergency measures are such a re-enactment.

I don't think we can fully comprehend these recent developments without reflecting on history. In the past the colonial state cast the net of what I have called in previous works an illusion of protection or the masquerade of recognition of the humanness of Aboriginal peoples.¹⁵ But under the protectionist policies of the Aborigines Acts our lives were totally controlled. Our old people were forced to live on reserve lands and were only allowed to leave the reserve once they obtained the permission of the Aboriginal Protector, or held a certificate exempting them from being identified as an Aborigine under the Aborigines Acts.¹⁶

So who am I/ we today in this new so-called 'postcolonial landscape'?¹⁷ This question is particularly relevant to situations of native title claims where Aboriginal culture and identity is interrogated for authenticity. In the past our ability to truly live as Aboriginal peoples was subjugated entirely by colonial policies, but during the 1970s there was a symbolic shift to 'recognition' of Aboriginal lands, laws and cultures. However, recently we have been made aware that these shifts in the 1970s were never based on firm ground but were vulnerable 'rights recognition' secured only by the 'human rights movement' of the times. So what are these times and how far if at all have we shifted from the original founding colonial intentions?

Prior to the commencement of the Intervention, Aboriginal culture and collective forms of land ownership were deemed subversive to 'proper' forms of property ownership. In a speech to parliament, Mal Brough spoke in support of amendments to land rights legislation, arguing that private property rights would provide safer and more progressive developments for Aboriginal communities.¹⁸ At the same time, negating the possibility for judicial consideration of Aboriginal cultural background was also considered by the Commonwealth as an advancement of universal human rights standards.¹⁹

The original colonial intentions were to establish colonies that were to become transformed into the Australian state. At the time of its foundation we were the non-native coloniser's natives, but we were ourselves Tanganekald or other peoples, by our own names.²⁰ Our identity and voices were unknown to the colonisers and unheard, but they have survived the attempted genocide. Today our voices are still talking while the colonial project remains entrenched and questions concerning identity politics, and the 'authentic native', are constructed and answered by those who have power to determine legal and political categories. The categories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal were imposed by the colonial project and in this process of constructing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities, the colonisers excluded themselves from having an Indigenous past. I see this process of negating an Aboriginal identity as being tied to the idea of progress or the movement towards a 'vanishing future', away from an Aboriginal being, and relationships or connections to country.

While the colonial project from the outset denied and extinguished Aboriginality it seems contradictory that the commodification of Aboriginal culture brings an increased demand for authenticity—of Aboriginal art, and other tangible and intangible 'products'. Commodification occurs even while the survival of the 'authentic native' was and is threatened by colonialism. Who we are is often navigated from a violent space within which Aboriginality is measured for its degree of authenticity, and where those who do the measuring are ignorant or deniers of the history of colonialism. So when the struggle and desire for an Aboriginal life is depicted by

the state as being no more than an invention or fabrication of culture and law, as was found in the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission (South Australia) we are reduced of our Aboriginality.²¹ The commission was established to determine the truth or otherwise behind the claim that the building of a highway bridge from mainland Goolwa to Hindmarsh Island would destroy a significant Aboriginal women's site. Presuming to inquire into the authenticity of Aboriginal women's law business, the commission concluded that Aboriginal women had invented law business for the purpose of preventing the building of the bridge and that the practice in question had never been a part of Aboriginal cultures in the southern and southeastern regions of South Australia. Since then the bridge has been built and a number of Aboriginal women continue to contest and resist the legitimacy of the decision that enabled the damage of an important Aboriginal site.

Aboriginal culture and identity is more likely to be supported when it is not challenging development projects and when culture performs as a commodity. However, when it challenges the political agendas of the state, it is most likely to be attacked or demeaned as it was by Commissioner Iris Stevens when she determined women's business was a fabrication and a reinvention of the past. Here the state determined the process of cultural translation, and the evidence relied upon was taken from white male experts, while the evidence of Aboriginal women's business was not presented to the commission because its proponents did not acknowledge the Royal Commission's jurisdiction. How can anyone consider the possibility of cultural translation when the source of the translation has no status or even presence? When the information relied upon is that of the 'white expert' that is being translated? It is a compilation of their record of events; the Aboriginal record has no speaking voice. The commission's conclusions resulted in the damage of a site of significance to Aboriginal women's law and cultural business. The discourse of progress framed and determined these conclusions and the processes of translation.

Zizek, in consideration of Scottish kilts, their origins and history writes, 'in the very act of returning to tradition,

they are inventing it'.²² He was referring to a specific history of place and people, a subject which cannot be conveyed to every known territory. However, the concept of invention of tradition is imposed broadly, and occurred during the Royal Commission. It was applied to a place where Aboriginal peoples are in struggle for the land and a space to re-establish a life beyond that of subjugated natives. The possibility for decolonisation or engagement with Aboriginal worldviews on law and culture was rendered a fabrication by Iris Stevens, of the same species as Žižek's act of invention. Does a space in which there might be Aboriginality beyond a fabricated invention or a commodified Aboriginal being exist? The cynic in me would say no; the resisting-survivor would say it is the challenge.

In a critique of the 'tolerance' of liberal multiculturalism, Žižek reasons most unreasonably: 'an experience of Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealised Other who dances fascinating dances and has an ecologically sound holistic approach to reality, while features like wife-beating remain out of sight)?'²³ Here Žižek renders the 'other' as 'real' without being so, for the real 'reality show' is not Aboriginal relationships to country but the out-of-sight wife beating. This is real. But what of the reality of relationships to country? Here they are demeaned as invention of tradition while the real is wife-beating. What is real and where is the reality space of colonialism as a determined player in the construction of the other's identity and responses to violence and the inter-generational traumas of colonialism? What has been stripped here is an Aboriginal context of life or an Aboriginal reality and not one as suggested by Žižek that is divested of substance resisting that which is real.

Colonial policies of protection were initially applied with the expectation that there would be a decline and eventual extinguishment of the 'native'. They would all die. When native populations, however, successfully resisted extinguishment, protectionist policies were replaced by policies of assimilation which assumed not that the natives would all die, but that cultural annihilation would occur. These policies more or less continue in various guises, but the recent Australian Government intervention into the Northern Territory works

differently to colonial policies of the past. Aboriginal reserve lands which were set aside under the Aborigines Acts of the past for the purpose of sustaining protectionist policies of exclusion later formed the land base for the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976 (Cth)*. These lands have now been targeted for large-scale development and the bringing of both country and peoples into modernity. The Intervention is supported by a package of Commonwealth laws which have been referred to by both major political parties as a necessary human rights intervention to relieve the crisis in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities.²⁴

We might ask: was the sole purpose of the Intervention to save and transform lives and in particular the lives of Aboriginal children? The involvement of the Australian military raises the question as to whether this hardline offensive precludes or negates other ways of dealing with violence in Aboriginal communities. For example, from early colonial times Aboriginal peoples have attempted to negotiate with the colonial powers on Aboriginal strategies which could work towards alleviating suffering in communities across Australia. For more than thirty years Aboriginal strategies such as alternative justice models, and rehabilitation and healing centres modelled on Aboriginal cultural knowledge have largely been ignored or if they have been supported it has been in a tokenistic manner.

In considering the military intervention into Aboriginal communities, I am interested in the question that Wendy Brown raises regarding humanitarian intervention: 'what kinds of subjects and political (or antipolitical) cultures do they bring into being as they do so, what kinds do they transform or erode, and what kinds do they aver?'²⁵ It is a question which could also be applied to the early colonisation of Australia, and to this scenario we have an answer: what was brought into being was large-scale dispossession of peoples from land, culture and law, peoples left without space to survive inside a colonial body that continually works to subjugate the 'native' to the trajectories of progress. Will Aboriginal communities be able to hold onto their land, or will they be removed? We have seen this history performed in the past. So what kinds of Aboriginal identities will form out of

this most recent ‘humanitarian intervention’?²⁶

As the Intervention laws begin to peel back land rights legislation, we are yet to see the extent to which the Rudd Labor government will follow the line of its predecessor, the Howard government, and its original intention. At the time of writing there is little to distinguish Rudd’s policy from Howard’s. It is, however, difficult to extrapolate all the intentions behind humanitarian intervention, because interventions by their nature are masked by the illusion of missionary goodwill, masking which is all the more powerful because of the real hardship and poverty of the peoples who are subjects of the intervention. What is to be saved or transformed by the Intervention, or what is likely to be achieved? Is the Intervention really about fixing the Aboriginal position of endemic poverty and violence or is it a land grab? Any answers to the above must critically consider that if intentions were sincere, then why has the state taken so long to act, and why now? We know that the Australian government has spent the past decade de-funding and closing down Aboriginal initiatives and programs that were improving living conditions in Aboriginal communities across Australia, and might have gone further if they had been allowed to continue.

The *Little Children are Sacred* report recommended collaboration between governments in consultation with Aboriginal communities to address the issue of child abuse as a matter of national emergency. But the Howard government did not consider this. It has been suggested (and I am in agreement) that the Intervention had less to do with addressing the question of child abuse and more to do with the government gaining greater access over Aboriginal lands, as well as weakening the position of Aboriginal law and culture.²⁷ The Intervention was planned and effected but to date it has not been proven that there is any link between Intervention measures and child abuse.

As stated above, the Rudd government supports the Intervention and appears to share the goal of gaining greater access into and control over Aboriginal lands. The Intervention laws, while covering a broad area, include the following three measures which have been identified as having the most potential to negatively impact upon the continuity

of Aboriginal relationships to land. The first involves relaxing the Aboriginal permit system, which allowed Aboriginal people to exclude or remove persons from ‘common areas’ and access roads into their communities and lands. While the federal government and the supporters of this provision have argued that greater access for the media and other members of the public would reduce the remoteness and increase public scrutiny of these communities, on the other side many Aboriginal peoples have argued that it would open the lands to an increase in drug and grog runners into communities where alcohol is restricted or prohibited. Second, the compulsory acquisition of Aboriginal townships for five years will provide for the compulsory transfer to government control of approximately seventy Aboriginal townships and settlements in the Northern Territory. Over these lands five-year leases will be compulsorily taken up by the Commonwealth using powers under section 51(xxxi) of the Constitution.

The Howard government stated that this was necessary to allow unfettered access to Aboriginal townships; however, both state and federal bureaucrats already had access to meet and negotiate with communities on a range of issues. Compulsory acquisition would not provide any greater benefit to the Aboriginal communities in the critical areas of health, housing, and education. Third, the intervention laws disallow the consideration of customary law or the cultural background of an offender in sentencing or bail proceedings.²⁸ Critics of the Intervention have argued that these amendments are most likely to result in higher incarceration rates and also undermine the work of Aboriginal courts and their efforts at increased involvement with community people and elders. In mapping the sentencing remarks of justices in the Northern Territory, I have found no evidence of Aboriginal offenders gaining a more lenient sentence where the courts have considered their ‘cultural background’; nonetheless, the government played upon populist sentiments that this in fact was happening.²⁹ The emergency response laws are now being challenged for contravening Australia’s obligations under international racial discrimination law.³⁰

Initially, the Intervention found its legitimacy in the findings of the *Little Children are Sacred* report. The report

was the result of an eight-month inquiry which held consultations with forty-five communities: 260 meetings, sixty written submissions, and ninety-seven recommendations, most of which were ignored by the federal government. Instead, the government headlined the report's finding that child sexual abuse was endemic in Aboriginal communities, and decided upon fast-tracking and implementing the emergency response with all its powers to compulsorily acquire land. The Australian military entered targeted Aboriginal communities without prior consultation or their consent.

There have been a number of Aboriginal responses to the Intervention — mine, like many, is an outsider's view. I am not an Aboriginal person living in any of the communities which were the subjects of the *Little Children are Sacred* report and now targeted by the emergency response. From experience and long-term connections and relationships with friends living in some of the targeted communities, however, I know that the physical and economic violence suffered by some members of those communities is critical and it has been for a long time.

I was the director of the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement in Adelaide in 1988 when I was contacted by members of a remote South Australian community and asked to assist in their negotiations for a greater police presence within their community. For me, it was a difficult position to be placed in. In my life, led in more 'settled' areas of South Australia, police practices had deliberately targeted Aboriginal men, women and children as part of a strategy of maintaining an Aboriginal-free space for white people. We were the enemy for no reason other than our Aboriginality. So to consider the need to call upon the police to aid and protect members of Aboriginal communities in 1988 was a very different proposition, even if it was to assist with the alarmingly high levels of substance abuse-related violence. That call has been consistent for some twenty or more years, not only from communities within the Northern Territory, but from across Australia. But the call for increased services was not only for improved policing, it was also for services which would improve the overall wellbeing of communities in health, education, and housing.

Among the widespread criticism of the emergency response, a number of communities have expressed support. I would argue this support is an indication of how critical the situation has become rather than being an expression of support for the manner in which the federal government has acted. It's hard to see enthusiasm for sending in the military and amending land rights legislation so as to transfer control of Aboriginal townships.

I have written elsewhere about the long media campaign waged against Aboriginal culture and law, the many acts of demonisation enabling the space for the current emergency response to enter and occupy with very little opposition.³¹ In post-Intervention media debates the focus shifted to ideological differences within Aboriginal communities. The media facilitated a public slanging match between two Aboriginal women, both members of the Northern Territory Labor government, who held opposing views on the emergency response. Alison Anderson, in line with Rudd's national policy, publicly supported it and condemned Marion Scrymgour's rigorous opposition as being out of touch with 'grassroots' community concerns.³² Scrymgour had argued that there appeared to be no rational linkage between the need to rescue women and children from sexual abuse and the compulsory acquisition of their land. The emergency response has taken on the mantle of being the bringer of 'human rights' and to speak against it for whatever reason is to be against the advancement of the human rights of Aboriginal communities and an advocate for violent black men.³³ At least this is how both major Australian political parties and their investors, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, allowed the event to be characterised by the Australian media in the lead-up to the Federal Election. I, among others, would characterise the emergency response differently.³⁴

As I have flagged earlier in this article, the Intervention is a continuing play for legitimacy, and the act of legitimacy is the rescue of Aboriginal women and children from the violence of Aboriginal men. In the protection racket of shielding and protecting subjects from certain abuses they also become subjects in the tactics of their disempowerment. Here, that disempowerment comes in the form of weakened land tenure

and the loss of opportunity to build communities from an Aboriginal centre and knowledge base.³⁵ In the rescue mission the provision of essential services will be at the cost of Aboriginal autonomy over township areas.³⁶ Instead of shifting the colonial imbalance towards a decolonised space, the state further entrenches the colonial project by reviving protectionist policies, this time under the rubric of human rights. We are returned to the stereotype of the barbaric violent bashing native, one that is in need of protection from one's 'own kind'. It is not my intention to deny the experiences of chronic poverty, violence, poor health, housing shortages and poor education outcomes existing in the life of many Aboriginal peoples, or the need for action to remedy this critical condition, but to critically evaluate the Intervention processes. Brown makes the point that 'there is no such thing as *mere* reduction of suffering or protection from abuse — the nature of the reduction or protection is itself productive of political subjects and political possibilities.'³⁷ The political subjects which are reproduced are Aboriginal peoples who continue to be subjugated by the colonial body state, having no possibility of shifting to or opening up a decolonised space. The Intervention has had the effect of foreclosing any possibility of that because the construction of the 'violent native' provides the legitimacy to that foreclosure.

What are the possibilities of having healthy, safe Aboriginal futures and should indeed our efforts be focused on decolonising the space as a strategy to this end? The continuing colonial cycle has a vested interest in retaining its own ordinary violence. So, as a strategy towards having a life and better still an Aboriginal one, I am in agreement with Brown's suggestion that there should be a more direct challenge of imperialism and support for 'indigenous efforts to transform authoritarian, despotic, and corrupt postcolonial regimes'.³⁸

The response to the 'Aboriginal crisis' has misrepresented the causes of violence against Aboriginal women and children and reinforced the colonial myth that violence against women is inherent in Aboriginal culture, rather than considering that the source of violence lies in the invasion and colonisation of Australia and the imprisonment of its Indigenous population. Alternative views on the source of

violence in Aboriginal communities have not been given much of an airing in the debate. In general, the public knows very little about the complexities of Aboriginal law (beyond the perception of it being acquiescent in violence).³⁹ Aboriginal women are portrayed as victims in need of rescue from violent black males, but this view is rarely inverted to reflect on the Australian legal system's failure to protect white women from white male violence.⁴⁰ While the concept of an 'inherent violence' in Aboriginal culture is deployed to explain the rape of small Aboriginal children and the focus is shifted from the social, economic and political environment of those being raped, culture is not deployed to explain the same in the white community. That is a policing matter. The emergency response instead engages the military to resolve sexual assault in Aboriginal communities living on Aboriginal lands. On Aboriginal ground, at home, reality is more complex. The violence in Aboriginal communities, in my view, is more a comment upon the Australian Government's management of the colonial project than it is about the culture of the perpetrators. Aboriginal communities across Australia continue to resist the pressure of assimilation, while the public gaze turns away (as it has done before) from the colonial violence of poverty and dispossession of Aboriginal Australia to cultural profiling of the Other as barbarian.⁴¹

The violence of the colonial foundation was a means to an end: the creation of the Australian state. But this endpoint requires constant maintenance and, as I have argued, this maintenance occurs through continuous re-enactments of state violence. Derrida writes that European law prohibits individual violence of the military and its police not simply because the state's laws would be thereby threatened, but because individual violence 'threatens the juridical order itself'.⁴² In Australia, it is the state which is threatened by its own founding violence.⁴³

Just prior to his recent election defeat, Prime Minister John Howard announced his new interest in reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia. He declared 'We are not a federation of tribes. We are one great tribe, one Australia', announcing that 'group rights are, and ought to be, subordinate to both the citizenship rights of the individual

and the sovereignty of the nation'.⁴⁴ In the space of a united Australia where the many become the one-Australia tribe, what is it that we the Aborigines become? Is this the restaging of Badiou's 'new man' where the creation of a 'new humanity' requires the destruction of the 'old one'?⁴⁵ In the destruction of the old one, Badiou cautions us on the capacity of science to make the new man along with the power of profit to determine its making or unmaking.⁴⁶ The century Badiou reviews, the twentieth, was one in which it is impossible not to see the 'unceasing burden of questions of race'.⁴⁷ Along with race there were the questions of contested sovereignties and lawful and unlawful foundation. The impact of these unresolved 'burdens' provides for the continuation of a violent colonial foundation, one that leads to skewed and colonised readings on violence and its origins. This is as well as the negation of the many hundreds of Aboriginal 'tribes' that co-existed in this land we now call Australia at the time of the coming of an 'originary colonial violence'.

Reflection

I began thinking about this essay while working on 'Illusionists and Hunters: Being Aboriginal in this Occupied Space', published in 2005. At that time and since I have written on colonial constructions of 'recognition' and examined also the way in which the state both translates and interprets colonial violence. In 2005, I was resisting and observing the Howard government's campaign to eradicate our First Nations struggle for land and self-determination. In 2007, the government's campaign ultimately morphed into the Intervention.

It was Derrida's work which helped me to think through originary violence and its connection to the colonial invasion of our lives and lands. I have written about how colonial violence is perpetuated by the state so as to justify its own past and ongoing acts of terror and invasion. These days, colonial violence is veiled by the illusion of 'recognition' and that illusion is acted out as being in the 'best interests' or for the 'protection of Aboriginal victims of Aboriginal violence'. I have argued that the state is in the business of re-enacting invasion and that the Intervention is one contemporary version of re-enactment. The purpose of re-enactment allows the state to perform new ways of legitimising

and justifying its existence; it conjures images of itself as a dutiful state which secures the protection of its citizens. The subtext is that these state re-enactments work to secure an unlawful colonial foundation.

Talking back to the Intervention was to talk against the dominant colonial narrative, a narrative which positions Aboriginal women and children as being in need of protection from the dangers of rampaging, drunken Aboriginal men. The government's picture was a return to life similar to the past—under the 'Aborigines Acts'—with state-sanctioned control over our lands, governance, children, incomes and so on. This, notwithstanding the fact that the degree of First Nations self-determination prior to the Intervention hardly measured up to recognition of our status as sovereign peoples in our own lands.

Feedback on this essay and what has followed has been marginal so I have little idea as to how it has been received. I continue to build upon earlier works and have become more focused on our strengths as original First Nations peoples. Currently I am working on an ARC project—'Indigenous Knowledges: Law, Society and the State'—in which my gaze is directed beyond the dominant colonial narrative towards instead recentring our own First Nations knowledges as the sources for our survival as peoples against colonialism. This work also builds upon my recent book *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law* (Routledge, 2015). Our peoples are building strength and getting off the treadmill of involving ourselves with a framework which is genocidal and incapable of knowing and recognising whom we are. Instead we are rebuilding places where we can hear the voices of our old people and in which we can have conversations that are not leading us down an illusory path to 'progress' but instead build a continuing and sustaining relationship to country.

Notes

- 1 Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority', *Cardoza Law Review*, vol. 11, 1989, pp. 927, 931, 943, 971-7.
- 2 Jacques Ranciere, 'Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 103, no 2/3, 2004, p. 307.
- 3 Rex Wild and Pat Anderson, *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle 'Little Children are Sacred': Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abus*, Northern Territory Government, Darwin, 2007.

- 4 The Howard government on 21 June 2007 announced its intention to use Commonwealth powers to impose a number of emergency measures following the *Little Children are Sacred* report.
- 5 Derrida, p. 949.
- 6 Ibid., pp. 983-5.
- 7 See Ibid., pp. 919-1045.
- 8 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, Profile Books, London, 2008, p. 99.
- 9 The 2008 economic crises has impacted upon proposed uranium and other mining developments in the region and at the time of writing there is an indication that mining developments are slowing down.
- 10 Wendy Brown, 'The Most We Can Hope For ... Human Rights and the Politics of Fatalism', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 103, no. 2/3, 2004, pp. 451-63.
- 11 Ranciere, pp. 297-310.
- 12 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 284. See also Irene Watson, 'Aboriginal Women's Laws and Lives: How Might We Keep Growing the Law?', *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, vol. 26, 2007; Irene Watson, 'Illusionists and Hunters: Being Aboriginal in this Occupied Space', *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, vol. 22, 2005.
- 13 For examples of early colonial legislation see: *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act (Qld) 1897*; *Aborigines Protection Act (Vic) 1886*; *Aborigines Act (Vic) 1890*; *Aborigines Protection Act (WA) 1890*; *Aborigines Protection Act (NSW) 1909*; *Northern Territory Aboriginals Act (SA) 1910*; *Aborigines Act (SA) 1911*.
- 14 Marcia Langton, 'Trapped in the Aboriginal Reality Show', *Griffith Review*, vol. 19, 2007, p. 147.
- 15 The recognition of Aboriginality is seen as an illusion in Irene Watson, 'The Power of Muldarbi and the Road to its Demise', *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, vol. 11, 1998; for further discussion on how this illusion is manifested in Australian native title laws, see Irene Watson, 'Sovereign Spaces, Caring for Country and the Homeless Position of Aboriginal Peoples', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 108, no. 1, 2009.
- 16 *Aborigines Act (SA) 1934-39*, section 11a, provided Aboriginal individuals with an exemption from being identified as an Aborigine from its provisions.
- 17 I say so-called postcolonial because from my lived experiences there is very little which is postcolonial to the Aboriginal experience in Australia.
- 18 Mal Brough, *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Amendment Bill 2006* Second Reading, Commonwealth Parliament of Australia, Canberra, 31 May 2006.
- 19 See the amendment to the *Crimes Act 1914 (Cth)*, s16A. Prior to the amendment the court could consider the cultural background of the defendant.
- 20 Tangane kald is my mother's people of the Coorong of South Australia; our lands bordered with kin including the Meintangk, as our traditional identities mapped the land.
- 21 Iris Stevens, *Report of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission*, State Government Printer, Adelaide, 1995.
- 22 Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, Granta Books, London, 2006, p. 29.
- 23 Ibid., p. 38.
- 24 For a critical Aboriginal response to the intervention, see Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory, *A Proposed Emergency Response and Development Plan to Protect Aboriginal Children in the Northern Territory: A Preliminary Response to the Australian Governments' Proposal*, 2007.
- 25 Brown, pp. 451-63.

- 26 Ibid., p. 454.
- 27 For further discussion see: Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory; Balgo Women's Law Camp, *Aboriginal Women Have Answers Themselves*, 2007; Jon Altman, 'The "National Emergency" and Land Rights Reform: Separating Fact from Fiction', CAEPR, Canberra, 2007.
- 28 National Emergency Response Bill, Part 6, Section 91. On 14 July 2006, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed that no customary law or cultural practice excuses, justifies, authorises, requires, or lessens the seriousness of violence or sexual abuse. This decision was then made effective through a series of legislative changes.
- 29 See Irene Watson, *Aboriginal Women, Law and Colonialism: Safe Places for Women*, 2008.
- 30 For further discussion on 'special measures' under the Racial Discrimination Act (Cth) 1975, Mabo and native title see: Irene Watson, 'Buried Alive', *Law and Critique*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2002, p. 253.
- 31 Watson, 'Aboriginal Women's Laws and Lives'.
- 32 Marion Scrymgour, 'Whose National Emergency? Caboolture and Kiribilli? or Milikapti and Mutitjulu?', Charles Perkins Oration, 26 October 2007.
- 33 See Watson, 'Illusionists and Hunters'.
- 34 For a further discussion on the construction of Aboriginal culture and the role of the media see Norm Sheehan, "'Some Call It Culture": Aboriginal Identity and the Imaginary Moral Centre', *Social Alternatives*, vol. 20, 2001, p. 29.
- 35 Brown, p. 459.
- 36 National Emergency Response Bill, Part 4.
- 37 Brown, pp. 459-60.
- 38 Ibid., p. 460.
- 39 Catherine Wohlan, *Aboriginal Women's Interests in Customary Law Recognition*, Background Paper No. 11, Law Reform Commission of Western Australia, 2005, discusses the complex interaction between Aboriginal and Anglo-Australian laws, contextualising the problem as not being sourced in Aboriginal law and suggesting that Aboriginal law could be useful 'in addressing community justice'.
- 40 In a recent South Australian court decision, the presiding judge referred to 'culture sickness' when referring to the impact of Aboriginal people disconnected from country as an explanation for the rape of a woman. See 'Rapist's "Cultural Sickness"' *Advertiser*, 10 June 2006.
- 41 See further Slavoj Zizek, 'How China Got Religion', *New York Times*, 11 October 2007.
- 42 Derrida writes, 'militarism is a modern concept that supposes the exploitation of compulsory military service, is the forced use of force, the compelling to use force or violence in the service of the state and its legal ends', pp. 1001-7. In short, law seeks to monopolise violence not in order to protect legal subjects, but to protect itself from challenge from acts of revolutionary violence which might found a new legal order. See also Rosemary Hunter, 'Law's (Masculine) Violence: Reshaping Jurisprudence', *Law and Critique*, vol. 17, no. 27, 2006.
- 43 Derrida, p. 989.
- 44 Dennis Shanahan, 'Howard's New Reconciliation', *Australian*, 12 October 2007.
- 45 Alain Badiou, *The Century*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007, p. 8.
- 46 Ibid., p. 9.
- 47 Ibid., pp. 14-15.

II: Power

Subduing Power: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters

Aileen Moreton-Robinson

The concept of ‘power’ can refer to the institutionalised and embodied capacity and right to dominate through a variety of means including ideology, politics, science, religion, class, race, gender and sexuality. Early feminist theorising within the West, for example, conceptualised the structure and nature of power as being connected to male domination and authority within society. Marxists, alternately, argue it is the ruling class that holds power and exercises it as owners of the means of production. In a general sense, we can say that as feminists have tied power to patriarchy and Marxists’ definitions of power have been connected to capitalism. The essays in this section, though, are less concerned with such totalising conceptualisations of power than they are with processes of interpellation or subject creation within dominant or dominating discursive spaces.¹ Not power as such, but its many workings and apparatuses.

In surveying the essays from this ‘Power’ section, it is therefore useful to draw on the work of French political theorist and historian Michel Foucault; however, for reasons that will soon become clear, I will also be a little analytically promiscuous.² In a 1976 interview Foucault states:

As soon as one endeavours to detach power with its techniques and procedures from the form of law within which it has been theoretically confined up until now, one is driven to ask this basic question: Isn’t power simply a form of warlike domination? Shouldn’t one therefore conceive all problems of power in terms of relations of war? Isn’t power a sort of generalized war which

assumes at particular moments the forms of peace and the state? Peace would then be a form of war, and the state a means of waging it.³

Foucault's questions about power and war arise from his inversion of Carl von Clausewitz's formulation of war as politics by other means. For Foucault, politics is war by other means; antagonisms, struggles and conflict are processes of war that should be analysed according to a grid of strategies and tactics. Historically, sovereignty and rights are born of war. The relationship between the nobility, the third estate and the king produced a form of society, which became the basis of the modern nation, enabling war to continue within new mechanisms of power. Within the formation of democracy, ensuing conflicts between rulers and ruled increasingly involve a relation between a superior race and an inferior race. As Foucault argues:

the state is no longer an instrument that one race uses against another: the state is, and must be, the protector of the integrity, the superiority, and the purity of the race... racism is born at the point when the theme of racial purity replaces that of race struggle, and when counterhistory begins to be converted into biological racism.⁴

Hence his argument that race, as a biological construct, emerges with the nation-state during the eighteenth century through disciplinary knowledges, such that race becomes a means of regulating and defending society from itself. Describing this form of power as biopower, Foucault notes that war continues in modernity in different forms; sovereignty shifts from a concern with society defending itself from external attacks to focus on its internal enemies. Race becomes the means through which the state's exercise of power is extended from one of 'to let live or die', to one of 'to let live and to make live'.

While Foucault's theory of biopower is useful, it does not account for the whiteness of sovereignty without which biopower could not function. It may be more productive to

consider how the evolution of democracy, through the spread of Europe as empire, served to reinforce white supremacy in the form of biopower. Racial thinking and notions of whiteness were powerfully determinative of imperial maps that were broader than Foucault's genealogy of bourgeois identity and its biopolitics.⁵ Race became the means through which the colonising state's exercise of power does not shift but is extended from one of 'to let live or die', to one of 'to let live or die and to make live'. Relations of empire through diaspora and occupation of Indigenous lands are immanent, not exterior, aspects of biopower. Thus Indigenous peoples within empire becomes the subject of colonial violence and dispossession — subjects made to live and die. In this sense, the Indigenous subject is marked by its proximity to death, demonstrating most pointedly the contradictory promise of citizenship to let live and make live.

The essays in this section all demonstrate, in different ways, how racialised power operates to enable and constrain Indigenous subjects in Australia and New Zealand; societies structured by white possession that actively work to dispossess Indigenous subjects of their sovereignty. If we trace the assumption of British sovereignty over Indigenous lands — whether this be by *terra nullius* as in Australia or treaty as in New Zealand — these moments mark the kind of racialised power relations that continue to colonise through time, albeit in different forms so that Aborigines and Maori live their lives in and through struggle.⁶ As Indigenous subjects they are subjected to racialised colonising power that works through discursive and non-discursive means. The Australian and New Zealand states have developed and enshrined conceptualisations of 'Aborigines' and 'Maoris' in settler law through legal definitions. The law presumes to regulate who is entitled to be a property owning Indigenous subject, with entitlements and rights. Indigeneity marks the ways in which subjects will be governed and disciplined through various legal and political mechanisms. Subjection to these racialised forms of power is not shared with non-Indigenous subjects; it is the preserve of the Indigenous.

We can ascertain from Tess Lea's essay how racialised power is not deterministic but rather involves processes of

normalisation, reproduced by and within health care intervention, to deal with the Indigenous as abnormal. Lea provides an excellent account of how normalising discourses about the transformative effects of scientific knowledge, predicated on a particular construction of white subjectivity, are performed by white health professionals in the Northern Territory. These health care professionals believe in the transformative pedagogies and statistical truths they deploy and discursively perpetuate as the 'Aboriginal health crisis' through a discourse of Aboriginal dysfunction and abnormality; the crisis then can be ameliorated by these professionals 'enlightening' Aboriginal people about how sick they really are. The supposition is that once Aboriginal people become properly knowledgeable they will take remedial action. As a disciplining technique, health education is the means by which Aboriginal people become subjected to white normative health practices that are the solution. Lea's work shows that subjectification as a power effect has produced an unintended outcome: reinscribing white health care professionals' enlightenment discourse as they seek to improve Aboriginal health. As subjects, white health care professionals discipline themselves through a process of health care normalisation.

Moving from the Northern Territory to Queensland, Aboriginal scholar Bronwyn Fredericks focuses on demonstrating what prevents Aboriginal women from accessing health services. Fredericks undertook research with Aboriginal women to ascertain their views on the accessibility and delivery of health services. Fredericks' research illuminates that Aboriginal women know and understand when they are sick, but seeking treatment depends on a number of variables, the most important of which is the degree of inclusiveness of the health service place and space. Regrettably, these spaces and places are disciplined by health discourses, not the subjugated knowledges or experiences of Aboriginal women, designed and configured through white spatial norms that are also signified in the material objects on display. The power effect of such significations and spatial distribution is the reinforcement of Aboriginal women's exclusion from white health care services. As Fredericks argues, many Aboriginal women who know that they are sick will not enter a place

that is replete with markers of inclusion for white people and, thereby, marked out as being the preserve of white possessiveness. Through discursive practices, health services become spaces and places of exclusion because they are designed for a particular white subject of modernity that equates care of the self with hygiene and the disciplinary power of medicine. The delivery of these services occurs on Aboriginal lands that were never ceded. The inclusiveness of a place will be evaluated through Aboriginal discursive practices based on knowledges and histories of exclusion and dispossession. As relay points within a network of power, Aboriginal female subjects have the capacity to act but this action depends on their assessment of the degree of inclusiveness of white inhabited spaces and places.

Lisa Slater's essay on Aboriginal wellbeing and the making of a good life through Aboriginal cultural festivals can be read in tandem with Lea and Fredericks. Slater's work demonstrates that Aboriginal cultural festivals enable the nourishing of wellbeing because they are places where Aboriginal cultural discourses flourish, sustained by Aboriginal knowledges and truths. They are positive places of celebration and cultural sharing; discursive and material spaces for cultural reproduction and wellness of Aboriginal participants. The Aboriginal wellbeing discourse includes a healthy body, a body that is spiritually and culturally connected to family, community and country. This is an semi-autonomous zone where the capillary power effects of white normalising regimes become subdued as another form of power flows from the land and into bodies that are incommensurate in their ontological existence; bodies that struggle for life beyond the discourse of dysfunction that seeks to annihilate them.

The Aboriginal struggle against the state of perpetual dispossession, in its many forms, is a daily occurrence. Tony Birch reminds us of this in his essay, outlining a potted history of the mistreatment of Aboriginal peoples by the juridical mechanisms of settler/white law, statecraft and sovereignty. He argues that the power effects of colonialism include the persistent requirement that Aboriginal people must act as dispossessed subjects. They must refrain from asserting ownership and moral authority, and yet our sovereignty

prevails as an incommensurable difference that is embodied and ontologically tied to country.⁷ Birch implores us to deploy our sovereignty to act to protect our rights and the rights of others who wish to live in or visit our country. This enactment of Aboriginal power is also the focus of Gillian Cowlshaw's essay, arguing that Aborigines in the New South Wales town of Bourke transgress white social norms in public spaces in ways that simultaneously counter and reinscribe national truths about dysfunctional Aborigines. Deploying normative anti-social behaviour, their ritualised public performances are often explicitly designed to offend white sensibilities. In this way they challenge the white possessive claim to public space. However, this public display of Aboriginal power is limited by state intervention in the form of the police who utilise the force of the law to attend to Aboriginal unruly behaviours. Cowlshaw clearly demonstrates that Murriss' codes of social behaviour, cultural mores and humour function as circuit breakers in public space, often delimiting and undermining juridical forms of power, while in the Aboriginal domain, beyond public space, white juridical forms of power are subdued.

Deborah Bird Rose argues that power circulates through discourse and its effects shape the way knowledge is valued. She proposes that the West must desist from the monologue it conducts with itself, producing only discourses and disciplinary knowledges that reflect inverted logics of modernity in order to maintain power and superiority over what constitutes knowledge; an 'other' can only function as it is defined. Rose notes that racial tropes of colonisation invoke a kind of ecological racism whereby imprudent, careless and lazy 'natives' practice environmental mismanagement or, on the other hand, are romanticised as the perfect environmentalists. They are caught within both discourses. Bird Rose explains that there must be a dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on ethical grounds, one that is inclusive of Aboriginal knowledges and their relationships to place, nature and other species and history. Aboriginal knowledge, Bird Rose suggests, involves sustainable reciprocity.

The use of particular discourses to subjectify and dominate Aboriginal peoples is also evident in my own essay. I argue

that the discourse of pathology deployed by patriarchal white sovereignty to intervene in the lives of Aboriginal people within the Northern Territory manifests as pathological behaviour by the state. Within the race war, citizenship rights are used as methods of subjugation to let Aboriginal people live and to make them live as welfare dependents to be regulated, disciplined and dominated into complicity. Patriarchal white sovereignty, as a regime of power, functions pathologically through various mechanisms and embodied relay points, making Aboriginal people targets of state violence. Despite the exercise of juridical power this violence has not produced the 'good Aboriginal citizen'. Virginia Watson's essay also addresses the limited reach of a racialised juridical power, demonstrating how the state's discourse of social crisis was deployed to change policy, remove ATSIC and proceed down the path of 'practical reconciliation' to discipline Aboriginal subjects into becoming self-reliant and responsible. Watson argues that the new policy will be difficult to manage at the periphery where Aboriginal social values and practices shape the sociality of the community in which policy is to be implemented. Here, complex Aboriginal relations of dependency confer authority, affirm social status and agency within a cultural realm that privileges such behaviours.

In his analysis of Te Papa Tongarewa museum's aesthetic practices, Ben Dibley illustrates the power effects of neoliberal and bicultural discourses in shaping the way in which, as a discursive project, the museum represents and fabricates New Zealand's national identity. Dibley argues that critiques of the museum have all too readily misread its signs through the obvious; its lack of recognition of colonial trauma and history, the Disney-like physicality, the lack of clear aesthetic boundaries between what is low and high art, the kitsch nature of the displays, and so on. Taken together these critiques misread the power effects of an antipodean camp aesthetic style that uses bricolage, frivolity, mockery and irony to be ostentatious and bold in the immediacy of the present, decontextualised from the past, in order to signify a Pakeha future. As an apparatus of the state, the museum nominally signifies Maori ontology—Te Papa Tongarewa—while remaining a space where capillaries of racialised colonising power displace

Maori sovereignty to secure a white national identity for New Zealand's future.

I want to return now to Foucault's proposition that we need to think beyond juridical power, bound up with the sovereignty of monarchical or democratic right, to reveal its limitations. Foucault's analytics are concerned with how biopower operates rather than who holds power. He requires us to 'study [bio]power by looking, as it were, at its external face, at the point where it relates directly and immediately to what we might, very provisionally, call its object, its target, its field of application, or, in other words, the places where it implants itself and produces its real effects'.⁸ To attend to this task we must look for subjects who submit to racialised power as well as exercise it as relay points of power. Racialised power is relational, enabling and constraining, operating through discursive and non-discursive means.

The essays in this section of *History, Power, Text* demonstrate the importance of exploring the capillaries of power at the periphery, where most Indigenous people are positioned, in order to understand how forms of racial subjugation and domination and their connections to apparatuses of knowledge and regulation work. They reveal not only the enabling and constraining dimensions of racialised power; they also expose the incommensurability of Indigenous sovereignty as a different form of power. This latter sovereignty — Indigenous sovereignty — can subdue and limit biopower because the disciplinary knowledges and regulatory mechanisms deployed to erase or displace it are constitutive of, and constituted by, a different episteme.

Notes

- 1 My task here is not to evaluate different conceptualisations of power, as others have provided greater intellectual insight. For example, see Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd edn, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004; Barry Hindess, *Discourses of Power: From Hobbes to Foucault*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996.
- 2 Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith, *Theorizing Native Studies*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014.
- 3 Michel Foucault. 'Truth and Power' in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, Penguin Books, New York, 1991, p. 65.
- 4 Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76*, Picador, New York, 2004, p. 81.

- 5 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1995.
- 6 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd edn, Zed Books, London and New York, 2012.
- 7 See also Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a White Postcolonizing Society' in Sara Ahmed (ed.), *Uprootings/Regroundings*, Berg, New York, 2003, pp. 23-40.
- 8 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, p. 28.

The Last Refuge of the 'Un-Australian'

Tony Birch

*This nation is an island. Its borders have never changed. We don't want our beaches violated. This is the best country in the world.*¹

In 1860, with the establishment of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines (BPA), the Victorian colonial government formalised, through the legislative process, the alienation of Aboriginal people from our country. To ensure that we would become non-citizens in our own land the government incorporated the independently established Christian missions with existing and proposed government stations into a system of centrally administered Aboriginal reserves.

The previous thirty years or so had witnessed the widespread murder of Aboriginal people in Victoria who had defended their land against colonial expansion and its insatiable appetite for exploitable land. While this violence was reported to, and was at times actively supported by, representatives of the Crown, from the 1850s the British colony of Victoria rested in the comfort of selective amnesia whenever conversation turned to the very recent history of the dispossession of Aboriginal people.

Indigenous people, who prior to the era of violence and massacre were feted as abstract, acultural noble savages were now reconstructed and imagined by the coloniser as a ragged 'cultureless remnant', which had rapidly 'declined' as a result of a self-destructive 'propensity for alcohol and disease' (for details see *1858 Select Committee on the Aborigines, Victorian Parliamentary Papers*). Not only did the government wash the blood of violence from its hands, it reconfigured itself as the saviour, the 'Protector of the Aborigine', now regarded as a

landless and homeless refugee.

The regime of the government reserve system was framed within a passive language of state benevolence; whereby a people who had lost all but everything would now be 'saved' from further violence by a caring, paternal authority, until the inevitability of their 'passing' (yet another colonial term attempting to escape its own violence), came into being.

The reality was very different. Once incarcerated on a reserve or mission Aboriginal people suffered still further. They had ceremonial objects taken from them or traded in the lucrative market place. The basis of culture, their language, was often forbidden, while their children were taken from them so as the language of the foreigner would replace their own. And in the 1880s, when the Victorian Government realised that it had not been able to subdue Aboriginal people and destroy Indigenous culture, or bring into reality the 'passing of the Aborigine', it introduced the infamous *Aborigines Protection Act 1886*, more commonly referred to as the 'half caste act'.

This was a vicious piece of legislation which introduced a caste system into colonial Victoria and attempted to destroy both family and community vitality. This ideology and practice would later become the model for the attempted obliteration of Aboriginal communities across Australia in the twentieth century.

I know that I am raking over history here. Many readers will know of this history by now (and some will have actually come to accept it). But it is a history that I find myself having to revisit again and again. Sometimes for the students I teach, who have been fed a lean diet of so-called Aboriginal History, and little or none of the racism practiced by Australia's 'founding fathers'.

We need to revisit this history also for the misinformed or deliberately ignorant who regard the High Court's 1992 *Mabo* decision as a form of quasi-treaty. People need to be reminded that the 'ability to show continuity' (as expressed to Aboriginal people by the High Court) also serves to cruelly remind the dispossessed 'Aborigines' that they will most likely remain so in the eyes of the court.

We have for too long now been regarded as dispossessed in *our own land*, aliens in *our own land*, 'citizens without rights' in *our own land*. At times we have come to regard ourselves in the same way. As a result of the *Mabo* decision the High Court finally buried the myth of *terra nullius* (yes, the wheels of European justice turn ever so slowly). But it also upheld the realities of dispossession, whereby many more Aboriginal 'legal' claims to land will be 'washed away by the tide of history' (a phrase used by Justice Olney in the Yorta Yorta native title claim heard in the Federal Court in 1998) than will fit within the confines of 'continuity'.

Clearly, the 'darkest hour of [white] Australia's history', (a phrase used by the High Court in the *Mabo* decision) was so dark that it is unable to recognise the need for real justice. Since 1992 the parliament has delivered up a form of 'native title' and subsequent amendments, which further seek to disenfranchise some Aboriginal communities from their land, while perversely the same system has lined the pockets of sectors of the legal fraternity and its adjunct industry of anthropologists, genealogists and other 'expert' hangers-on, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

Outside the courts another discussion has been taking place. It is about the past, about the role of history in Australia. While the prime minister, John Howard, may want us to think that he believes the teaching of history should begin with the 'noble sacrifice' of the ANZACs and end with an understanding of both the triumph and the tragedy of Sir Donald Bradman's batting average, he has waged a history war where it really matters to him, against the Aboriginal community.

While in opposition, both the federal Liberal and National parties attacked the *Mabo* decision, which although it offered, as I have argued, very little for many in real terms, did serve a symbolic purpose in its refutation of the absurdity of *terra nullius*. It also provided political and intellectual forces on the Right in Australia with the ammunition to wage a war of hysteria in relation to the outcome of the *Mabo* decision, ('your backyards are not safe'). Included in the Right's arguments about the past the question of the personal family and communal history of 'real' as opposed to 'unreal(?)' Aborigines was also repeatedly raised, ostensibly to ensure that only those

who were legally entitled to partake in the native title process would be able to. In reality, it was yet another attempt to render the life and history of Aboriginal people as illegitimate, and therefore absent of moral or legal standing.

These arguments, although relative to the post-*Mabo* legal environment, more importantly and determinedly upheld that mid-nineteenth century mythology of a rag-tag collection of refugees who no longer maintained a rightful culture or subsequently any right to land or control over the articulation of our history. Once in government, the Liberal-National coalition used this argument to justify its policy of advancing nothing in the way of land rights or giving recognition to other colonial abuses of Aboriginal people.

Regardless of any real or rhetorical threat posed by the post-*Mabo* native title arrangements it was, and is, vital that Aboriginal people be disenfranchised and devalued at a more immediate level of social value for many in this country to remain psychologically, if not legally, within the secure space offered by terra nullius. It is the Aboriginal body and its claims to its own history and identity that must be destroyed.

It is important to note that when the 1886 'half caste act' was introduced most Aboriginal people in Victoria had been killed or forcibly removed from their country and held virtually as prisoners within the reserve system. (If any reader wants to argue for agency here, please keep it in perspective. The fact is, if the government wanted to remove a woman's child from her and take it hundreds of miles away to be interned on a reserve, for instance, it was simply done, with ruthless bureaucratic efficiency).

Aboriginal people, therefore, had no control over their land and no immediate prospect of regaining it. And yet they posed a real and persistent threat to colonial society. That threat was their very being, their continued existence. And the existence of Aboriginal people is what has continued to affront those sectors of Australian society who live within the mythology of a British outpost established on land that was empty and never populated.

Following the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report, which investigated the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

children from their families, the federal government and its cronies, including journalists, academics and publications such as *Quadrant* magazine, further abused the past, through both a defence of the racist policies and practices of 'assimilation' and the refusal to accept the histories of Aboriginal people who had been affected by the removal policies.

It has been necessary to present those children who were removed from family and community as suffering pathologically from 'faulty' memory or 'repressed memory syndrome'. Some Aboriginal people have simply been labelled as liars. If the government were to accept the history of generations of stolen Aboriginal children the outcome would do more than inflame discussion of that dirty word, compensation. All of the stock clichés of Australia's European history, many of them peddled during this year of the centenary of Federation, such as 'the Australian character', 'the battler', 'a nation forged through collective adversity' (to name but a few of an endless parade of shallow, nationalistic slogans), would be rendered absurd.

Some might argue that they are regarded as such anyway. It has been widely stated this year that Australians don't care much for the Federation celebrations, that the party, if not meaningless, has been boring. That may be so. But a point is always missed when the discussion of the Australian public's supposed apathy toward the past is discussed. History, as served up by the dominant white sector of Australian society is something that is digested with great familiarity (maybe like a meat pie?). People get so used to it, that it is taken for granted. Its enjoyment and relevance becomes embedded in the subconscious, and at times is forgotten. But try taking it away? Or introducing something new to the diet? Then you will quickly discover that a very staple and particular view of the past matters quite a lot.

When the Australian Democrats Senator Aden Ridgeway addressed a United Nations forum in March this year and rightly stated that there exists in Australia a lack of political leadership in relation to Indigenous issues, he was attacked by both John Howard and the opposition leader, Kim Beazley, for behaving in an 'un-Australian' manner. There is nothing worse than being 'un-Australian' in Australia, particularly

when celebration is in the air.

When the genocide against Aboriginal people in this country is discussed for what it is, the apologists for the Australian nation say it cannot be so. Nor can it even be discussed, because such a term, let alone a history, of genocide is 'un-Australian'. If Aboriginal people, as supposed citizens of this country attempt to pursue their rights through the legal system in relation to their removal from their family they are regarded as 'un-Australian'. To raise matters concerned with the physical and psychological abuses suffered by Aboriginal children over many decades, to speak of the anguish experienced by the Aboriginal families left behind, who now carry the burden and unnecessary guilt of the theft of their children, is decidedly 'un-Australian'.

Members of the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal children who had been taken from their families were not only disloyal for speaking out about this to the 'Stolen Generations' inquiry, or seeking justice before the courts. They were disloyal to the nation because they were a stolen generation. Being a 'removed' rather than 'stolen' child seems easier for the nation to swallow. Additionally to be referred to as 'stolen' rather than 'removed', by either yourself or others is, to quote one of the Prime Minister's favoured terms when denying realities of the past, to be 'ridiculous', and I would add 'un-Australian'.

Australia imagines itself as a liberal-democracy, founded on mutual struggle. In order to uphold this the Australian nation has attempted to ensure that the history of the treatment of Aboriginal people not stand in the way of this stock legend. So we wage a struggle, a history war, to ensure that the history of colonisation and dispossession is no longer relegated to the status of out-of-sight out-of-mind, as it was in the past. If we feel that this is important to ourselves as Aboriginal people, then we must also assert more moral authority and ownership of this country. Our legitimacy does not lie within the legal system and is not dependent on state recognition. It lies within ourselves. We need not feel dispossessed when a man in a black robe and silly wig tells us that our rights have been 'washed away by the tide of history'. We need to claim our rights, beyond being stuck in an argument about the dominant culture's view of land rights or identity. And we need to claim

and legitimate our authority by speaking out for, and protecting the rights of, others, who live in or visit our country.

Recently, when a Pakistani migrant who had been granted permanent Australian residency in 1996 set himself on fire outside the federal parliament, as a result of his unsuccessful application to the Immigration Department to have his wife and child join him here, the Immigration Minister, Phillip Ruddock stated '[self-immolation is] not something we are used to or experienced with ... sadly, he sought to do so'.² This man had done something that was very 'un-Australian'. He had publicly expressed his grief and anguish at his treatment at the hands of Australian government officials. He had raised an issue that might tap away at all of those clichés of national foundation and celebration. It is not only 'un-Australian' to be, through experience, a whistle-blower against nation-building mythology. Simply 'to be' one of those who have been abused by the Australian nation is to be 'un-Australian'.

It is also 'un-Australian' to intern people without trial for up to four years, to subject people to months of isolation in solitary confinement. It is 'un-Australian' to remove those people to remote parts of the country where they cannot be visited by family or friends, to where the activities of the multi-national company that profits from their incarceration cannot be scrutinised by the media or the legal representatives of the imprisoned. It would be 'un-Australian' in the extreme to use water cannon, tear-gas and truncheons against people imprisoned without trial, who are rightfully protesting about the abuse of their human rights.

I cannot, as a trained historian, state this with empirical certainty, but it is a mathematical probability that it is 'un-Australian' to disparage and devalue the worth and lives of refugees by claiming, without evidence, that many of them 'may be' associated with 'terrorists'.³ Likewise, the propagandist need to focus more closely on the supposed threat that the approximately eight thousand 'illegal' arrivals in the last ten years pose to 'our way of life' rather than overturn a policy that contributed to more than three hundred and fifty people drowning trying to get here in just one year (1999), is somewhat 'un-Australian' I would think.

But of course the representatives of the Australian people, the federal government, engage in such behaviour on a daily basis. So to ensure that such practices are not perceived as 'un-Australian' we not only transfer refugees to remote areas of the country, we un-people those who arrive here by reconfiguring them as 'the ungrateful', 'the terrorist', 'the queue-jumper', and legally as 'the non-person'. 'We' can then protect Australia and 'our way of life' against the alien invader as 'we' did against 'the Aborigines' in the past, because they failed to adhere to the doctrine of *terra nullius* by unpatriotically refused to reclassify themselves as 'non-people', in claiming their rights and identity as Indigenous people.

The Department of Immigration lists thirty-seven countries that it regards as a threat to Australia, in that visitors who arrive from these countries, by boat or otherwise, are regarded as those most 'at risk of overstaying their visa'.⁴ The countries listed include Bangladesh, Chile, India, Poland, Samoa and Vietnam. Most are non-white and none are Anglo or English speaking (as a first language). And yet approximately 20 per cent of arrivals to Australia who overstay their visas are British. There is no mention of Britain in the blacklisted countries. Nor do we see the fair skin of the back-packer behind the barbed wire of the detention camps.

White Australia would not tolerate such treatment, as to incarcerate thousands of British citizens for remaining illegally in the country, to see such an image on our television screens would be for many Australians like looking in the mirror. It would be as 'un-Australian' as one could imagine, to do such a thing.

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Several years ago I was asked to speak to an East Timor support group at a dinner organised by students at the University of Melbourne. An objective of the group was to bring local Aboriginal people, students and the East Timorese community in Victoria together so as we might share in some way our belief in social justice. I immediately said yes to the invitation. To be involved in such an experience was a noble gesture. But I quickly realised, that from my own experience at least, it was nothing more than a gesture, and a shallow

one at that. As I sat listening to the stories of students in Dili, who had been dragged from their beds and 'disappeared' in the night, I realised that since the invasion of East Timor by the Indonesians in 1975 I had never lifted a finger to help this community beyond gesturing about 'how awful' the invasion had been.

So when I stood up to talk at the dinner that is what I said. I felt ashamed of myself. But shame for me, as an Aboriginal person, is not a negative emotion. It is a realisation of honesty that has the potential to bring about change. After that night, at rallies and meetings held in support of the East Timorese, its community members would find me in a crowd of sometimes many thousands and think me for my support. I did not feel ashamed any longer. I felt humbled. And I felt empowered, as a member of the community, and as an Aboriginal person, supporting the rights of a people who were visitors to the country of my elders.

We have a situation in Australia today where we are witnessing the human rights abuses of many people. Aboriginal people continue to be abused as a result of crimes committed by white Australia both in the past and contemporary society. The abusive treatment of refugees is similar to the treatment of Aboriginal people in this country in that they pose a threat which, more than being based on any material manifestation, either real or imagined, is a threat to a way of life erected on xenophobia, selfishness and a fear of difference.

We must transform the culture of Australian life by screaming to our politicians that such an idea is genuinely un-Australian and that we will not tolerate it. And we must do this beyond the act of the political gesture. Activism can be a loaded word, but still, to be active in some way, to speak, to write, to march, to protest, to be angry and put that anger into expression and action is a suitably un-Australian idea at this time.

Notes

- 1 Peter Lyssiotis and Nick Petroulis, 'New Troy', *Meanjin* no. 3, 2000.
- 2 Kerry Taylor And Mark Forbes, 'Man Sets Himself Ablaze In Immigration Protest', *Age*, 3 April 2001.

TONY BIRCH : THE LAST REFUGE OF THE 'UN-AUSTRALIAN'

- 3 Dr Gary Klintworth, former member of the Refugee Review Tribunal, *Age*, 2 April 2001.
- 4 Angela Mitropoulis, 'The Blacklist-Federation and the White Australia Policy', *xborder*, <http://www.antimedia.net/xborder/05_whiteaustralia.html>.

Decolonising the Discourse of Environmental Knowledge in Settler Societies

Deborah Bird Rose

This essay is devoted to a practical purpose: to open up an area of discursive space by analysing and exposing a set of practices that serve to police certain boundaries of knowledge. The arena is Indigenous people's claims to a tradition of environmental knowledge and ethics that has pertinent contributions to make to debates about environmental crisis. To be totally clear, I am not proposing to adjudicate the legitimacy of given sets of statements; my focus is on the strategies deployed by non-Indigenous scholars in marginalising or outlawing a class of positive statements. In the interest of even-handedness, I offer counter-arguments where they are missing.

Jane M. Jacobs has offered an excellent discussion of the formal limits of postcolonialism, as does Nicholas Thomas in a somewhat different context. Both insist upon what Jacobs calls 'the fantastic optimism of the "post" in postcolonialism'.¹ Their comments are particularly oriented toward settler societies in which the ongoing relationships between settlers and Indigenous people tend to be constitutive of nationhood. As I have argued elsewhere, we settlers, or settler descendants, are the inheritors of the spoils of a dual war: one war was fought against the natives, and one against nature.² I take the term decolonisation to index a dialogical search; new world settler descended people's efforts to inscribe a moral presence for ourselves in our societies can only be achieved in collaboration with the Indigenous peoples whose lives bear the imprint of colonising violence.

Decolonisation poses a particular epistemological challenge. Not only is there no way to theorise in advance how

decolonisation should or ought to occur but it would morally reprehensible to try to do so. Decolonisation is a form of practice that is worked at and worked out among the peoples and other living things whose lives have become entangled in the violence of colonisation. As a path toward peace, decolonisation must be open to continuing negotiations. To disallow certain classes of stories because they appear to be tainted is already to fail to work toward decolonisation.

Monologue is the narcissistic conversation that the West has with itself, a key feature of which is that the 'other' never gets to talk back on their own terms. Monologue is a practice of power, of course, since it involves silencing the people whose words and thoughts would require a break with self-absorption. Much of what passes for conversation is actually monologue because it is constructed around a self-other structure such that the 'other' is the absence or reflection of self.³ In contrast, dialogue is intersubjective: it is an open-ended meeting of subjects. Emil Fackenheim articulates two main precepts for structuring the ground for ethical dialogue.⁴ The first is that dialogue begins where one is, and thus is always situated; the second is that dialogue is open, and thus that the outcome is not known in advance. Openness produces reflexivity, so that one's own ground becomes destabilised. Dialogue breaks up monologue; it clears a ground for meeting, generating a place where people can speak on their own terms. It thus requires attentive listening and an open mind. Construed in this way, dialogue is a decolonising practice leading toward unpredictable outcomes.

There is currently a global discussion about ecological crisis, and the need for social and cultural change. Indigenous people intervene in, or are drawn into, these debates as speakers who try to articulate for others their own understandings, some of which may be foreign to many in their audience. Further, representations of Indigenous people's ecological knowledge and land management practices have been pulled into the discourse as objects of scrutiny, judgement and desire. All too frequently, Indigenous knowledge is dragged into monologue by means of an intellectual structure that operates as a trap.

The trap

Noble savage or dismal savage, it hardly seems to matter. Both images are dead ends. And yet, they are often wielded as weapons: if a settler descended person says something positive about Indigenous people's ecological knowledge and/or ethics, one is accused of romanticism or primitivism; if one says something negative, one may be accused of racism. Indigenous people themselves are by no means exempt; they too are accused of romanticism or, alternatively, of cynicism.

The structure of some of the debates about indigenous ecological knowledge and ethics serves to sustain monologue. My argument is that in the forest of ideas there is a path that is defined by Western narratives; and further, that whoever steps off this path is trapped by a form of argument that lands you straight back on the well-trodden path. I will look at the structure and process of how that is done.

A basic question in the literature is: 'were Aboriginal (or other Indigenous peoples) conservationists?' A tremendous amount of the literature touches on this question one way or another, and a lot of it actually is talking about us (settler descended peoples). One answer is 'no'; it is built upon the view that wherever you go in the world people are pretty much the same: they all want to consume and compete, to achieve greater power and comfort. The fact that Aboriginal people had so little destructive impact upon the environment is said to be due to the level of their technology and their low population densities, rather than to any fundamental difference in their worldview. A second answer, of course, is 'yes'. It is built upon the view that there are social and cultural differences among the different families of humanity, and that Aboriginal people have developed systems of knowledge and ways of managing ecosystems that may differ from European-derived management of knowledge and land.

My own view is that one would not want to spend too much time debating this question because it is monological. In asking whether 'our' views are held by others, we go looking for ourselves, we engage with our own reflections, and thus we let ourselves be deflected from the more serious and challenging possibilities to be found in dialogue. In a recent, thorough, and relatively even-handed study, Krech distinguishes

between conservation and protection, and between ecology and environmentalism.⁵ He concludes that there are points of convergence as well as divergence, and he too wonders if the whole debate may be a red herring. That people go on addressing these issues is proof that there are important issues tangled up here; they demand to be treated seriously because they are part of the power relations that sustain monologue and thus already undermine our efforts at decolonisation.

The trap that is hidden near the path in the forest depends on two stereotypes. One is the Noble (Indigenous) Ecologist—he or she lives in perfect harmony, respects all life, has little or no impact on the environment, and is basically oriented toward conserving the world around him or her. The Dismal (Indigenous) Ecologist, by contrast, is pragmatic, ruthless, and destructive. Only their limited toolkit and their small population numbers prevent them from being just as destructive as Western capitalist colonisers. Let me make it clear that I am not drawing on overtly racist literature here; I refer only to published academically informed work.

The trap, a double-jawed device similar to a double-bind, uses both stereotypes to achieve its effectiveness. First a dualism is asserted that appears to canvass all the relevant options: either-or, one or the other. Implicitly the dualism asserts: not both, and not anything else. Each side of the dualism can be understood as one jaw of the trap. Second, one side of the dualism is rejected, usually on grounds that purport to be factual. Third, with one side rejected, the other appears by default to become the truth of the matter. Fourth, the truthfulness of the remaining side is supported through various appeals to commonsense. These appeals appear to be commonsensical because they are part of broader social narratives surrounding which is a vast amount of implicit social support. They are the ‘path in the forest’, and the narratives are mutually reinforcing.

On my reading of the literature, the noble savage is the first side of the either-or equation; it is the one to be argued with and dismissed. The dismal savage is the second side, the default position. The commonsense view is based on a theory of progress, and requires accepting an implicit theory of history in which humans progressively extricate themselves from nature through increasingly sophisticated technology. The

commonsense position thus invokes as human givens progress, technology as a driving force and the will to dominate. These are all highly contested issues, of course, but the cunning of the trap is its dual reinforcement. When the dismal ecologist is left standing in the default position, nobody has to take responsibility for an outcome that disempowers Indigenous people. Arrival at the default can seem to be reasoned and fair because it is based on the arguments presented against the first side of the dualism. Once the default appears as an unavoidable conclusion arrived at through reason, the more contested issues can be left unexamined.

An example will bring this out of the abstract and into the domain of living action. Anthropologist Lee Sackett proposes that there is a viewpoint among members of the public that Australian Aboriginal people are to be emulated as ideal exemplars for conservationists. This ideal depends on an either-or dualism: 'Instead of making it their right and duty to tame and harness the wilderness, they lived in harmony with it.' In Sackett's logic (and he is not alone), all that remains, once harmony is dismissed, is to conclude that Aborigines did try to tame and harness the wilderness (such culturally loaded words!) but failed to make much of an impact. To quote again: 'To the extent that they [Aborigines] were conservationist at all, pre-colonial Aborigines were conservationists by default. Their relatively low numbers and limited tool kit meant their impact was of a different order than that of today's high density, industrialised society.'⁶ This excellent trap works with a second dualism that reinforces the first. In the second one, the contrast is between a limited tool kit and a highly industrialised society. The contrast is commonsensical and unarguable; the differences are real, even if their meaning is contentious. This dualism conceals the underlying supposition that we are all just driven by our technology; we go our destructive ways, some of us with more impact than others. The commonsensical proposition that hunter-gatherer societies differ significantly from advanced industrial societies slides effortlessly over a theory of social change that is eminently debatable. There is absolutely no consensus around the idea that worldviews, social change, and systems of ethics are solely driven by technology, but this larger issue is obscured.

Sackett calls for Aboriginal people to be understood in their own terms rather than in terms of Western stereotypes, but he seems to conclude that Aborigines were ‘proto-environmentalists’.⁷ This proposal neatly traps Aboriginal people within a narrative of evolutionary progress in which we westerners have long since superseded them.

Dismal or noble?

Dismal natives are stuck in the downstream of history. They are the backward guys with the little tool kits. This stereotypical native has nothing much to say to us (advanced or post-industrialists), first because he is not really all that different; he is driven by technology but is less effective. Second, he has nothing to say to us because we have superseded him. If we are all in the business of consuming and destroying, nobody does that better than we do.

The other side of the either-or structure is the noble ecological savage. He is frequently signalled by the term ‘harmony’, and Western scholars are particularly scathing of the idea that Indigenous people live(d) ‘in harmony with nature’. Harmony encompasses a complex field of stereotypes and debates. At the most extreme, this stereotype implies Indigenous people have all the answers, that their wisdom is so perfect that all we need to do is adopt it, and that their practices are so perfect that all we need to do is mimic them. The far end of this stereotype views Indigenous peoples as themselves sacred.⁸ The exaggerated position is ridiculous, and yet, people go on addressing it as if it had serious substance. It is so ridiculous that every time a scholar takes it on, he or she cannot fail to score a hit. And every time it is demolished, the dismal guy is left in the default position. The very stridency of the anti-harmony arguments suggests that some powerful ideas are being challenged.

Perfect wisdom

An extravagant harmony theme is that Indigenous people were in possession of a system of complete knowledge that enabled them to behave impeccably in conserving the world around them. This claim is totally at odds with all that we know about human beings generally, and thus would seem to

position Indigenous people as members of another species. It is also totally at odds with what most Indigenous people say about themselves. There are many contexts in which Indigenous people assert that their knowledge is incomplete; their awareness of the complexity of the interactions among living things assures them that they do not know everything.⁹ In respect of the proposition that harmony means perfection, we have to conclude on both etic and emic grounds that by this definition there is no harmony. We would also conclude that the debate at this level is spurious.

A weaker version takes harmony to mean that Indigenous peoples made no alterations to the environment. This idea has been shown in recent years to be completely false in many parts of the world, as numerous scholars argue without hesitation. Indigenous people's use of fire is increasingly being shown to have promoted biodiversity. In Australia it is now possible to say with certainty that Aboriginal people's land management practices, especially their skilled and detailed use of fire, were responsible for the long-term productivity and biodiversity of this continent.¹⁰ Similar findings are being made in other parts of the world, including North America.¹¹

Cultural fires (fires deliberately set by humans for ecological purposes) impact upon the environment but do not necessarily change environments for the worse. Not surprisingly, then, cultural fires are rarely invoked to clinch anti-harmony arguments.

Megafaunal extinctions

There is an unresolved debate about how a number of species of large prehistoric mammals became extinct, and one theory is that human agency, that is, overkill, was the main factor. Beginning in the United States in the 1960s, Paul Martin has proposed that in about 11,000 BP (before present) human colonisers from Asia instituted a blitzkrieg across the Americas that in a couple of millennia caused all the megafauna of the Americas to go extinct.¹² Alternatively, Ward's study of North America comes down very heavily on this overkill theory; the main alternative argument is environmental—that megafauna were caught in changing environments to which they could not successfully adapt.

Recently a similar theory of extinctions has been proposed in Australia under the label ‘future eating’.¹³ Tim Flannery proposes that in about 60,000 BP the first wave of human beings arrived in Australia and instituted a blitzkrieg that annihilated the Australian megafauna. Having made a complete mess of the place, they then set about learning how to work with cultural fires and to sustain what was left. Lesley Head shows that current evidence offers almost no support for this position, though there is good evidence to suggest that some megafauna lived on until about 28,000 BP.¹⁴ Her subtle analysis leads her to conclude that Flannery’s thesis ‘is partial, deterministic and incompatible with the best evidence currently available’.¹⁵ David Bowman and David Choquenot have also disputed the ‘future eaters’ theory, modelling predator-prey relationships in a hypothetical north Australian savannah and concluding that for Aborigines to have killed off the megafauna they would have had to have had far greater population densities than they did in 1788, or have been far more efficient hunters than they were for the period in which we have direct evidence.¹⁶

There are two points that bear directly on the use of the overkill theory in anti-harmony arguments. The first is that we do not know why the Pleistocene mammals (or earlier life forms) became extinct, or even if that is what happened to all of them. The evidence is not all in, and a hypothesis cannot stand as a clinching argument against ‘harmony’ or against anything else. One simply cannot rest one’s case on the hypothesis that there may have been a blitzkrieg, but that is exactly what some scholars do. Thus, for example:

Certainly we have something to learn from contemporary tribal peoples, but we must not romanticize them ... those who assume that prehistoric tribes must have existed in some blissful harmony with nature must reckon with the fact that, thousands of years ago, members of such tribes apparently hunted to extinction many large mammals in North America.¹⁷

This is a fairly blunt operation of a trap that wants to hold out a possibility of conversation even as it snidely undermines the

ground for dialogue. A more subtle approach is to slide this question into a further dualism. Thus, for example, archaeologists White and O'Connell state:

If the extinction of some Pleistocene species was wholly or even partly the result of human action, then we cannot so easily think of these people as careful environmental managers with a very long-term perspective. Rather, like other humans, they may have been only working for short-term gains, without considering the long-term effects.¹⁸

This argument acknowledges the hypothetical quality of overkill theory, and then advances certainty through the use of another dualism. The argument takes no notice of the anthropological literature that examines the interplay between short-term and long-term strategies as complementary, not dichotomised, options in subsistence strategies among many hunter-gatherer groups.¹⁹ Indeed, the mounting evidence for the effects of cultural fires suggests that people did make, and still today do make, many long-term decisions. Likewise, the widespread existence in Aboriginal Australia of 'sacred sites' that were taboo for hunting and were also refugia and breeding grounds for different species of animals suggests long-term considerations.²⁰

The second point goes in another direction. What if people 11,000 years ago, or 60,000 years ago, did hunt animals to extinction? Would that have a bearing on the worldview and practices of people today? It seems to me that it can only have a bearing if one assumes that Native Americans or Indigenous Australians today are identical to their ancestors; that is, if they have not changed at all.²¹ It is dubious to posit such a lack of change, but in this instance the proposition is completely contradicted by further evidence. If overkill is the benchmark for human impact, one then has to account for the fact that there were *no* major extinctions between the time of the early ones and the period of European colonisation. It would seem to follow that Indigenous people today may know a lot about how to avoid driving animals to extinction.

Waste and litter

A second stereotype that is used to clinch the argument against harmony with nature is ‘waste’. It cuts across ancient extinctions and current practices, and links up with another current clincher: ‘litter’. Waste can be understood as the wastage of ‘resources’, such as might be evidenced by overkill. In contemporary contexts, waste seems to involve leaving lots of dead animals and other ‘waste’ lying around; it is thus treated as ecologically, morally and aesthetically repugnant. For example, Sackett takes up the issue of waste, quoting Strehlow’s account of Aranda people’s reaction to the profusion of edible animals and plants in the wake of drought-ending heavy rains. The Aranda people live in Central Australia and are well accustomed to periods of extreme aridity and periods of well watered abundance (at least by desert standards), apparently linked to the large cycles of El Niño. Strehlow observed Aranda people in a period of abundance following upon a drought, writing that:

Animals were slaughtered ruthlessly, and only the best and fattest parts of the killed game were eaten; every tree was stripped bare of its fruits, and all that were unripe and tasteless were tossed away with that air of wasteful carelessness that characterizes the improvident native whenever a brief spell of material abundance smiles upon his hard lot.²²

Strehlow’s judgmental description is of the dismal guy — ruthless, careless and improvident — but, in my experience with Aboriginal people, leaving food on the ground does not constitute waste. Food not consumed by humans will be consumed by others, and it is not wasteful to leave food for them. It is most common indeed for people to take the best parts of the meat for themselves and to leave the remainder for the dogs. Other meat-eaters such as dingoes and raptors also benefit, as do the ever-present meat ants. I do not know what he means by ‘ruthless slaughter’, but in non-judgmental terms one would say they were responding how living things respond to abundance following deprivation: they build themselves up.

I am not acquainted with the type of harvesting that strips trees bare, but I am well acquainted with the type of eating that seeks the most delightful fruits, and leaves the rest for others. As my friend and teacher Jessie Wirrpa told me when we were on walkabout getting conkerberries, ‘turkey will eat ’im, emu might eat ’im, dingo can eat ’im too, even goanna might eat ’im’. The food we left was going to be put to good use by the other creatures with whom we shared those places and those foods.

The use of litter as a clinching argument falls more readily into the category of racism than reason,²³ but may also be a source of genuine perplexity.²⁴ The category of waste easily slips into litter, but it is useful to distinguish between the two because litter is currently a concern of its own and rests on quite different cultural suppositions. According to an Australian state government report on litter control, litter is defined as waste improperly discarded.²⁵ The particular emphasis is on public places such as roadsides, beaches, parks and vacant lots. A problem of waste disposal, with effects on resource conservation and public health, the same report states that ‘the primary impact of litter is aesthetic’. The general view is that litter ‘is visible evidence of antisocial behaviour’ and that ‘littering is a behavioural problem’.

I hold no brief for litter. It is a serious problem everywhere. What interests me, however, is that ideas about litter and litter control invoke some fundamental propositions about civil society: about the difference between public and private space, about what constitutes good citizenship. Consider the idea that a good citizen picks up after herself. Her social responsibility is demonstrated as she erases the traces of her presence.

My Aboriginal teachers in the Northern Territory rarely picked up after themselves, but more to the point, they never seek to erase themselves. When they go fishing they call out to the ancestors and Dreamings saying ‘Give us food, the children are hungry, we got kids here!’ When they get food, they cook it on the spot. The remains of people’s action in country tell an implicit story of knowledgeable action: these people knew where they were, they knew how to get the food that is there in the country. The country responded to their presence by providing for them. Anti-social behaviour, in contrast,

involves sneaking around the country, not announcing one's self, and using special techniques to avoid leaving tracks or traces. It is the behaviour of people who intend harm or who have something to hide. Self-erasure is anti-social; visible and audible presence is responsible and moral.

In sum, none of the three main arguments brought to bear in contending that Aboriginal people did not live in harmony with nature—extinctions, waste and litter—go to prove what the authors claim them to prove.

Natural natives

There is yet another argument: it works against the idea that Indigenous people lived in harmony with nature because they were part of nature. Many Western scholars hold this idea to be racist because it conflates biology with culture.²⁶ The claim of racism is based on the Western distinction between nature and culture, and on the long and miserable history of colonisation during which Aboriginal people were treated as a part of 'nature' by people who held both nature and natives in contempt. The logic in this argument is that because Aboriginal people are human, and because humans are part of culture, not nature, then Aboriginal people cannot be part of nature. If harmony means that people are part of nature, then there is no harmony.

It is now well known that the distinction between nature and culture is a cultural artefact itself. We have an excellent body of ecofeminist analysis, as well as the critical theory of a number of postmodern and postcolonial streams, in addition to a newer anthropological stream that demonstrate the ethnocentricity of the belief that human culture is separated from, and is in some sense superior to, nature.²⁷ The story that Western civilisation tells about itself is the story of culture transcending nature.

For many Indigenous people, though, knowing that one is part of nature constitutes wisdom and law. My friend Riley Young Winpilin, like many Aboriginal Australians, believes that Law comes from the earth, and he holds this to be a matter of high regard:

You can't change ... that big hill there. You can't change im this ground. How you going to change im? How you going to change that creek? .. You can't. No way! ... I know government say he can change im rule. But he'll never get out of this ground.²⁸

He is saying that human projects properly conceived will be embedded in 'this ground'. It is unjustifiable to suggest that he does not know what he is talking about. To universalise the culture/nature binary is to assert that Indigenous people who believe themselves to be embedded in the world around them must be rescued from their own lack of understanding. Such a rescue mission is itself a colonising project.

Along with people's assertions that they are part of nature, many Indigenous people also assert that they do or did live in harmony with nature. This perspective may be ridiculed by any of the arguments above, or it may be dismissed as romantic fantasy or nostalgia. The term harmony is most frequently undefined by Indigenous people, but it often conveys an idea of peace: they do not see themselves to be in any way at war with their world. As Joe Mohawk said, they do not aim to conquer, or to subdue, or to dominate.²⁹ Richard Nelson, in his brilliant study of Koyukon ecological world, says: 'the interchange between humans and environment is based on an elaborate code of respect and morality, without which survival would be jeopardised'.³⁰ People seek to live in balanced reciprocity with their ecosystems, rather than trying to 'deplete, despoil and depart', as is said of whitefellas.³¹

If harmony is taken to mean something like sustainable reciprocity, then the evidence from many sources indicates that many Indigenous peoples understand themselves to live this way. Furthermore, the evidence of their interactions with ecosystems prior to colonisation supports the accuracy of their view. So too does the evidence of many anthropologists whose work during the past six or more decades has shown that 'egalitarian hunter-gatherers and horticulturists cultivate an ethic of environmental responsibility'.³² This is not a recent anthropological invention, although some critics would like to maintain that it is.

Ecological racism

Joe Mohawk, a Native American professor of social philosophy, uses the term 'ecological' racism to describe the imperialistic view that everybody in the world is called upon to go out and assert 'dominion over nature'.³³ Mohawk argues that the imposition of the theory of a universal drive for domination is hegemonic and violent. This intellectual imperialism denies the possibility that Indigenous or other peoples have things to say to us advanced capitalists. It denies that we could listen and learn, that we could talk back and be answered, that our conversations could be beneficial to all of us. The most extreme instances are quite clearly part of the Indian-hating stream of American social life, and would be labelled racist in Australia as well. The moderate examples I have discussed do not work on hatred in any overt sense, and yet they do invoke the kind of hegemony that Mohawk identifies.

Their power to police the discourse is, I believe, intimately associated with the West's monological history of its own superiority. As is well known, many of the racial tropes of colonisation invoke exactly the images of waste, carelessness and ruthlessness that I have discussed above. Hawkins makes an important contribution to this strand of analysis by proposing that current moves to control litter and waste constitute a process of virtue-adding.³⁴ This analysis heightens the colonising contrast, discussed by Anderson in his essay on 'excremental colonialism', between the closed and bounded American (white) body and the open, grotesque (undisciplined) body of the colonised other (Filipino, in Anderson's case study).³⁵ The deeply internalised regulatory discipline of Western selves is caricatured in this contrast, even as it seeks to repress and reform the other.

The particular point I wish to pursue here concerns virtue. We can turn Hawkins's analysis back into colonising power relations where natives have been imagined as lacking virtue. Here again the dismal native appears in the downstream of history, this time as a virtue deficit. As a wastrel and a pollutant, he becomes an actual hindrance to good environmental management. Russell Barsh, for example, says that Indigenous people 'must not only pay attention to what can be learnt from their past, but adopt realism about their present'.

His concern for realism is used against Indigenous leaders because he believes they are self-deluded in thinking that they already have values and beliefs that can fruitfully inform and shape their actions, and that are relevant in today's world.³⁶

I think we can turn Hawkins's analysis back into scholarly practice as well. The stridency of much of the anti-harmony arguments may arise from the possibility of our own scholarly virtue being either impugned or rendered irrelevant. Harmony is a value-laden and virtue-bearing term. The idea that virtue-deficient people lived in harmony with nature must suggest either that our own understandings of history are faulty, or that there is such a thing as harmony without (our kind of regulatory) virtue. The spectre of a natural or undisciplined harmony is, of course, one of the West's dreams, desires, and stereotypes. It also conjures anxiety. What if the disciplines we practice on ourselves and others are both unnecessary and ridiculous? Anti-harmony arguments may contain a desire to salvage a story of our own self-discipline as well as a theory of (our own) history. They would thus salvage the meaning of the actual practices of our daily lives. It is necessary to remember, therefore, that monologue works with absence. If 'our' virtue is not visibly present, then, from a monological perspective, there is no virtue. If 'our' disciplines are not present, then there is no discipline. Scholars who reject the idea that Indigenous people have anything of substance to contribute to ecological knowledge are not saving Indigenous people from stereotypes; they are saving their own monologue.

So what?

Thomas makes the excellent point that the business of simultaneously exhibiting and exterminating natives is part of the enduring invasive logic of a settler-colonial nation.³⁷ Philip Deloria makes a similar point concerning the United States: that American (settler) identities are 'built not around synthesis and transformation, but around unresolved dualities themselves'. Those dualities include the simultaneous desire to exalt and 'extirpate' the Indian.³⁸ The Noble and Dismal savage stereotypes are deployments of power toward this dual project. One exalts by appropriation, the other extirpates by dismissal, and both efface the living people who are targeted

by the stereotypes. Each in its own way invites parody, trivialisation and, ultimately, contempt. Consider, for example, Thomas's concerns about primitivism: 'In the environmental movement [in Australia], and in the Green consciousness that has spread well beyond lobby and activist groups, Aboriginal uses of land and resources are idealised as non-destructive and caring, in contrast with white society's inability to restrain its extractive rapacity.'³⁹

Thomas mounts a brilliant argument against primitivism, his point being that primitivism merely inverts the hierarchies of modernity, and thus remains trapped within the same binary. I find his analysis to be rich with insight concerning colonialism, but it still has the potential to leave us in monologue. Where is the discursive ground for assertions concerning matters that are not derived from the binary of modernity but that can be (and so amazingly readily are) read through the lens of that binary? Where, for example, is the ground for asserting an ethic of care, or of non-destructive practices, once the proposition has been claimed as a form of primitivism? To put it another way, if there is a commitment to a plurality of positions, as there must be if dialogue is to proceed on ethical ground, then that plurality must be capable of including indigenous people's own positive views concerning their relationships to place, 'nature', other species, and history.

In the midst of these debates, we are in a period of deeply serious questions about resource management: who has the right to be involved in decisions about the use and/or conservation of plants, animals, soils and water? In the twenty-first century these are key struggles nationally and globally, and, as many commentators note, the wars of the future will be resource wars. The project of decolonising our settler homelands cannot be accomplished without due attention to environmental ethics and a re-imagining of the decision-making process in respect of environments and resources.

In Australia much of the contestation now focuses on native title issues. If Aboriginal people are found still to be in possession of original (native) title, they will legally occupy a place in decision-making, and the decisions are of huge long-term magnitude. Native title cases are vigorously opposed. The Yorta Yorta case, with which I was involved, pitted

a group of Aboriginal people ('Yorta Yorta') against some five hundred opposing parties (some of whom dropped out, and many of whom pooled their efforts), including three state governments. When Yorta Yorta people asserted that their relationship to country is demonstrated by the fact that they take care of the country, the opposition contested this point of view.

Olney J. heard the case and decided against the Yorta Yorta applicants. His decision was appealed twice and upheld both times. Olney J. took his analysis back to the work of Edward Curr, who had been a squatter in Yorta Yorta people's country. Over the years he became interested in compiling a natural history of Aboriginal people, and he published his *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* in 1883. Curr asserted that the local Aboriginal people were lacking in thrift, foresight and reason, writing that: 'food was plentiful, and they were very wasteful of it. I have often seen them, as an instance, land large quantities of fish with their nets and leave all the small ones to die within a yard of the water'.⁴⁰ Olney used this passage as one measure of the lack of continuity in Yorta Yorta traditions when contrasted with the practices of today:

Another contemporary practice which is said to be part of the Yorta Yorta tradition is the conservation of food resources ... It is said by a number of witnesses that consistent with traditional laws and customs it is their practice to take from the land and waters only such food as is necessary for immediate consumption. This practice, commendable as it is, is not one which, according to Curr's observations, was adopted by the Aboriginal people with whom he came into contact and cannot be regarded as the continuation of a traditional custom.⁴¹

As an anthropologist, it is perfectly clear that Curr observed people who were obtaining surpluses, as people did and do all over the country. His fragment of information, offered as a benchmark of savagery, is almost certainly incomplete. Much of the evidence went like this: Curr's propositions were held as benchmarks, and Yorta Yorta people of today were found wanting. The opposition had argued that Aboriginal people

traditionally did not take care of country, so any care they engage in today is a new age invention rather than a continuity of their own law and custom. Both Strehlow and Sackett were cited for their anthropological expertise on this point. I imagine that neither would have wanted their work used in this way, as both have been strong supporters of Aboriginal rights, but in the politics of identity and dispossession their twentieth-century scientific authority appeared to confer a continuing legitimacy on Curr's reported observations.

Such debates are the raw material of contestations over who will have land and who will not, who will make managerial decisions and who will be excluded. They are thus contestations about who will control the future of many ecosystems. They will determine which species will live and which will die, which forests will stand, which rivers will run clean, and whose soils will remain uncontaminated. Decolonisation proceeds as a social project when dialogue between settlers and Indigenous peoples is open and attentive across both environmental and social justice. Joe Mohawk put these issues in succinct and elegant form:

It is possible for the first time to take all the knowledge of the whole family of humanity and start plotting a course toward a viable future ... It at last is possible, in other words, not only to finally find the real meaning of Columbus, but to bury it.⁴²

In Australia, my teacher Hobbles Danayarri made a remarkably similar argument:

You know Captain Cook been passed away now ... Right, now — till we can have a friend, friend together now. I'm speaking on now. We're friends together because we own Australia every one of them no matter who white and black. We come together join in ... That be all right. Make it more better out of the, out of that big trouble. You know before, Captain Cook been making lot of cruel you know. Now these days, these days we'll be friendly, we'll be love *mijelb* [each other], we'll be mates. That be better, better for make that trouble.⁴³

Reflection

Earlier this year (2014) I had a Skype session with a group of students at the University of Washington in Seattle. They were studying my book *Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland*, and they had questions and comments that we wrestled with most enjoyably. In spite of the distance between Sydney and Seattle, there were a lot of mutual concerns to talk about. One of the First Nations students asked about romanticism: how do you avoid being dismissed as romantic?

I was struck all over again with the power of this label and its capacity for hurtfulness, especially for Indigenous people who may be pushed to feel constrained in how they understand and present the knowledge of their own elders. It was a pleasure to be able to suggest that she read this essay, and that she start to think of the term 'romantic' as weapon for stifling debate rather than a serious and considered critique.

At the time that I wrote this essay I had two particular stimuli. The first was the fact that while I was a research fellow at the ANU's North Australia Research Unit I had begun to have some significant interactions with biologists. Some biologists were interested in collaborating with an anthropologist, but a few of my fellow researchers were also notable for their dismissive ridicule and, sometimes, hostility. Being laughed at for suggesting that Aboriginal people should be involved not only in the conduct of research but in the very design of the research questions was unpleasant. These understandings, which are almost taken for granted today, were provocative in the early 1990s in north Australia. Being an anthropologist, I became interested in the cultural context which made dismissal and ridicule seem reasonable.

In those same years, I was flying to Melbourne regularly to work with the Yorta Yorta people on their native title claim. I was a senior off-sider (the 'grey beard', had I happened to have one!) while their main anthropologist was Rod Hagen. It was a shock to read Justice Olney's findings in the matter; once again the idea that Indigenous people could be experts concerning their own lives was being radically and harshly dismissed. I embarked on a series of articles in which I explored how a refusal to listen to Aboriginal people was normalised in academic and other texts. This essay was part of that exploration. Life goes on: Aboriginal people's involvement in ecological research in north Australia is now well

established. The Yorta Yorta people have found alternative routes toward inclusion in the care of the River Murray.⁴⁴

Notes

- 1 Jane M. Jacobs, *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 24.
- 2 Deborah Bird Rose, 'Social Justice, Ecological Justice, Reconciliation' in Lenore Manderson (ed.), *Reconciliation: Voices from the Academy*, Occasional Papers of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, no. 2, 1999, pp. 30-9.
- 3 Deborah Bird Rose, 'Indigenous Ecologies and an Ethic of Connection' in N. Low (ed.), *Global Ethics for the 21st Century*, Routledge, London, 1999, pp. 175-86.
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Performing Aboriginality: The Politics and Poetics of Citizenship in Everyday Life

Gillian Cowlshaw

The search for human dignity seems like a positive action men undertake; history, however, shows that the images of human dignity in society can be enormously destructive.¹

A stigmatised town

Bourke is an isolated Australian town in western New South Wales, notorious across the nation as a site where Aboriginality is manifested in racial tension.² This is a town of which a journalist can write with confidence and an element of horrified fascination: ‘Go to a place like Bourke—young [Aboriginal] people don’t expect to live beyond their 20s. They have nothing to hang on to.’³ While this was written about the need for Aboriginal communities in northern and remote Australia to retain their languages, the argument relies on the foundation myth of Bourke as a social space empty of any positive sociality, lacking culture and real Aboriginality. Indigenous people here are definitively ‘have nots’ in two senses; statistical evidence of Aborigines’ lack of jobs, education and health is a regular part of a concerned public discourse; further, these are Aborigines with no (traditional) language, no (traditional) ceremony, and not even black enough skins to be credited with authenticity, though such a view is not articulated in the public domain.⁴ One task of this paper is to counter the view of lack by showing some aspects of what Aborigines in Bourke ‘hang on to’.

What is obscured from the nation’s anxious narratives of a depressed Aboriginality is the humour and energy, the specific

sense of history and the intricate forms of sociality which are evident in the world of Murriss. It is not necessary to assert to this readership that where there are people there is culture, but the extent to which contemporary Aboriginality can be characterised by its response to colonisation is a contentious matter, with the dichotomous categories of 'traditional' and 'urban' Aborigines still haunting the literature, interfering with the exploration of conditions under which a distinct culture or identity is reproduced and transformed. In this essay I emphasise how the social world of Murriss in Bourke is ordered and reproduced as a conversation with whitefellas, an 'answering back' with all the transgressive and rebellious implications such a term can have. However, I do not assume that this process is the *only* source of contemporary Aboriginal identity; a larger canvas would include sources of identity anchored in experiences, stories and fantasies of the past.

Agency derived from injury

The process of stigmatisation and response can be analysed beginning with Judith Butler's work on hate speech and the politics of the performative, where she takes up Althusser's notion of interpellation, whereby the subject comes into being when hailed. When the policeman calls 'Hey you there', and the passer-by turns, an identity is acquired which is 'purchased, as it were, with the price of guilt'.⁵ In order to be recognised and taken as real social beings, Aboriginal people from infancy have to accept the meaning of 'Aborigine' with its salience in national and local discourses as the focus of strong, contradictory and dynamic emotions. Interpellation 'seeks to introduce a reality rather than report on an existing one' and 'to indicate and establish a subject in subjection, to produce its social contours in space and time'.⁶ I believe it was a response in recognition of this process that led an Aboriginal woman in Bourke to bounce her daughter on her knee, chanting repeatedly, ironically, 'You're an Aboriginal', as if warning her, or perhaps getting her used to the social space into which she would be expected to fit.

Butler further emphasises that we all share a vulnerability and susceptibility to this 'call of recognition that solicits existence', that is, to a 'language we never made' but through which

we acquire 'a tentative ontological status'.⁷ The dependency on language and on being named is such that 'we find ourselves preferring the occasion of being derogated to the one of not being addressed at all'.⁸ On the other hand, the socially constituted self may not be recognised by its bearer, so that one may meet one's image with 'surprise, alarm or pleasure, even with shock'. Thus the power of the name to constitute its subject is 'indifferent to the one who bears the name'.⁹ Butler is here considering responses to hate language, and argues that state-sponsored censorship is neither appropriate nor effective. Rather she emphasises the 'social and cultural struggle of language ... in which agency is derived from injury, and injury countered through that very derivation'.¹⁰ The political possibility of reworking the force of the speech act against the force of injury consists in misappropriating the force of speech from its prior contexts. 'The kind of speaking that takes place on the border of the unsayable promises to expose the vacillating boundaries of legitimacy in speech'.¹¹ It is these vacillating boundaries that are made use of in the performances of Aboriginality, both within and outside the Murri community.

Performing stigma

The ethnographic arena I am analysing is a racial and cultural borderland, a notion I take from Rosaldo, but use to refer to the arena of social interaction in which Murriss' social existence takes place under the observing, judging eye of whitefellas whose authority is bolstered by their identification with the state, an issue to be explored below.¹³ There is sparse ethnographic material emerging from the cultural borderlands, perhaps partly because it is a discomfiting space where sparks fly and observers recoil. Few flourish in this no-man's-land. I present here some ethnographic material which I have observed and participated in while in Bourke, in the 1980s, and more fully in 1998.¹⁴ The ubiquitous presence of the white's language and the white gaze renders Aboriginal being suspect and problematises Aborigines' intersubjective identity. Gladys Darrigo expressed this in saying, 'The gubbas [whites] look at you as much as to say you shouldn't be here.' This came from a woman who has had a life-long love of the competence and glamour she associates with whiteness.

The attribution to Aboriginality of a recalcitrant outsider status, which dismays, disgusts or evokes the righteousness of those within the realm of good citizenry, is familiar to the black residents of Bourke. Such images can become the source of creative reworkings, an example of agency being derived from injury.¹⁵ Picture the main street of Bourke. Aborigines gather regularly outside the 'pub' (as the hotel is known), lounging against the windowsills. Men and women talk beside the open pub doors and children play on the wide pavement. On 'pension', 'social' or 'endowment' days the crowd thickens and gets in the way of other pedestrians, sometimes spilling onto the street among the cars. There is a lot of movement, loud laughter and shouting, an assertive presence that sometimes erupts in verbal and physical violence. People have not dressed up to go to town because they are at home in the street, available to their network of kin, participating in a dense community-wide quotidian sociality. Some children seek their parents here, and news can be exchanged with cousins on their way to or from the shops or the courthouse at the end of the street. People are contributing to the poetics and politics of everyday life in a space on the side of the main street, a space where a continuing struggle for control is being enacted.¹⁶

When some Aboriginal girls begin shouting violent abuse at one another in the main street, a white woman serving in the shop opposite claims me, her white customer, as one of her own. Expressing a combination of embarrassment and contempt she says 'The circus has come to town' in an attempt to distance herself and her town from identification with the event in the street. Another day a black woman yells abusively, cursing and swearing at another who is walking away from her down the street. At full volume she screams, 'I'll kick your cunt till it bleeds', loud, intense, her anger apparently out of control. The waitress in the cafe opposite shrugs and says to her customers, 'They're at it again.' While these white women are positioning themselves as Other¹⁷ to the event, the black women are acting out the grotesquerie attributed to them by their white fellow citizens. When a woman screams at her child, 'I haven't got \$2. Get, go on, get away you little black cunt', I detect grins and nudging among the black audience as

this woman takes satisfaction from expressing at full volume her shocking sentiments of frustration and fury. Among local whites these public displays evoke a palpable air of anxiety, repressed anger and contempt, but they are routine, habitual responses evoked by routine, predictable experiences.

An incident was relayed to me of a black woman, arrested in a drunken incident, sitting in the dock in the police station being charged. When she asked to go to the toilet, the police told her to wait and she wet herself. The policewoman said 'Look at you, how disgusting you are, and you're a grandmother too.' In such scenes the police and shopkeepers sanctimoniously repeat the maxims of their faith in propriety, while the Aboriginal people act out responses to a harsh world, portraying themselves as without sensitivity, warmth or delicacy. One element in the performance is the thrilling ability to shock white observers with an exaggerated version of their known fears. To those outside the Aboriginal realm these performances are taken as immediate and incontrovertible evidence of a serious social problem. In an example of what Feldman, following Bloch, calls, 'the cult of the immediately ascertainable fact', drunken shouting in the street attests to the fact of Aboriginal recalcitrance.¹⁸ But, like other insiders, I do not see the street scene as typical or as direct evidence of a fundamental truth about Aborigines. Rather, those expressing violent sentiments in the main street are particular performers who are responding to their social typification, crying out: 'You think we're disgusting? I'll show you disgusting'.

The police station event was relayed to me by Murriss with a combination of laughter and outrage, both as an accusation of the unfairness and lack of humanity among police, and also as evidence that counter attack is possible. There was a latent but unstated implication that the woman's act of urinating in the station was deliberate, stating, in effect, 'Look at how you treat people, making me piss myself. Look what you made me, a grandmother, do.' Social honour within the Aboriginal community is not damaged in such interactions, but is enhanced by challenging police and white authority generally. Bodily functions, urinating in the police station, expressing fury in the street, throwing stones at shop windows,¹⁹ can be weapons deployed to sabotage hierarchy, independent of speech acts.

Minor subversions, such as an assertive and noisy street demeanour, can nudge at and irritate the habitual sense of order assumed by whites. These actions are symbolic victories which 'expose the vacillating boundaries of legitimacy' by causing tension and fear among those external to their secret, ironic meanings.²⁰ They take place on the borders of the unsayable and the undoable. The force of these responses derives precisely from turning the terms of interpellation back on those who purvey them, performing in public the iniquities which are the subject of accusations in the privacy of white's gossip, which blacks only have access to in paranoia-inducing hints and glimpses, and leaks across the racial boundaries from whites who are disloyal to their racial domain.

By appearing to affirm stigmatised images in public, such performances assert and deploy their symbolic power. The amplification of grotesque images can be seen as both an affirmation of their truth and an inversion of their meaning. The inversion derives from the shift away from accepting the definitive shamefulness of the images, and instead producing them voluntarily and intentionally, claiming them as their own. For instance, swearing is not illegitimate, but normal, as are family fights and drunkenness, so why should such practices be carefully confined to the privacy of the domestic realm?

These street performances can be seen as an answering back by the black recipients of white judgments, and they are deeply and powerfully political. One direct political effect is that they define the contours of race relations by emphasising the separation between the cultural arenas of disreputable Aborigines and respectable white citizens. They also create a division within the Aboriginal community concerning what constitutes a black identity, particularly its public face. This can be glimpsed in the everyday decisions people make about how to dress, talk and greet people in the street. Aboriginal people risk the accusation that they are flash if they dress up too much or if they cease to greet others, for instance those who are drunk. Such people are commonly accused of forgetting who they are. The more 'respectable' blacks who do not contribute to these performances, those with jobs and/or more restrained habits, are forced into a double bind in relation

to their own self-presentation, and in their relations with whites. Such a politics was evident in the remarkable shift in the demeanour of two active young men who had been proud of their ability to get on well with whites, and who had taken pride in their conventional neat attire. They began to wear beanies, tee-shirts and sneakers; they swore more and even managed to look darker skinned. Their changed orientation was part of a bid by a section of the community to displace an entrenched family-based group from control of a community organisation. The aspirants needed support from the core of the black community who tend to deride as 'coconuts' (white on the inside), those whose demeanour is too 'flash'.²¹

Whites also take decisions about how to conduct themselves in relation to the black population. Multiple markers of the racial boundaries are evident in social habits, dress and demeanour, housing and domesticity, employment and income, and in language, though none of these are absolute or reliable indicators of individual identity. Whites who nurture intimate interracial relationships, as spouses or friends, experience chronic problems in participating in the sociality of whites, where blacks are regularly objectified and disparaged in private conversations. In relation to the assertion of social identity in public places, the majority of whites take care not to mimic practices that are seen as characteristic of black social life. While for some young whites, especially teenage boys, association with Aborigines can be a form of rebellion, most young people would echo the sentiments of a young white woman who, with a sense of shame, recalled that as a teenager she had felt that 'Aborigines represented everything I didn't want to be: poor, badly dressed and looked down on.'

This identity politics is complicated further by the developing consciousness of the newfound legitimacy and power of tribal identities (Ngemba, Budjidi, Gunu and Wangkumara) in this era of the recognition of land rights and native title, and the possibility of royalty monies from mines, gas pipelines and other uses of land now under claim. What are known as traditional cultures, or tribal identities, are being activated in conscious attempts to make the Indigenous past speak to the present in ways other than as victims of dispossession and whiteness. A hitherto hidden store of knowledge and

experience of things deemed 'tribal' among many older people has emerged. Fragments of languages are being revived to circulate in everyday speech. An Aboriginal language from the region has been learned by several young men who are teaching it with much enthusiasm to many school children. These activities demonstrate a palpable hunger for definitive, iconographic Aboriginal things among these 'have nots'. Complications stem from the rivalry between the relative strengths of tribal identifications in relation, on the one hand, to potential material rewards, and on the other to the authority they confer over the locality of Bourke. Further, some Murriss express cynicism about the evoking of tribal identities in self-conscious opportunistic ways.

Thus the street performances are but one manifestations of a struggle underway about how a contemporary Aboriginal identity is to be expressed. Many Murriss, even those who otherwise contribute to the exaggeration of stigma, deplore the most outrageous street behaviour, and condemn the violent language used by some individuals inside and outside the pub. On the other hand, the contempt and even cruelty shown by whites towards the small number of old alcoholics who sometimes stagger around the streets or create minor disturbances, tend to unite people in sympathy for their distressed kinsmen and in support of Aborigines' rights to the streets. Further, the more 'respectable' Murriss enjoy the outrageous performances, not only because they are deeply aware of the symbolic meaning of this sometimes ghastly impromptu street theatre, but also because its style and black humour is echoed in other, less contentious and less visible features of black sociality. That is, Aboriginality is performed in the street that is home, but it is also performed in other social and domestic spaces to which we will now turn.

Fabulations

Performance may be an ordinary part of all sociality, but in Aboriginal communities there is a recognised tradition of mimicry and a conscious dramatisation of narratives, which are performed in everyday domestic circumstances.²² The domestic realm of Murriss is not centred in the interior of the house, but in front and back yards and in the street. Murri

children inhabit the streets of Bourke as their own, homely space, another goad to white disapproval, because autonomous children in the public domain are in danger and endangering social order. The idealised social existence of whites is split into a private realm within the confines of the family home where intimate relationships are experienced and the true self emerges, and a public realm where a more socially constrained self and sociality appear. This conventional split is what fuels the disapproval of unconstrained and boisterous behaviour in public. The narrativised Aboriginality produced on front steps and in back yards in Bourke delighted me, with its humour, social commentary and fabulations. Here I found the ‘alternative social knowledge’ that exists among those who have been the ‘subjects’ of the social sciences.²³ Perhaps the warnings against lies and superstition that pervaded the childhood of those of us who are modern Anglo subjects have created a fear and contempt of flights of fancy and the imaginary. A faith in facticity seems to paralyse whitefellas when they come across the kind of fabulations that comprise the body of conversation among Murriss of Bourke. Some of the stories recorded can provide examples:

That Opera House it will be all under water. That water is going to come and drown all them people in Sydney. The old Aboriginal people said that, and now that white bloke [Nostradamus] is predicting it. They [the elders] were that wild when it was built, on the site where they did whatever they used to do there. Sacred place. They was wild that all that money was spent on the Opera House. What’s the good of that? It’s no good, all them squeaky voices.²⁴

Elaborated stories are usually relayed by several interwoven voices. One person begins to recall an event, another takes up the thread and hooks in other filaments of memory, a third will add in a further strand. As elements are fitted together the tale is strengthened and enriched. Each performer searches for more embellishments to add to the significance and pleasure in the story. One story told by two people, speaking in turn and overlaying, interrupting, repeating, was about a group walking home one day after the races where they had

been drinking. I noted the story's outline:

Bruce was staggering with a heavy Eski full of beer to drink at home. They asked police for a ride, tried to appear sober. When they got home, found the Eski was full of ice, besides only 4 stubbies and a bottle of champagne. Bruce's stagger, surprise and outrage that others had drunk it all were all evoked. The story was interspersed with that of the bloke whose mother in law put a knife to his throat. He said 'Fuck the lot of youse, you cunts, and pricks [X] family, I'm going', and he was pulling his port [suitcase] around — 'he had wheels on it see'. He kept saying, 'Fuck the lot of youse'²⁵

Each person in the story, including the history of their relationships with the police and each other, is well known to the tellers, who savour the scene, repeating and echoing bits to wring from it whatever humour it contains. The story is forced to yield up its maximum potential to astonish, intrigue, entertain; paramount is the ability to evoke laughter.²⁶ The skill is in coming at the event at the right angle, striking the right note to make the laughter come. There is a marked contrast with the anaemic niceness of much whites' conversation as I experienced it among the aspiring middle-class office and shop employees in Bourke,²⁷ with its narrow precision about events, its overwhelming moralistic flavour, and its occasional chilling nastiness.

Dramatisation is also evident in the almost gleeful Murri response to a new sign put up in the Post Office Hotel, 'the P.O.'. This statement read: 'We request that patrons show respect to members of the New South Wales police force when they enter these premises.' There was also a new notice that children were not allowed inside the door of the pub. 'See, it's racial discrimination', Dianne and her brother said with satisfaction. I was sceptical, and they explained that the notices were not put up in other pubs. That is, they recognised that the patrons of this mainly Aboriginal pub were being 'hailed' as ill mannered and foul-mouthed. They not only rejected the naming but wanted to name the namers who had let their impartial guard slip. The assertion that the notice

addresses *Aboriginal* patrons and is thus discriminatory illustrates Murri's sharp awareness that an element of the moral superiority claimed by the police and good white citizens is that they are non-discriminatory. The application of the law is systematically monitored in the light of the formal egalitarian principles which are now central features of legal and social race relations.²⁸

The notices and the responses are also moves in an ongoing struggle concerning the P.O. hotel and the main street. The activities around the pub are a source of despair to the Bourke Chamber of Commerce because they discourage the tourists who might bring prosperity when they come to savour the outback history the town tries to stand for. Providing visitors with access to comforting conceptions of the past, (the paddle steamer on the Darling River, memorabilia of the writer Henry Lawson and stories of the first settlers), will be ineffective lures if visitors are frightened by the robust performances of Aboriginal people in the main street. Attempts to recruit Aborigines to perform in a different manner for tourists, to revive some dances or to act as guides and informants on 'bush medicine' or local indigenous myths, have met with little success so far, although they are beginning to gain a positive response in some quarters. Regular attempts have been made to close the P.O. pub down, so that the repugnant Aboriginality is removed from sight, but recently the old building has been given a face-lift and the publican is prospering, especially since poker machines were installed.²⁹ Thus, various interests in the town are positioned differently in relation to the black drinkers whose intermittent presence in the street is so definitive of Bourke's public reputation, yet whose image is the antithesis of the white resident's idea of what it is to be a modern citizen. These modern citizens though, cannot express in public any racial antipathy towards Aboriginality; to do so would be to betray Australia's firmly established identity as an egalitarian and non-racist nation.

However, there are nooks and crannies both in cities and in the country, where a concealed racial hatred, fear and contempt gains expression. This expressive domain was glimpsed by a Murri woman who overheard a white woman denigrating Bourke Aborigines on the public telephone. The

listener said, 'That person will believe that story. They will never come here to see what we are like.'³⁰ Such naivety is not shared by those who have come across the hate speech that is audible or visible on specific and significant occasions. On the gate of a property just outside of Bourke in capital letters and idiosyncratic spelling a sign read:

IF YOU DONT KNOW ME DONT COME UP

NO MINERS RITES LAND RITES NO CIVIL ORE
MARRAIGE RITES

CROSS THIS FENCE IT WILL BE YOUR LAST BLOODY
RITES

Gladys immediately recognised this form of interpellation, one that has become common since the state recognised Indigenous rights to land and heritage. Exaggerated rumours of Aboriginal demands have flourished in the bush at times gaining an incendiary force as Aborigines became the enemy inside the nation, the avaricious, illegitimate threat to our property and peace.³¹ Gladys's response to the sign was one of semi-vengeful wrath and a half serious threat that she would send down some of the boys to fix up the fellow who wrote it.

'What they call us behind our backs' is known among Murris who can never be sure of either who has written the words, or who has read them, let alone how the readers have responded. Sentiments that are forbidden in public are thus made known to Aborigines in these extreme forms by people who are regarded as marginal by other whites but who nonetheless voice the disavowed racial antagonism and repugnance which are usually evident only in oblique forms, and in the consequences of exclusionary or punitive acts. These sentiments are the foundation which enable the construction of a disputed, unequal and unwilling form of Aboriginal citizenship.

Rejecting citizens

While Aborigines' formal equality before the law has been established and their historical disadvantage recognised in

the last three decades, overt and continuing contestation of the meaning of citizenship is embedded in daily conflicts such as I have documented in relation to the control of public space. I also want to argue that, contrary to public perception and legal assumptions, Aborigines are offered equal citizenship status contingent upon their abandoning practices deemed repugnant.³² What other meaning can we attribute to the presence of thirty police officers in Bourke, with the consequent level of intrusion and surveillance in the lives of those deemed chronic suspects?³³

Civil, political and social rights of Indigenous subjects are now formally recognised in Australia. But the refusal of Aborigines' rights in the past, indeed the great effort put into ensuring their lack of rights was not merely a formal condition which could be reversed by legislative change.³⁴ The conditional acceptance of native title has been addressed in a number of studies.³⁵ I want to add to these concerns the recognition that there are limitations on the rights of Indigenous people 'to share to the full in the social heritage'.³⁶ Ironically, elements of the social heritage of Aborigines are sources of suspicion, fear and violent hostility from established citizens. What needs recognising is that the 'social dimension' of citizenship is embedded in and inexorably bound to present and future relations *with other citizens*. Citizenship can be obstructed by other citizens in the very process of enjoying their own citizenship to the full. The enjoyment of Indigenous citizenship depends on other, already secure citizens extending acceptance to those newly recognised as citizens, and according them the status of fellow citizens. Rowse raises the important question of what responsibilities accompany Aborigines' accrual of citizens' rights, but a prior question is, what is the responsibility of those who are secure in their citizenship towards those whose citizenship is precarious because they have formerly been rejected as citizens?³⁷

I will use the words of Alan Knight to illustrate the awareness among Aborigines that the offer of citizenship is contingent on accepting derogation. Alan's accounts of his lifetime of interaction with police evince a deep and abiding sense of being misperceived as dangerous and alien.³⁸ After a long series of specific complaints, Alan said:

I'm not saying this because I hate police. Why I hate police is because they are very very racist people. I could show you all the names they made up for me, like 'ape' and everything. That's how much they hate me. This was in the magistrate's chamber while I'm getting bail. I said 'What's those names there?' [on the charge sheet].

And they said 'They're just names that you're known by.'

'I said, known by who? I've never been known by these names in my life. It's what the police put there.'

And one of the coppers said, 'Oh we'll take it off then'.

'NO!', I said 'You leave it on there. Don't you touch it. Because the clerk has seen it and if you do touch it now, I'll take it out in court, cause it shows they're racist, and the reason they're against me.'

I'll just show the magistrate how much they hate me these bastards.

Like Dianne's reaction to the notice in the pub, Alan gains a bitter satisfaction from finding evidence that police are prejudiced and call him 'ape'. He does not recognise himself in this interpellation, but it could count in his favour in court and it vindicates his own consuming hatred. This meeting a ghastly parody of oneself is not a unique event for Murriss; their lives are regularly caricatured in the legal process. Alan told me of this encounter during a street brawl which, after police intervened, became a riot with a shop window smashed and goods stolen:

Then next minute this policeman came out of nowhere, and I said to him 'Why didn't you stop it when it started down the street down here. You all scared or what? What are you doing in uniform? Gutless bastard.' And something I said there, well he said to me, 'Go on hit me big man, hit me', like that. I couldn't pass up an invitation like that, and, 'whack', I hit him once under the chin and knocked him out. And I'm supposed to have started the riot! I can't see how I started the riot.

Alan is quite willing to be charged with 'assault police', an

act which accrues a degree of social honour, but he is deeply angered by the ability of police to multiply and transform his crimes. Here the 'the dialectic of antagonism' turns a ritual event, in this case regular spats and brawls, 'into resistance at the moment of intervention by the higher powers'.³⁹ There occurred a shift of the meaning and trajectory of the fight from internal Murri dynamics into an occasion for the expression of protest, anger and revenge on the bodies of the police and the body of society. Further transformation is brought about when the event is represented in the metropolitan press as 'rioters tear up Bourke'.⁴⁰ Yet another mutation is called up when the individuals' crimes are identified, recorded and punished according to police practices and the law, entailing the accused repeatedly being summonsed by alien directors to perform a bit part in a familiar drama acted out in the court room. In these ways Murris have to face a constant contortion and misrepresentation of their lives and experiences.

Occasionally a reversal of this process is achieved. One day, as the magistrate convicted a number of young Murri 'rioters', a youthful voice, clearly audible within the courtroom, yelled from the vestibule: 'Give us a fair go you poofters. Why don't you give us a fair go?' The Aboriginal people hanging about inside the courtroom and in the vestibule giggled excitedly at this breaching of the 'boundaries of legitimacy in speech', which asserted a profound objection to the proceedings.⁴¹ The court rendered itself deaf. No flicker of recognition was apparent from the magistrate or lawyers. What Butler, in relation to hate speech, called 'the rush of excitement that, for some, went along with the utterance' was here enjoyed by the Murris, while the officials firmly suppressed any response to these irreverent, vulgar obscenities, just as they do when the terms 'white cunt' and 'fucken copper' are spoken regularly inside the court in the recounting of evidence of street crimes.⁴²

Conclusion

I began by showing that the stigmatised images of a violent and incoherent modern Aboriginality, which attracts obsessive national attention in the popular media, generates performative responses among Murris in Bourke. While

Aboriginal communities in rural Australia cannot take part in the 'production of [public] truth' about themselves because they are outside the circuits which activate the 'ensemble of rules' for this game,⁴³ they nonetheless respond to their interpellation by producing counter-truths which circulate within a narrower social domain. These are part of a counter-discourse, which employs dramatic fabulations characteristic of contemporary Aboriginal narratives as well as legalistic anti-discrimination and egalitarian language. Willis showed working class kids in London engaging in a politics which successfully defended and celebrated their working-class values and practices and protected them from moving into the middle class and the office jobs that their teachers wanted them to aspire to.⁴⁴ Similarly in Bourke, the celebration of the poetics and rhythms of everyday Aboriginal community life combines with a street politics which confirms the power of the Aboriginal domain while severing it from engagement with the white world.

But this severance is only partial. All kinds of interactions occur which breach the racial divide, in places of work and recreation, in marriages and in the identities and the very bodies of individuals. Yet even within the intimacies of family and domestic life the racial boundary is reproduced; white spouses virtually always join the black community or their family remains relatively socially isolated. However, at a more profound social level there exists a generative dialectical relationship in which 'high discourses ... are structured in relation to the debasements and degradations of low discourse'.⁴⁵ In the forms of 'creative disrespect and radical opposition to the illegitimately powerful' described above, Murriss are striking back at the conventional, disapproving and superior gaze of local whitefellas by at once mocking the images and deploying their symbolic power.⁴⁶ In answering back to the white discourse, these performances confound, disconcert and embarrass the white audience. Because they cannot be approached, answered or treated as legitimate social events, they produce a certain kind of fear, interrupting and temporarily silencing white voices in the vicinity. They do not institute a dialogue but rather seem to affirm the grotesque images of a deformed Aboriginality. That is, they are elements

of a quarrel with citizenship, an assertion of other social forms which challenge the normality of white practice.

Finally I need to comment on the street performances as a specific political practice. I have argued that the black counter-narratives which emerge at the margins of society use the symbolic power of violence and of racialised bodies to create a space in which to perform, through speech and movement, startling parodies of the conventional discourses about Aboriginality. The meanings produced have been built, in part, on an understanding of the fear and censure of violence in the white world. This practice exaggerates and exposes rather than ameliorates and dissolves the space of fear and horror between the races. I do not underestimate the cost of this racial battle to those caught up in it. It cannot be celebrated as a brave struggle for freedom from oppression, though there are moments of liberation both in the actions and their effects. The outbursts in the street are also cries of pain which are clues to deeper disturbances, to a domain of destructive emotions and habits, which can reproduce and entrench the very conditions they protest against.

In the context of another situation of derogation, Feldman said, what is needed is a '*re-perception*' that would recover 'stratigraphies of pain ... the historical limits, manipulative omissions, and sanitising censors of media and juridical realism'.⁴⁷ Such a re-perception would allow us to appreciate and even to enter into dialogues with those who shout in the streets where 'God, staggers, sly in a drunken rage'.⁴⁸

Reflection

It is an unambiguous pleasure to be asked to republish a 13-year-old essay, thanks to the editors of this volume. I am delighted that urban readers—my Murri friends would call you the 'latté set'—have a chance to appreciate the drama, humour and challenges created in Bourke. Or will they? Will the urban reader reel back in dismay when confronted by these robust challenges from people we are used to pitying?

My first book about Bourke was *Black, White or Brindle* (1988). It was criticised for excusing—even celebrating—the 'bad behaviour' of Murris, so I felt further research and a second book was necessary to ascertain the truthfulness of the depiction of 'resistance'.

Gladys Darrigo, a natural satirist with a scathing tongue, invited me to stay with her because, I believe, she understood my ethnographic intentions. In her company it became ever clearer and more important to show that one man's bad behaviour is another's rebellious fun or even serious resistance to white hegemony.

Of course there is a level of creative license in interpreting social processes, in finding the social logic behind a complex of mass of social relationships. This is not unambiguous 'science'. But the necessity to get things right, meant, in this case, plunging into a social world of conflict, of love and hate, pleasure and pain, and ongoing moral rivalry. Transcribing recordings made on the windy riverbank, in a crowded house, or on the street, takes a great deal of time. An unusual phrase might take an hour or two to decipher, and its significance can only be established if it is precisely understood. This article was a major stepping-stone in the research project that culminated three years later in *Blackfellas, Whitefellas and the Hidden Injuries of Race* (Blackwell, 2004), a book that won a Premier's Literary Award for critical writing.

Ambiguity remains. In the first publication of this article, I spelt Aboriginal peoples' self-designation Murdi, thinking I could correct the usually pronunciation of Murri by emphasising the rolled 'r' at the back of the mouth—it sounds more like a 'd' to me. I did not have the linguistic skills to offer a precise phoneme and anyway a 'correct' orthographic representation would mean little on the page. I now revert to the usual Murri, accepting that no one can wield authority over how we use words.

Notes

- 1 Richard Sennett and J. Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, Vintage Books, New York, 1973.
- 2 About one third of Bourke's 3600 population are self-identified as Aboriginal. Western New South Wales was invaded by white pastoralists from the 1850s, often with violence. From the early twentieth century the remaining Indigenous population was 'protected' under a repressive regime in reserves and missions. Legal equality was increasingly granted from the 1950s under an 'assimilation' policy, and after 1970 positive steps were taken to ameliorate social inequality under a policy of 'Aboriginal self-determination' (see, for example, Tim Rowse, 'Indigenous Citizenship and Self-determination: The Problem of Shared Responsibility' in Nicolas Peterson and Will Sanders (ed.), *Citizenship and Indigenous Australians: Changing Conceptions and Possibilities*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1998).
- 3 Mark Whittaker, 'Tongues Tied', *Weekend Australian*, 23–24 January 1999.

- 4 Indigenous activists of the 1970s rejected the fractional designations which Aborigines had carried for years exemplified in the categorisation into 'half-caste', 'quarter caste' and 'quadroon' and in the assimilation policies. Experience was stressed as the more important basis of Aboriginality than skin colour, though biological ancestry remained a necessity. Such a view is now the standard one adhered to by public officials, but other beliefs circulate in coded forms and in private opinion.
- 5 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge, New York and London, 1997, p. 25.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 34.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1989.
- 13 Gillian Cowlishaw, *Black, White or Brindle: Race in Rural Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Sydney, 1988.
- 14 I cannot do justice to this idea here, but I am referring to the deep ambivalence generated in this seventy year old who loved the dancing and music and admired the attainments and cleverness of whitefellas, while never accepting their sense of their own superiority. Gladys successfully encouraged her younger children to pursue education and enjoy its fruits, far from her humble rural existence, notably as a drover.
- 15 Jeremy Beckett, 'I don't care who knows': *The Songs of Dougie Young*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1994; Julie Carter, 'Am I Too Black to Go With You?' in Ian Keen (ed.), *Being Black*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1988, pp. 65-76; Suzi Hutchings, 'The Great Shoe Store Robbery', *Oceania*, vol. 63, no. 4, 1993, pp. 345-61; Cowlishaw, *Black, White or Brindle*, p. 235.
- 16 Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an 'Other' America*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996.
- 17 'Other' is used here in the existentialist sense recovered by Feldman to mean the stranger, an other to the self in a relationship which emerges from 'situated practices of domination and social violence', Alan Feldman, 'On Cultural Anaesthesia: From Desert Storm to Rodney King', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 21, 1994, p. 416, fn. 6.
- 18 Alan Feldman, 'Violence and Vision: The Prosthetics and Aesthetics of Violence', *Public Culture*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1997, p. 36.
- 19 The frequent stoning of shop windows in the main street has led to virtually all of them being covered in heavy wire mesh, and more recently with roll-up metal shutters which can be retracted, allowing the town to appear normal in daylight hours.
- 20 Butler, p. 41.
- 21 This is but one small example of the ongoing drama of Aboriginal organisations which are often sites of intensely nepotistic political struggle. Accusations of corruption are commonplace and the state has instituted auditing and accountability systems which are stricter and more thorough than those for other organisations.
- 22 Basil Sansom, *The Camp at Wallaby Cross*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1980, p. 95ff.
- 23 Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983, p. xvii.
- 24 Interview with Gladys Darrigo, 1998.

- 25 From the author's diary notes.
- 26 I have not yet analysed the form of this humour and its wider significance which is related to the teasing and harsh ribbing which is so common a part of Murri interpersonal interaction.
- 27 These are the office and shop employees who Murriss interact with. In the pubs and among working-class Gubbas embellished stories are told, but they are not such a widespread feature of everyday life and they lack the enthusiasm and creativity of Murriss. These forms of talk are expressions of differently disciplined bodies and voices; verbal habits and expressions are characteristic of specific socialising regimes.
- 28 See also Bruce Kapferer, 'Bureaucratic Erasure: Identity, Resistance and Violence: Aborigines and a Discourse in a North Queensland Town', in Daniel Miller (ed.), *Worlds Apart: Modernity through the Prism of the Local*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995; Barry Morris, 'Racism, Egalitarianism and Aborigines', in Gillian Cowlisshaw and Barry Morris (eds), *Race Matters: Indigenous Australians and 'Our' Society*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1997.
- 29 Gambling on the poker machines is called 'playing the pokies' or 'pressing' and, along with drinking is a frequently deplored practice of people on unemployment benefits. It is Aboriginal mothers who are subject to the most severe criticism, including self-criticism, for their addiction to pressing. Whites, of course, engage in similar conduct in the town's well patronised clubs.
- 30 Cowlisshaw, *Black, White or Brindle*, p. 260.
- 31 In the fierce public debate which emerged after the Mabo High Court decision and its legislative consequences and subsequent related court decisions, a number of prominent figures, including academics, fomented the fears and what was called the 'uncertainty' of the public. See Gillian Cowlisshaw, 'Did the Earth Move for You?: The Anti Mabo Debate', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, 1995, pp. 43-63; Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity on a Postcolonial Nation*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 2-3; Hal Wooten, 'Mabo and the Lawyers', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, 1995, pp. 116-33.
- 32 Elizabeth Povinelli, 'The State of Shame: Australian Multiculturalism and the Crisis of Indigenous Citizenship', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, 1998, pp. 575-610.
- 33 A 'law and order' campaign in north-western New South Wales, which was code for racial resentment and hostility, saw the number of police assigned to Bourke rise in the 1970s to nearly ten times that of an equivalent all-white town. See Chris Cunneen, *Criminal Justice in North-West New South Wales*, Bureau of Crime Statistics, Sydney, 1987, p. 207. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody found that while under 25 per cent of the population, Aborigines represent 30 per cent of Australians in custody. See Gillian Cowlisshaw, 'Inquiring into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody', *Journal for Social Justice Studies*, vol. 4, 1990, pp. 101-15.
- 34 '[Aborigines] were subjected to discriminatory practices of quite extraordinary severity and detail. The sheer amount of legislative ingenuity and administrative effort that went into devising and maintaining these discriminatory regimes is truly astonishing.' John Chesterman and Brian Galligan, *Citizens without Rights: Aborigines and Australian Citizenship*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 9.
- 35 For example, see Nicolas Peterson and Will Sanders, *Citizenship and Indigenous Australians: Changing Conceptions and Possibilities*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998; Francesca Merlan, 'The Regimentation of Customary Practice: From Northern Territory Land Claims to Mabo', *The Australian Journal of*

- Anthropology*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, 1995, pp. 64-82.
- 36 T. H. Marshall [1950] cited in Chesterman and Galligan, p. 5
- 37 Rowse, 1998.
- 38 And earlier with officers of state institutions where he was incarcerated as a child and experienced extreme cruelty.
- 39 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Methuen, London, 1986, p. 16.
- 40 *Sun Herald*, 7 December 1997.
- 41 Butler, p. 41.
- 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.
- 43 Michel Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom' in J. Bernauer and D. Rasmussen (eds), *The Final Foucault*, MIT Press, Boston, 1988, p. 6.
- 44 Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs*, Gower Publishing Company, Hampshire, 1977. This kind of defence of a familiar cultural milieu against upward mobility or modernisation is not confined to working-class youth, but nor is it free of deep seated ambivalence which has been a theme of countless fictionalised and ethnographic accounts of social processes in the modern era. See Sennett and Cobb.
- 45 Stallybrass and White, p. 3.
- 46 Stallybrass and White, quoting Stamm, 1982, p. 55
- 47 Feldman, 'On Cultural Anaesthesia', p. 414.
- 48 Colin Johnson, *The Song Circle of Jacky and Selected Poems*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1986, p. 31.

A Benign Arithmetic: Taking Up Facts About Indigenous Health

Tess Lea

Of the many stories that are scripted to explain the sickly blood and diseased organs of Indigenous Australians, few explain how the facts of the matter are incorporated into the lives of health professionals, who in turn attempt a reproduction of their understandings into the subjects who are the objects of the epidemiological horrors. Bureaucratic and professional health knowledge is somehow ready-made, and its actors controlled by the organisational logic they play an unwitting part in reproducing. There is a prefabricated instrumentalism. But if we take as a starting point the active and agonised reflexivity of health professionals, the engaging force-field of pre-given ideology quickly morphs into a more animated and refractory set of exchanges.

My argument grows out of anthropological field research (1997–2000) and active participation in Territory Health Services (THS), the Northern Territory Government's preeminent agency for health and social welfare policy setting, program funding and service delivery. In this essay I explore the anxiety that surrounds the recurring concern that Aboriginal people do not take up health facts sufficiently to change their behaviour—so new facts must be delivered, in more powerful ways, to create the right response. The chief focus of my attention is the native (that is, bureaucratic and expert) theories of the role and participation of scientised knowledge into formulations of selfhood that are invoked by health professionals when they call attention to the best ways to transmit the health facts that have found them. But I am also concerned with the net effect of bureaucratic struggles with fact absorption and transmission on the administrators and practitioners at the centre of the agonising, and it is here

that I move to a more generalised style of argument as I search for ways of capturing the high momentum stasis that, I will argue, creates the lived imperatives of this domain.

Intervention learning

In my work, focusing on the bureau-professionals¹ of Territory Health Services as they grapple with the intransigencies of ill health in the colonised Aboriginal populations of the Northern Territory, the question of *what has to be done* quickly comes to the fore. The challenge is how to return the otherwise stable universal category of the healthy person²—here disrupted by the damaging vicissitudes of colonialism, poverty, loss of land, loss of culture, overcrowding, poor education, unemployment—back to a form of healthy order without further damaging Culture.

A public health physician who has worked long and hard on ways of presenting death information, exploring the persuasion power of pie charts versus bar graphs among various Aboriginal groups, says one of his most frequently asked questions is ‘do Aboriginal people know how unwell they are?’ This, he reflects, is very difficult to answer:

Clearly some, especially in the health field, have heard the statistics. Others have not. Almost all Aboriginal people have personally experienced the death of one or more family members. But even so, many seem surprised by our presentation of mortality information (which) began by acknowledging the grief of individuals and explicitly linked statistical information with personal stories and local issues... The implication is that information can remain abstract, external and cold, or it can become internal and warmed by contact with emotional feelings and personal experiences.³

The solution, he feels, lies in the empowering effects of well designed and meaningfully presented information. Statistics that have been warmed, demystified, their tears returned and secrets rendered.

Imagine a darkened room, blinds drawn shut, witnessing in the hushed artificial darkness a PowerPoint conspectus

transmitting the Epidemiology Unit's knowledge of Aboriginal disease categories, specially designed for inducting health professionals new to the Northern Territory:

Life expectancy at birth
Age adjusted mortality
Rate of death: 25-44 year olds
45-64 year olds
Infant mortality rate
Still birth rate
Infant growth rate

The multi-hued information-dense tabulations embedded within deep blue illuminations are interspersed with sombre commentary: 'Unusually, the female Aboriginal mortality rate is far worse than the male in all age groups'; or

We are actually getting bigger infants, birth weight is increasing, but after one year of age the weights aren't sustained. In one community we've studied, every single baby under 12 months of age is evacuated out in an emergency condition at least once in the first year of life. Injuries aside, the high death rates in the 25-44 year old category are from poor childhood health. These remain third world conditions in a first world country.

And on to the next visual: 'Like people in many developing countries, Indigenous people wage an *unnoticed struggle* against disease. Low birth weight and failure to thrive from malnutrition and under-nutrition is implicated in the onset of diabetes, heart disease and cancer later in life.'

Lights back on, a doctor in the audience asks what work is being done to explain why these rates are as they are. 'The data just says what happens, not why', he points out. 'If Aboriginal people *knew* that the high rate of infant illness contributed to these high death rates, they'd be interested in acting on it. In public health generally, are there people working on this?'

'Yes,' reassures the presenter, 'we are aware of this. But we are really needing community specific data so we can sit down with groups and say this is what is happening for you mob here. But we are a few years off ... We have new information

systems being put in place but it will still take a few years. The populations are pretty fluid too and that creates its own problems.³

Now this is not uncommon among the narrative formulations within health talk: from opening depictions of direness to hope, back to difficulty; out of overwhelming problem to the more that can be done, against the harshest of odds.⁴ The answer, with better data, is around the corner — but it will take time and be a densely problematic process. New electronic information management systems are on their way, which will speed up the rate of localised data collation and dissemination, but accurate capture of elusive Aboriginal people will remain difficult in the face of their multiple identifiers and high levels of (morbidity-induced) mobility.⁵ *When* decisions are reached about how to count the number of bodies as they move across the landscape, when alternate *noms de plume* can be readily called up by computer wizards for reliable cross-matching; when fibre-optic cables are laid to connect the remote area clinics together or when satellite transmissions suffer less disruptions; when the proliferating data sets are better standardised and coordinated; when the material is meaningfully translated; when the map of Aboriginal distinction perfectly overlays every available variable — when, we might say, all the secrets of Aboriginal ill-health have been revealed, digitalised and re-expressed — *then* we will be in a position to help Aborigines panic and re/act in a *more informed manner*.

Accounting

At this level, accounting for both the preponderance of health information and for the conscientious attention paid to how best to circulate it, is relatively straightforward. For the sociologist Ulrich Beck, risk consciousness is the defining feature of late modernity, where the production of more hazards has prompted high anxiety on a global stage.⁶ The modern subject is schooled in a style of continual reflexivity, imbued with ‘the idea that more and more aspects of social life can be subject to strategic transformation and modification on the basis of new knowledge and the capacity to discursively interpret conduct.’⁷ Yet under informational capitalism, the structural conditions for reflexivity about causes and effects is unequally

distributed.⁸ Why do ‘we’ know about being healthy? Because we are structurally enabled to produce and consume the information, we know about the risks, and in a liberal politic, information equates with power to act. It is a symptom of the ongoing existence of racist inequality in Australia that Aboriginal people are burdened by the premature death and illness captured in multiple enlistments of rates and figures, and it is a matter of social justice that they be informed of the outrage of their own unhealthiness. As Bob Connell puts it: ‘One measure of how far we are from a just society in Australia and New Zealand is the evidence of systematic social inequalities in morbidity, mortality and health care access.’⁹

Travelling facts

Pondering the route of travelling facts, bio-science ethnographer Joseph Dumit asks ‘Who takes up facts? Who does not? How are they produced and distributed?’¹⁰ Now, given our all-over dependence on categories of scientific knowledge for our lived sense of healthfulness, personhood and function,¹¹ it comes as no surprise if I gloss a bureaucratic answer as: it is ‘we’ who take up facts, and it is Aboriginal people who are deemed to not take them up. And it is to epidemiologists and remote area health workers that we turn in Territory Health to produce the transformational knowledge that will fashion appropriately alarmed responses. What we see played out in many pedagogic encounters within Territory Health Services is an infusing of a scientised knowledge, which (it is assumed) needs only be retold to be internalised, heated up to render its full scandalous import, appropriately translated to allow the reversals to flow.

But then again, as a representation of the native theories of factual transfer operating in this environment, such a simple one-to-one domino image of information transmission and uptake is more aspirational than actual, straightening out a more chaotic informatics phenomenon and a more complex conceptualisation of the stakes. It puts it *too* matter-of-factly, to imagine the pathway as a recitation of serious facts, their uptake by the health professionals, an attempted transmission to the subject objects, as all to do with a more-or-less simple matter of more-or-less complex translation. For translation,

as Walter Benjamin reminds us, is a mode, never a neutral transmitting device.¹²

Re-defleshing

Thinking about statistical groupings, Paul Rabinow makes the observation that:

individuals sharing certain traits or sets of traits can be grouped together in a way that not only decontextualises them from their social environment but also is non-subjective in a double sense: it is objectively arrived at, and does not apply to, a subject in anything like the older sense of the word (that is a suffering, meaningfully situated integrator of social, historical and bodily experiences).¹³

We are familiar with the desensitising power of statistics. But entering the world of public health, despite the sustained sense of outrage engendered in worried talk concerning what needs to be done to reduce the burden of disease carried by the population of Aboriginal bodies, there is curiously no visceral reality behind the depictions. It seems unnecessary to the creation of scandal — unlike say, epic depictions of fascism or mass starvation — that we experience, vicariously or visually, a sense of what chronic disease might mean as felt phenomenon. Does taking a piss feel different if you have kidney disease? What does embodying every known risk factor from an early age feel like?

Chronic disease, known to be eventually debilitating and life terminating, is as it is: a stripped and straightened syndrome, not an embodied state. It is even disembodied for its carriers. Aboriginal people are a population who are ‘young and very sick’ but they do not necessarily know it (yet), as they suffer diseases that ‘are relatively asymptomatic for prolonged phases’.¹⁴ The THS Preventable Chronic Disease Strategy, for instance, starts from the premise that ‘Chronic diseases, by definition, do not arise overnight. Instead, they *develop silently* over years until something serious happens that forces a person to attend a health centre and interventions are required *in the silent period* long before the disease itself appears.’¹⁵ Even trained health professionals may not know

it, as when remote area nurses diligently measure and record childhood growth patterns for the epidemiological register and are unable to see the (silent) stunting in the live-wire, energetic, frenetic little black bodies in front of their eyes.¹⁶ Here the visual image which does not have the look of disease, which lacks its encultured, performative dimensions, is not sufficient to activate intervention.¹⁷

Liisa Malkki similarly describes intact Hutu refugees as being unrecognisable to humanitarian aide administrators:

For the refugee ... wounds speak louder than words. Wounds are accepted as objective evidence, as more reliable sources of knowledge than the words of the people on whose bodies those wounds are found. So the ideal construct, the 'real refugee', was imagined as a particular kind of person: a victim whose judgement and reason had been compromised by his or her experiences. This was a tragic, and sometimes repulsive, figure who could only be deciphered and healed by professionals, and who was opaque even (or perhaps *especially*) to him- or herself.¹⁸

As Malkki describes it, the narrative testimony of refugees specifying political violence could not be trusted in the absence of corporeal wounds: here 'bodies could give a more reliable and relevant accounting than the refugees' "stories"'. For the asymptomatic diseased bodies of Aboriginal people, a reverse move takes place: their silent bodies cannot be trusted to tell an 'immediately ascertainable'¹⁹ story, an opacity which must be made transparent through more skilful professional investigation and tutelage. Health professionals, like the nurses who fail to witness properly, need to be told what to look for, assisted with new measuring instruments, practicum and appropriately presented information so they see the damage they can't see and which seems not to be felt, in order to help Aboriginal people feel the damage they don't yet feel and about which they know little.

Authoring, receiving and transmitting

It is day four of a week long remote area nurse in-service session for the East Arnhem Region, held in the Nhulunbuy

Hospital staff conference room, with this afternoon's session dedicated to discussing the Growth Assessment and Action program. In a suite of interventions across a continuum of tackling the seemingly well (prevention) to ameliorating the afflicted (best practice management), the program requires that all children will be monitored and their growth documented, with check points to trigger alarm carefully specified. As the remote area nurse with the longest tenure in the Arnhem region, it falls to Sherry Riley to lead her counterparts page by page through the latest Growth Assessment Action Reports which collate the annual clinic returns into a report specially designed for community feedback. In a conscientious aesthetic of cross-cultural simplification, minimal text is maximised in large print and vividly coloured drawings, and diagrams replace the dense exegesis of an internal-use epidemiology report. Interacting with Sherry are eight nurses who've already attempted to use the previous year's material in feedback sessions with Aboriginal health workers who are frequently used as the standardised representatives of the (poorly literate) 'grass-roots'. The nurses are cynical, they've seen it all before.

'This is about moving from interpreting the data to doing something about it', rallies Sherry. 'The question of "why bother?" is they're saying now that the first two years of life is really important for preventing chronic disease later on. So keep going guys — this really is important'. So they keep going, combing through the new layouts of this year's report in the light of their previous efforts at 'feedback'. The interactively negotiated verdict is that fluorescent lime-green and fire-truck red squares gridding under- and over-nutrition rates are the most successful in creating Aboriginal interest.

Page by page analysis of the report continues.

'It would be good to have everything on one sheet, using those colours'.

Another nurse: 'Do you think your health workers really understand it'?

Sherry responds: 'Well it's really important that you sit down with them and talk them through it because they're the ones most likely to tell others. I think it is good for people to get an idea of how many kids there are and what the

consequences are. They know the kids are skinny but they see them running around all day and they eat at least one meal so what's the problem?'

Inscription

Thus far I have attempted to follow the routes of health fact exchange in talk about what has to be done and how, to get some sense of how the necessity to act is created out of the projected absence that health professionals begin with. Recall this is an absence operating at a number of levels:

- The diseases are not necessarily felt by their carriers
- The diseases are certainly not felt by their interpreters
- The information is insufficient
- The information is insufficiently known.

Returning then to the porters who must carry the informational load into the Aboriginal domain, I want also to return to my opening curiosity about the visceral bond that is imagined to connect receivers and transmitters to the facts that have acted upon them. My question is how, in this world of stealthy disease, are health facts made visceral for their transmitters, who in turn hope to configure the same bio-effects within Aboriginal beings-in-the-world? But in fact, asked in this way, I may unwittingly be forcing a digression into a treatise on the imbibing of Western bio-social habits from infancy on to explain how concepts of risk and acceptance of health facts are instantiated within a suite of mundane practices—from a dutiful care to combine ascorbic acid when taking iron tablets, to dish washing.

My quest then needs to be rephrased, more simply, as: What creates the scandal and hope that surrounds the telling of facts, in the apparent absence of affect? And further, what kind of 'sensory alterity'²⁰ is imagined for Aboriginal people in schemes to repackage statistics in the name of internalisation? What I have in mind here is a reflection on what health professionals are in fact implicitly knowing when they assume facts act, beyond viewing this faith as a version of a classic enlightenment vision of the power of scientific knowledge to compel solutions.²¹ For while, like social scientists, health professionals seem to pay little attention to how health facts found them in the first place, at the same time, they know they have been

found.²² Facts have acted on them, both in terms of their own daily healthy lifestyle calibrations, and in terms of fuelling a zealous determination to share facts in the Aboriginal domain in the cause of betterment. A theory of socialisation and personhood is clearly operating in the following narrative by an environmental health officer, here describing her hygiene work with Tiwi women on Bathurst Island:

It is very interesting working in a project like this. It's probably the most interesting work I've ever done. I'm having to learn how to talk about hygiene to a group of people who do not take bacteriology for granted. When you and I were growing up our mothers sat us on their knee and told us not to pick our noses and eat it. 'Ooo, yucky' we were told when we went to pick up a discarded lolly from the floor; 'oo yuck' when we played with cat poo in the sand pit, so we grew up with it. Some of it was old wives tales—I was told not to sit in the bath when I was menstruating—crazy isn't it? But some of it was based on germ theory, so we got it from the beginning.

Barbara plans to fix this imagined osmotic gap by, among other things, showing Aboriginal women microbes (bacteria, viruses and parasites) under microscopes; by taking comparative agar prints of people's hands before and after washing; and by cutting up some chicken on a kitchen bench and then swabbing the bench, swabbing the bench again after cleaning it with a dirty rag, and swabbing it once more after cleaning it more thoroughly with the right chemical agents:

The ambient temperature up here is perfect for incubating the agar plates so within three days they should be able to look at the microscope images. I love looking down there, it's a whole different world. The little creatures sometimes build shelters for themselves, little cones, and it's fierce as well. Larvae will prey on other larvae, it is quite hierarchical. Really fascinating ... But most Aboriginal people are losing their eyesight by the time they are my age with diabetes, or trachomas, so we can't take it for granted that they'll be able to peer down a microscope. And the last

thing we want to do is to shame anyone. Aboriginal people care a lot about shame. So I'm thinking of also enlarging the images onto a computer screen. I've got lots of ideas really.

Barbara is not alone in thinking that social inscriptions in early childhood generate a psychological health-conscious interiority orienting the Western subject for life. Nor, as I have shown, is she isolated in considering that whereas 'we' bump into facts about managing our health on a daily and unavoidable basis, whereas our history and present infills with a flood of advice which help us act right, Aboriginal people do not have the same temporal and microscopic exposure to help them discern the underlying causes of their own illnesses. And the assumption that Aboriginal people are a psychological facsimile of ourselves,²³ which runs through the quests to change behaviour through (narrowed and simplified, even Aboriginalised) simulations of 'our' education, also draws on a philosophic and sociological tradition which likewise sees the body as a blank text to be marked, to in fact be constituted by, 'pedagogical, juridical, medical and economic texts, laws and practices'.²⁴

But Barbara is also blending in alternative understandings. Shame figures prominently, both in her recollection of the disgusted maternal figure who installs through admonition a shame-making contempt for bodily products and a lifelong (healthy) respect for the invisible stealth of germs; and in the reminder that Aboriginal people are acutely sensitive to shame, an incantation of a common injunction about Aboriginal cultural distinction that stands here not as a symbol of sharedness but as its inverse: a mysterious and singular attribute which must be carefully guarded against transgression.²⁵

Yet the cultural difference that seems to be about a distinct form of being is just as quickly displaced by the notion of a universal response to the hyper-real images of the microscopic. We could compare Barbara's widely shared faith in the microscope's power to provoke a particularised form of enlightenment,²⁶ with Emily Martin's discovery of the excess of meanings different viewers bring to the surreal and wondrous

images produced by cells under electron micrographs.²⁷ For Martin's American subjects, the space of inculcating a correct classification of these images of the intra-organic was instead occupied by deepening forms of wonder and perplexity, resulting in anything but closure. The one factor uniting her informants' wildly diverse interpretations of the scientifically derived scale reversal of human cells magnified onto a screen, even with an authority figure suggesting a particular interpretation, was acute displacement: 'as depictions of the body, micrographs show microscopic entities radically decontextualized from the context of the body ... the depictions ... could be anything at all, from jellyfish in the ocean deep, to star wars in outer space'.²⁸ So much for guaranteeing phobic hygiene mentality out of a form of (sur)realist revelation which, it appears, readily translates into deeper forms of concealment, even for the biologically pre-saturated population of English-speaking Americans.²⁹

Barbara's own enchantment with the marvellous activities of little creatures speaks eloquently of the theories of factual transfer and uptake operating among health professionals. These are germs with unique cultural and structural forms, an esoterica which makes sense for Barbara in terms of her understanding of the science informing environmental health, but this subtending ability to objectify the links is stripped of its heritage and reduced to a straight osmosis between the visual and the interior. Here it is the mesmerising effects of minitiation which will articulate a connection between germs, domestic cleaning habits, and bodily health; elsewhere it is pie-charts (not bar graphs), green and red (not pastel).³⁰ But the women might not be able to see things clearly because their eyes are diseased. In fact they are all diseased, they are, in the words of one remote area doctor, 'dying like flies' and in the annual report of a medical research faculty, buried in a sink of germs.³¹ If only they really knew it.

This switching between a sense of radically different sensory alterity and assumptions of cognitive sameness brings me full circle to the problem health professionals have diagnosed as a problem of information lack and gain. Where, in Malkki's world, it is 'physical, non-narrative evidence (which) assumes such astonishing power'³² in manifesting

refugee-ness, in Territory Health Services it is the pervasive narratives about what is wrong and what is to be done, made authoritative through symbolic calculations of the disembodied corporeality of Aboriginal disease patterns, which override the highly suspect physical testimony and lacklustre uptake of health actions by Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people do not know how unwell they are. But in the face of this determined finding, very little is known about Aboriginal *incorporation* of statistics, which we might consider is a contradictory not knowing in the midst of the intense time, effort and resources expended on translation calls and attempts, which seem to presume a non-absorption of some dimensions. And even this concern switches attention back to forms of anthropologised speculation about Aboriginal absences when it is the astonishing motivational power attributed to the statistical content that must be translated to achieve affective effect which puzzles me here.

Toward retaining this focus then, let's assume that Aboriginal ill-health has been statistically encountered. In fact, let's see this statistical encounter not as an orderly transmission of facts in tutorial sessions but as an informational deluge, a swamping of data which points to its own infinity and scarcity at one and the same time, layer upon already-sedimented layer of already-analysed and over-documented material of which there is never enough and which is always uncertain.³³ Picture how, within the health bureaucracy, and well beyond it, facts about the poor health of Aborigines come from random and arbitrary directions—dinner party conversations, news reports, corridor talk, policy documents, media articles, political speeches, academic papers or seminars, in aside descriptions of why a magnification of microscopic images is necessary, as mundane advice to use ti-tree oil or some other home remedy when visiting communities to avoid scabies infestation. Apologetic and condemnatory facts about poor Aboriginal health may erupt in the form of a scandalised re-recognition of racist inequality, a regularly recurring aghast discovery which proves, for instance, that government efforts toward reconciliation are not working hard or fast enough. In each case, the chaotic repetition and heterogeneous iteration and absorption of health facts, like all intersubjective

moments, have their own specific density of encounter,³⁴ and yet retain a wider patterning, drawing on sombre registers of quantification (the particular constellations of phenomena that warrant measuring) and a culturally established ‘trust in numbers’.³⁵ That is, on the subtending cultural and historical depth which imbues statistical representations with the power of logic and comprehensibility, enabling not just the authoring of factual research within health but also its widespread acceptance as transparent representations of a more serious ‘that’ which it purports to explain.

And yet, despite the randomness of direction from which facts about Indigenous morbidity, mortality and informational lack can come, it remains both a chaotic informatics and a deterministic phenomenon, with a tremendous sameness characterising the history and style of our professional worry and diagnosis for urgent remedial action. The social life of health facts become denser still, if we add a more than a chrono-historical dimension to the lateral replicating movements, reference to which implies further ‘fact-events’.³⁶ If I go back in time, I can trace the same concerns that Aboriginal people do not know the detail of their own pathology and/or what to do about it to the beginnings of colonial medicine in the Territory. Each of these would have their own structures of instantiation, which would need to be traced to honour the phenomenological dimension to health information multiplications. Yet in the archival work undertaken for this ethnography, the core of the formulations (ideas about ill-health and social disorder and what to do about it) seem to have shifted very little. Calls for community involvement and greater awareness, more research and better coordination abound and have done so for an astonishingly lengthy period. Among other effects, this contributes to participant feelings that things remain the same, despite the extensive re-analysis, renewed critique and widening sphere of interventions. Take, for instance, a summary report depicting Aboriginal health twenty-five years ago:

the poor health of Aboriginal people is a matter for concern ... comprehensive figures are not available, but it is known that in some areas Aboriginal babies die at a

rate five times greater than other infants in the Australian population ... Low incomes, poor housing conditions and lack of appropriate knowledge continue to affect the health of Aboriginal adults and children.³⁷

Impacting

If we imagine facts now as travelling and transmuting between encounters with interlocutors, as travelling like particles in heated animation, bombarding health professionals from indeterminate directions but operating according to a calculable set of rules³⁸—and further, if we imagine them as being able to be acted upon, heated up (deployed to create scandal or warmed to link to people's lives), or cooled down (the serious subject of serious epidemiological work, stripped of any post-modernist angst about claims to scientific method)³⁹ then I also am now imagining health professionals as akin to the suspended particle, held in place by the equilibrium created by the bombardment. An equilibrium created by the fact that there seems to be no room to move (the ill health is so complex, and ultimately caused by unretractable colonisation itself) and yet there is still so very much to be done. Always there is scope for better management, more research, less turnover, more commitment, more resources, more action, more coordination, more planning and review, more learning, more dialogue, more partnerships, more data and more information transfer.

The Brownian metaphor is mine, but it draws attention to the analyses health bureaucrats offer of their own inundation. Describing their own work, health professionals complain of feeling things are heating up, of the increasingly fast tempo (required) of their work, and of the rapidly accelerating overflow of things to know, read, keep abreast of, and participate in formulating. They pine for a time when the busyness stops and they can take stock and plan but they also say things are so dire, so critical, action is required now. They strive for new approaches yet complain that nothing changes, things have been as they are for so long now, getting worse in fact, if indeed we turn to the facts—and yet, on the horizon, around the corner, embedded within program success stories and deliverable with perfection of the data sets lies the good news

that improvement is possible, if the more that can always be done could only better handled through a redirection of effort and the design of a new approach. Each time, the problem diagnosis breathes new life into the proliferating need to share information with each other and with the other.

And it is this avalanche of catastrophe and opportunity, rather than any breaching of the skin barrier, that animates health statistics and persuades health professionals that a key requirement of betterment is that Aboriginal people know how sick they are through an appropriately alarming rendition of the available statistics. On the one hand, 'we'll all be rooned', it is such a catastrophe; and on the other, let's get to it, there's still so much to be done.

I am here attempting to invert the notion that it is Aboriginal disease—passive and silent—that predates professional alarm, to say we worry ourselves sick about their sickness via other means. To my question of what leads professionals to embrace health statistics as a tool for creating new alarm, I have suggested it is because alarm has already found them. To put this another way, the health statistics which do not speak for themselves, requiring, as they do, societal steep-age and interpretive training to be rendered,⁴⁰ create an alarm for health professionals as a result of their virulent infinity. An indexical infinity created by their inability to encompass all there is to know, or to achieve a perfectly translatable reformulation which creates the alchemy of Aboriginal transformation. The very possibility of proliferating statistical refinements in the name of change and cure creates a dynamic stasis which exhausts and compels its knowers toward more of the same, which must ever be measured (evaluated and reported in the hope it has indeed changed and cured) to reveal and revitalise its own momentum. Gap analyses index a recursive need for more research, action, intervention and data management. The well-designed pie-chart aimed at achieving Aboriginal transformation through apprehension is, in short, a culturally stylised abstraction of our own governing imperfections and as we are moved to act, so shall they be.

Reflection

This essay works through a puzzle: what do we know about the people undertaking forms of (paid) worry on behalf of Indigenous people; about *their* states of being; how they acquire and absorb information; and why they are so convinced that data sharing will be life transforming for others? At the most straightforward level, the mantra ‘knowledge is empowerment’ underpins the knowledge-sharing imperative that drives much of the outreach work in Indigenous public health. Lots of data is collated which describes just how unwell Aboriginal people in regional and remote Australia are, how early this starts, how complicated its causes are and so on. If this knowledge could only be made accessible, then everyone will be operating from a shared starting point. But what other convictions are health professionals expressing in their fervent belief that facts act? This essay looks more closely at the effect of statistical bombardment on health professionals themselves, arguing that the imperfection of the quest helps explain the ready-to-think quality of data translation strategies. For hope to stay alive, an elusive sense of what lies beyond is needed, if only we work harder to get there. Data and its translation feed a (hope-creating) battle with futility. Like the Borges map, the task of statistical completion is without end, with many impediments and distractions in the way. The flurry creates urgency and stress; a somatic impact that easily becomes a cultural homologue. If I am so animated by these portraits of suffering, surely the ‘subject-objects’ will be too—only more so, because this important information that I have privileged (stressful, partial, never-completed) access to, is denied to them, because of unequal states of power-knowledge.

The idea that futility might be psychically and organisationally productive took me to a greater puzzle about Indigenous social policy: how does a domain as automatically self-reflexive and smart as Indigenous health continue to serve up the same kinds of answers, over and over again? How are bureaucratic logics made so resilient given they are subject to relentless critique? An extended ethnographic account of how fiercely independent and intelligent people learn to do deeply bureaucratic and repetitive things can be found in my book *Bureaucrats and Bleeding Hearts: Indigenous Health in Northern Australia* (UNSW Press, 2008). This book looks at the circular and narcissistic quality of bureaucratic rationalities, and how there seems to be no way that interveners can imagine

improvements that omit their involvement ... except as a desired future redundancy when working beyond the limits of wit and energy to solve the intractable issues of neo-colonial health inequality will stop being so necessary. In a similar way to how the search for data becomes an end in itself, a sense of the sheer impossibility of this endpoint fuels what I term ‘remedial circularity’. In Indigenous health, futility and optimism operate as a hologram, ultimately being one and the same thing. Viewed from one angle, the hologram shows crises—impossible and endless work—and then, with a twist of representation and a dash of institutionally ordained optimism peppered with compulsory good news stories, the same issues magically transform into challenges (not problems) and opportunities that can be acted upon with the right attitude and means. It is all a form of suspended animation, or what I call here ‘dynamic inertia’, a description that could well hold true of many forms of work and life in this alienated, information-saturated, time-fractured age.

Notes

- 1 The term ‘bureau-professionals’ was introduced by Henry Mintzberg to capture the simultaneity of professionals trained in personal social services with their location in contemporary welfare programs and government-funded bureaucratic structures. Mintzberg, *Structure in Fives: Designing Effective Organizations*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1993.
- 2 Joseph Dumit, ‘A Digital Image of the Category of the Person’, in Gary Lee Downey and Joseph Dumit (eds), *Cyborgs & Citadels: Anthropological Interventions in Emerging Sciences and Technologies*, School of American Research Press, Sante Fe, 1997, pp. 83-102; Andrew Metcalfe, ‘Living in a Clinic: The Power of Public Health Promotions’, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 4, 1993, p. 31.
- 3 Tarun Weeramanthi, ‘Knowledge, Language and Mortality: Communicating Health Information in Aboriginal Communities in the Northern Territory’, Territory Health Services, Darwin, undated, p. 7.
- 4 See Joseph Dumit’s account of the different modalities of resting answers in the research that is yet to be done in Dumit, How to Do Things with Science: Facts as Forces in an Uncertain World, paper presented at Travelling Facts: Inscription—Materiality—Translation, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Institute for Advance Study, Berlin, 12-13 July 2000, p. 26.
- 5 The reference is to explanations which cite as causes of high mobility the need to attend funerals, to care for sick relatives or to seek tertiary treatments. See, for example, John Taylor, ‘Measuring Short-term Population Mobility among Indigenous Australians: Options and Implications’, *Australian Geographer*, vol. 29, 1998, pp.125-37 and Nicolas Peterson, ‘An Expanding Aboriginal Domain: Mobility and the Initiation Journey’, *Oceania*, vol. 70, 2000, pp. 205-18.
- 6 Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Toward a New Modernity*, Sage, London, 1992.

- 7 Robin Bunton and Roger Burrows, 'Consumption and Health in the 'Epidemiological' Clinic of Late Modern Medicine', in Robin Bunton, Sarah Nettleton and Roger Burrows (eds), *The Sociology of Health Promotion: Critical Analyses of Consumption, Lifestyle and Risk*, Routledge, London, 1995, pp. 206-22.
- 8 Scott Lash, 'Reflexivity and its Doubles: Structure, Aesthetics, Community', in Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (eds), *Reflexive Modernisation: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994, pp. 110-73.
- 9 Robert W. Connell, Class, Health and Justice, Address to the first Conference of the Public Health Association of Australia and New Zealand, Sydney, 1987, p. 1; as cited in Metcalfe, p. 35.
- 10 Dumit, 'A Digital Image', p. 83.
- 11 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Free Association Books, London, 1991; Emily Martin, *Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture — From the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994.
- 12 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Fontana/Collins, New York 1955, repr. 1977.
- 13 Paul Rabinow, 'Artificiality and Enlightenment: From Sociobiology to Biosociality' in Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (eds), *Incorporations: Zone 6*, Urzone, New York, p. 243.
- 14 Joe Wright, *Community X: Final Report. Evaluation of Existing Health Care Service Delivery and a Measured Health Needs Analysis of a Remote Aboriginal Community in the Top End of the Northern Territory*, Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services, Darwin, 1996, pp. 5-6.
- 15 Ministerial Statement, August 1999, 'Preventable Chronic Disease Strategy' (Eighth Assembly First Session 10/08/99, *Parliamentary Record No.18*), available at <http://www.nt.gov.au/nths/public/lcdc/preventable/minister.html>; emphases added.
- 16 Alan R. Ruben and Alan C. Walker, 'Malnutrition among rural Aboriginal children in the Top End of the Northern Territory', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 162, 1995, pp. 400-403.
- 17 This is well established as a syndrome in the sociology of medicine literature. Although the subject of extensive revisal and critique, Talcott Parson's classic original concept of the 'sick role' firmly established the idea that the sick person has to perform unwellness and actively comply with the injunction to noticeably desire improvement to attain legitimacy. Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, *The Free Press*, Glencoe, 1951. In contemporary literature, post-Foucault, this notion has been expanded to a cover a more continuous set of rights and duties: a shift captured in the term 'health roles'. See Robin Bunton and Roger Burrows, 'Consumption and Health in the 'Epidemiological' Clinic of Late Modern Medicine', in Robin Bunton, Sarah Nettleton and Roger Burrows (eds), *The Sociology of Health Promotion: Critical Analyses of Consumption, Lifestyle and Risk*, Routledge, London, 1995, pp. 206-22.
- 18 Liisa Malkki, 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism and Dehistoricization', in Karen Fog Olwig and Kirsten Hastrup (eds), *Siting Culture: the Shifting Anthropological Object*, Routledge, London, 1997 p. 232; original emphasis.
- 19 On the cult of the immediately ascertainable fact, see: Alan Feldman, 'Violence and Vision: The Prosthetics and Aesthetics of Terror', *Public Culture*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1997, pp. 24-60.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 21 See Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1986.

- 22 Much attention has been paid to the role of science, with its sense of the molecular, combined with the societal desire to control epidemic-prone and unruly populations in setting the scene for the growth of public health and the numerical charting of patterns of illness. See, for example, Deborah Lupton, *The Imperative of Health: Public Health and the Regulated Body*, Sage Publications, London, 1995. With brilliant exceptions, such as Martin and Downey and Dumit, these analyses tend to imagine a world of ideas as discrete from, but locked in a tight embrace with, broader social conditions, and say very little about the interactive dimension of factual deployment, the pan-handling with which people are making sense of their worlds and with the facts before and within them.
- 23 Barry Morris, 'Making Histories/Living History', *Social Analysis*, vol. 27, 1990, p. 85.
- 24 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1994, p. 117.
- 25 For a more detailed discussion of shame in terms of its structure/structuring effects, its role in Australian anthropology, and its place in Walpiri life see Jennifer Biddle, 'Shame', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 12, 1997, pp. 227-39.
- 26 My fieldnotes overflow with informant references to the use of microscopes as a strategy of information sharing to compensate for what is diagnosed as the Aboriginal lack of germ theory. The health education work of the Aboriginal Resource Development Service (ARDS) — formerly the Uniting Church Mission — in East Arnhem Land is a case in point (see Richard Trudgen, *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die: Towards an Understanding of Why the Aboriginal People of Arnhem Land Face the Greatest Crisis in Health and Education since European Impact*, Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Inc., Darwin, 2000, p. 246.
- 27 Martin, pp. 167-82.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- 29 Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1999.
- 30 Consider also Alan Feldman's critique of realist strategies of depiction in which he points out 'the ethic of the correctness of the gaze, the concept of homioiosis — the resembling gaze that matches perception to what should be sighted — is the ground of realist aesthetics and should be placed under question in any inquiry into politicized vision'. Feldman, p. 41.
- 31 MSHR, Menzies School of Health Research, Northern Territory, Australia. *1994-1995 Annual Report*, MSHR, Darwin, p. 12.
- 32 Malkki, p. 233.
- 33 See also Kim Fortun's arresting description of information deluge in her study of the Bhopal environmental disaster, 'Locating Corporate Environmentalism: Synthetics, Implosions, and the Bhopal Disaster', in George E. Marcus (ed.), *Critical Anthropology Now*, School of American Research Press, Sante Fe, 1999, pp. 214-15.
- 34 In Dumit's terms, 'a material history of modification ... which in each situation effects one or more intercorporeal transformations'. Dumit, 'How to Do Things with Science', p. 6.
- 35 Theodore M. Porter, *Trust In Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995.
- 36 Dumit, 'How to Do Things with Science', p. 6.
- 37 Australian Reference Service, *The Australian Aborigines*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1976.
- 38 In addition to the required linkage to science as an authorising grounding for health facts (however indirectly stated), there are rules of fact talk, traced by Joseph Dumit in relation to the work of socio-linguist J. L. Austin and also

specified by Bruno Latour in *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1987.

- 39 I am familiar with the rhetorical deployments of statistics having myself called upon front line researchers to deliver dramatic statistics to heat up a political speech or policy document.
- 40 As Rayna Rapp puts it: 'As many sociologists and historians of science and technology have pointed out, the objects of scientific and medical scrutiny must be rendered: they are rarely perceived or manipulated in their "natural" state. It is their marking, scaling, and fixity as measurable, graphable images that enable them to be used for diagnosis, experimentation or intervention. The power of scientific images may, in large measure, be attributed to their mobile status: they condense and represent an argument about causality that can be moved around and deployed to normalize individual cases and theoretical points of view.' Rayna Rapp, 'Real Time Fetus: The Role of the Sonogram in the Age of Monitored Reproduction', in Downey and Dumit, pp. 31-48.

Antipodean Aesthetics, Public Policy and the Museum

Ben Dibley

Introduction

The Museum of New Zealand—Te Papa Tongarewa has proved a complex cultural site that has generated much public debate and a growing academic literature. In this essay I depart from critical approaches that resolve the analysis of this museum by pointing out its programmatic inconsistencies, internal contradictions, representational inadequacies or its institutional paradoxes.¹ While these formulations do get at matters important to the operations of Te Papa, what is striking in these analyses is that the museum somehow always disappoints the critic by not living up to its stated aims or some ideal of the museum form.² Rather than establishing Te Papa as an object for reform as these critics have done, I read it as an archive for reflection on the cultural predicament of an antipodean modernity.³ To this end this essay proceeds by initially establishing the wider movements in which the institution is located. Then it maps how these movements have shaped the museum's formulations and its reception by focusing on the period leading up to its opening. Finally, it considers a particular antipodean style of representation associated with these movements. In this context, I conclude, Te Papa might best be understood as a monument to 'antipodean camp'.⁴

Before entering into a discussion of the museum proper it is helpful to sketch the pressures shaping the wider economic, social, political and cultural scapes whose contours marked Aotearoa/New Zealand (A/NZ) in the closing decades of the last century; the period in which Te Papa was conceived and came into operation as a public institution.⁵ Principally this

concerns the accumulation crisis that drove the restructuring of the nation's economy according to the dictates of global capital and a correlated discursive project which sought to reinvent the national community in its wake. Here, as elsewhere, in the face of the historic failure of the import-substitution tradition, an economic-political project embracing neoliberalism was advanced. In A/NZ this was contemporaneous with a particular socio-cultural project that sought to reinvent the national community in a postcolonial image which has gone by the name of biculturalism.

Restructuring

Following a twenty-year period of economic decline, exacerbated by the loss of the country's traditional market for agricultural products when Britain joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 and by the OPEC shocks beginning the same year, A/NZ's unemployment, inflation and public debt by the 1980s had spiralled to levels unprecedented in the postwar period. By the mid 1980s the import-substitution policies that sought to protect the domestic economy from the vagaries of global capital flows had all but run their course. Driven by the imperatives of this global transformation in the regime of accumulation and by the rhetoric of neoliberal public policy, there followed a rapid dismantling of the legislative shock absorbers of the domestic defence tradition, which subsequently exposed the country to the full force of the world economy. In a relatively short period A/NZ's economy was transformed from one of the most highly regulated in the world to one of the least regulated. Domestic production came to be dominated by international money markets, large corporations and international speculators, in particular those from Australia, Japan and South-East Asia. Labour market legislation individualised employment contracts between employers and workers, and changes to immigration legislation encouraged wealthy and highly skilled immigrants from 'non-traditional source countries' to counter negative migration and encourage investment. Substantive steps were also made towards the dismantling of the welfare state. Ironically enough, it was following the election of the Fourth Labour government in 1984 that A/NZ made this switch to

Thatcherism, initiating a restructuring program in which the old ‘laboratory of welfare statism’ was to be transformed into the new ‘laboratory of economic rationalism’.⁶ Celebrated by *The Economist*, among others, the New Zealand Experiment, as Jane Kelsey labelled it, was for a time widely advocated by neoliberal economic and public policy analysts as a model for the world to follow.

The once pervasive discourse of an utopic little Britain in the South Seas — liberated from the class inequalities of the Old World and free from the racial injustices of much of the New World (expressed in the popular refrain ‘the best race relations in the world’) — became an increasingly unsustainable settler mythos following these transformations in the regime of accumulation. As Simon Durning observed: the ‘strategies of state minimalization, deregulation, orientation to global, and especially East Asian, markets fractured the colony’s hegemonic, if blind, understanding of itself as an outpost of British culture and civility’.⁷ Nevertheless, the ideologues of neoliberalism made a direct assault on the residue of this once pervasive myth, arguing that it was ‘the culture’ that was holding the country back from accelerated economic growth. The Porter Project (a state sponsored neoliberal think tank), for example, stated: New Zealand’s only constraint to achieving its potential was the ‘people’s inability or unwillingness to adapt, change and thus compete successfully in the global economy’.⁸ This concern to install a neoliberal ethos in the citizenry aimed to move ‘the culture’ from one of egalitarianism and ‘welfare dependency’ to an internationally viable ‘Enterprise Culture’ based on competitive individualism. It also sought a cultural change in regional orientation away from the old economies that had so painfully rejected the country, towards the new economies of the Asia-Pacific rim through which its future might hopefully be secured.

Biculturalism

The downturn in the market for A/NZ’s agricultural production, along with the abandonment of domestic defence policies of import-substitution that promoted a local manufacturing sector, increasingly propelled rural Maori into the ranks of the urban working class. This process had

begun in the 1950s and accelerated over the 1960s and 1970s, leading to the disembedding of many Maori from their tribal affiliations. Facilitating this process and all the while seeking to ameliorate social fragmentation, was the welfarist policy of assimilation. Here Maori were to be progressively 'raised' to the level of Pakeha (settler heirs) through policies in education, health, housing and social welfare. Assimilation remained the dominant model of social policy until the late 1970s. The situation of tribal disembedding and institutional racism gave rise to a resurgent anti-colonial activism over the late 1970s and 1980s.⁹ Significantly, this political movement secured the legal recognition of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi that the British Crown had signed with Maori chiefs to regulate relations between Indigenous communities and European settlement. Although the Waitangi Tribunal was initially established in 1975, it was not until the passing of the Treaty of Waitangi Amendment Act in 1985 that the Treaty was officially acknowledged and the Tribunal was given the power to investigate Maori claims of injustice and loss back to 1840. From the early 1990s, government policy developed to acknowledge past wrongs and to supply compensation to recapitalise tribes.¹⁰

Associated with this development was a wider project which sought to acknowledge and bridge the economic, social and cultural fault-lines of a nation whose inheritance was forged in the violence of an earlier globalising movement of capital: nineteenth century British colonisation. To rekindle, for Pakeha at least, good faith in the future possibility of harmonious race relations, a prominent and increasingly state sanctioned discourse of biculturalism announced its utility. Imported from Canada, the concept began to be used in academic circles from the late 1960s.¹¹ From the mid 1980s it has increasingly been advocated in public policy and has emerged as a legislative practice of compensation for Maori. It has also served as a discursive practice of reconciliation, to promote a new 'postcolonial' national imagining. This has seen the Treaty of Waitangi recognised, not only as the basis for Maori to seek redress for loss and injustice, but as the constitutional origin of the nation, being increasingly articulated as such in public culture over the 1980s and 1990s.¹² Here, anti-colonial efforts by Maori to reassert aspects of their traditional culture

and political autonomy, have given rise to a socially liberal desire among Pakeha to reinvent the national imagining and ‘change the culture’ (in ways that are not theoretically, historically and politically unproblematic) from the colonial to the postcolonial.¹³

Unsurprisingly, the relationship between the processes of economic restructuring that forced the hegemony of a utopic little Britain to fragment, and the project of biculturalism that emerged to replace it, has been contentious. For many commentators of the time, restructuring and biculturalism appeared to be deeply antagonistic agendas. Wendy Larner and Paul Spoonley, for example, enthusiastically emphasised biculturalism’s progressive potential:

Biculturalism in Aotearoa/New Zealand provides a powerful expression of progressive and inclusive forms of politics based on self-defined identities and reflecting local sensitivities ... [It] provides one of the most effective counters to New Right ideologies and the harsh realities of the monetarist experiment based on market competition and individualism.¹⁴

Other commentators conceded it was not a coincidental conjuncture that as A/NZ became increasingly assimilated into a new regime of global economics and cultural politics it simultaneously became ‘more sensitive to [cultural] differences’. For example, cultural critic Mark Williams found biculturalism rather less oppositional. More cautiously, he wrote, ‘biculturalism has clearly been advantageous in fashioning an acceptable national self-image in a world where colonialism and racism are bad for business’.¹⁵

Te Papa

In 1993, shortly after her appointment as CEO for the new museum project, Cheryl Sotheran acknowledged the mission with which the state had charged her institution.¹⁶ Embracing the logic of public sector restructuring, she was to deliver a museum product that would generate a wide audience, while ‘bedding down’ biculturalism within the institution. Presciently, Sotheran announced that when it eventually

opened, the museum would be ‘as popular, in Kiwi terms, as Disneyland’.¹⁷ This rhetoric confirmed that the legislative authority was purchasing an ‘info-tainment experience’, which, if the museum was to fulfil its statutory obligations, must ‘create a new audience’ whose demographic profile extended traditional patterns of attendance and more adequately mapped the contours of the country’s population. Yet this demand for a new expanded audience was only partially motivated by a desire to democratise the museum. For, while making a substantial fiscal investment in the project—a purported NZ\$320 million—the state was making no ongoing commitment to meet the full costs of its operations once the museum opened. Rather, it sought to construct conditions in which the museum would have to market itself to attract the discretionary income of consumers and corporate sponsorship.

In addition to this deliberate policy of under-funding, to further foster this marketisation, both central government and the city council funding commitments were contingent on the museum reaching visitation ‘performance targets’. In this policy environment the museum’s administrators identified their task as that of ‘repositioning’ their organisation as part of the entertainment industry.¹⁸ Here Sotheran opined: ‘The great private sector institutions of Disneyland and McDonalds have a lot to teach us.’¹⁹ The museum took these lessons very seriously. A themed architectural environment was commissioned that owed as much to fun-park and shopping mall design as it did to museum architecture.²⁰ The innovative theme parks, heritage sites and leisure destinations of Europe and North America were toured by senior staff.²¹ US Themed Attraction trade shows were attended and UK leisure industry consultants hired. Multimillion dollar theme park-like rides were invested in.²² Front-of-house staff or ‘hosts’—a term borrowed from Disney—were comprehensively trained in the ‘customer focused’ and ‘scripted’ manner pioneered by Walt Disney and McDonalds founder, Ray Croc. All of which was to facilitate the ‘repositioning’ of the museum product, which, while entry was to remain free, delivered customers to numerous ‘revenue-generating opportunities’. A ‘McDisney’ service model, then, was to deliver national identity.²³ In the words

of its promotional material, the museum would constitute a product 'different from any other museum ... Playful, imaginative, interactive, bold, even cheeky — Te Papa is quintessentially Kiwi, stunningly high-tech, and seriously fun'.²⁴

If Disney, in part at least, provided the inspiration for the repositioning of the museum, it was the exhibition Te Maori which provided the catalyst for the 'bedding down' of biculturalism. Te Maori opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art New York in 1984 and subsequently toured the United States, before returning to A/NZ and touring the main centres in 1985.²⁵ Famous for its radical aesthetic decontextualisation, Te Maori was a complex event: complex in its organisation, reception and effects.²⁶ It was celebrated by some cosmopolitan academics and criticised by others. For James Clifford, Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine it exemplified museological practices by which an indigenous community was able to represent itself on an international stage.²⁷ Raymond Corbey read the primitivist reception of the exhibition in the United States as uncomfortably repeating elements of colonial displays of alterity,²⁸ while Nicholas Thomas argued that the essentialist elements of Te Maori's primitivism had been used strategically to empowering effect for Maori communities.²⁹

Locally, the exhibition was contentious among Maori. There were heated debates as to whether taonga — cultural treasures — should tour the United States. Communities were divided over the exploitation of taonga as art in a major foreign institution: should taonga remain in a context in which they had mana — power and prestige — and a non-aesthetic function, or should they be used to communicate Maori culture and skills to a wider audience and increase Maori international prestige?³⁰ The experiences of local museums in organising this exhibition were salutary and led to widespread recognition that such institutions needed to dramatically renegotiate their relationship with their Maori constituencies.³¹ On its return tour of A/NZ the collection of taonga, each imbued with complex tribal associations, caused unprecedented issues of protocol for tribal Maori as they negotiated their relationship with each other, the tribal lands in which the taonga were rooted and the whakapapa with which they were invested.³² For Pakeha, American interest in

Te Maori was seminal in generating a large national audience for its return home tour. As columnist Rosemary McLeod glossed it, for a broad public the exhibition ‘suddenly showed Maori cultural heritage as art as much as artefact, as unique and as a sleeping asset’.³³ Published at a time when hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders were flocking to see Te Maori, *Nga Taonga o Te Motu: Treasures of the Nation*—the report that initiated the Te Papa project—aimed to capitalise on that asset:

The outstanding success of the exhibition Te Maori in the US has demonstrated that the taonga of New Zealand, sensitively presented and appropriately housed, is a potent force in the processes of identifying our culture in all its richness and diversity and enhancing its relevance to all New Zealanders.³⁴

In the planning stages of the museum project the processes of ‘identifying’, ‘defining’ and ‘promoting’ ‘our culture’ saw the development of various mechanisms that would deliver biculturalism.³⁵ Conceptually the institution was founded on a threefold division based on the relations the Treaty of Waitangi established between *tangata whenua* (people of the land), *tangata tiriti* (people of the treaty) and *Papatuanuku* (the environment).³⁶ Architecturally this was to be expressed in a biculturally themed structure; ‘cleaved’—a drawing apart while pulling together—by the space devoted to the Treaty of Waitangi (see below) which also linked the two major exhibition zones given over to Maori and Pakeha exhibitions.³⁷ This was to facilitate the exhibitions’ articulation in relation to the institution’s narrative of bicultural nationalism. Bilingualism was deployed across the institution: Maori language—*te reo*—alongside English was to be used in all museum labels and signs. However, biculturalism was not to stop at the level of representation. A bicultural organisational structure was implemented, exemplified by the appointment of Cliff Whiting as the museum’s *kaihautu*, which was an institutional position equivalent to that of the CEO. Decision-making processes throughout the planning stages of the project were to involve extensive consultation with *iwi* on the principle

(Mana Taonga, discussed below) that those with cultural objects in the museum should contribute to how they are managed and interpreted. In addition, competency in te reo was set as a performance target for all staff.³⁸ All of which was to institute 'one of the first public institutions in the country modelled on bicultural commitment'.³⁹

Sensibly, then, recent analyses of the museum project position it as an 'alternance between neoliberal wisdom and the postmodern vision of Aotearoa/New Zealand's biculturalism ... that has characterised the country in the last two decades'.⁴⁰ However, it is interesting to recall that the position of the museum project's relationship to the broader structural and discursive realignments that the country was experiencing was confused in early commentary. While for some it did exemplify a paradigmatic shift in cultural policy contingent on those forces, for others it appeared to embrace an inappropriate nostalgia for the public policies of the protectionist era. For those inclined to read it as harking back to older, superseded policy initiatives, some emphasised its resonances with economic policies of the domestic defence tradition, while others emphasised its affinity with social policies of assimilation.

For some commentators the construction of a state sponsored multimillion dollar theme-park devoted to national identity had resonances with the discredited 'Think Big' policies, which had promoted projects like the hydropower scheme at Clyde that had been the last gasp of the 'domestic defence' tradition.⁴¹ That the public face of the new museum project was Wallace Rowling, a former Labour leader from the protectionist era, further encouraged the reading of the proposed museum as a public policy anachronism. Certainly, in his efforts to enlist support for the project Rowling did express discontent with the current policy direction, stating: 'a country needs more than monetary policy to weld its people together and create a sense of identity'.⁴² When the finalised plans of the new building were released for public perusal (to a less than warm reception) and details of government expenditure on the project were disclosed (to a scandalised media), the national press ran editorials whose headlines rang with the alarm of a certain *deja vu*: the *Sunday Star* warned

‘Another Grandiose Monument to Insanity’, while the *New Zealand Herald* feared ‘Think Big Reincarnate’.⁴³ For these commentators the project looked like an unwarranted turning away from the tight fiscal policy that two terms of a Labour government had told New Zealanders was the tough medicine that would ultimately be good for them. The hydropower scheme, which was (finally) plugged into the national grid the week the museum project was given the go ahead, was years behind on its projected completion schedule and vastly over budget. Characterising the museum as a massively expensive ‘job creation’ scheme, commentators declared the ‘taxpayer’ could not afford a ‘Cultural Clyde Dam’.⁴⁴

Other commentators, less concerned with the museum’s apparent nostalgia for superceded economic policy, found it to be a social policy anachronism. A number of commentators were suspicious of the museum’s conceptual architecture and its totalising thrust, which they felt threatened to flatten out cultural difference in a mode that disconcertingly appeared to mimic the ambitions of mid-century social policy. Apirana T. Mahuika, architect of the policy—*Mana Taonga*—governing the museum’s relation to Maori material culture, *iwi* (tribe) and other cultural artefacts, appeared to explicitly articulate this agenda.⁴⁵ Mahuika argued, with ‘the Papa Tongarewa concept many Maori tribes have paused a while [with their calls for Maori nationhood] to see what cultural recognition will result from the proposed Museum’. ‘Maori disquiet’, he continued, ‘can be calmed only by a program such as that proposed by Te Papa Tongarewa.’⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, the protocol that Mahuika designed has been controversial among tribal Maori. Indeed, Te Arawa scholar and museum curator Paul Tapsell has argued that the passing over of the customary lore of local *iwi*, Te Ati Awa and Ngati Toa, inherent in the *Mana Taonga* concept, abrogates the museum’s obligations to *tangata whenua* under the Treaty.⁴⁷ In this way the nationalised *taonga* of Te Papa repeated the colonial injustices experienced by the *tangata whenua* of the Wellington region.⁴⁸ Luit Bieringa, former director of the National Art Gallery of New Zealand, found the Te Papa concept to be ‘an out-dated piece of assimilatory nationalism’. He argued:

in confusing [cultural] unity with similarity [it] represents an order reminiscent of 1950s and 1960s assimilation. Not only does it speak of centralised bureaucracy of the kind being demolished by the present Government, but it is also out of step and shows an insensitivity to the aspirations of ... [Maori] communities.⁴⁹

Cultural critic, and Te Papa curator to be, Ian Wedde, was to argue along similar lines. The museum's concept, he contended, 'runs absolutely counter to Maori culture's fundamental base in tribal regionalism' and was 'surely an anachronism at the turn of the century'.⁵⁰

However, unsurprisingly, when in July 1994 Jim Bolger, then the conservative prime minister, unveiled the foundation stone for the new institution with Maori elder, Te Ru Wharehoka, he represented the museum not as an anachronism but as the very symbol of the success of the country's program of structural adjustment and cultural realignment. Addressing his audience, Bolger congratulated himself on his foresight in giving the project the 'go-ahead' in those 'dark days' of the 1992 recession. For him the museum not only announced a new national 'cultural maturity' and 'celebrated', as the inscription on the foundation stone read, 'the many journeys and identities of all the communities and peoples of New Zealand', but it also stood as 'a symbol of the economic recovery' after a long period of decline.⁵¹ In Bolger's estimation, then, the museum looked to symbolise the cultural and economic reorientation the nation required to successfully compete in the global market place.

Providing some analytical coordinates for Bolger's proposition in an early analysis of the project, cultural policy analyst and former director of the National Museum, Michael Volkerling, argued that the museum represented a paradigmatic shift: as the 'key institution' for 'New Zealand cultural policy' reorientation, the museum marked the 'transition from Fordist to post-Fordist forms of economic and social organisation'.⁵² Exemplifying the 'fondness for spectacle' shared by New Right regimes in periods of economic austerity, Volkerling contended, the project's bicultural 'exotic hybrid' provided the cultural emblem for, and a marketing strategy

deployed internationally by, 'New Zealand's post-Fordist state'.⁵³ While, anticipating Te Papa's CEO's entrepreneurial characterisation of the country's citizenry as 'energetic, can-do, determined progressive risk takers',⁵⁴ Volkerling contended that the museum's hailing of the national subject provided 'an ideological sanction of the methodological individualism which underpins its economic strategies'.⁵⁵

If its early commentators were confused with regard to the museum's policy orientation, this perplexity was mirrored by the disorientation of the museum's first visitors. Despite a tense relationship with its public while under development, there can be little doubt that the museum was enthusiastically received in the immediate period after its opening. In the first nine weeks after Te Papa opened in February 1998, it had already received two thirds of its projected annual visitation of 750 000 (which had been considered by some as hopelessly optimistic). By its first birthday it had exceeded two million visitors. And, if quantitative measures were impressive, so too were its qualitative evaluations, the overwhelming majority of visitors (ninety-three per cent) reporting satisfaction with their 'experience'.⁵⁶ Sotheran had achieved her theme park audience. Yet, while Te Papa's McDisney template sought to deliver for its visitors predictability, via an architecture, design environment and corporate culture that solicits 'the recurrence of reassurance', being physically perplexed and cognitively confused became a frequent, if not *the* experience for many of the museum's early visitors.⁵⁷ Swiss architect Mario Botta, for example, found Te Papa's interior cluttered and confused.⁵⁸ He opined: 'It's a labyrinth, not a space ... life is already complicated — why do we have to make it more confused.'⁵⁹ A post-occupation evaluation of 'the museum experience', conducted several months after opening, indicated that the failure to successfully deliver a coherent space that could be readily negotiated both cognitively and physically was causing distress among visitors. Overwhelmed by the museum's indeterminate narrative and pedestrian flows, these visitors complained they had little choice but to be thrown into an itinerary of 'drifting'.⁶⁰ Echoing this experience, the recently elected Labour Prime Minister, Helen Clark, reported finding the museum's interior 'jumbled and incoherent'.⁶¹

The perplexity of many of the visitors to a museum intended to designate ‘Our Place in the World’,⁶² might support Hamish McDonald’s speculation in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He contended that Te Papa emphasised the predicament of New Zealanders — Pakeha at least — who ‘fear they are globalising themselves out of existence’.⁶³ Perhaps, then, like Fredric Jameson’s Bonventure Hotel, Te Papa might stand as a ‘symbol and analogue of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects’.⁶⁴

While in recent commentaries on Te Papa this line of analysis hasn’t been rigorously pursued, considerable criticism has been levelled at the museum’s embrace of aesthetic practices that have been designated postmodern. Here the strategies of mockery, irony, and bricolage deployed by the museum are read by its critics as imported rhetoric that ‘lampoons’ the sincerity of national feeling;⁶⁵ pastiches that undermine the seriousness of high culture;⁶⁶ a frivolity that diminishes the importance of ‘disinterested knowledge’;⁶⁷ or, ‘an endless circulation of simulacra’ that ‘deny the traumas of the past’.⁶⁸ While these arguments do highlight important issues to be debated, there is a tendency to read the museum’s aesthetics as derivative of certain discourses and practices — ‘the linguistic turn’⁶⁹ or ‘the new museology’, for example.⁷⁰ This risks missing what might be the novelty of Te Papa’s exhibitions as a particular response to the scapes in which the museum is located. In using these strategies the museum is not simply a local representative of the cultural dominant of late capitalism,⁷¹ nor, while certainly indebted, is it simply derivative of broader intellectual orientations and institutional practices. Rather, I think, its embrace of mockery, irony and bricolage might be the articulation of a distinctive camp style associated with a locally inflected set of cultural practices reflecting the experience of an antipodean modernity.

Camp

Te Papa’s opening exhibitions, which were devoted to the culture of the settler heirs positively, revelled in their own

artifice. As their titles suggest, the exhibitions flaunt a camp sensibility whose fabrications, I contend, are explicit exercises in both putting on, while pointing out, the manufactured-ness of national culture and identity. These include the ironic distancing of ‘Exhibiting Ourselves’, the irreverent bricolage of ‘Parade’, the nostalgic montage of ‘Golden Days’, and the ambivalent play of ‘Signs of a Nation’.

However, what goes unanswered in analyses that suggest that these names are simply strategies imposed by populist “post-modern” scholarship, is their particular saliency and operation under local conditions.⁷² In his analysis of a particular antipodean cultural sensibility, Nick Perry writes:

Viewed historically, antipodean camp is explicable as a ‘post-colonial’ aesthetic for the beneficiaries of colonialism. In its classic form it signals the attempt to outflank the cultural categories and control of metropolitan powers without, however, directly confronting either the historical conditions of its own possibility or the counter narratives which the historical pattern continues to generate.⁷³

As exercises in putting on, while pointing out, the fabrications of national identity, which steadfastly avoid any direct confrontation with imperialism and its legacies, Te Papa’s opening exhibitions on settler culture share in this aesthetic.

This is exemplified in Te Papa’s exhibition devoted to the Treaty of Waitangi, ‘Signs of a Nation’. This exhibition mediates between the Pakeha and Maori sections of the building and is posited by one of its curators as a ‘liminal space between two worlds’.⁷⁴ This ‘cathedral like space’ is flanked by two large veneered panels carrying the full text of the Treaty — one a Maori version, the other in English — while a huge suspended glass relief forms its centrepiece. This is composed of enlarged facsimiles of fragments of the Treaty, indexing the document’s fraught history. As the exhibit’s architect explains: ‘The front layer contains all the signatures of the Waitangi document, while the rear layer represents, in moulded and coloured surfaces, the parchment as ravaged by ill treatment and hungry rats’. This display was designed to demonstrate that the Treaty is ‘historical, monumental, awe

inspiring, troublesome ... [and] relevant'. Put succinctly, this 'monumental treatment' sought to 'convey a sense of wonder'.⁷⁵

While Foucault has observed, 'history is that which transforms documents into monuments',⁷⁶ what has been at stake for critics of 'Signs of a Nation' is the waning of historicity that monumentalising entails. While this treatment might aim to evoke wonder at the historical significance and the contemporary ambiguities 'that abound in the current deployment of the treaty', for Paul Walker and Justine Clarke, wonder dissolves into the depthlessness of distraction. 'In the space of Jameson's paradigmatic Bonaventure or the reality of an interior like Te Papa's', they write, 'everyone is distracted, no one is looking.'⁷⁷ For Walker and Clarke, 'Signs of a Nation' ironically hails less the citizenry subject of the postcolonial nation-space, and more the distracted subject of the postmodern. Similarly, for others, 'Signs of a Nation' signalled a vacuous-ness in which the originary violence and the continuing trauma of settler colonialism are voided in the interests of the expediencies of the national present.⁷⁸ It seems, then, for these critics, 'Signs of a Nation' as an exercise in wonder — of feeling history — shares in the processes that Benjamin has characterised as the aestheticising of politics and which Jameson up-dates as the hysterical sublime.⁷⁹ No doubt these are useful coordinates for reading the exhibition as symptomatic of the transforming scapes in which Te Papa's citizens/consumers are located.

Yet, for all this, wonder here perhaps shades less into distraction and more into the self-mockery of antipodean camp. How else to read an exhibition that seeks to aggrandise the inelegant bureaucratic prose of the Treaty's articles, which decidedly lack any of the grandiloquence of, say, the Declaration of Independence that is immortalised in stone in the Washington Memorial? Or, for that matter, an exhibition that seeks to monumentalise, with gigantic simulations of the Treaty fragments, artefacts that will forever lack the aura of the originals that is dramatised with low light and high security at the National Archives. Wonder fails here, not because everyone is distracted, although that might be so, but because of a sensibility that could only enter into wonder in bad faith. It is this insincerity in the face of wonder, not

distraction, which makes it the target of attentive critics' complaints that it has avoided a direct confrontation with colonial history and its trauma. If it was sincere, the implication seems to be that the pathos of violence and trauma would demand that wonder give way to historical resonance; antipodean camp would — as it hasn't in this exhibition — slide into 'the New Zealand sublime' diagnosed by Jonathan Lamb.⁸⁰

Perry reads the aesthetic practices with which he is concerned as 'Antipodean permutations on the angel of history allegory'. However, the sensibility of these practices shades not into a Germanic melancholy but toward an antipodean camp. This is because cultural identity here, Perry contends, 'is not seen as shaped and limited by the restraining given-ness of the ruins [of modernity], but as derived from the prospects that such debris opens up for future scavenging and bricolage'.⁸¹ Te Papa's critics have inadvertently acknowledged a quasi-Benjaminian 'trash aesthetic', as Denis Dutton does, when he disparages the museum's resemblance to a 'junkshop', and as other commentators have done when they deride Te Papa for its postmodern populism.⁸² What is unacknowledged, however, when it is read simply as a derivative site or an 'obstinately provincial place', is the complexity of the patterning of the sensibility informing Te Papa. This is one that is decisively marked by a Pakeha futurism which fabricates a national identity from the detritus of the global culture industry and the ruins of colonialism. The museum's opening exhibitions, I think, are more adequately understood as a monument to this sensibility, whose complexity is perhaps best comprehended as antipodean camp.

Notes

- 1 These approaches are taken respectively by Paul Williams, 'Te Papa: New Zealand's Identity Complex', *New Zealand Journal of Art History*, 2003, no. 24, pp. 11-24; Senka Božić-Vrbančić, 'One Nation, Two Peoples, Many Cultures: Exhibiting Identity at Te Papa Tongarewa', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 2003, vol. 112, no. 3, pp. 295-24; Anna Neill, 'National Culture and the New Museology', in Anna Smith and Lydia Wevers (eds), *On Display: New Essays in Cultural Studies*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2004, pp. 180-96; Amiria Henare, 'Rewriting The Script: Te Papa Tongarewa the Museum of New Zealand', *Social Analysis*, vol. 48, no 1, 2004, pp. 55-63.
- 2 See Ben Dibley, 'The Museum's Redemption: Contact Zones, Government, and

- the Limits of Reform', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2005, pp. 5-27.
- 3 For two different perspectives see Peter Beilharz, *Imaging the Antipodes: Culture, Theory and the Visual in the Work of Bernard Smith*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997; J. G. A. Pocock, 'The Antipodean Perception' in his *The Discovery of Islands*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 3-23.
 - 4 Nick Perry, 'Antipodean Camp', in Nick Perry (ed.), *Hyperreality and Global Culture*, Routledge, London, 1998.
 - 5 The appellation 'Aotearoa/New Zealand' is caught in processes of transliteration and mistranslation that characterise postcolonial exchanges. It is not the country's officially sanctioned title. A/NZ is increasingly used by the country's socially liberal to designate (a desire for) an emerging bicultural national condition. See Paul Spoonley, 'Constructing Ourselves: The Post-colonial Politics of Pakeha', in M. Wilson and A. Yeatman (eds), *Justice and Identity: Antipodean Practices*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 1995, pp. 96-115.
 - 6 For one account of these processes see Jane Kelsey, *The New Zealand Experiment: A World Model for Structural Adjustment*, Auckland University Press and Bridget Williams Books, Auckland, 1997.
 - 7 Simon During, 'Postcolonialism and Globalization: Towards a Historicization of their Inter-relation', *Cultural Studies*, 2000, vol. 14, no. 3/4, p. 391.
 - 8 Cited in Kelsey, p. 327.
 - 9 See Ranginui Walker, *Struggle Without End: Ka whawhai tonu matou*, Penguin, Auckland, 1990.
 - 10 For a recent collection of essays see Michael Belgrave, Merata Kawharu and David Williams (eds), *Waitangi Revisited: Perspectives on the Treaty of Waitangi*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2004.
 - 11 The term biculturalism was introduced into the country's academic discourse by Eric Schwimmer, *The Maori People in the Nineteen Sixties*, Blackwood, Auckland, 1968.
 - 12 Donna Awatere's essentialist Indigenous critique set the agenda for 'race relations' debate in late twentieth century A/NZ. Over this period numerous "Treaty-oriented" histories have reorganised the country's past-present alignments. See, for example, Anne Salmond, *Two Worlds: First Meetings between Maori and Europeans*, Viking, Auckland, 1991; James Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1986; Judith Binney, *Redemption Songs: A Life of Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1995.
 - 13 See Spoonley; Aril Bell, 'Authenticity and the Project of Settler Identity in New Zealand', *Social Analysis*, vol. 43, no. 3, 1999, pp. 122-45.
 - 14 Wendy Larner and Paul Spoonley, 'Post-colonial Politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand', in Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis (eds), *Unsettling Settler Societies*, Sage, London, 1995, p. 61.
 - 15 Mark Williams, 'How Many Cultures Make a Culture?', *New Zealand Books*, October, 1996, p. 12.
 - 16 See *Museum of New Zealand—Te Papa Tongarewa Act*, Government Printers, Wellington, 1992.
 - 17 Simon Collins, 'Big Bangs for "Disneyland"', *City Voice*, 10 June 1992.
 - 18 Cheryll Sotheran and Cliff Whiting, 'The Positioning of the Museum of New Zealand Te Tapa Tongarewa', in *Museums: A Forum for Museums, Stakeholder Representatives and Marketing Support Agencies: conference proceedings*, Waikato Museum, Hamilton, 1995, October 1-3.
 - 19 Cited in Collins.
 - 20 Pete Bossley, *Te Papa: An Architectural Adventure*, Te Papa, Wellington, 1998.

- 21 Ken Gorbey, Report on an Investigatory Trip to Europe and the United States of America, The Museum of New Zealand—Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, 1994.
- 22 Details are reported in ‘Themed Attractions Project: Report for the period 1 February 1997 to 28 February 1997’, Themed Attractions: Concept and Design Documentation vol. 1, File Number TH35-05, Museum of New Zealand, Wellington.
- 23 George Ritzer and Allan Liska ‘“McDisneyization” and “Post-tourism”: Complementary Perspectives on Contemporary Tourism’, in Chris Rojek and John Urry (eds), *Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, pp. 96–109.
- 24 *Te Papa: Redefining the Word Museum: Tourism Trade Manual 1998–99*, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, n.p.
- 25 Sidney Moko Mead, *Te Maori, Maori Art from New Zealand Collections*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1984.
- 26 For different contemporary perspectives see those of Maori scholar Sidney Moko Mead, ‘Concepts and Models for Maori Museums and Central Centres’, *AGMANZ Journal*, 1985, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 3–5.
- 27 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1988, pp. 209–10; Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, ‘Introduction: Museums and Multiculturalism’, in Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (eds), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1991, p. 2.
- 28 Raymond Corbey, ‘Ethnographic Showcases, 1870–1930’, in J. Nadreveen and B. Parekh (eds), *The Decolonization of the Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*, Zed Books, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, London 1995, p. 71.
- 29 Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism’s Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 184. Stephen Turner offers an important corrective to Thomas’s position in ‘Sovereignty, or the Art of Being Native’, *Cultural Critique*, vol. 51, 2002, pp. 81–2.
- 30 Simon During, ‘What Was the West?: Some Relations between Modernity, Colonisation and Writing’, *Meanjin*, vol. 48, no. 4, 1989, p. 769; Clifford, pp. 209–10.
- 31 Te Maori corresponded with the advent of trenchant anti-colonial activism that deemed Maori the only adequate interlocutors for their taonga, radically questioning the legitimacy of Pakeha scholarship. For more see Walker; Paul Tapsell, ‘From the Sideline: Tikanga, Treaty Values and Te Papa’, in Michael Belgrave et. al., pp. 266–82; Ngapine Allen, ‘Maori Vision and the Imperialist Gaze’, in Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn (eds), *Colonialism and the Object*, Routledge, New York, 1998, pp. 144–52.
- 32 Tapsell defines whakapapa as ‘a systematic framework ordering descendants under common ancestors; genealogical descent lines connecting gods with all things living’. Paul Tapsell, ‘The Flight of Pareraututu: an Investigation of Taonga from a Tribal Perspective’, *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 1997, vol. 106, no. 4, p. 326.
- 33 Rosemary McLeod, ‘The Mighty MoNZ: Artless at Heart?’, North and South, October, 1994, p. 76.
- 34 *Nga Taonga o Te Motu: Treasures of the Nation: National Museum of New Zealand: Te Marae Taonga o Aotearoa: A Plan for Development, Report of the Project Development Team*, Wellington, November 1985, p. 7. Here, on the one hand, a ‘nationalised’ Maoriness looked to provide a suitable export image for a cosmopolitan gaze and one around which a renovated settler nationalism could cohere. On the other hand, such Maoriness gave Indigenous communities unprecedented access to an international stage for self-representation and a

- certain cultural capital to exploit.
- 35 *Museum of New Zealand—Te Papa Tongarewa: Report on the Interviews*, 22 September 1988, p. 9.
- 36 A Concept for the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, adopted by the Project Development Board at its meeting held on 4 April 1989, Wellington. For an analysis of early commentary on the museum's conceptual architecture see Ben Dibley, 'Museum, Nation, Narration', *Culture and Policy*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1997, pp. 97-118.
- 37 Bossley, *Te Papa: An Architectural Adventure*. Pete Bossley, 'The Treaty,' *Architecture New Zealand*, 1998, February, pp. 64-7.
- 38 See *Te Papa: Annual Report*, 1 July 1997 - 30 June 1998, Museum of New Zealand, Wellington.
- 39 Sotheran cited in Dibley, 'Museum, Nation, Narration', p. 105.
- 40 Lorenzo Veracini and Adrian Muckle, 'Reflections of Indigenous History inside the National Museums of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand and outside of New Caledonia's Centre Culturel Jean-Marie Tjibaou', *The Electronic Journal of Australian and New Zealand History*, 2002. Also see Neill, and Williams.
- 41 See Nick Perry, 'Upside Down or Downside Up? Sectoral Interests, Structural Change and Public Policy', in John Deeks and Nick Perry (ed.), *Controlling Interests: Business, the State and Society in New Zealand*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1992.
- 42 Cited in 'Time to Delay Museum Plans', *The Evening Post*, 28 February 1991.
- 43 Brian Rudman, 'Another Grandiose Monument to Insanity', *Sunday Star*, 31 May 1992; 'Think Big Reincarnate', *New Zealand Herald*, 29 May 1992.
- 44 Rudman.
- 45 Apirana Mahuika, 'Maori Culture and the New Museum', *Museum Anthropology*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1992, pp. 9-11.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 Tapsell, *Taonga*, pp. 156-217, 179.
- 48 Both Te Ati Awa and Ngati Toa had claims before the Waitangi Tribunal, which argued 'that the aboriginal title to Wellington's reclaimed harbour-front [on which the Museum stands] has never been extinguished by the Crown and that it continues to belong to the tangata whenua', Tapsell, *Taonga*, p. 179.
- 49 Bieringa, pp. 11-2.
- 50 Wedde, 'Museum of New Zealand: Te Papa Tongarewa', p. 43.
- 51 Bolger cited in *The Evening Post*, 27 July 1994.
- 52 Micheal Volkerling, *The First Fifty Years: The State, Leisure and the Arts in New Zealand since 1945*, Auckland University Winter Lecture Series, unpublished manuscript, 1995, pp. 5, 4. Also see Michael Volkerling, 'Death or Transfiguration: The Future for Cultural Policy in New Zealand', *Culture and Policy*, 1994, no. 6, pp. 7-28.
- 53 Volkerling, *The First Fifty Years*, p. 13.
- 54 Sotheran cited in *Newsletter: Museums Association of Aotearoa New Zealand*, Te Ropa Hanga Kaupapa Taonga, 1997, vol. 6, no. 2, n.p.
- 55 Volkerling, *The First Fifty Years*, p. 13.
- 56 See Colmar Brunton, *What Keeps Them Coming: Visitor Satisfaction Research Quantitative Report*, Museum of New Zealand, Wellington, 1998. For qualitative findings see Lisa McCauley, *Customer Satisfaction: Findings from the Qualitative Research Conducted at Te Papa—May 1998*, Museum of New Zealand, Wellington, 1998.
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- 58 *The Dominion*, 20 August 1998.

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- 67 Williams, p. 21.
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- 71 Paul Walker and Justine Clark, 'Museum and Archive: Framing the Treaty', in Anna Smith and Lydia Wevers (eds), *On Display: New Essays in Cultural Studies*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2004, pp.163-79.
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- 76 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Routledge, London, 1989, p. 7.
- 77 Walker and Clarke, pp. 169-72.
- 78 Božić-Vrbančić, p. 313; Williams, p. 21.
- 79 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, Fontana, London, 1973, p. 234; Jameson, pp. 76-7.
- 80 See Jonathan Lamb, 'The New Zealand Sublime', *Meanjin*, vol. 49, no. 4, 1990, pp. 663-75.
- 81 Perry, 'Antipodean Camp', 13. This is also suggested by the title of Chris Healy's book in which he offers his own antipodean permutation on the angel allegory. Chris Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 6.
- 82 Denis Dutton, 'New National Museum Resembles a Junkshop', *New Zealand Herald*, 21 May 1998, p. 15.

‘There is nothing that identifies me to that place’: Indigenous Women’s Perceptions of Health Spaces and Places

Bronwyn Fredericks

There is a growing body of literature within social and cultural geography which explores notions of place, space, culture, race and identity.¹ The more recent works suggest that places are experienced and understood in multiple ways and are politically embedded.² Memmott and Long—who have undertaken place-based research with Australian Indigenous people—present the position that ‘place is made and takes on meaning through an interaction process involving mutual accommodation between people and the environment’.³ They argue that places and their cultural meanings are generated through one or a combination of three types of people-environment interactions. These include a place that is created by altering the physical characteristics of a piece of environment and might encompass a feature or features which are natural or made; a place that is totally created via behaviour that is carried out within a specific area and therefore that specific behaviour becomes connected to that specific place; and a place that is created by people moving or being moved from one environment to another and establishing a new place where boundaries are created and activities carried out.

All these ideas of places are challenged and confirmed by what Indigenous women have said about their particular use of and relationship with space within several health services in Rockhampton, Central Queensland. As my title suggests Indigenous women do not see themselves as ‘neutral’ or non-racialised citizens who enter and ‘use’ a supposedly neutral

health service. Instead, Aboriginal women demonstrate they are active recognisers of places that would seek to identify them. That is, they as Aboriginal women didn't just 'make' place, the places and spaces 'made' them. The health services were identified as sites within which spatial relations could begin to grow with recognition of themselves as Aboriginal women in place or instead create a sense of marginality in the failure of the spaces to identify them.

The women's voices within this essay are drawn from interviews undertaken with twenty Aboriginal women in Rockhampton who participated in a research project exploring 'how the relationship between health services and Aboriginal women can be more empowering from the viewpoints of Aboriginal women'.⁴ The assumption underpinning this study was that empowering and reempowering practices can lead to improved health outcomes.⁵ The focus of the study arose from discussions with Aboriginal women in the Rockhampton community as to what they wanted me, another Aboriginal woman, to investigate as part of a formal research project.⁶ Throughout the interviews women shared some of their lived realities including some of their thoughts on identity, the body, employment in the health sector, service delivery and their notions of health service spaces and places.

Sommerville, also writing on Indigenous place, states that it is both a 'specific local place and a metaphysical imaginary' and 'has been noted as an organising principle in Aboriginal ontologies and epistemologies by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian scholars'.⁷ Moreton-Robinson articulates how Indigenous peoples' sense of place, home and belonging is configured differently to that of migrants.⁸ She asserts that 'there is no other homeland that provides a point of origin, or place for multiple identities. Instead our rendering of place, home and country through our ontological relation to country is the basis for our ownership'.⁹ While colonisation has dispossessed and displaced Indigenous peoples and may have altered Indigenous connection, access and control within and of place, it does not alter the reality of Indigenous place and Indigenous ownership of place. This is even in the case of large metropolitan cities such as Perth, Melbourne and Sydney.¹⁰

Sommerville contends that there are 'complex political realities of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships in place'.¹¹ Some places offer multiple and contested stories of experiences and experiences that may contain deeply held beliefs and emotions; people may even display affection, nostalgia, dislike or other emotions in relation to place.¹² Furthermore, as emotions and behaviours develop, they may also then be 'maintained by groups of people having collective experiences at those parts of the environment and reinforced through feedback from ongoing experiences at such places'.¹³ Through this process it is possible that places can enact the politics of inclusion and allow for multiple identities and marginalised groups or enact 'a place-based politics which is reactionary, exclusionary and blatantly supportive of dominant regimes'.¹⁴ Along with these understandings of place is a body of work which relates to the everyday practices of belonging within or to place. De Certeau constructs the notion of belonging as a sentiment which develops over time through the everyday activities.¹⁵ Simple, everyday activities are part of the process of appropriation and territorialisation and, following de Certeau, non-Indigenous peoples' attachment and belonging to places based on the dispossession of Aboriginal people and on their everyday practices of the past two hundred years. Such attachments, however, do not erase Indigenous ownership.

In discussing place, space will also be considered since place and space are so 'deeply implicated in one another it is difficult to consider one without the other'.¹⁶ Mills explains that 'space is a question of relations: perceptions of and actual relations between the individual, the group, institutions and architecture, with forces being perceived as restricting or enabling movement or access'.¹⁷ Gregory and Urry add to this by explaining that 'spacial structure is now seen not merely as an arena in which social life unfolds, but rather as a medium through which social relations are produced and reproduced'.¹⁸ What can be understood is that spaces act as almost social texts, which convey messages of belonging and exclusion and produce and reproduce power relations within society.¹⁹ They are, as suggested by Foucault, sites of social struggle and contested realms of identity.²⁰ In this way, places are in mutually constitutive relationships with spaces.²¹

There is no doubt that there are complex interrelations between who women are — women's identities — and the environments or spaces and places in which women live.²² The aspects of women's identities such as class, race, ethnicity, culture and sexual orientation must add to the complexity of the interrelationships between women and space and place.²³ Women therefore don't just physically use spaces and places; they interpret, represent, and produce and reproduce space within places. It is therefore probable that non-Indigenous women and Indigenous women will interpret the same place as different spaces and that these may be in conflict with each other.²⁴ Indigenous women's understandings of place and space within health services operate within this complex context.²⁵ Indigenous women I interviewed refer to a particular site, building or a feature as a place. They see space as the interactions and activities within a defined area and understand that they convey texts of society, including inclusion, exclusion, domination, control and power. They additionally see purposefully defined areas within a larger place as spaces based on what the function of that defined area is. That is, a site could be a place, and an allocated area within the place could be called a space. Areas where a program may do outreach work or create an area within their space for an activity might also be called spaces and all the things that are within that space are important to acceptance of that space. For example, the Community Health and Public Service building and the Mammography Unit are places. The Accident and Emergency section at a hospital is a space within the place called the Hospital.

Entering health places

Generally health services or health programs that are specifically established for Indigenous people are operated by governments or by Indigenous community-controlled non-government organisations. Indigenous women referred to both forms of service during their interviews. While the women referred to the different forms of services they additionally made references to the spaces and places within those services. The women provided clear understandings of how they access these services and the powerful way that their idea

of place impacts on their interactions with those services.

One of the older Indigenous women interviewed gave a very clear example of place and a space within a government operated health service. She explained that when the Queensland government developed their new Community and Public Health complex and opened it in 1998, they placed the Indigenous Health Program 'in the back room'. She made reference to a past era in Australia when the 'blacks were in the back'.²⁶ The era she refers to is when Indigenous people were expected to stand at the back in shops and wait to be served or sit in the back of the cinema. In this situation the woman explained that when Indigenous people entered the building they had to ask a non-Indigenous person at the large reception desk at the front of the building where to go to get to the Indigenous Health Program and if they could go there.

As the entry was large and with a highly public waiting area, other people could view who was going in and out through this entry. In addition, in the foyer, on the wall facing the door hangs a print of what is considered one of the masterpieces of Australian art: Frederick McCubbin's triptych titled *The Pioneer* (1904). This work depicts the pioneering spirit of the white settler in the bush. In addition to this print there are two other prints by the same artist on the two adjoining walls of the foyer. Both of these paintings — *The Lost Child* and *Lost* — represent young white children on their own, facing away from the painter's gaze, lost in the bush. The image of the lost child is presented in a range of Australian imagery and writings;²⁷ Torney suggests that being a lost child in colonial times was no more common than drowning or death by fire and that the idea of lost children in the bush hides a greater anxiety.²⁸ Pierce asserts that it is about Anglo-Australian adult anxieties of what they perceived as a hostile and indifferent environment and their feelings of alienation within the Australian bush.²⁹

The prints, then, are not simply three prints within an empty space. They assert an emphasis on European settler history and the claiming and clearing of Aboriginal land and erasure of Aboriginal sovereignty. They act as markers, centring white power within the building and making Indigenous women visiting 'non-locals' or 'strangers,' allocated the use

of the 'back room' along with Indigenous men and children. Within this foyer, colonial power is inscribed and conveyed to Indigenous women without a word even being said. It is an extremely political space which reflects expressions of cultural memory, belonging, identity and citizenship.³⁰

The Indigenous Health Program was established within the new premises to be part of the full selection of programs offered under the unitary banner of primary and public health, yet it became a site which manifested a form of social exclusion. By having to ask a non-Indigenous person to enter the area named Indigenous health, non-Indigenous people were placed in a position of domination and Indigenous people in a position of subordination. Non-Indigenous people were positioned as the owners of the place in much the same way as they control who has citizenship and who has the right to grant citizenship. Indigenous re-engagement with the site has then been mediated via a form of surveillance and cultural guardianship at the main entry and exit of the building. There is an irony here in that while Queensland Health was trying to bring everyone together within the one building (place), the symbolic representation and configuration of the front reception desk, the paintings and the Indigenous Health Program 'out the back' (spaces) were underwritten by the on-going colonial stories of the settlers who made the nation and the negation of the sovereign rights of the Indigenous population.

In this way, Indigenous peoples and Indigenous sovereignty are suppressed and white Australians are able to exercise racialised power and their possessiveness of place.³¹ Furthermore, the possessiveness and whiteness exercised is productive in that it constitutes both the white and the Indigenous subject within the place and space. Moreton-Robinson contends that possessiveness is 'predicated on the taking of other peoples' lands and resources for the benefit of Empire'.³² This exercising of possessiveness commenced with Britain taking possession of Australia and hasn't stopped. In exercising white possessiveness within health environments a range of other behaviours and emotions are demonstrated. For example, it might result in Indigenous resistance via reluctance to access or participate in the services and for the place to be clearly identified as a white place or space. A

number of the women interviewed clearly stated that as a result of the move into the new building they ceased to go to the Indigenous Health Program and that they were aware that there was a large reduction in the number accessing the Indigenous Health Program.

This was not about transport to the new premises as transport is available to clients through the program. The 'drop off' could be attributed to a form of resistance to the epistemological position of the Department about how Indigenous people should access their health service through the new building, to the exercising of white possession and to the reproduction and affirmation of Indigenous dispossession.³³ A decision was made at a later date by the Rockhampton Health Service District that the old Indigenous Health Program premises in Phillip Street would be renovated and that the program would move back where it became 'business as usual'. Indigenous people did need to go to the new premises in Bolsover Street for some of the other community and public health programs. The program still operates from the Phillip Street address today and while the buildings there are accessed by Indigenous people they are still owned by Queensland Health. From this perspective, Indigenous sovereignty is still denied. The McCubbin paintings, while now faded from sunlight, still hang in the building foyer facing the entry.

One of the women discussed the new Community and Public Health building along with the other new buildings being built in the hospital grounds and in the region. She stated: 'It's no good putting up big buildings, I'd rather go to Amy's tin shed.' The tin shed was the site of the Bidjerdii Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service's premises prior to September 2000. At that time the service operated from a renovated tin shed attached to the rear of a legal business opposite the new Community and Public Health building. 'Amy' refers to Amy Lester who was the chief executive officer of Bidjerdii, a community-controlled, not-for-profit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health service. It is operated by an Indigenous board of directors, an Indigenous chief executive officer and where possible it employs qualified Indigenous staff.

It became very apparent during the interviews that the Indigenous women felt comfortable accessing the ‘tin shed’/ Bidgerdii and they articulated that their needs as Indigenous women were not only discussed but considered and included. It was obvious that there was a sense of belonging to Bidgerdii and that there were connections to the people and place where Bidgerdii delivered its health services. In that one woman naming it ‘Amy’s tin shed’, she also demonstrates an act of protest against white domination over what kind of health services Indigenous peoples ‘should have’.³⁴ In members of the Indigenous community finding what was a storage shed and gaining planning, landlord and funding approval to renovate it to develop and deliver a health service demonstrates incredible drive to shape and plan a site of belonging and attachment by and for Indigenous people. Furthermore, it demonstrates their capacity to develop a place to root identity and to ensure regulation of their environments within the development delivery and accessing of health services.³⁵ Dixon and Durrheim explain that people are ‘agents who are able to appropriate physical contexts in order to create, here, a space of attachment and rootedness, a space of being’.³⁶

What was clearly demonstrated in the interviews was the degree to which spaces and places can be recognised as culturally specific and gender-specific and as non-Indigenous. That is, places and spaces can be seen as broader community places and spaces and as women’s places and spaces, but not inclusive of Indigenous women. They can also be seen as Indigenous places and spaces or non-Indigenous places and spaces. Soja cautioned against seeing and treating places as depoliticised arenas in which people live and act.³⁷ Women’s services are predominately operated in Australia by non-Indigenous women and—unless they are aware of the complexity of the interrelationships between women and the spaces and places they occupy³⁸—then they may be ignorant of the way their services and the spaces and places their services occupy can be privileging to themselves and disadvantage other women. Women interpret, represent, and produce and reproduce space within places and in this way women’s spaces and places can be additional sites of social struggle and contested realms of identity even while proclaiming to be

‘women friendly’.³⁹

Women’s places and spaces may continue to constrain and oppress and disempower Indigenous women, rather than improving health and wellbeing or empowering Indigenous women. In discussing her sense of place and space, one of the women was quite particular about her overall needs and her woman’s health needs. She was uncomfortable about accessing the Rockhampton Women’s Health Centre due to the feelings within the place and the spaces within the centre. Her feelings of discomfort were around not having a connection with the place as a place for Indigenous women. Other women also expressed discomfort with the Women’s Health Centre. For example, one woman commented that it was ‘culturally uncomfortable’. Several Indigenous women highlighted that the Women’s Health Centre was obviously a place for women, but for ‘white women’. The natural order of the place is as a location for white women and as a site of belonging and attachment for white women.⁴⁰ This is evident in the voice of one Aboriginal woman who explains that:

it’s not an Indigenous woman’s space, the design of the space. It is a totally white designed space. There is nothing that identifies me to that place. I just won’t go there as a client because I don’t feel they cater for me as a black woman.

This woman did not get a sense of belonging, nor does she have any sense of identification or connection with the place as an Aboriginal woman. She came back to the point later when she was discussing notions of place. In reference to the Women’s Health Centre, she said that:

there was no Aboriginality around the place, I didn’t see black people, I didn’t see black workers, I didn’t see any posters either ... that kind of says its not a place for me, maybe that’s an assumption but all of the things ... that’s how I gauge whether it wants me to be part of its centre or if I’m just going to be sitting on the fringes as I have done all my life.

This particular woman's expression of whether she feels included or not as part of the core is evident. The identity, meaning and power are constructed and bound within the Women's Centre space and place in a way that does not create this for her. She and other women saw the centre as a racialised place to which they had no sense of belonging or attachment. There are clearly practices and structures operating which enact forms of social inclusion and exclusion despite the claims that the centre is for women in Rockhampton. The services being offered from the centre are also given full legitimacy as women-centred services, thus re-centring white ways of offering women's services, white ways of womanhood and white ways of knowing. Since there was (and still is) no specific Indigenous women's service in Rockhampton, the issue of resources attached to the Women's Health Centre and other women's services was raised several times during the interviews. It was very clearly stated that it is non-Indigenous women who are granted monies to provide services for women. The centre derives its income from both the Queensland and the Australian governments, further adding to the legitimisation of white women's ways of knowing and of being. The boundaries of womanhood are clearly defined in terms of non-Indigenous women to the exclusion of Indigenous women and resonate powerfully with the research work undertaken in the area of feminism by Aileen Moreton-Robinson.⁴⁴

What can be ascertained is that the nature of a place, what happens there, who is present and how they work, and how the place and spaces look, feel and are interpreted and experienced impacts on whether Indigenous women physically access that place. The women interviewed who knew of the Women's Health Centre did not feel comfortable accessing it. They did not identify it as being a place that was for Indigenous women and did not use its services. Non-Indigenous women are positioned as the owners within the centre. Moreton-Robinson provides a powerful analysis of how white race privilege manifests itself through the subject position of the middle-class white woman and the dominance of ideological assumptions of womanhood. Her work offers a context as to why Indigenous women might find themselves being marginalised in such feminist identified environments

and what happens when Indigenous women attempt to highlight and address this dominance.⁴² Furthermore, non-Indigenous women can only do this within the centre and on the site of the centre because of the dispossession of the Darumbal people. The Rockhampton Women's Health Centre was aware that access by Indigenous women was an issue.⁴³ The only way this can be changed is if Indigenous women are involved in the designing, developing, production and operation of women's spaces and places and if our critiques and challenges are not marginalised by statements of 'goodwill' and 'benevolence' which mask the power differentials.⁴⁴ The next section will begin to address how such changes can be made to bring about more inclusive health places and spaces.

Including Indigenous women

I am not suggesting that there aren't any health services in Rockhampton that recognise and value indigeneity other than the Indigenous specific health service. There are several that do and they are seen as attempting to recognise Indigenous women and to value aspects of indigeneity. This kind of effort fosters greater inclusion. If there is nothing within a place that reflects Indigenous women then it can be viewed that Indigenous women are not valued and not wanted. If the place in total creates this feeling then as the women explained they will not access those services or they do so with anxiety, ill comfort or trauma.⁴⁵ The way a place is designed and the placement of furniture and the paintings, however, also need to be more than symbolic to bring about any longer term changes. Otherwise they do little more than deflect white possession and ways of knowing briefly, all the while recentring non-Indigenous power over Indigenous people.

The Indigenous women interviewed talked about a range of healthspaces and places within the geographic locality and implied that at times they felt less able, not able or too intimidated to enter those spaces and places. It was made very clear by many that if they feel that that space is not for them, they will not go there. At times, it may take a lot of courage to enter a space or place which you know has not included you in any shape or form and yet it tells you through one leaflet that it wants to provide a service for you or that it has

some program money for ‘you’ or ‘your community’ or ‘your organisation’ which you might be able to use. Sometimes these may operate as forms of seduction to ‘get Indigenous people in’ but really this offering or gift masks the truth of Indigenous poverty and dispossession and non-Indigenous privilege.⁴⁶ I know how it feels to enter a building with the feeling that I am only there in a sense to see what ‘they are willing to hand out’ to Indigenous people and Indigenous organisations. I and other Indigenous people hate being in the position of receivers within this benevolence process but sometimes we are left with little choice in order to bring about change or to receive services. In this way Indigenous people are often asked to concede to or fit within the dominant culture’s ways of ‘doing health care’. Writing about the education system in Canada, James Sakej Youngblood Henderson explains that because of the poverty and welfare consequences of not accepting education, Indigenous peoples are forced to validate the colonialists’ mythology about themselves.⁴⁷ Moreover, he states: ‘We are being forced to affirm alien values and to sacrifice Aboriginal worldviews and values for norms outside traditional cultural aims.’ Parallels can be drawn with Indigenous peoples and health services and health systems in Australia. Having to accept the way health services are delivered or where they are delivered means Indigenous people could be affirming the dominant culture’s values about their way of knowing health and their way of providing health services. As Henderson asserts, the ‘penalties are high for refusing to conform to Eurocentric thought’.⁴⁸ If we don’t accept health services as they are delivered then we can find ourselves in a position of extreme illness and possibly death. It is not the case, and should not be assumed, that Indigenous people are happy with health services simply because Indigenous people are using them and that we are included within those health spaces and places.

In looking at what makes Indigenous women feel good about space and place, some had concrete suggestions. One woman said: ‘I like a bright happy place ... I like to see Indigenous paintings on the walls.’ Indigenous-identified spaces including government agencies that are specific to Indigenous people generally have a range of Indigenous

artworks and/or posters on the walls that portray Indigenous imagery. Another woman stated in reference to places, 'make it a place that Murri women want to use it and be comfortable to use it, lay out of the place, Murri staff, not that you're the only one, liaise with Murri organisations'.⁴⁹ Another women suggested that there needed to be leaflets around, easily accessible information and posters on health issues. However, it is not as simple as laying down brochures and leaflets and putting up any old posters. As Kirk et al. found through their research with Indigenous women in the area of breast cancer, the women 'in all of the study sites (across Queensland) felt that the generic mainstream materials were not always appropriate, did not catch the attention of Indigenous women, or were not seen as relevant to them'.⁵¹ The health education materials were criticised for not using plain English, which is imperative for people who speak English as a second or third language or people who have a limited education in Western systems. The women who were part of their study wanted to be involved with the development of educational programs.

Kirk et al. also asserted that a 'cost-effective method of developing appropriate materials would be to develop a basic format to which communities could provide input. Local education materials, such as artwork and banners, are one way of disseminating health education messages.' Care needs to be taken that the messages are not too simplistic when the information is disseminated. Just because people may have difficulty with English or with health terminology does not mean that people cannot understand issues if placed in an appropriate context. This allows for the appropriation of the new medical and health knowledge in ways that give Indigenous women more control and the ability to become masters of one more aspect of their lives. It is Indigenous women who need to be involved in the processes of working out the best way to convey messages and the contexts.

The physical layout of the place and the use of spaces needs to be discussed, planned and then implemented. The politics of places and spaces need to be tabled as part of the planning process along with 'whose memory is being commemorated or ignored'.⁵² This includes what goes inside as well as the physical structure of buildings. For example, one

Indigenous woman in the study made the suggestion that health personnel ‘should have smaller chairs and clients should have bigger chairs’, making them equal. At the present time ‘most health professionals have large comfortable chairs and us clients have little seats’. She indicated this was a symbol of power before any conversation even happened about health and that it ‘clearly defines who has more power than me when I enter that space’. Clinical practitioners needed to look at the layouts of their clinical rooms, the positioning of furniture, equipment and information and question themselves around the power dynamics within that designated space. They need to ask, what power dynamics are at play? Are they interfering in their communication with Indigenous women? And with Indigenous people? What could make them more accessible based on the emotions enacted from the space or place?

Four women were all very clear and articulate in their desire to see Indigenous people within the services they use, even in mainstream services. One stated she’d like:

to see Aboriginal faces around, to know its a service that employs Aboriginal people around, to see Aboriginal people around in the waiting room accessing the service ... women’s things that are displayed like pamphlets ... they are taking consideration of women’s issues, sometimes it’s easier to pick up something than ask.

She expressed her wish to be ‘amongst other Murri people’ when she accesses services. She did not wish to be segregated but to be among people of which some were also other Indigenous people. Most of the time Indigenous people find themselves in a clinic waiting room full of non-Indigenous people when visiting a mainstream health service. This again raises the issue of where Indigenous women locate themselves according to their comfort levels in being with other Indigenous women, Indigenous people or among non-Indigenous people accessing services. The additional concern is whom do Indigenous women feel most comfortable with in disclosing private information and health problems. In regards to women-specific services, the same woman

suggested that services need to be:

looking at where Murri women gather, not coming in with a big fan fare, making links first and then coming in to work with Murri people ... working across daughters, mothers, grandmothers ... [There is a] need for women specific program still, lot of women don't want to talk about.

Government programs and organisations could incorporate a process of decision-making, planning and implementation that involved Indigenous women in the production of materials for Indigenous women. Indigenous women could utilise their own words, meanings and symbols for the services or agencies and what was available to them. This would increase visibility and meaning for Indigenous women and also recognise that Indigenous women's needs are also considered important by those agencies or services too. Indigenous women could be involved in designing the space and adding what Indigenous women see as a form of identification to place. This, of course, would need to be followed up with what happens inside the place and the spaces that operate within that place.

Conclusion

Places and space are neither innocent nor neutral. As is demonstrated in this essay they can work to marginalise, oppress or include and engage. They are instruments of the political: they are embedded with power and unwritten laws informing women whether they belong or they don't. What has been revealed through the interviews with Indigenous women are the times that Indigenous women feel included and the times when they feel excluded and that they don't belong. What can be established is that if thought, time and energy is placed into consideration of how health spaces and places are developed then they can be a successful part of the equation in servicing the health needs of Indigenous women. This requires a commitment from governments and management and staff of health services, organisations, agencies and departments to see their services more comprehensively than

they presently do. It is more than just having the service, it is also how the service is delivered and from what point the service is delivered. Ensuring Indigenous women are comfortably going to walk through the door or telephone is one step on the pathway of servicing Indigenous women. Ensuring that the environment is Indigenous friendly is a major step and yet this is the step which can be easily overlooked. In looking at what is Indigenous friendly the questions that need to be asked are: What does the health service mean by Indigenous friendly? How far will it extend? Is it Indigenous friendly according to the dominant culture's perceptions or according to local Indigenous women?

Services should also be looking out for ways that do not constrain but rather improve and empower Indigenous women. They need to be Indigenous women friendly rather than being sites where the dominant culture controls all within that environment and reinscribes the colonial stereotypes. Planners, designers and managers of health spaces and health places need to give consideration to how Indigenous women access spaces and places. Weisman explains that, 'design is a reflection of prevailing social, political and economic values and is often symbolic of the place that each individual holds in society'.⁵³ If Indigenous women are not part of the design process they are reflected within the social, political and economic values by their absence. It is very clear the role that memory, representations, symbols and images have in showcasing who is of value and who is not. As we have understood from the Indigenous women who participated in this research, the buildings may end up looking beautiful, have all the latest equipment and room for staff and clients but are in fact highly unsuitable and unwelcoming for certain groups, including Indigenous women. This ultimately impacts on and maintains the poor health status of Indigenous women in Australia and hinders improvements to their health and wellbeing.

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Imagining the Good Indigenous Citizen: Race War and the Pathology of Patriarchal White Sovereignty

Aileen Moreton-Robinson

In June 2007, the federal government sent military and police into Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory on the premise that the sexual abuse of children was rampant and a national crisis. This 'crisis' was constructed as something extraordinary and aberrant requiring new governmental measures. Agamben argues that this 'state of exception' is now the normal form of governance within democracies that 'establishes a hidden but fundamental relationship between law and the absence of law. It is a void, a blank and this empty space is constitutive of the legal system'.¹ Guantanamo Bay has become the public face of the deployment of this state of exception, where law and lawlessness exist in dealing with detainees as a response to the events of 9/11, but it is not exceptional. Other detainees are held in various locations such as Camp Bucca, Abu Ghraib and Camp Cropper and in these camps the United States has determined its own rules, which are outside the law. In this sense, exceptionalism is not unified, but rather is a discursive formation that can only be partially known.²

While the state of exception thesis provides a way of explaining how sovereign states responded to terrorism through security measures, which requires disciplining detainees and citizens, the historical conditions of its possibility can be linked to colonisation. Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States have a long history of detaining Indigenous people, denying their rights and controlling behaviour

through and beyond the law. From the late nineteenth century reserves, privately owned pastoral stations and missions were the places where the majority of Indigenous people in Australia lived under the control of white managers and missionaries appointed by government. Indigenous people, while living in poverty, were treated differently to white Australian citizens and were subject to 'special' laws, regulations and policies that were racist. Knowledge of the impoverished conditions under which Indigenous people lived was shared by those who controlled their lives. They acted disingenuously and their silence about Indigenous poverty operated repressively as 'an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know'.³ During the campaign for citizenship rights in the 1960s, Indigenous poverty was first brought into the public consciousness of white Australia through the advocacy of Indigenous people and their white supporters, televised and beamed into the living rooms of white middle-class Australia and represented within the print media. This occurred during the time that the white Australia policy was incrementally being phased out. White Australians voted in overwhelming numbers to endorse the 1967 Referendum believing they were casting a vote for Indigenous people to be included within the nation by being granted full citizenship rights. Within the white imaginary, citizenship represented equality and it was assumed that this status would enable Indigenous people to overcome their poverty and become the same as other Australians.

The 1967 Referendum did not confer on Indigenous people citizenship rights. Instead the constitution was changed to give the federal government the power to make laws on behalf of any race and Indigenous people could be counted in the census.⁴ The federal government of the day was well aware that these were the changes being made. The rhetoric of citizenship became a strategy by which Indigenous people could now come under federal government control instead of being primarily the responsibility of state governments. These changes to the constitution did not emerge publicly until the 1990s after academics revealed that Indigenous people

were accorded civil, industrial, social and political rights incrementally from the 1960s through the removal of explicitly racially discriminatory legislation and policies. Irrespective of this research the idea that Aborigines were granted citizenship rights in 1967 continues to circulate discursively. As a consequence, the lack of citizenship rights is no longer linked causally to Indigenous poverty within the white Australian imaginary; instead, social rights in the form of welfare payments are seen as having contributed to this outcome.

Since 1967 Indigenous people have continued to live in poverty irrespective of the level of economic prosperity of the nation or whether there are Labor or Liberal federal and state governments in power implementing their 'different' Indigenous affairs policies. There are still large gaps in outcomes between Indigenous people and other Australian citizens on all social indicators. Our life expectancy rates are seventeen years less than the rest of the population, our health is the worst in the country, we live in overcrowded houses, we have the highest unemployment rates, are over represented in the criminal justice system and our education outcomes are well below the Australian average.⁶ These differential outcomes and their history raise a question: do citizenship rights enable or constrain Indigenous people within society? In this essay I address this question by focusing on the Northern Territory Intervention. I argue that patriarchal white sovereignty as a regime of power deploys a discourse of pathology as a means to subjugate and discipline Indigenous people to be extra good citizens and that the tactics and strategies deployed within this race war reveal its own pathology.⁷

Social contract and rights theory

Social contract theorists, such as Locke and Rousseau, argued that the formation of the state was enabled by a contract between men to decide to live together, govern and make laws for such living. It is a contract that secures the right of the sovereign in the form of the state to govern and the right of citizens to partake in that governance and to live in society through the rights and responsibilities conferred on them. The problem with most social contract theories is that the moral egalitarianism that underpins them is predicated on the

theory that the transition from a state of nature to civil society ‘founds government on the popular consent of individuals taken as equals’.⁸ The white patriarchs who theorised about the social contract were primarily concerned with it being a means of agreement between white men to live together, make laws and govern incorporating white women into the polity as their subordinates through the marriage contract.⁹

In contrast, Michel Foucault offers a genealogy of rights from the seventeenth century to the present arguing that war has been central to the development of the judicial edifice of right in democratic as well as socialist countries.¹⁰ He explains how in France the absolutist history of the divine right of kings was challenged by Boulainvilliers’ production of a counter history, effectively introducing the new subject of rights into history. Refuting the myth of the inherited right to rule, Boulainvilliers’ history of the nobility advanced the idea that because of their investments in participating in war they too had rights. Having become legitimate and normalised, Foucault argues, the nobility’s assertion of rights was utilised by the commoners as an impetus to the French revolution; in this way a ‘partisan and strategic’ truth became a weapon of war.¹¹ It is only by repressing the founding violence of sovereignty’s emergence through war that equality can circulate as a truth constitutive of citizenship and its relationship to state sovereignty. While it is a truth that is challenged by theorists of citizenship within modernity, the right of state sovereignty functions discursively as not being born of conflict and war but rather of agreement between citizens.¹²

For Foucault, antagonisms, struggles and conflict are processes of war that should be analysed according to a grid of strategies and tactics because ‘war’ continues within government. The ensuing conflicts from the late eighteenth century between rulers and ruled increasingly involve a relation between a superior race and an inferior race. As Foucault argues, ‘the State is no longer an instrument that one race uses against another: the State is, and must be, the protector of the integrity, the superiority, and the purity of the race’.¹³ ‘Race’ is defined by Foucault as a linguistic and religious marker that precedes the modern nation state, surfacing as a biological construct in the late eighteenth century just as regulatory

mechanisms were developed to control populations. He describes this form of power as biopower, arguing that race became a means of regulating and defending society from itself. That is, race war continues in modernity in different forms, while sovereignty shifts from a concern with society defending itself from external attacks to focus on its internal enemies. What is important about Foucault's work is how race and war are tied to sovereign right. It offers us a different understanding of how colonisation operates through sovereign right as a race war whose power effect on the Indigenous population was one of 'to let live or die' and after occupation becomes one of 'to let live and to make live'. The origins of sovereignty in Australia are predicated on a myth of *terra nullius* (the imagination of an un-possessed continent) which functioned as a truth within a race war of coercion, murder and appropriation carried out by white men in the service of the British Crown. The military secured sovereignty on Australian soil in the name of the white King of England; in this way sovereignty was both gendered and racialised upon its assumption. Patriarchal white sovereignty is a regime of power that enabled the 'seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographic area — of writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations' underpinned by the rule of death.¹⁴

As I have argued elsewhere, patriarchal white sovereignty in the Australian context derives from the illegal act of possession and is most acutely manifest in the state and its regulatory mechanisms such as the law.¹⁵ Therefore possession is tied to right and power in ways that are already racialised. Foucault argues that 'right' is both an instrument of, and vehicle for, the exercising of the multiplicity of dominations in society and the relations that enable their implementation. He argues that the system of right and the judicial field are enduring channels for relations of domination and the many forms of techniques of subjugation. For this reason 'right' should not be understood as the establishment of legitimacy but rather the methods by which subjugation is carried out.¹⁶ In this sense, citizenship rights are a means of race war that can be used strategically to circumscribe and enable the biopower of patriarchal white sovereignty.

Rights and race war

Disciplinary knowledges that developed and deployed ‘race’ as a biological concept in the eighteenth century in Australia did so through a prevailing racist discourse. Indigenous people were considered a primitive people: nomadic, sexually promiscuous, illogical, superstitious, irrational, emotive, deceitful, simple minded, violent and uncivilised. We were perceived as living in a state of nature that was in opposition to the discourse of white civility. This racist discourse enabled patriarchal white sovereignty to deny Indigenous people their sovereign rights while regulating and disciplining their behaviour through legislative and political mechanisms and physical and social measures. After the 1967 Referendum it became increasingly difficult to continue to deny citizenship rights to Indigenous people. ‘Race’ had become the means to let live and to make live. After World War II the allies agreed to a new international regulatory mechanism being established to preserve human rights and justice while upholding state sovereignty in their respective countries.

The United Nations was established in 1942 and member countries agreed to be bound to the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Two important covenants were also ratified in 1966 by the United Nations which gave all people the right to self-determination and by virtue of that right they were free to pursue their political, cultural, social and economic rights within society. These covenants supplied moral and political strategies for the emergence of decolonisation and civil rights movements which soon spread globally. In Foucaultian terms, this represents a phase of war whereby the antagonisms, confrontations and struggles of the 1960s became represented strategically and tactically through a discourse of Indigenous rights in the 1970s. In Australia the effects were the advocacy of civil, women’s, gay and Indigenous rights claims of subjects within its borders. The White Australia Policy was formally abolished in 1972, while discriminatory legislation specifically designed for Indigenous people was revoked and new laws were enacted in 1975 to protect against racial and gender discrimination. An Indigenous land rights discourse, encompassing Indigenous sovereignty claims, was placed on the public agenda. Just as human rights were becoming an

effective political weapon Australia strengthened its internal sovereignty by formally separating from British judicial review. The High Court of Australia became the final court of appeal, meaning the nation state's management of its citizens is no longer subject to an external sovereign's scrutiny.

Race war and the discourse of Indigenous pathology

Since the 1970s government policy has oscillated between self-management and self-determination. The former was concerned with administration and management of communities and organisations, while the latter 'implied control over policy and decision making, 'especially the determination of structures, processes and priorities'.⁴⁷ While it is often argued that self-determination has been the dominant policy framework since the early 1970s, a closer analysis of government processes and practices would reveal that self-management has occupied centre stage, despite the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 1989. ATSIC was represented to the world as the epitome of Indigenous self-determination by the Keating Labor government. However, regional councils did not have autonomous control over expenditure in their regions and ATSIC's budget, staff and policy areas were controlled and monitored in the same way as other government departments.

When the ATSIC commissioners did change the policy agenda, under the stewardship of Geoff Clarke, from one of self-determination involving decision making, to a self-determination model that advocated Indigenous rights, the newly elected Howard government, in concert with the media, represented ATSIC as mismanaged, misguided and corrupt. Howard deployed a discourse of pathology strategically to win electoral support aided by the mainstream media, representing its leaders as violent criminals and blaming ATSIC for the underperformance in policy and program areas, such as health and education, administered by mainstream departments. Howard had made an electoral promise that he would cut funding to Indigenous affairs, review ATSIC and amend native title laws to reduce the property rights Indigenous people had won in the High Court's *Mabo* decision. The pendulum, he argued, had swung too far in the direction

of Indigenous people's rights. Through the use of the law the Howard government reduced and controlled the rights claims of Indigenous people, positioning us as having received more than our entitlements as citizens and not taking responsibility for our 'dysfunctional' behaviour. Rights of citizenship were deployed as weapons within the race war serviced by a discourse of Indigenous pathology. Within this discourse social problems are considered to be any forms of behaviour that violate the norms of white civility.

From 2000, Howard's Indigenous affairs policy agenda became concerned with 'practical reconciliation' involving mutual obligation contracts with Indigenous communities. The government's closure of ATSIC signalled the end of an Indigenous rights policy consistent with international covenants, and the beginning of a focus on 'practical measures' to alleviate Indigenous disadvantage. Significantly, the Howard government rejected the Aboriginal Reconciliation Council's *Declaration Towards Reconciliation* and any recommendation of a treaty. Mick Dodson, the former Indigenous Social Justice Commissioner, states that:

Howard responded with his own version of the Declaration. While there is considerable similarity between the two documents, there are more subtle differences in wording ... It refused to endorse the term 'self-determination', claiming that it implies the possibility of a separate Indigenous state or states. More significantly, the Howard government refused to support a formal apology to Indigenous people for past injustices, claiming that such an apology could imply that present generations are in some way responsible and accountable for the actions of earlier generations.¹⁸

Howard's tactics in the race war were to only recognise those rights that were available to other citizens, also making social rights of citizenship, such as the right to welfare support, the means of disciplining Indigenous subjects and containing their human right to be self determining. This regulation was rationalised within a neoliberal discourse which promotes formal equality of individuals through citizenship, allowing

government to implement economic and social policies that reinforce structural inequalities between Indigenous people and the rest of Australian society.

The individualism of neoliberalism informs the discourse of pathology within the race war, enabling the impoverished conditions under which Indigenous people live to be rationalised as a product of dysfunctional cultural traditions and individual bad behaviour. In this context Indigenous pathology, not the strategies and tactics of patriarchal white sovereignty, is presented as inhibiting the realisation of the state's earlier policy of self-determination; because citizens have 'rights', the King no longer rules. Nonetheless, his 'Crown' remains intact as the holder of radical title to all land, meaning patriarchal white sovereignty can invade land occupied or owned by citizens when it wishes to do so. This was clear when the federal government sent the army and police into seventy-three Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory in 2007.¹⁹ The use of the term 'emergency response' by government signified that it was life or death situation requiring a response out of necessity; it was a state of exception. In effect, patriarchal white sovereign right was exercised, utilising the report as justification to further regulate and manage the subjugation of Indigenous communities, creating a new laboratory for an experiment in Indigenous civility.

The federal government passed five bills enabling the 'emergency response' and suspended the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* to protect itself from litigation. The media had prepared the white Australian imaginary by utilising a discourse of pathology, constantly reporting negative stories of Indigenous dysfunction, corruption, neglect and sexual abuse to elicit white virtue and possessive investments in citizenship. This discourse was deployed by Noel Pearson, an Aborigine from Cape York whose collusion with the media resulted in him being the first 'Aboriginal leader' to have a regular column in the *Australian* newspaper. In August 2000, he stated:

Our social life has declined even as our material circumstances have improved greatly since we gained *citizenship*. I have also come to the view that we suffered a particular

social deterioration once we became dependent on passive welfare ... [This] has taken a decisive toll on our people, and the social problems which it has precipitated in our families and communities have had a cancerous effect on our relationships and values. Combined with our outrageous grog addiction and the large and growing drug problem amongst our youth, the effects of passive welfare have not yet steadied ... The violence in our society is of phenomenal proportion and of course there is inter-generational transmission of the debilitating effects of the social passivity which our passive economy has induced. (my emphasis)²⁰

Pearson strategically uses citizenship rights to welfare as the enabler of Indigenous ‘dysfunction’ by arguing that these rights have given Indigenous people entitlements but no responsibilities. Between 2000 and 2004, Pearson produced twenty-five papers elaborating this thesis while also acknowledging that communities require service provision and resources to enable a change in behaviour. His argument is that citizenship rights should be tied to behavioural outcomes for Indigenous people as a means to let live and make live. Focusing on individualist explanations, Pearson promoted welfare reforms that mimicked the United States neoliberal conservative position of the early 1990s; these advocated ‘reciprocal responsibilities’ from adult welfare recipients to ‘behave in socially approved ways’ and required them to search for employment and to accept jobs when they are offered.²¹

Pearson’s thesis that the right to welfare facilitates Indigenous addiction and dysfunction circulates as a truth in the race war, while masking the strategies of patriarchal white sovereignty to perpetuate Indigenous welfare dependency. Pearson indigenises welfare dependency, silencing talk about the behaviour of millions of non-Indigenous people who receive welfare in one form or another to enable them to live within society. In a 2007 response to Indigenous people advocating an Indigenous rights agenda, he outlined ‘three problems’ with their project:

First, it is just not credible on too many questions. Ordinary Australians are simply not convinced that land rights and culture alone will solve social problems. Ordinary Australians can see through the fact social order is an urgent imperative ... The evidence of social and economic disrepair is too obvious for them to accept the old solutions. Those seeking indigenous rights must come up with more compelling justifications for the policies they propose. Second the advocacy must be more sophisticated and have more of an impact ... Third those concerned about rights must understand that most rights—the right to better health and education and safe and healthy children—cannot be delivered by rights alone. They require behavioural responsibility on behalf of our people ... The gap will not close unless we have a plan that is as forthright about these responsibilities as it is about rights.²²

Pearson's pathologising works discursively. He positions Indigenous rights advocates as being unsophisticated, righteously impotent, incompetent and naïve. He appeals to and elicits the virtue of 'ordinary Australians' who are already assumed to be 'good citizens', strategically using the terms, as did Howard and Pauline Hanson, to seduce his white middle-class audience and affirm the characteristics of white civility. Pearson's explanation for the existence of poverty and inequality is the 'problematic' characteristics of Indigenous people, not patriarchal white sovereignty's right to disavow Indigenous sovereign resource rights. Indigenous people are perceived and talked about as the undeserving poor who lack effort, proper money management skills, a sense of morality and the ability to remain sober, the ability to resist drugs and a work ethic. Pearson has staked a possessive claim to patriarchal white sovereignty in his welfare reform agenda, which seeks to discipline and produce the good Indigenous citizen who is perceived as having no inherent sovereign right to their resources which were illegally appropriated by the Crown. The media and government have conferred on Pearson a leadership role, one which services the legitimacy of patriarchal white sovereignty by denying the effects of colonisation in producing economic dependency. This serves, in turn, to

make invisible the ongoing race war against Indigenous people.

Race war and tactics of intervention

The print media's representation of Indigenous pathology in the race war was actively promoted by the national magazine the *Bulletin* in the late 1880s. Cartoons of drunken and destitute Aborigines were a regular feature over the subsequent century in its promotion of the white Australia policy.²³ A National Inquiry into Racist Violence in 1991 concluded that the Australian media was responsible for the 'perpetuation and promotion of negative and racial stereotypes, a tendency towards conflictual and sensationalist reporting on race matters'.²⁴ Over the next fifteen years it became the norm for negative stories about Indigenous people's 'demands' and 'dysfunctional behaviour' to circulate in the popular press, typified in May 2006 by a feature story on Indigenous sexual abuse in Central Australia broadcast on ABC's *Lateline* program.²⁵ The main interview was with Dr Nanette Rogers, Crown Prosecutor in Alice Springs, who provided information on cases involving children as young as two years of age who had been raped. She explained that the silences around this sexual abuse could be attributed to entrenched violence, failure to take 'responsibility for their own actions' and the punitive nature of Indigenous society where reporting an incident could lead to 'harassment, intimidation and sometimes physical assault'. What Rogers did not disclose is the way in which silence operates as part of the cycle of sexual abuse in white communities, whether they are remote, rural and suburban; it is not openly discussed, easily reported and prosecuted. Child sexual abuse in white homes is dealt with by government as though it is something aberrant that requires intervention on an individual case by case model. There is no intervention into the whole community. The civil rights of perpetrators are respected. In contrast, child sexual abuse is treated as being normative within Indigenous communities, requiring everyone to be placed under surveillance, scrutinised and punished.

There was a flurry of media activity pathologising Indigenous communities after Rogers' interview. This was in

stark contrast to the media's lack of response to Indigenous women's recommendations about the violence, alcohol, substance and sexual abuse in communities, which were made as early as 1980. Recommendations from Aboriginal women concerning these issues and the need for increased service provision and resources were made at the ANZAAS 50th conference in Adelaide in 1980, the Federation of Aboriginal Women's conference in Canberra in 1982, the National Aboriginal Women's Taskforce in 1986, the First Indigenous Women's Conference in Adelaide in 1989, the Remote Area Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's meeting in Laura in July 1991 and the ATSIC National Women's Conference in 1992 in Canberra.²⁶ Governments and the media did not respond to any of these recommendations. As a white woman and a lawyer Rogers was already conferred with authority, legitimacy and virtue within the white imaginary. Her revelations confirmed Indigenous pathology and fed moral outrage within the race war. The decades of silence and inaction by government and media on these issues confirms that politics is race war by other means; during an election year the media and government strategically deployed the discourse of Indigenous pathology as a weapon by making child sexual abuse a central issue for voters.

In response to Rogers' national disclosure, the Northern Territory Labor government commissioned a board of inquiry into Indigenous child sexual abuse in August 2006, signalling that Labor, not the federal Coalition government, could stake a possessive claim to the morality and virtue of white civility. The inquiry's *Little Children are Sacred* report found that there was sufficient 'anecdotal and forensic and clinical information available to establish that there is a significant problem in Northern Territory communities in relation to the sexual abuse of children'.²⁷ It acknowledged that alcohol and drug abuse, poverty, housing shortages, poor health and poor education were contributing factors to its prevalence, and recommended that the government consult with Indigenous communities on the implementation of their recommendations concerning service provision and resources. The majority of recommendations reveal the level and length of government neglect in service provision to its Indigenous

citizens who have the highest levels of mortality and morbidity rates in the Western world. Within the race war, the exercising of patriarchal white sovereignty's right to let live or make live produces an early death for Indigenous people.

The recommendations in this report echo all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner's reports from 1993 to 2007. In a 2005 speech, the chairman of the Australian Productivity Commission, Gary Banks, presented an overview of its *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report to government. It identified strategic areas for government action: early child development and growth (prenatal to age three); early school engagement and performance (pre-school to year three); positive childhood and transition to adulthood; substance use and misuse; functional and resilient families and communities; effective environmental health systems and economic participation and development.²⁸ Similar recommendations were made in an earlier Senate report.²⁹ But despite the advice and recommendations of its own mechanisms, the federal government failed to take responsibility for its policies. The exercise of sovereign right by patriarchal white sovereignty has continuously denied Indigenous sovereign rights by containing Indigenous people through social rights to welfare. Indigenous people have limited social capital and resources, independent of welfare, to engage in economic development.

Since colonisation began, patriarchal white sovereignty has deployed punitive action as a technique of subjugation in its relations with Indigenous people. And it has been cunning and deceitful in masking its subjugation. For example, in 1996 Prime Minister Howard removed \$470 million from ATSIC's budget and in 2007 \$39 million was cut from Abstudy, which had a direct impact on Indigenous peoples' participation in the education system. Between 2000 and 2007 the federal government increased its Indigenous budget to \$3 billion, however \$360.45 million of those funds which were identified for family violence programs, health, child care, business, education, housing and schooling was not spent by 2007, and \$136.216 million was used as substitute funding on programs that benefit all Australians.³⁰ A similar picture has emerged from the Northern Territory, where only \$43 million of \$177

million allocated by the federal government in the areas of child and family services had been spent. Gerritsen states that federal funds are channelled into wealthy electorates for political purposes and that over 50 per cent of Indigenous funding 'ends up in white hands'.³¹ But the lack of resources and underspending of funds is not perceived to be linked to the impoverished conditions under which Indigenous people live. Instead, the discourse of pathology prevails as the government's explanation. 'Knowledge' about Indigenous pathology circulates as strategic truth in the race war to rationalise the continuing subjugation of the Indigenous population and encourage non-Indigenous investment in patriarchal white sovereignty.

In a speech to the National Press Club in July 2007, Mal Brough, Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Family and Community Services, took the opportunity to present the Howard government's welfare reform agenda.³² Brough began his speech with a pledge of \$1.8 billion for older carers of disabled children, stating that the government 'has now said to older carers that we will ensure that you have a place and that you will have the services that you need as you grow older and frailer and that you have given your love and your life to your child who's disabled, we'll guarantee that'. Brough then made a discursive shift between the deserving poor, white citizens, and the undeserving poor, Indigenous people, who are rarely represented within the white national imaginary as carers or as disabled in spite of the well-known health statistics. When discussing Indigenous housing needs he stated that 'over years, ATSI and successive federal governments have gifted over \$3 to \$4 billion worth of housing, lost control of it, don't know who's in the houses, whether they're appropriate people, whether rents are being paid, whether maintenance has been undertaken ... Put away the political correctness, let's stop that and let's do something that actually will provide more housing and better housing.'³³ Brough imagined Indigenous people as inappropriate tenants, who behave irresponsibly by not valuing or maintaining their assets. The discourse of pathology is used to vilify Indigenous people while promising them more and better housing only if they behave like good white citizens. Throughout his speech Brough gave highly emotive

individualised anecdotal evidence of the violence, substance and sexual abuse and neglect in Indigenous communities in order to substantiate the measures taken to intervene in the Northern Territory. Brough deployed the discourse of pathology to mask the government's neglect in service provision to Indigenous communities and justify increasing surveillance and subjugation.

The imposition of martial law and the emergency measures were outlined in a press release from Brough's office on 6 July 2007. The legislative package would allow the federal government to restrict alcohol, audit computers to detect pornographic material, lease Indigenous land and change land tenure to allow for private purchase, remove customary law as a mitigating factor for bail and sentencing; put in place business managers in remote communities; quarantine income support payments for basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter; compulsory health checks for Indigenous children; change the permit system for access to Indigenous lands and abolish the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP). The law enables patriarchal white sovereignty's regulation of Indigenous behaviour through their social rights entitlements. Brough suggested that while the *Little Children are Sacred* report 'highlighted horrific abuse of children':

I was astounded that the report's authors provided *no recommendations* designed to immediately secure communities and protect children from abuse. The legislative measures being introduced tomorrow will achieve that.³⁴

In order to shift responsibility for their poverty back onto Indigenous people, Brough negated the recommendations of the report, which clearly outlines the substantial neglect by government. Neglect, denial, blame, abdication of responsibility and violence are attributes of the dysfunctional behaviour of patriarchal white sovereignty which service Indigenous economic dependency and the negation of Indigenous sovereign rights.

In the conflict over the Intervention, the response to government from rights advocates was framed to deploy both

citizenship and human rights as a strategic truth to make claims and repatriation against patriarchal white sovereignty. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission welcomed the government's announcements but argued that they should be delivered within a human rights framework.³⁵ Approximately one hundred and seventy-five representatives of church, social service and civil rights organisations wrote an open letter to Brough, arguing that the services provided to other Australians are often not delivered to Indigenous communities and that 'in their present form the proposals miss the mark and are unlikely to be effective' due to 'an over-reliance on top-down and punitive measures'.³⁶ Similarly, anthropologist Jon Altman argued that there is no evidence to show the relationship between child sexual abuse and changes to the permit system and compulsory acquisition of land: 'In particular both measures will lessen the property rights, and associated political and economic power, of an already marginalized Indigenous minority.'³⁷

Several months after the intervention, the Central Land Council consulted with traditional owners from across Central Australia. They found that overall most Indigenous people supported steps taken to address child abuse, housing shortages and increased policing but were opposed to 'five year lease, changes to the permit system, welfare reform measures' and changes to CDEP.³⁸ The Aboriginal Rights Coalition's research into experiences and attitudes towards compulsory welfare management revealed that '85% of respondents do not like the intervention and see the overall changes as negative. 90% of respondents experience serious problems with income management. The changes have caused problems within families for 74% and made no change for 23%.'³⁹ Rallies were held in June 2008, demanding 'the repeal of the *NT Emergency Response* legislation, the restoration of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, increased funding for infrastructure and community controlled services and the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples'. However, patriarchal white sovereignty continued its welfare reforms regulating and defending society from itself and external sources by actively rejecting such human rights claims. The Australian government did

not ratify the UN Declaration, which recognises Indigenous peoples' inherent sovereign rights to their lands, when it was passed by the UN General Assembly in 2007.

The election of the Rudd Labor Government in November 2007 did not signal a radical shift in policy. Rudd committed to Howard's measures but agreed not to preserve the CDEP and the permit system. The CDEP allows Indigenous people to work for their unemployment benefits in areas where virtually no labour markets exist. The 2006 Census revealed that of the 22,055 Indigenous people of working age in Northern Territory remote communities, 80 per cent were unemployed and 20 per cent were on CDEP.⁴⁰ The national statistics for unemployment are currently at 6 per cent. Keeping Indigenous people on CDEP hides the real levels of unemployment and exclusion from the economy. If the state of Indigenous economic disadvantage was reflected within the broader Australian citizenry there would be outrage and government would seek to intervene in the market to provide capitalists and workers with financial incentives to stimulate employment and economic development.

The government's agreement to retain the permit system was influenced by suggestions that it assisted in regulating the unwanted activities of outsiders and the exploitation of Indigenous artists. In their first budget the Rudd government committed a further \$1.2 billion to Indigenous expenditure over the next five years, most of which is committed to the Intervention. Only \$554 million is allocated to the majority of the Indigenous population who live in other states and territories but share the same socioeconomic position in Australian society. The Rudd government has called for a review of the Intervention measures and is seeking to establish an independent Indigenous body that will advise on Indigenous policy and programs but it will have no fiscal responsibility for them. The federal Department of Health's analysis of the mandatory child health checks revealed that out of the 7433 mandatory health checks of Indigenous children in the Northern Territory only thirty-nine were considered at risk of neglect or abuse with only four children identified as being sexually abused.⁴¹

Conclusion

The discourse of pathology is a powerful weapon deployed by patriarchal white sovereignty to gain support from its white citizens for the exercising of its power. Race and rights are the means by which patriarchal white sovereignty exercises its power to let live and make live where the granting of life is conditional on the perceived appropriateness of the individual, the measure of which is the good white citizen. As a regime of power capillarising through rights and possession, it enables the law and government to intervene in the lives of Indigenous people to let them live and to make them live as welfare dependent citizens, not as property-owning subjects with sovereign resource rights. In this way citizenship rights are methods of subjugation because in their relations with sovereign right they can be both enabling and constraining.

In the race war with Indigenous people, patriarchal white sovereignty pathologises itself through the tactics and strategies it deploys in subjugation. Deceit, neglect, blame, abuse, violence and denial become tactics and strategies of war to subjugate the Indigenous enemies and their counter claims of sovereign rights, which are perceived to threaten the integrity of patriarchal white sovereignty's inherited right to rule. The pathological behaviour of patriarchal white sovereignty has been produced by the contradictions and imbalances in its fundamental constitution originating in Australia through theft and violence. The unfinished business of Indigenous sovereignty is refused by patriarchal white sovereignty because Indigenous entitlements to inherent resources would allow Indigenous people to engage in the economy on a different basis as self-determining property-owning subjects, which would alter the current state of exception. Within the race war Indigenous sovereign counter rights claims pose a threat to the possessiveness of patriarchal white sovereignty, requiring it to deploy a discourse of Indigenous pathology as a weapon to circulate a strategic truth: if Indigenous people behaved properly as good citizens then their poverty would disappear.

Notes

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- 2 Andrew W. Neal, 'Foucault in Guantanamo: Towards an Archaeology of the Exception', *Security Dialogue*, vol. 37, no. 1, March 2006, pp. 31-46.
- 3 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Vintage Books, New York, 1990, p. 4.
- 4 Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The 1967 Referendum*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1997.
- 5 John Chesterman and Brian Galligan, *Citizens Without Rights: Aborigines and Australian Citizenship*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997.
- 6 Tom Calma, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 'Achieving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Equality within a Generation: A Human Rights Based Approach', presented at The Right to Health of Indigenous Australians seminar, University of Melbourne Law School, 16 March 2006.
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- 10 Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, Penguin Books, London, 2003.
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From the 'Quiet Revolution' to 'Crisis' in Australian Indigenous Affairs

Virginia Watson

On 26 March 2005, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) formally came to end, its abolition the capstone of a much longer process initiated by the Howard government when it assumed power in 1996. The process began rhetorically, with government ministers and the Prime Minister, John Howard, incessantly questioning the legacy of self-determination, and of Indigenous corporate, communal and individual capacity. By 2004, this critique had been institutionalised. Indigenous policy development, program and service delivery organised around the goal of 'practical reconciliation' was 'mainstreamed'. Shared responsibility agreements (SRAs) between the federal government and individual Indigenous communities formed the new basis for the distribution of discretionary federal funding. This 'whole of government' approach, together with the idea that Indigenous citizens and communities would be co-responsible for their own welfare, linked philosophical commitments and an underlying moral critique of Indigenous agency to institutional change. In 2005, Senator Amanda Vanstone termed these changes 'a quiet revolution'.

Within a year the 'quiet revolution' had turned into a 'crisis'. The then-new Minister for Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, toured 'town camps' on the outskirts of Alice Springs and the 'long grass' in Darwin in the first half of May 2006 — returning a week later to take part in one of the town camp night patrols. He and other government ministers delivered an ongoing commentary for the benefit of the media, decrying the 'dysfunction', 'violence',

'substance abuse', 'alcoholism', 'poverty', 'unemployment' and critically poor health of these Indigenous communities. The public scandal might have dissipated fairly quickly. Most 'revelations' of deprivation in Indigenous communities are short-lived media events that scandalise a public enough to want to read or listen to network coverage for a day or two, but which invariably get overtaken by the next round of current affairs. However, this was not what happened.

In May 2006, the Crown Prosecutor in Alice Springs appeared in an interview on national television to voice her concerns about what she understood to be the widespread, long-term, violent abuse of Indigenous women and children by Indigenous men, and the failure of the law and other institutions to respond appropriately to this criminal behaviour. The Treasurer, Peter Costello, together with Brough, responded by decrying the use of 'tribal' law, declaring that the restoration of law and order in these communities was now the government's priority in Indigenous Affairs. Then, as if to demonstrate the correctness of this new focus, long-running tensions within the Northern Territory community of Wadeye (Thamarrurr) hit the press and airwaves. Stories of 'gang violence' and a community held hostage to these 'gangs' prompted claims by some (including some town residents) that an emergency evacuation of those hostages was imperative.

There was never an evacuation of Wadeye. But the idea that there was a 'crisis' taking place in Indigenous communities across the Australian continent took hold of public discourse. Media attention focused on the 'violence', 'dysfunction', the 'morass', 'emergency', 'social crisis' and 'depravity' in remote Aboriginal communities. The term 'crisis' frequently organised the coverage and commentary, not just of tabloid journalists or shock jocks, but also the federal political leadership itself, as well as many other commentators with backgrounds that range from long-term experience in Indigenous Affairs to those with more recent and superficial engagement.

In this essay, I suggest that claims about 'crisis' in Indigenous communities should not be seen as a straightforward outcome of empirical circumstance, even though this

appears in many ways to be verified by 'objective' statistical data and the 'subjective' testimony of many Indigenous people themselves. The *idea* of crisis does not derive *naturally* from such accounts of Indigenous circumstance. Rather, it is clear that the federal political leadership in fact *orchestrated* events, particularly throughout the month of May 2006, by transforming the government's failure to change the fundamentals of Indigenous welfare — its 'quiet revolution' and commitment to 'practical reconciliation' — into a widespread, general crisis. This 'crisis' became a turning point at which the discourse of government responsibility for citizens was overtaken and replaced by that of citizen responsibility to government, namely, that Indigenous people and communities themselves are now equally responsible for (governmental) failure in Indigenous Affairs.

Crisis, within such an account, needs to be understood as a *process*. And while the idea of crisis has proliferated to the point that it seems to represent a key concept of modernity,¹ crisis situations do not naturally grow from objective conditions of threat. Instead, politicians and citizens *narrate* social problems or shifts of power in ways that project them as critical moments in history that signal disaster. Crises, then, as the political scientist Colin Hay has argued, are constituted in and through particular narratives, they are 'subjectively perceived and hence brought into existence through narrative and discourse ... Crises are representations and hence "constructions" of failure.'²

The capacity of the Australian Government to render the present moment in terms of crisis needs to be seen as one point along a discursive continuum. Along this continuum, contradictory forms of thought and practices are made coherent. On the one hand, the social, economic and political issues entangled with Indigenous marginalisation are defined as requiring Indigenous people themselves to take responsibility for their structurally peripheral circumstance — citizen responsibility eclipses citizenship rights. On the other hand, this definition of crisis frames the circumstances of Indigenous experience in ways that provide the non-Indigenous political leadership with the key to defining the appropriate strategies for resolution of 'the crisis' — here, the restoration of law

and order is defined as the fundamental solution. That this particular conjuncture has made possible the narrative construction of crisis is an outcome of the contingent coupling of these discursive positions.

In examining the development of this narrative of crisis, I make two points. First, in the conception of crisis as deriving naturally from inherent features of Indigenous culture, community and individual behaviour, we fail to grasp the crucial, *active* and *material* role that the Commonwealth and other government and non-government agencies have played in the emergence of this crisis. Governmental fiscal neglect needs to be understood as one of the key factors producing the often critical conditions of daily life in communities such as Wadeye (Thamarrurr).

Second, the Howard government's declared solution to the crisis—the restoration of law and order—grossly underestimated the nature of the problem and scope of solutions and public resources required. It is certainly clear that national governments generally are unwilling to deal with increased inequality—it is no longer possible to mount arguments that will have any purchase along the lines that that the state has full responsibility for the welfare of disadvantaged citizens. However, in the case of remote Indigenous communities, the opportunity costs of maintaining the status quo have been calculated, and there is no argument, economic or political, that this situation is sustainable. There are, instead, alternative models as well as current practices organised broadly around notions of economic, cultural and social sustainability that make possible the long-term viability of communities such as Wadeye (Thamarrurr).

Although policy and discourse are often thought of as separate spheres of activity, this separation is misleading. They are better understood as effectively one and the same thing, in that they are bound up with each other in constituting a particular field of discursive practice. This essay charts the contours of this field of discursive practice.

Naturalising crisis

When John Howard came to power, the new political leadership began—slowly at first, and then with increased

vigour—to develop a narrative about the ‘failure’ of national policy and administration in Indigenous Affairs over the previous two decades. As is well known, that policy period, and the administrative and representative structures and processes it spawned, were organised around the principles of ‘self-determination’/‘self-management’ and a bipartisan commitment to the elimination of racial discrimination and the protection of human rights. The former was institutionalised in the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, and the latter in the creation of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). During this twenty-year period, ‘self-determination’ was represented by supporters and critics alike as signifying a clear ‘break’ from the era of ‘assimilation’ which had preceded it.

When the first Minister for Indigenous Affairs in the Howard government, John Herron, was appointed, he also maintained this idea of a rupture. However, he articulated a critical negative account of ‘self-determination’, suggesting that there was much merit in assimilationist ideas and the administrative regimes established during that era. Herron’s apparent support for a ‘return to assimilation’ was coupled with an ongoing critique concerning the ‘failure’ of ‘separate’ Indigenous institutions, programs and services to deliver improvements in the socioeconomic circumstances of Indigenous populations across the country. Remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory who had benefited from Commonwealth land rights legislation and community government, but who were now said to be ‘land rich and dirt poor’, were singled out for particular attention in this critical narrative. However, so as not to confine the critique to the Northern Territory—Indigenous socioeconomic indicators are appalling in all states—the federal government expanded its long-held criticism of ATSIC.

All these criticisms of the legacy of ‘self-determination’, developed in the first three years of the Howard government’s term, are well documented and analysed.³ Many commentators (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) worried that the government was signalling a ‘return to assimilation’. However, the government framed its ‘new’ approach to policy and administration in terms of ‘practical reconciliation’. This

appeared at least in rhetorical terms to signal continuity as opposed to discontinuity with the previous policy era.⁴

'Practical reconciliation' built upon a direct critique of the Keating government's legacy of 'reconciliation' and, more indirectly, on a critique of the idea of 'self-determination'. Howard and other ministers argued that the Keating decade of 'reconciliation' had been too concerned with 'symbolic' questions;⁵ Howard's focus would instead be on 'practical' outcomes in Indigenous health, education, welfare, income and employment. Achieving statistical equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians was seen by Howard to be the eventual goal of 'practical reconciliation'.

All these developments in Indigenous affairs under Howard need to be seen as coextensive with wider and longer-term national, international and global transformations, many of which began during the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁶ In the national context, the reform of social welfare more broadly has been underscored by the McLure report⁷ and driven by the notion of 'mutual obligation' and the restructuring of the welfare sector. This has entailed a complex process of 'enterprising' both the state and its citizens, particularly those who are recipients of welfare.⁸ Public sector agencies (formerly the primary providers of welfare programs and services), non-government organisations and the private sector now compete with one another to provide at the most competitive rates, programs and services to the recipients of welfare. At the same time, those citizens who are recipients of welfare are also required to conduct themselves in more 'enterprising' ways, actively undertaking designated work projects in exchange for unemployment and other welfare benefits.

Furthermore, all these efforts by policy makers to reconfigure the relationship between society, state, economy and citizen have, at the same time, also reconfigured geography and territory. Localities facing sustained economic hardship are now required to sort out their own problems, especially through the route of 'rebuilding local community', 'building community capacity', 'bridging social capital'—key terms in the contemporary vocabulary of 'welfare reform' in this geographic guise.⁹

At the international level, the transfer and exchange of these reforming ideas and practices in welfare and social policy has been productive and has cross-cut liberal, conservative and neo-conservative ideological commitments. For example, Blair Labour's 'Third Way' in the United Kingdom, the 'compassionate conservatism' of the Bush administration in the United States, and 'mutual obligation' and 'mutual responsibility' of the Howard government, whilst configured in nationally unique ways all stress the obligations of citizens to government as a critical element of welfare reform.¹⁰ The idea that Indigenous Australians needed to assume greater responsibility for themselves and their circumstances is clearly to be located within this wider and longer-term context.

To suggest that there is a social crisis unfolding across Indigenous communities is in many ways not an entirely new strategic intervention by government. This analysis was not confined to government sources or those commentators who identified as supporters of the federal government. Indigenous community leaders and commentators, and many non-Indigenous analysts, have been frank about the critical social conditions in Indigenous communities, as well as the relationship between these circumstances and individual and corporate/communal responsibility. Some of this commentary has indeed lent credibility to the governmental narrative of crisis. However, this does not appear to have been the intention of these analyses. Rather, these critiques have aimed to urge governments to take more seriously a range of cultural, ethnographic and historical factors in policy making, service delivery and institutional arrangements as they are configured for Indigenous communities, *rather* than supporting a simple moral critique of Indigenous 'failure'. I want to look in particular at two examples of this critique, not only for the ways in which they raise crucial issues associated with Indigenous corporate and individual agency, but also for the ways in which these raise crucial issues to do with the active role of government action itself, over many decades, in constructing and sustaining the current circumstances of daily life in many Indigenous communities.

'Bringing the state back in': Noel Pearson's critique¹¹

The first example of this critique is that developed by the Indigenous activist and policy consultant, Noel Pearson, one of the most prominent critics of the active, historical role that governments have played in developing Indigenous disadvantage and marginalisation. Pearson argues that the extension of welfare payments to Indigenous citizens over the past three decades has produced a debilitating dependency and widespread social dysfunction — specifically among the communities of Cape York.¹² The welfare economy that has developed in the region, Pearson observes, is inimical to traditional Aboriginal culture as much as it is to the economy of the market.¹³ As Pearson puts it:

The problem with the welfare economy is that it is not a real economy. It is a completely artificial means of living. Our traditional economy was and is a real economy. Central to the traditional economy was the imperative for able-bodied people to work. If you did not hunt and gather, you starved ... Common to the real economy of traditional society and the real economy of the market is the demand for economic and social reciprocity. This reciprocity is expressed through work, initiative, struggle, enterprise, contribution, effort. The key problem with welfare is that it inherently does not demand reciprocity. I call it a gammon economy.¹⁴

According to Pearson, if the debilitating effects of the welfare economy are ever going to be overcome, the reinvigoration of reciprocity as the basis of social relations is crucial. For this to be possible, new institutional arrangements must be established. Pearson argues that service delivery to Aboriginal communities has proved extremely problematic on the ground, and that while government certainly has the resources to commit to services and programs, its *modus operandi* lacks coordination, encourages overlap and duplication, and is not based on holistic approaches. Simply attempting to address the manifest problems in Cape York Aboriginal communities through better coordination of programs and other adjustments that generally take place under the rubric of 'whole

of government' approaches to service delivery will be totally inadequate to deal with the scale of the problems and needs in those communities. From Pearson's perspective, the idea of better coordination still assumes that welfare-induced problems can be solved through more effective program delivery under policies that are usually developed by bureaucrats far removed from these communities.

In other words, from Pearson's perspective, *government itself* continues to be an *active* source of the negative welfare mentality. What is required to fully tackle the problems that confront Cape York communities is, according to Pearson, a new interface with government, a statutory authority between Cape York peoples and government to coordinate holistic policy development, planning and the administration and delivery of welfare programs at regional, sub-regional and local levels. This new statutory interface will operate as a 'partnership interface', through which 'the state would negotiate with Aboriginal community representatives ... about the design of programs and the development of cooperative agreements on how the programs will be delivered on the ground'.¹⁵

Some commentators have seen Pearson's arguments as supporting the Howard government's commitment to welfare policy and payments premised upon the notion of citizen responsibility.¹⁶ However, such accounts are misleading; they ignore, first, Pearson's critique of the *ongoing*, active role of the state in perpetuating welfare dependence — and this includes the Howard government's focus on mutual responsibility and mainstreamed, whole-of-government approaches to policy and service delivery. Second, they overlook his arguments for the creation of new institutional arrangements through which the relationship between the state and Indigenous citizens should be configured. For Pearson, welfare has been debilitating because of the *way* in which it has been directed to Indigenous people. Pearson argues that systemic changes are essential in terms of the way in which welfare is distributed, but he does not see welfare *per se* as debilitating. Rather, welfare provides potentially valuable resources for the development of remote Aboriginal communities if genuine partnerships are established with government, developed under the new institutional arrangements he

proposes replace the current arrangements which are wholly controlled by government. In 2006, six years on from the publication of his monograph *Our Right to Take Responsibility*, it was hardly surprising (although dreadfully depressing) to hear Pearson state that for all the negotiations he has been involved in over the years with federal and state governments to bring about the changes he has argued for, almost no change has been the result.¹⁷

Anthropological critique: David Martin

Anthropologist David Martin draws on his own ethnographic work in the Cape York region as well as that of other anthropologists to suggest that there are certain widespread Aboriginal values and practices which may be inimical to the kinds of social and attitudinal changes sought by Pearson and the Howard government in advocating an end to welfare dependency. First, as Martin shows, the notion of 'dependency', which lies at the core of both Pearson's and governmental assessments of the effects of welfare, is not necessarily one that would have much meaning for many Indigenous people living in remote communities. 'Dependency' here is understood in terms of a 'culturally established and validated capacity to demand and receive resources and services (symbolic and tangible) from others'.¹⁸ Seen this way, not only is dependency *not* inimical to individual and group autonomy, it is 'a core principle through which Aboriginal agency is realised in the structuring of social relationships'.¹⁹

What appears as 'objective disparities in wealth and power', both within Aboriginal groups and between Aboriginal people and the wider society, can, as Martin states, 'be transformed by Aboriginal agency through a process of co-opting others, often outsiders (including non-Aboriginal people) to become patrons or "bosses" for Aboriginal people'.²⁰ This establishes a complex set of relations: from the perspective of those Aboriginal people involved, relationships of so-called 'dependency' are relationships of obligation and responsibility to those same Aboriginal agents. This ethnographically informed understanding of Aboriginal sociality has perplexed proponents of 'self-determination' no less than advocates of mutual and individual responsibility in the sense that both

have sought to develop active Indigenous agents in terms that clearly have little resonance with Aboriginal peoples' expectations or experience.²¹

Martin is also concerned that Pearson's principle of reciprocity and the related notion of mutual responsibility as he uses it, while quite different from that used by the Howard government, will also founder against certain Aboriginal social values and practices. For Pearson, because the state is too remote from Indigenous experience, efforts to strengthen individual responsibility need to be organised around the idea of reciprocity and mutual responsibility between the individual and his or her 'family', local group and 'community'—and not between individuals or communities and the state. However, as Martin shows, neither 'families' nor 'communities' can be assumed to be units of sufficient moral and political authority capable of instituting the kinds of reciprocity and responsibility for which Pearson argues. In the case of 'families', the value of individual autonomy means that 'it is rare even for a senior individual to be able to exercise authority across all members of a family, particularly in relation to the matters about which Pearson is most concerned—expenditure of individual incomes, care of children, consumption of alcohol, and so forth'.²² In the case of 'communities', there are few if any Indigenous-wide community political institutions which exist apart from the quasi-local community government councils and regional councils (such as land councils). These bodies represent highly complex and internally differentiated populations in terms of factors that continue to inform Aboriginal political, economic and social relations such as affiliations with ancestral lands and language, personal and group histories, ethnicity and, bearing on all of these, kin group and other local affiliations. Consequently, although community government councils have legislative responsibility for the general peace, welfare and health of community residents, they cannot be considered to have the necessary political or moral authority to demand responsibility and reciprocity from residents.

Finally, in relation to Pearson's conception of the relationship between the cash flows into communities through welfare payments and CDEP, and the manifestations of social

pathology, Martin points out that there is a complex interplay between the social processes involved in increasing individualisation on the one hand, and of enduring forms of collective action on the other. Where Pearson imagines that the source of the cash provides a moral force which is manifest in the way in which it is used by individuals—‘you value the things you work for’²³—ethnographic evidence suggests rather that there is ‘a more complex interaction between individuals’ values and practices, and those of their significant social networks as well as those of the community in which they live’.²⁴ Although cash has only become widely available to Aboriginal people living in remote communities in the last thirty to thirty-five years, it has nonetheless become ‘deeply implicated in the production and reproduction of [the] distinctive Aboriginal values and practices’ that lie at the heart of the issues that concern Pearson, and which are the subject of the highly moralising governmental discourse concerning citizen responsibility.²⁵ Money, Martin argues, ‘has become central to a particular kind of Aboriginal “performative sociality”, in which social relations (notably those of kinship) are constantly produced and reproduced through the flows of services and material items between individuals’, while, at the same time, money has enabled individuals to abstract themselves from many of those same relationships of kin-relatedness and responsibility. What this means in terms of the uses to which money is put by recipients of welfare is complex. On the one hand, welfare payments enable the deepening of collective actions within Aboriginal groups (through collective saving for consumer items such as vehicles, for example, and the financing of large ceremonial gatherings as well as resourcing drinking and gambling groups). On the other hand, welfare and cash make possible more autonomous action by individuals who want to assert their independence from others within their significant social networks. What all this implies for policy makers and governments, then, is that it is not possible to make clear-cut normative assessments about the effects of welfare payments and socially destructive behaviour. Rather, the availability of cash in the form of welfare payments can facilitate both constructive and destructive activity. In sum, the ‘responsible’ Indigenous citizen constructed by the Howard government,

like the 'self-determining' Indigenous citizen²⁶ of previous governments, is not only a simplistic rendition of the cultural and social complexity described by anthropologists such as Martin. Government policy in fact actively contributes to the reproduction of those critical circumstances of daily life in remote Aboriginal communities, reproducing programs and policy that fail to engage with those Indigenous values and practices that can prove so problematic for the health, well-being and development of individuals and communities.²⁷

Governance as a multi-sited activity

To speak here of the active role of 'government' in reproducing Indigenous disadvantage is to gloss into homogeneity what is in fact an altogether 'heterogeneous ensemble of institutions'.²⁸ This assemblage of organisations and agencies comprises not only federal, state and local government agencies — as well as non-government organisations — but also, most significantly, thousands of publicly funded Indigenous organisations or, as Tim Rowse refers to them collectively, the 'Indigenous sector'. Furthermore, this very diverse governmental/organisational terrain means that there is no longer any sense (if there ever was) in which policy-making processes and practices can be understood to be coherent projects.

As the anthropologist Dianne Smith puts it, policy-making processes and practices are not only multi-sited, they are increasingly complex in their manifestations, values, principles, structure and agency, and do not necessarily cohere in the ways in which many commentators are prone to suggest.²⁹ Smith has argued that as Indigenous groups have asserted their own cultural values and priorities and inaugurated their own civil and legal structures, we need to understand that the state no longer monopolises policy-making power. Policy 'solutions' to the 'problem' of Indigenous disadvantage now pose difficult dilemmas not only for non-Indigenous bureaucrats and politicians, but for an expanding class of Indigenous policy makers as well.³⁰ By factoring these institutional transformations into our thinking about policy making, Smith argues that policy is no longer a matter of choosing between competing paradigms organised around the idea of cultural difference — how to eradicate it if you were/

are an assimilationist, and how to preserve it if you were/are committed to 'self-determination'. Rather, as she puts it, 'the [current] dilemma for policy makers is not so much the need to recognize cultural values and diversity, but how to respond to these in the formulation of programs without degenerating into social engineering. This is a dilemma for Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous policy makers.'³¹

While these issues of Indigenous 'welfare dependency' and the 'destructive' uses made of welfare payments by some recipients of those benefits form the basis of much of the debate about the 'crisis' in remote Aboriginal communities, there is, of course, a crucial element missing from this narrative. Government funding and the fiscal responsibility of the state is rarely the focus of attention in these debates, and to the extent that it is, it is usually in terms of government largesse in relation to Aboriginal communities, not governmental fiscal neglect. However, the data that are widely available reveal large and persistent shortfalls in government expenditure on infrastructure and services in Aboriginal communities. Although it is also the case that the federal government is failing to make adequate provision for infrastructure across the country more generally,³² the research that demonstrates large shortfalls in expenditure on Indigenous communities receives little-to-no media attention. The sustaining fiction that government overspends on Indigenous programs and services is, it would seem, strengthened by public awareness of under-spending on infrastructure across the country more generally. Furthermore, this research also reveals a structural imbalance in funding in expenditure across Indigenous affairs, with proportionally much less being spent on positive aspects of public policy such as education and employment creation, and proportionally more being spent on negative areas such as criminal justice and unemployment benefits. One study focused on Wadeye and its satellite homelands and outstations makes this explicit.³³

The cost of sustaining the status quo

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) commissioned economists John Taylor and Owen Stanley to produce an account of the costs—both to governments and to the

local community—of sustaining the status quo in the Wadeye region. The 'opportunity costs'—the costs arising from forgone production and from remedial actions necessary to compensate for critical socioeconomic conditions—identified by Taylor and Stanley show just how unsustainable that status quo is. Key findings of their report include the fact that far less is spent on residents of the region, per head, than on the average Territorian; for example 'for every education dollar spent by governments on the average child of compulsory school age in the Northern Territory, at present \$0.47 is spent on the Thamarrurr equivalent'.

One might expect that the remedial costs to government of servicing a growing Australian community that is relatively sick, poorly housed, illiterate, innumerate, disengaged from the education system, on low income, unemployed and with a sub-standard communications network would be substantially higher (not lower) than the Northern Territory average. What emerges instead is something akin to Hart's oft-cited inverse care law in relation to health care needs—'*to those most in need the least is provided*'. Furthermore, there is a structural imbalance in funding at Thamarrurr with proportionally less expenditure on positive aspects of public policy such as education and employment creation that are designed to build capacity and increase output, and proportionally more spending on negative areas such as criminal justice and unemployment benefit. Taylor and Stanley write: 'This begs the very important question as to whether this situation of fiscal imbalance actually serves to perpetuate the very socioeconomic conditions observed at Thamarrurr in the first place.'³⁴

Taylor and Stanley's research provides the data upon which irrefutable arguments for increased public spending on positive aspects of public policy in Indigenous affairs can be made. They argue that this spending must be primarily directed at positive public policy initiatives, namely, job creation and human capital formation.

Law, order, authority and sustainability

Yet for all the persuasive detail of this COAG report, the Howard government continued to insist that 'the crisis' in

remote Aboriginal communities is not about money. Howard's Minister for Health, Tony Abbott, for example, claimed that 'the basic problem of Aboriginal disadvantage was not a lack of spending but the directionless culture in which Aboriginal people lived'.³⁵ This view was reinforced almost daily by editorials in the print media throughout May and June 2006. The crisis being narrated led to the conclusion that its solution lies with Aboriginal people themselves, and in the restoration of law, order and security. Aboriginal people, in these terms, must sort out their disorganised lives and take greater responsibility for their circumstances. The problem of violence in communities — and here there is tacit acknowledgement that increased spending is required, albeit negative spending — is to be solved through an increased police presence in those communities.³⁶

If this narrative of crisis has been an easy political fiction to sustain, operating effectively to deflect from public attention the very active role of government in perpetuating the critical conditions of life in remote Aboriginal communities, it has also had the effect of making it difficult to conceive how those critical conditions might be transformed into a situation where lives and communities can be made sustainable beyond, of course, the proposals about improving individual and communal responsibility and increased policing. However, once again, there is research which, taken together with consideration of those factors that I have discussed so far — tough-minded, empirically grounded understandings of the specific cultural bases of individual and corporate life in many remote communities, of the heterogeneity of governance and policy-making institutions and practices, and of the critical supporting fiscal and institutional role of the state — that is very suggestive of ways in which those communities and their residents can live socially and economically sustainable lives.

Jon Altman has argued that we need to extend our conception of what constitutes economic activity in remote Aboriginal communities beyond orthodox conceptions of the economy as the market economy, to include the full range of economic activity carried out in remote Aboriginal areas. When we do this, we see that there is a great deal of economic activity currently being carried out in remote areas populated

by Aboriginal people that is not recognised as such, and which produces very significant economic, environmental and social benefits. What is more, these economic, environmental and social benefits do not only devolve to Aboriginal communities but to the public and private sectors more generally.³⁷ In other words, a broader conception of the economy reveals very broad national benefits generated by Aboriginal people.

Altman's argument is based on the premise that the narrow conception of economic activity contained in the notion of the market economy should be extended to encompass the full range of economic practices and institutions in remote areas. This then includes: (1) the market, conceptualised as productive private sector activity; (2) the state, which is a provider of services and benefits; and (3) all customary economic activities. This last category, the customary, is based on traditional economic activity such as hunting, gathering and fishing, but also includes more recent innovations in these fields of practice such as land and habitat management, species management and the maintenance of biodiversity as well as artistic production. While Aboriginal people carry out all these activities as a matter of custom and tradition, they have also become involved in recent times in commercial and public sector applications of these practices.

In doing so, however, the value of their labour is seldom recognised, nor is the productive benefit of this labour recognised or valued. If, however, the value of Indigenous labour and productive activity in the customary sector were recognised and accounted for, we would have a more accurate understanding not only of current levels of economic activity in remote communities, but also of the development potential of these communities. In addition to this, we would have an accurate account of the value that these communities add both to the market economy, the public sector and the national estate. Such a model of economic activity utterly contradicts the idea that remote Aboriginal communities are too costly and that some should be shut down.³⁸

The links between the customary, market and state economies comprise what Altman calls 'the hybrid economy' of remote Aboriginal communities. By extending our concept of what constitutes economic activity in those remote regions

to include all three spheres of economic activity at work in those places—the market, state and customary—Altman argues that we have the (conceptual) framework around which it is possible to build institutions and practices of sustainable development.

Conclusion: Crisis, what crisis?

At one level, this has been an essay about the changes in Indigenous Affairs brought about by the Howard government during its decade in power, and about how these changes can be understood as being inextricably linked with a broader project of welfare reform—one which is not unique to Australia. This reforming project has conjured up anew ideas about the responsibility of citizens to the state, their communities and themselves. As a result, in place of the former welfarist conviction that the state was responsible for its disadvantaged citizens, the idea of citizen responsibility to the state now seems secure. In Australian Indigenous Affairs, this conviction has been translated more harshly into the idea that citizens can indeed fail their governments. Those who point to disorganisation, poverty, violence, unemployment, critically poor health conditions and lack of schooling, literacy, skills and viable economic activity in remote Aboriginal communities, are attempting to demonstrate the rightness of this conviction, but can only do so by ignoring the evidence to the contrary.

At another level, however, I have been concerned with the way in which government fails its citizens, specifically Indigenous citizens, not in the ‘symbolic’ terms that Howard rejected anyway, but precisely in the ‘practical’ terms developed by Howard and his leadership team. The failure of the Howard government to make any difference during this time to Indigenous socioeconomic indicators—the ‘practical’ goal identified by the government itself—is an assessment of that government’s legacy that receives little media coverage. The failure of Howard’s ‘quiet revolution’ has been very quiet indeed. The critical circumstances of daily life in many remote Aboriginal communities, instead of providing testimony to this failure, have instead been turned into something of an alibi, making the idea of a ‘crisis’ in those communities seem

utterly feasible. This idea of crisis, as narrated by the Howard government, naturalised a people and their circumstances as the product of moral deficit, deviance and even degeneracy. We have reached the point where 'the crisis has begun to be lived in its terms', not in the sense that we have all been duped, but in the way which this narrative of crisis, as Stuart Hall noted, does in fact 'express real problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions'.³⁹

Reflection

This essay was written at a time when public and political debate about the fundamental tenets of policy and practice in Indigenous affairs was making headlines, not just for weeks but for some years. I wrote the essay in an attempt to try and clarify the different strands of the debate at the time, to place them in historical context and to calibrate the many arguments and assertions against relevant research, evidence and argument. The notion of 'crisis' as constituted through particular narratives (an analysis developed by the English political scientist, Colin Hay) seemed to me to be an apt way of thinking about the political and public construction of 'failure' in Aboriginal affairs at the time. That this 'failure' was narrated in normative terms and seen to lie almost entirely with Indigenous communities and individuals rather than being anchored in sociological and historical factors tied to profound fiscal neglect by governments signalled to me something deeper to do with the politics of Indigenous affairs in this country.

I probably couldn't have responded to this signal in this essay—the politics of the time were complex enough for me to discern. However, I regret that since then I have failed to pursue it. If I had, I imagine being led back to 1788 and beyond, to the long history of Anglo-European thought about the First People of this continent; an intellectual history that we know of today as having informed the development of those bodies of disciplinary knowledge that we as academics continue to work with and which today still shape and inform public discussion and debate in Indigenous affairs.

Just to isolate out one brief quote I cited, let me revisit a claim made in 2006 by our current prime minister, then Minister for Health, Tony Abbott: 'The basic problem of Aboriginal disadvantage', he claimed, 'is not lack of spending but the directionless culture in which Aboriginal people live.' How deeply embedded in

Australian law, politics and history is a statement such as this, and how embedded in the history of Anglo-European thought? This is an intellectual history in which Aboriginal people were said to lack civilised society, culture and religion, no less than they were said to lack politics, government and law, private property, free trade, and lives organised around capitalistic economic activity. On this reading, there's very little that separates the claim of the current prime minister, I believe, from this intellectual history. And underlying it all, are of course, the material facts of dispossession, of sovereignty denied, of the forcible removal of peoples from their lands to missions and reserves, and the subsequent legal reinvention of those same marginal lands since the 1970s as Aboriginal 'communities' held by Aboriginal land trusts.

In mid-2014 the Abbott government handed down its first Budget. We learned that those 'communities' and the Aboriginal organisations, state and Commonwealth departments that service their chronically disadvantaged residents will have to manage (somehow) with budget cuts of \$530 million across the Indigenous Affairs portfolio. Yet another crisis is surely in the making.

Notes

- 1 Claudio Lomnitz, 'Times of Crisis: Historicity, Sacrifice and the Spectacle of Debacle', *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 127-47; Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, 'Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis', *Public Culture*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1995, pp. 324-46.
- 2 Colin Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the "Winter of Discontent"', *Sociology*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1996, pp. 253-72.
- 3 See, for example, Larissa Behrendt, 'ATSIC: Regional Mythologies', *Arena Magazine*, April-May 2004.
- 4 Tim Rowse, 'The Politics of Being Practical: Howard and his Quiet Revolution in Indigenous Affairs', speech to the Brisbane Institute, 13 July 2005, p. 2, <http://www.brisinst.org.au/resources/rowse_tim_indigenous.html>. See also Tim Rowse, *Indigenous Futures: Choice and Development for Aboriginal and Islander Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2002.
- 5 Jon Altman and Boyd Hunter, *Monitoring 'Practical' Reconciliation: Evidence from the Reconciliation Decade, 1991-2001*, CAEPR Discussion Paper, no. 254, CAEPR, ANU Canberra, 2003, p. 1.
- 6 David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt and Jonathan Perraton, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001.
- 7 Patrick McLure, Participation Support for a More Equitable Society, Final Report of the Group on Welfare Reform, unpublished report to the federal minister for Family and Community Services, 2000.
- 8 Mark Considine, *Enterprising States: The Public Management of Welfare to Work*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2001.
- 9 By contrast, those prosperous localities where capital and labour markets,

- investment and jobs are located are never required to demonstrate their funds of 'social capital' or 'community capacity'. A. Amin, 'Local Community on Trial', *Economy and Society*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2005, pp. 612-13.
- 10 Transformations in the global economy are seen by governments in each of these countries to be the inevitable drivers of these reforms. Many commentators have often glossed this as neoliberalism. The effect of this incorrect gloss is twofold: first, it erases the distinctively national configuration of ideological commitment and institutions in each case; second, it elides the distinctive, and in many ways contradictory, intellectual traditions that inform these ideas associated with contemporary economic, political and cultural transformations—particularly as these concern changes to 'the welfare state'. See: Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays in Knowledge and Politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005.
 - 11 I have lifted the title of a now seminal work published in 1985 by the historical sociologist Theda Skocpol and colleagues P.B. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer and T. Skocpol (eds), *Bringing the State Back In*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985. Their work demonstrated the importance of institutional analysis in history, sociology, politics and so forth at a time when many scholars tended to focus on the actions of individuals and groups of individuals in producing social and historical change.
 - 12 Noel Pearson, *Our Right to Take Responsibility*, Noel Pearson and Associates, Cairns, 2000.
 - 13 Pearson uses the term 'welfare economy' to refer to the full range of welfare benefits payable to Indigenous individuals and communities. This includes the form of 'unemployment' benefit unique to Indigenous communities in which Indigenous people work for the equivalent of welfare payments through the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP). CDEP was developed more than twenty years ago and to this extent was probably a world first as a mutual obligation welfare program. Jon Altman, Matthew Gray and Robert Levitus, *Policy Issues for the Community Development Employment Projects Scheme in Rural and Remote Australia*, CAEPR Discussion Paper, no. 271, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, 2005.
 - 14 Noel Pearson, 'Positive and Negative Welfare and Australia's Indigenous Communities', *Family Matters*, vol. 54, 1999, p. 32.
 - 15 Noel Pearson, 'Positive and Negative Welfare', p. 33.
 - 16 Helen Hughes, 'New Deal for Communities', *Executive Highlights*, no. 261, 2005; Christopher Pearson, 'Beware of a Relapse, Noel', *Australian*, 1 July 2006, p. 16.
 - 17 *The 7.30 Report*, ABC Television, 29 June 2006.
 - 18 David F. Martin, *Is Welfare Dependency 'Welfare Poison'? An Assessment of Noel Pearson's Proposals for Aboriginal Welfare Reform*, CAEPR Discussion Paper, no. 213, CAEPR, ANU Canberra, 2001, p. 6.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
 - 21 Richard Sennett has made a similar point in relation to arguments developed in the United States about 'welfare dependency': that the conceptions of dependency that inform these debates derive from liberal political philosophy and Christian theology and are therefore culturally specific. Richard Sennett, *Respect: The Formation of Character in Age of Inequality*, Allen Lane, New York, 2002.
 - 22 Martin, p. 15.
 - 23 Pearson, *Our Right to Take Responsibility*.
 - 24 Martin, p. 9
 - 25 *Ibid.*, p. 8

- 26 Here I am not mounting a critique of self-determination so much as pointing out—as many others have done previously—that is that it was never clearly defined.
- 27 See Peter Sutton, ‘The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Policy in Australia since the 1970s’, *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2001, pp. 125-73.
- 28 Rowse, Indigenous Futures.
- 29 Diane Smith, ‘When Starship Pintupi Meets the Klingons of Policy’, *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2003, p. 262.
- 30 Over the last decade a great deal of bureaucratic and political attention has focused on ‘governance,’ and what makes for ‘good governance’ in particular, in Aboriginal communities. Yet, as Diane Austin-Broos points out, ‘If in fact government transfers are not enough, if life-long welfare is inherently disabling even on the margins of the nation-state, improving governance can only have minimal impact’. Diane Austin-Broos, ‘Introduction,’ in Diane Austin-Broos and Gaynor Macdonald (eds), *Culture, Economy and Governance in Aboriginal Australia*, University of Sydney Press, Sydney, 2006, p. 2.
- 31 Smith, p. 262.
- 32 CEDA, Infrastructure: Getting On With The Job, CEDA, Melbourne, 2005.
- 33 John Taylor and Owen Stanley, *The Opportunity Costs of the Status Quo in the Thamurrurr Region*, CAEPR Working Paper, no. 28, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, 2005.
- 34 Taylor and Stanley, pp. 63-4.
- 35 Roger Maynard, ‘Death Rate is Three Times Higher among Aboriginal Children,’ *Guardian Weekly*, 30 June - 6 July 2006, p. 7.
- 36 There is an underlying assumption in these arguments that much of the violence in Aboriginal communities is incomprehensible to the wider community, that this violence is senseless, wanton and utterly destructive. Without in any way apologising for this violence or trying to downplay the extent of the suffering caused by violence, it is crucial, however, to recognise as Anton Blok argues, that we cannot understand violence (and therefore can do little to inhibit its unauthorised and unacceptable uses) unless we understand that far from being ‘senseless’ all acts of violence are meaningful (A. Blok, *Honour and Violence*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 103-4). That is, violent acts are forms of meaningful action in that they all ‘say’ or express something—for example, ‘I can humiliate you/am humiliated, subject you/am subjected, vindicate you/vindicate myself, and so forth’. At Wadeye, Bill Ivory has explained how the symbolism of heavy metal as a transgressive genre of music organises ‘gang’ formation and activity (William Ivory, *Nemarluk to Heavy Metal: Cultural Change and the Development of Contemporary Youth Sub-Culture at Port Keats, Northern Territory*, BA Honours thesis, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, 2003). Other anthropologists have similarly provided ‘thick’ descriptions of the meanings and uses of violence elsewhere, on how violence is learned and how and why it is practiced (Annette Hamilton, *Nature and Nurture: Aboriginal Child-Rearing in Northern Arnhem Land*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1981; David F. Martin, ‘Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Homicide: “Same but Different”’, in Heather Strang and Sally-Anne Gerull (eds), *Homicide: Patterns, Prevention and Control*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 1993, pp. 167-76; Colin Tatz, ‘Aboriginal Violence: A Return to Pessimism’, *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 25, 1990, pp. 245-60). It is to this data that non-Indigenous policy-makers must turn, and not to simplistic, moralising claims about the need for victims and perpetrators of violence to simply reform their ways or face jail.
- 37 Jon Altman, Sustainable Development Options on Aboriginal Land: The Hybrid Economy in the C21st, CAEPR Discussion Paper, no. 226, CAEPR, ANU,

- Canberra, 2001; Jon Altman, Craig Linkhorn, Jennifer Clark, *Land Rights and Development Reform in Remote Australia*, CAEPR Discussion Paper, no. 276, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra, 2005.
- 38 Nicolas Rothwell, 'Frontier too Far', *The Australian*, 4-5 February 2006, p. 17.
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'Calling our spirits home': Indigenous Cultural Festivals and the Making of a Good Life

Lisa Slater

Speaking about the problems affecting Wik youth of Aurukun, Cape York, a local community health worker, Derek Walpo, lamented that 'their spirits have wandered too far. We need to call them back.' The poignant reflection was made at a debriefing session following a social and wellbeing festival in Aurukun.¹ The five-day event culminated in a Mary G concert, in which almost all the township gathered to laugh and cheer the indomitable Broome 'lady'. It was not just Mary G's ribald humour that vitalised and galvanised the crowd, but also her performance that playfully reflected back and validated some of the locals' experiences and values, such as humour in the face of hardship. Derek was emphasising the importance of community celebrations and cultural ceremony as vehicles for improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal youth and community. Without denying or eclipsing the specificity of his remark, I would suggest that he was referring to an existential problem: the young people are overwhelmed by the dominant culture and fracturing local life and have lost a purpose of existence. His words underscore the ephemeral qualities that are vital to a good life. More, he evokes Indigenous life worlds that the settler-colonial state finds difficult to countenance.

What makes a good life? What allows people to flourish? Many words have been spent on calling the 'crisis' in Indigenous Australia. In 2008, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, spoke of Aurukun in a speech titled 'Out of the Chaos' as:

as tragic a place as you'll find ... It is a depressing broken community with the depressingly familiar symptoms of widespread breakdown in social norms—child abuse, alcoholism, suicide, welfare dependency, third world health and education. And above all, an abiding and pervading loss of purpose.²

She went on to say that Aurukun was 'typical of the dysfunction and breakdown of social norms that exist in many, many Indigenous communities'.³ Her concerns are widely shared; the solutions less so, as we witness with the continuing debate about the Northern Territory Intervention. Although I too share the distress, as I have written elsewhere, the language of brokenness and dysfunction troubles me.⁴ Such rhetoric, and the often-attendant graphic images, overwhelms most with thoughts of helplessness and hopelessness, and we wait for governments to rescue *us* from the pain of bearing witness to what is essentially the workings of colonialism. What the rhetoric of crisis and dysfunction also does is foreclose upon alternative interpretations of what nourishes life.

As we are well aware, recent governments have acted on the growing number of reports and voices detailing the social distress in too many Indigenous people's lives. The current 'crisis' in Indigenous Australia is largely responded to by government agencies by their reinforcement of mainstream values and experiences—as can be seen in the 'Close the Gap' campaign and the Intervention.⁵ The prevalent government approaches to improving the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians, as Jon Altman writes, are aimed at socioeconomic equality, and often ignore colonial history and the diversity of Indigenous circumstances and sociocultural distinctiveness. In Altman's words, Indigenous affairs 'looks for mainstream solutions to deeply entrenched non-mainstream problems'.⁶ In so doing, there is an assumption that what constitutes Indigenous wellbeing, or what makes for a good life, is roundly shared with mainstream Australia.

Despite reports as influential as 1997's *Bringing Them Home* recommending Indigenous cultural heritage and identity as important to wellbeing,⁷ there has been a failure by governments and mainstream agencies to engage with

Indigenous culture as a material expression of a vital life force, thus integral to wellbeing, or, put more poetically, calling people's spirits home. In his assessment of the Close the Gap campaign Altman asks how, in all this, 'are Indigenous people, in all their diversity, being enabled "to do and to be"?'⁸ In this essay I examine contemporary performances of Indigenous 'doing and being' through the lens of two cultural festivals: Laura Dance and Cultural Festival (Cape York) and the Dreaming Festival (southeast Queensland). Indigenous organisations, communities or individuals run a diversity of cultural festivals. Yet when I ask people to explain why festivals are worth having I hear very similar responses: to celebrate, share and, most importantly, maintain culture. To a lesser extent they are vehicles for economic development. The festivals are fundamentally about sustaining Indigenous worlds: the very life worlds that are not being valued in the race for statistical equality.

Being well

How health and wellbeing is understood and defined has far-reaching effects on policy and its implementation. Indeed, dominant definitions could be bad for some people's health. Wellbeing, Ian Anderson writes, 'implies the act to *be*', which has a particular emphasis on the social aspects of being.⁹ Thus social, cultural and historical differences will produce differences in what it is to be a healthy, capable person and what constitutes a good life. We have all benefited from developments in medical science. However, it is based upon an ideology of the Western concept of the self: a self-contained, independent individual separate from family, community and country.¹⁰ In prioritising individual health over social health, the individual is abstracted from the environment in which they live and how they make meaning of and in their life. Furthermore, it is assumed that there is a shared understanding of, desire for, and primacy of, a specific 'healthy' body, which takes precedence over cultural, spiritual or moral interests.¹¹ This is only one way of conceptualising health and wellbeing. Daniela Heil believes there is a need to understand the person not as a monadic individual but as always in the process of being constituted in social relations, and thus

relationships between people and their ongoing reconstitutions and affirmations is what makes *life worth living*.¹²

Like Heil, I do not want to pit essentialisms against each other—the dehumanising biomedical world against a benign Aboriginal cultural world. Rather, following Lenore Manderson, I want to suggest that wellbeing is not the state of individual bodies but of bodies in society.¹³ This is not to deny personal history or circumstances that affect our wellbeing, but rather, as my colleagues write, ‘to recognise that our social and communal life-world is not simply the contextual background to our wellbeing but fundamentally constitutive of it’.¹⁴ To improve Indigenous health and wellbeing requires not only a concern for biomedical health but also an exploration of what Indigenous people believe constitutes a ‘good life’ and the immediate and broader social, cultural and political circumstances that enable and disable a state of wellbeing. What is too often omitted, but should be central to government aims and policies, is a respect for how Indigenous people, in all their differences, are shaping their own lives in accordance with their sociocultural values and experiences of what makes life meaningful.¹⁵ Wellbeing, health or healthy body, is not a neutral concept; as much as it is a highly ethical project it is also political.

Governing difference

Notably, government responses such as the Intervention in the Northern Territory are concerned with the Indigenous social body; however, indigeneity is too readily presented as dysfunctional and in need of rescuing and recuperating into the ‘healthy’ civic body.¹⁶ In Australian public discourse the Indigenous population is almost always characterised as disadvantaged or deficient compared to the non-Indigenous. Indigeneity is structured through comparison with non-Indigenous population data across a range of socioeconomic indicators like health status, education and employment levels, income and housing. These comparisons have awakened mainstream Australia to vast inequalities, but the discursive frame continues to disable an engagement with Indigenous lived experience, values and aspirations. Imaginatively relocating Indigenous people from the margins to the centre

has material effects on lives that are often overlooked in the race for equality. Recognition of gross social inequalities can prompt urgent action by the state and community. It also implicitly, if not deceptively, foregrounds the kind of social ideals state and community organisations should aim for: social norms based on non-Indigenous, national ideals of experience and wellbeing. In the pressing moral and political objective of achieving statistical equality, as John Taylor observes, Indigenous people's own life projects can be obscured.¹⁷ If the critical goods of health and wellbeing, as is widely accepted, are leading a life with purpose, having quality connections with others, possessing self-regard and experiencing feelings of efficacy and control than the inability of the state to accommodate and value multiple interpretations of a 'good life' severely impedes goals for positive change.¹⁸

The forces that nourish many Indigenous lives, such as country, kinship sociality, spirits and law — what broadly could be referred to as culture — are seen as an encumbrance to, or outside, the healthy national sociopolitical body and thus incommensurate with the goals of government policy. The vision of Australian modernity, Kerry Arabena writes, has a resolutely white construct of the 'modern citizen'. The processes of Indigenous affairs are *making* Indigenous people fit for the modern nation, she argues, by resisting and minimising the recognition of cultural and historical differences.¹⁹ I would add that this is because the 'inheritors' of modernity, and thus political sovereignty, enact a particular mode of citizenship that cannot capture the specificity of Indigenous subjectivities. Yet it is this mode that is invoked as the benchmark for statistical equality and practical reconciliation. The modern is secular, disembodied and separate from the non-human world.²⁰ The social/public is the space for a particular performance of subject-citizen and by embodying this position one is 'taking their rightful place in the social realm'.²¹ To be otherwise is a demonstration of not yet being modern. There are too few public spaces that foster alternative performances of healthy citizens. Indigenous spirituality and cultural heritage is tolerated in mainstream politics as a lingering anachronism or as an ancient and worthy culture, but it is rarely understood as fundamental to Indigenous wellbeing.

Kicking up dust

Festivals and community celebrations have longed been vehicles for important communal functions—a part of the process of creating community and nourishing belonging—and in so doing defining and making connections between people and place: including and excluding.²² Throughout the history of the Australian nation, Indigenous people have participated in festivals commemorating nationhood, and have staged counter festivals to protest against colonisation, to celebrate survival and to share and keep their culture strong.²³ Festivals are a means of entering into dialogue with mainstream Australia and testimony to ongoing political struggles, and for both Indigenous performers and their audience these settings provide an important context for the contemporary negotiation and transmission of Indigenous people's identities.²⁴

Cultural festivals, as Rosita Henry asserts, allow Indigenous people to make themselves present to the world and to challenge a history that had rendered them absent.²⁵ To be 'rendered absent' from history is to be made marginal to the civic body, which reinforces the values of the settler-colonial culture. When this happens, the sociocultural differences that are life sustaining and generative do not inform the very government policies created to improve Indigenous lives. Indigenous cultures have long been denigrated, misunderstood, discounted and appropriated; they have been made meaningful or meaningless through a colonial lens, but rarely recognised as material expressions of worldviews and sociality that anchor and tend life. I am in no way suggesting that festivals are the only or only remaining space where 'culture' is performed, of course this is in no way true—culture is lived in the everyday. However, what is well documented, and most especially etched into the lives of Indigenous people, is the assimilative pressures upon peoples who are embedded within a dominant culture. A vital component of sustaining and supporting wellbeing is the creation of public spaces in which Indigenous culture can assert itself over and against the social construction of reality by the mainstream.²⁶

The Dreaming Festival strives to present rich and distinct Indigenous cultural histories, and affirm Indigenous people as historical agents. The festival, held in June near Woodford

in southeast Queensland, began in 2005. It showcases local, national and international Indigenous artists in a contemporary celebration of culture and Indigenous excellence. Held over three days and four nights, the program features film and literature components, performing arts, new media and digital technologies, comedy, ceremony, exhibitions, performance artists, physical theatre, visual arts, craft workshops, music program, street performers, musicals and a youth program and forums. While the impact of the Dreaming on the Murri host community of Jinibara land is extremely important to understand, the emphasis of this festival is not specifically local, and involves participation on a much larger scale.

The festival does not privilege a particular representation of Indigeneity; rather, it gathers a diversity of performers and forum participants from vastly different places. As I have written elsewhere, the range of performances and divergent identities presented at the Dreaming defies anyone's ability to define and categorise Indigenous identity. The Dreaming offers far more than an avenue for the expression of Indigenous culture: cultural performance provides a space for representation and identity formation, and also a political engagement and critique of the dominant culture. The display of cultural plurality, yet political solidarity, is not only a refusal of the neoliberal colonial state's agenda of homogeneity, but also a demonstration that the making of a 'good life' might require the valuing of difference as much as equality.

Among the dust, four-wheel drives, tents, towering eucalypts and the whirl of kids is the Laura Dance and Cultural Festival performance grounds. The Laura festival began in the early 1980s and is held biennially, fifteen kilometres from the township of Laura, Cape York, Queensland, on Kuku Yalanji land. The three-day program is a celebration of the region's Indigenous cultures; it primarily features dance groups from across Cape York and into the Torres Strait, but there are also long-standing participants from Mornington Island, Yarrabah and Palm Island. The 2009 festival — the eighteenth — saw troupes from as far as Inala, Brisbane. Every year non-Indigenous people from across Australia, and international guests, are welcomed onto country to experience the strength of Cape York Indigenous cultural heritage.

When Jeremy Gaia became the festival director it was made very clear to him by Indigenous communities of Cape York that they wanted Laura to return to a grassroots festival, with the express purpose of keeping culture strong through dance, story and art and to demonstrate sovereignty.²⁷ In an era of Indigenous affairs in which 'self-determination' has all but become a dirty word, where government interventions are imposed upon communities and Indigenous culture is routinely derided as a hindrance to socioeconomic wellbeing (yet there is a stated—and no doubt genuine—commitment to improving Indigenous lives), the communities' dedication to the Laura festival should be pause for reflection. It is no small feat to get a small plane of people from the outer Torres Strait Islands to Laura, or a busload from Injinoo over the dusty track of the Peninsula Development Road which cuts through the Cape—or from Inala for that matter. Nor is it to feed, water and shelter everyone—all such supplies needing to be flown or driven in by the visiting groups. People do so because for them 'culture' is not an impediment to a 'good life' but its very substance.

To borrow the words of Alfred Dockery, 'Australians should care, first and foremost, about the wellbeing of those Indigenous people in urgent need. This surely involves maintaining the things that they value, not destroying them'.²⁸ The peoples of Cape York's passion for and commitment to the Laura Dance Festival as a vital initiative in maintaining culture and strengthening identity was made clear in a two-day workshop that was held in Cairns in May 2008 by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board (ASTIAB).²⁹ Participants undertook an exercise to arrive at the festival purpose or mission statement. Despite the range of people and communities in the room, it did not take long for consensus to emerge: the festival's mission was to maintain and develop strong culture for the Cape and surrounding communities. The country men and women were unambiguous that Laura Festival is a significant event for bringing Indigenous people together from across the Cape, which is necessary for maintaining cultural integrity and passing on tradition to young people. Old men rose to their feet to stress their support for the festival and its role in gathering the cultures from across

the Cape to strengthen and affirm their sovereignty, and as a means for sustaining their life worlds.

In mainstream health and wellbeing research, it is widely acknowledged that a strong sense of identity is a prerequisite for mental health,³⁰ yet there are few opportunities to assert the importance of cultural heritage and identity as a vital component in Indigenous wellbeing. Furthermore, cultural identity depends not only on access to culture and heritage but also on an opportunity for cultural expression and endorsement within society's institutions.³¹ For Indigenous Australians there are few avenues to do this and people's experiences are seldom respected. Laura Festival provides a space in which Indigenous values take precedence. The country men and women's faith in their sociocultural processes to generate wellbeing parallels the beliefs of many health professionals who argue that innovative public health policies must deal with the root causes of social exclusion while at the same time respecting the unique ways that people draw meaning from their life experiences, take strength from belief systems and value particular social institutions.³²

The forces that nourish life can be evoked but not necessarily measured. At the Dreaming Festival I used photonarrative methods to illicit deeper discussions about young Indigenous people's sense of the festival. I asked a number of people to take digital photographs of their 'Dreaming experience', and then, as we reviewed the images — much like looking through holiday snaps — the participants chose particular images to talk to and help articulate their experiences, thoughts and feelings. All interviewees enjoyed the festival: in a general sense they had fun and it was an opportunity to mix it up with Indigenous people, young and old, from across the country and internationally. But much more profoundly it inspired hope not only because it is a showcase of Indigenous excellence, but also because it is a place of exchange, where participants could feel the spiritual strength of people and culture. Carl said that he felt the pride of the kids, and they were not subject to the shame they feel in the mainstream, which allowed them to reconnect with their 'internal compass'.

Thomas spoke eloquently of cultural gatherings, such as the Dreaming Festival, providing a stable platform for the next

generation. He emphasised the festival's role in maintaining the structures of life. We need, he told me, to attend to the foundations of life and he saw the Dreaming Festival as contributing to creating places where people can 'take off from': a generative force that enables young Indigenous people to participate in broader Australian life.³³ Performances of cultural heritage, in all its different modes, reassure people of their permanence and the legitimacy of their worldview,³⁴ and in so doing, nurture *life*. Thomas's thoughts are reminiscent of what Mick Dodson sees as Indigenous peoples' twin projects, one of which is to 'subvert the hegemony over our own representations, and allow our visions to create the world of meaning in which we relate to ourselves, to each other, and to non-Indigenous people'.³⁵ Indigenous cultural festivals, such as Laura and the Dreaming, provide much needed social spaces for affirming Indigenous visions and aspirations in a non-subservient relation to mainstream values.

We might hope that history has taught us that no matter how 'good' the intentions, what *makes* life worth living cannot be imposed upon peoples by the dominant culture. If wellbeing is fundamentally about 'the act to be', then social and cultural distinctive understandings of what makes a healthy Indigenous person are of primary importance. Social and communal life-worlds are vital for *everybody's* daily sustenance. What is evident in contemporary Indigenous affairs, and public discourse in general, is that Indigenous people and communities are characterised as dysfunctional and deficient compared to mainstream Australia, which reinforces white, settler-colonial values and experiences of wellbeing. Indigenous health requires creating public spaces in which Indigenous reality can be asserted over mainstream culture. Performances of cultural heritage and identity are vital elements in legitimising, sharing and challenging worldviews. They enable processes of creativity and renewal. People gather to not only celebrate Indigenous cultures but also to tend dynamic living cultures; in this sense the festivals are spaces for performing, discussing and negotiating contemporary culture and identity. Festivals such as Laura and the Dreaming are sociocultural spaces in which people are affirming worlds of meaning and the conditions of a good life.

Reflection

In April 2014, the organisations People Culture Environment (PCE) and Our Generation Media released *The Elders' Report into Preventing Indigenous Self-Harm and Youth Suicide*. It's a devastating read. In his report summary, the PCE Chair and Yunin Elder, Max Harrison, writes: 'It was developed in response to a massive and unprecedented increase in Indigenous youth self-harm and suicide that has occurred over the past twenty years across Australia's Top End.'³⁶

The report is comprised of transcriptions of interviews with Elders and community leaders from affected communities, who want to speak publically about how to address this overwhelming issue. Until the last few decades, self-harm and suicide was extremely rare, now the Kimberley region has the highest Indigenous suicide rate in the world. The Elders were asked two questions: What is the cause? What is the solution? Despite the diversity and differences of views, Harrison notes that there was a 'high level of agreement between the speakers about the role culture and loss of cultural connection plays in making young people vulnerable to self-harm'. The Elders are asserting the important role of culture for creating a good life.

My essay reproduced here was the culmination of a three-year research project examining the impact of Indigenous cultural festivals on socio-cultural wellbeing. We did not propose to address issues as devastating as youth suicide. However, reading the Elders' report, I heard the echo of Derek Walpo's poignant reflection: 'Their spirits have wandered too far. We need to call them back.' He too was gravely concerned about young people in Aurukun, especially men. Like many people I interviewed, he supported festivals as a means to connect youth to their culture. In the contemporary era of mainstreaming Indigenous programs and services, this thing called 'culture' is not always a good fit with neoliberalism. Culture as spectacle, commodity or artefact is appreciated and often valorised, but I don't think this is what the Elders of Northern Australia have in mind.

During the research project, I spoke to a lot of people. Hundreds. When I asked, 'Why are festivals important?' time and time again the response was, 'To keep culture strong'. Why? To keep young people strong. Notably more Indigenous than non-Indigenous people used this phrase. Yet still this thing called

Indigenous culture gets called into service—seemingly named as the main game in town—in significant and numerous government and non-government policy documents. Tony Abbott's government has recently streamlined Indigenous Affairs from 150 individual programs to five. One of the priority areas of the 'new Indigenous Advancement Strategy' is culture and capability: the 'programme will support Indigenous Australians to maintain their culture'.³⁷

The government is purportedly committed to culture. So why then are Elders from Cape York to the Kimberley calling for governments and mainstream agencies to recognise the vital importance of connecting young people to culture and country?

Maybe I'm asking the wrong question. What *work* does maintaining culture do? What are the Elders recognising and valuing? I doubt it is the same as the government. Yet these different, if not incongruent meanings, meet or rather collide in intercultural spaces, where there might be shared goals: improving people's lives. And this is the rub. It is easy to accuse previous governments, and all manner of Australians, of neglect: at the very least indifference to Indigenous Australia. And there is plenty of evidence. However, I think that cultural studies can play a more productive role. We can approach these spaces as complex political ecologies, embrace the messiness, and take multiplicity seriously. And in so doing, take people, culture and country seriously, which is what I think the Elders' report is asking us to do.

Notes

- 1 The meeting took place in Aurukun on 3 October 2008 after the Kemp Min, Kuchek Min festival held by Queensland Forensic Health.
- 2 Jenny Macklin, 'Out of the Chaos', Melbourne Institute Economic and Social Outlook Conference, Melbourne, 27 March 2008, <http://www.jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Lisa Slater, "'Aurukun, We're Happy, Strong People": Aurukun Kids Projecting Life into Bad Headlines', *Borderlands e-journal*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2008.
- 5 Kerry Pholi, 'Is 'Close the Gap' a Useful Approach to Improving the Health and Wellbeing of Indigenous Australians?', *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2009, pp. 1-13; Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson (eds), *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, Arena Publications, Melbourne, 2009.
- 6 Jon Altman, 'Beyond Closing the Gap: Valuing Diversity in Indigenous Australia', paper presented at the Values and Public Policy: Fairness, Diversity and Social Change conference, Centre for Public Policy, University of Melbourne, 26-27 February, 2009, p. 1.

- 7 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: A Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 1997.
- 8 Altman, p. 14.
- 9 Ian Anderson, 'Powers of Health— On the Politics of Self-Determining Aboriginal Health', *Arena Magazine*, no. 11, 1994, p. 36.
- 10 Heather McDonald, Kerry Arabena and Graham Henderson, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Healing', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, vol. 2, 2006, p. 1.
- 11 Danielle Heil, 'Shifting Expectations of Treatment: From "Patient as Individual" to "Patient as Social Person"', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, vol. 2, 2006, p. 100.
- 12 Heil, p. 100. My emphasis.
- 13 Lenore Manderson, 'Introduction: The Social Context of Wellbeing', in Lenore Manderson (ed.), *Rethinking Wellbeing*, Curtin University Publishing, Perth, 2005, p. 12.
- 14 Martin Mulligan, Kim Humphrey, Paul James, Christopher Scanlon, Pia Smith and Nicky Welsh, *Creating Communities: Celebrations, Arts and Wellbeing Within and Across Local Communities*, Globalism Institute, RMIT University, Melbourne, 2006, p. 25.
- 15 Folds in Vicki Grieves, *Indigenous Wellbeing: A Framework for Governments' Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Activities*, NSW Department of Environment and Conservation, June 2006, <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/cultureheritage/grievesreport2006.pdf>.
- 16 Slater, p. 12.
- 17 John Taylor, 'Indigenous People and Indicators of Well-being', Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Working Paper, Australian National University, Canberra, 2006, p. 8.
- 18 Manderson, p. 162.
- 19 Kerry Arabena, 'Not Fit for Modern Australian Society: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and the New Administration for Indigenous Affairs', AIATSIS Research Discussion Paper, no. 16, Canberra, 2006, p. 14.
- 20 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2000, p. 15.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- 22 See Mulligan et al.; Michelle Duffy, 'Performing Identity within a Multicultural Framework', *Social and Cultural Geography*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2005, p. 677-92.
- 23 Rosita Henry, 'Festivals', in Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 586; KALACC, New Legend, Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre, Fitzroy Crossing, 2006.
- 24 Sylvia Kleinert, 'An Aboriginal Moomba: Remaking History', *Continuum*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1999, pp. 345-6.
- 25 Henry, p. 586.
- 26 Michael Morrissey, Rogelia PePua, Alex Brown and Ahmed Latif, 'Culture as a Determinant of Aboriginal Health', in Ian Anderson, Fran Baum and Michael Bentley (eds), *Beyond Band-aids: Exploring the Underlying Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health*, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin, 2007, p. 245.
- 27 Jeremy Gaia, personal conversation with author, Cairns, 5 May 2008.
- 28 Dockery, p. 22.
- 29 The Laura Dance Festival workshop was held by ASTIAB, as a part of their Celebrations festival strategy, in Cairns, 5-6 May 2008.

- 30 See Melbourne Charter for Promoting Mental Health and Preventing Mental and Behavioural Disorders, From 'Margins to Mainstream: 5th World Conference on the Promotion of Mental Health and the Prevention of Mental and Behavioural Disorders', in Melbourne, Australia, September 2008, <http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/Resource-Centre/Publications and Resources/Mental-health-promotion/Melbourne-Charter.aspx>.
- 31 Durie in Morrissey, p. 249.
- 32 Leonore Manderson, 'Social Capital and Inclusion: Locating Wellbeing in Community', in Lenore Manderson (ed.), *Rethinking Wellbeing*, Curtin University Publishing, Perth, 2005, p. 184.
- 33 Interviews undertaken at the Dreaming Festival, Woodford, Queensland, 7 June 2008.
- 34 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Post-modern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. Don Berry, eds Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, Power Publications, Sydney, 1992, p. 42.
- 35 Michael Dodson, 'The End in the Beginning: Re(de)finding Aboriginality', in Michele Grossman (ed), *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003, p. 33.
- 36 The Indigenous-led social justice organisation, People Culture Environment in partnership with Our Generation Media produced the report. It is one of the initial actions of the Culture Is Life campaign, <http://www.cultureislife.org>. The quotes are from the Chairman of People Culture Environment, Max Harrison, in his foreword to the report, p. 8.
- 37 See http://www.dpmc.gov.au/accountability/budget/2014-15/IA_budget.cfm.

III: Text

From Scar Trees to a ‘Bouquet of Words’: Aboriginal Text is Everywhere

Crystal McKinnon

I remember once, many years ago, walking along Grattan Street in Carlton towards the Koori Student Liaison Unit in Bouverie Street with Ngarrindjeri student Fiona Rigney and Wiradjuri man Michael Penrith. Michael remarked, ‘You know, our people, our culture, are all around us and underneath us and beside us. We are walking across their bones, on our culture, our history.’ These words have stayed with me ever since. Particularly when I am walking along that same sidewalk, they come back to me and bring the past crushingly into the present. I am reminded of how Aboriginal people have marked the landscape for tens of thousands of years. Our textual productions cover outback deserts and country towns, and remain throughout urban cities and suburban sprawl. Though some may ‘walk across’ these productions without realising they are there, they are present nonetheless — the right person, a knowledgeable reader, recognises these signs of the past in the present and sees links to the past in contemporary markings. The scar trees that dot the sides of the road, the shell middens that are along the coastlines, the graffiti that declares ‘I am Aboriginal’ with a Koori flag sketched beneath, and the sounds of the didgeridoo busker are all textual productions of ours. Aboriginal text is everywhere.

So what is Aboriginal textual production? In thinking broadly here about what an ‘Aboriginal text’ is, I take the lead from many Aboriginal artists and musicians who declare that what makes their creative works ‘Aboriginal’ is that an Aboriginal person created it. Expanding this notion, an

Aboriginal text is then something that an Aboriginal person produces, whether that be a Gunditjmara singer-songwriter performing her song on stage at the Adelaide Festival, or a Wathaurong woman who weaves a basket from native grasses. When a text is created, the person necessarily brings with them their identity as an Aboriginal person, which cannot be removed from the text produced in this process — an integral characteristic of the text that can be available to the right reader. In this way, too, these textual productions are also cultural productions. Embedded within these texts are Aboriginal traditions, knowledges, identities and culture. They reveal many markers of Aboriginality, such as perspectives on history, social organisation and kinship structures, spiritual beliefs, associations with land and country, and lived experiences. They tell a story and in so doing they contain the legacy of our experiences.

Some texts are produced with an intended audience. Aboriginal authors, playwrights, singer-songwriters and poets all create texts with the intent of it being received, being read. Some do this with the explicit motivation of inserting their own identities, experiences and understandings of Aboriginality into a public discourse. As Stephen Muecke reminds us, in the colonial encounter ‘those who can’t speak “die”’.¹ Recalling Jack Davis speaking in 1983 at the launch of his book of plays, *Kullark/The Dreamers*, Cliff Watego writes that Davis ‘spoke of how in the 1960s there was a consensus among leading black activists to enlighten the white public to the grievances and aims of black Australians through literature’.² Davis explained:

We used to speak in those days when we were talking about politics — black politics — of how we were going to make ourselves within the white Australian society. And even in those days when we went back to our little dingy rooms, we said (referring to, among others, Kath Walker, Faith Bandler, and Ken Colbung), ‘Well we’ve got to write about this, we’ve got to tell the people’.³

Mandawuy Yunupingu of Yothu Yindi echoes Davis’ words when he describes how ‘[a]ll of my songs are focused on how

we live—the times when white people took our freedom. I want my music to give others an understanding of Aboriginal life and an idea of where we're coming from.'⁴ Lionel Fogarty likewise tells us:

I want to give everybody my understanding so that they can understand what the reality is in my community; the dreaming and the need for revival of my language and connection to the land. When people read my poetry I want them to feel the spirit that is in me and in the people of my community.⁵

These types of intentional textual creations by Aboriginal people have produced what Marcia Langton has described as a 'theatre of politics' in which sophisticated representations of Aboriginality can circulate.⁶ 'We must continually subvert the hegemony over our own representations,' Michael Dodson argues, 'and allow our visions to create the world of meaning which we relate to ourselves, to each other, and to non-Indigenous peoples'.⁷ This type of deliberate creation by Aboriginal people of text forms one part of the discourse Langton identified; they are easily recognised, and read, as representations of Aboriginal people and communities.

The production of some texts though is not always accompanied with the explicit purpose of making a text. They are not necessarily deliberate representational productions but are representational nonetheless. The unintentional text may be thought of as a production which is derived from the practicing of culture, a lived expression of being Aboriginal. Taken together, intentional and unintentional texts offer deeper understanding of not only the complexity of Aboriginal representation and identities but of all aspects related to Aboriginal people and communities. Shell middens or scar trees—these types of textual productions are not necessarily produced *as* texts to be read by an audience, but they have become available for readings today.

Many of the critical engagements by scholars with Aboriginal textual and creative production begin their discussion in the mid twentieth century. This is not without reason. In the 1960s a vibrant Aboriginal literature, poetry,

contemporary art and music scene began to emerge. This burgeoning movement of Aboriginal textual production gained momentum and magnitude throughout the 1970s and 1980s as more and more works emerged and were circulated. Many major events in Australian history ushered in and facilitated this period of artistic textual growth. Some well-known moments include the 1967 Referendum, the 1965 Freedom Rides throughout New South Wales led by Charlie Perkins, and the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy at Parliament House in Canberra in 1972. Two works in particular are seen as marking the beginning of this new era of Aboriginal textual production. In 1964 Oodgeroo Noonuccal published her widely acclaimed and popular collection of poetry, *We Are Going*, which was closely followed by Mudrooroo's novel *Wild Cat Falling* in 1965.⁸ Thus, the scholarship dealing with Aboriginal texts has often begun here. Jack Davis' poem 'Need' captured the importance of the written word and poetry for these newly emerged Aboriginal writers:

I need a bouquet of words today
 To bind my heart
 in interplay
 To strengthen my will
 to grind to grist
 to lighten the dark
 and the shrouded mist
 to remove the mask
 unclench the fist
 To better the world
 for tomorrow⁹

Davis's prose, showing the importance of words to him, would likely ring true for other Aboriginal people creating textual productions using words and language. Though the importance of this cultural renaissance in the 1960s and beyond cannot be underestimated, Aboriginal people have used language and words to create text in the form of story, literature, music, letter writing and poetry well before this era. Some research certainly examines these types of textual

productions of Aboriginal people in early colonial encounters, long before these twentieth-century developments. This includes the work of Ian Anderson, Michele Grossman, Mudrooroo Narogin, Anita Heiss and Peter Minter, and Penny van Toorn, whose essay is included in this collection.¹⁰ Their scholarship has shown how, as Anderson states, the often used catch-cry of postcolonial studies that “the empire writes back” would more accurately read: “the empire has already written back”.¹¹

Examining Aboriginal writing from Lake Condah, van Toorn uses the theories developed by political scientist James C. Scott regarding ‘public and hidden transcripts’ — ‘that which can safely be said publicly and that which must remain concealed’ — to place these writings within a framework of resistance.¹² Van Toorn examines life for Aboriginal people living on Lake Condah Mission Station in southwestern Victoria, challenging the notion of Aboriginal people’s passivity, powerlessness and cooperation under conditions of colonial control. She tells us how the public transcript, those generated by reserve and mission managers and other government officials, were ‘discursive performances that affirmed, naturalised and justified their power over Aboriginal people’.¹³ Van Toorn dismantles this hegemony as she persuasively makes the case that Aboriginal people, at Lake Condah mission and beyond, feigned consent towards authorities, engaging in strategic performances, and often using a kind of doublespeak to express their dissatisfaction. Hidden transcripts, secreted in texts, formed a major response by Aboriginal people who were to a large extent unable to express explicit opposition to their situation for fear of punishment or retribution. Thus, van Toorn makes an important contribution to our understanding of Aboriginal responses to colonial authorities and broadens the idea of what we consider to be Aboriginal text.

Indeed Aboriginal people have *always* created texts, both before invasion and after white-settler contact. In widening the scope to understand texts by Aboriginal people as something produced not only throughout colonisation but also before invasion, we expand our understanding of our texts — not only what they are but what they represent and the possibilities they hold. It is not the case that Aboriginal people

began telling stories and creating texts when white people came to our lands, it is that the vehicle and genre of some of these productions have changed. Some, like literature and contemporary art and music, are more identifiable as texts. But if we consider text to be about story, and to be a product of culture, then Aboriginal people have always told stories and always produced text from culture.

If we limit the frameworks for what is considered to be Aboriginal text by time, marked by contact, we only reinforce hegemonic ideas of colonial power and superiority and Aboriginal subordination and inferiority. We have always explored our place in the world and our interrelationships, through ceremony and art for instance, and have always practiced our culture, created knowledge and held complex philosophical beliefs and spiritual understandings. Texts produced by Aboriginal people, or more accurately by a Wurundjeri person, a Wathaurong person, a Wiradjuri person or in my case an Amangu person, are not dependant upon our relationships with colonisation or contact with white people. Understanding the texts we produce as a part of the practice of being from a sovereign Aboriginal group, not limited by colonial concepts of time, but moving beyond those borders assists us to wrestle the Aboriginal texts from all-encompassing colonial encounters. Broadening our understanding and conceptions of the production of Aboriginal text to those which encompasses time before white contact challenges the understanding of Aboriginal textual production and reframes it as an Aboriginal production not reliant upon settler society. These texts, produced in the present and in the past, are threaded together by stories, and evidence the continuity of Aboriginal lived cultural presence. Our creative work 'expresses the values and aesthetics of our people and connects us to them and to our ancestors and future generations'.¹⁴ We are connected through texts, to each other and to the past, present and future. These texts are an archipelago of Aboriginal stories, and the stories form the bedrock upon which they are connected, in a continuity that moves beyond the limits of time and place.

In Anne Brewster's interview with Kim Scott, Scott speaks about the concept of story, and its continuity with and

importance to culture. He states:

In literature — in terms of language and stories — continuity is really important for we Indigenous people because that's the culture, that's spirit. Culture is a manifestation of spirit. That's not an intellectual concept; that's what I feel.¹⁵

Linking the idea of story as a continuity of culture, Scott is also articulating culture as both a spiritual and an embodied, lived experience for him as a Noongar man, which is inscribed within the textual production of literature. His cultural identity as a Noongar man is crucial to his work and he states that 'In my heart I'm trying to put myself or Noongar culture at the very centre of things.'¹⁶ For Scott, the strength of Noongar culture is intertwined with the survival of Noongar language. He tells of the importance of language loss, and its power when it is reclaimed, stating: 'The idea of being linguistically displaced and dispossessed, even in one's own country; and then language comes back and ones makes oneself an instrument for it and for the spirit of place.'¹⁷ This articulation shows the complexity of the relationship between the dispossession of language, and its function, both temporally and through embodiment, of the creation of place through language reclamation and subsequent linguistic cultural practices.

Like Scott, Kathleen Petyarre also speaks about the importance of reclamation of past cultural practices. Petyarre discusses her paintings included in the exhibition 'Arnkerrth: Kathleen Petyarre, Abie Loy' as part of the 'Body Painting Series'. When Christine Nicholls asks, 'What makes you want to paint these works?' Petyarre responds with 'I've been thinking a lot about those old days and how we used to put that body paint on ourselves. I've been thinking back a lot, how we don't do it now.'¹⁸ A continuity of story and of textual production is evident here in this statement; Petyarre is stating that older cultural practices are the inspiration for the creation of her contemporary art works. Petyarre goes on to describe the ceremony and the painting of women's bodies, telling of the gendered nature of the ceremony — that it is for women only — which is informed by Law. She tells Nicholls:

This body painting (that is, in Kathleen's recent work) is for women-only ceremony. It's painted on our stomachs and thighs like an apron — in those days (we wore) no pants on our back or front side, just naked, naked backsides. (Laughing) Naked! There's (a) string belt, and underneath was the ochre paint. The ochre paint goes half way up (our bodies) — from knees up to waist. We wore hairstring belts around our middles, with strings hanging down over black, white and mainly yellow ochre paint underneath. This is really Old Law for Anmatyerr dancing ladies, not for men.¹⁹

Jennifer Biddle and Erin Manning also discuss the contemporary artistic production of Petyarre, along with Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Dorothy Napangardi, in this collection.²⁰ In both articles, these authors challenge the readers of the texts produced by these Aboriginal women, and offer a new exploration of the way that their art can be understood. In Biddle's piece, she argues that rather than the dominant interpretation of these women's paintings as representations of maps of 'country' or Dreaming narratives, there is a 'breasted ontology' informing their creation, 'a cultural way of doing and being in the world' which 'literally manifest in the ways in which these paintings are produced and, in turn, are experienced by the viewer'.²¹ Concerned with how these artworks are experienced by viewers outside the communities that women belong to, she argues these works 'engender a bodily relation between viewer and image' and that this relation is 'one in which the viewer relinquishes her sense of separateness from the canvas, where a certain coming-into-being in relation to the painting occurs'.²² Rather than just receiving, viewing, or reading the text, Biddle sees an 'intercultural encounter' which is experienced both bodily and temporally. Manning likewise sees the relationship between the artistic text and viewer as a type of intercultural encounter where, if the viewer wishes to engage these artworks, then they must recognise and employ alternative methods to begin that engagement. A 'relationscape' is one way she describes this engagement, where artwork 'create[s] a movement of thought, a movement that is *marayin*, at once painting, song, dance, sacred object and power word'.²³

Manning continues: 'Through their work, we move toward a topological hyperspace of experience, asking once again how emptiness is configured, how topologies extend our worlds, rhythmically (de)forming them, and how maps that sense-across create durations which eventfully alter what experience can be.'²⁴ For Manning, the experience of the viewer of the text is an engagement, which requires a reorientation of the viewer's perception from the outset, which then opens up possibilities and creates a 'relationscape'.

Alison Ravenscroft is similarly interested in the relationship between a text and its audience, particularly the white audience. Ravenscroft uses Roberta Sykes's autobiography *Snake Dreaming*, and its reception by non-Indigenous readers, to probe the question of race and its production in Australia. In particular, she 'consider[s] the ways in which white readers have produced racialised meanings from the text; in particular, how whiteness, blackness and Aboriginality have been read, and by what signifiers'.²⁵ She looks at the reading of Sykes's race, alongside the dominant reading by non-Indigenous people of her mother's 'unambiguous whiteness' to 'show the uncertainty and the contingency of racial identities' and that 'those identities are formed in the context of racialised social relations, and that the subject is produced as white or black according to historically shifting signifiers'.²⁶ She shows how Sykes's work 'is a text which can be read as destabilising the definitions of whiteness and blackness which have been mobilised by Sykes's white critics; it is a text which offers a critique of the very discourses which these reading practices have reinscribed'.²⁷ In Ravenscroft's article, she is harnessing the power of text to challenge hegemonic conceptions of whiteness, blackness and Aboriginality and show the cyclical way that these discourses operate to define, limit and control. At 'the heart of Sykes's autobiography' is what Alexis Wright calls the 'hidden contact', which belies the purity of White Australia 'and suggests the disavowed proximity of Aboriginality in White Australia's history'.²⁸

Katelyn Barney picks up on Ravenscroft's discussion of the power of discourse and racialisation, but in her essay she examines notions of Aboriginalism and its operation to produce narrow definitions of 'authentic' Aboriginal people

and cultures. These types of ideas of authenticity plague not only musicians but many Aboriginal people who sit outside these stereotypes. Detailing the way Aboriginalism is constructed in Australia, she engages Aboriginal women musicians' perspectives to show how they 'play around, within, and against such musical constructions by actively negotiating, challenging, and using them while blurring and merging the borders between contemporary and traditional Indigenous musical expression through the use of a wide range of musical styles and instrumentation'.²⁹ Barney places herself within the piece, and understands that '[w]riting about Indigenous Australian issues, peoples and cultures is inherently political'.³⁰ As a non-Indigenous researcher, engaged in research and writing about Indigenous people and communities, she asks ethical questions of herself and the reader. She recognises that she too is engaged in processes which create Aboriginalist discourse, 'despite my intentions, ultimately the work remains my interpretation of their words' but attempts to work within ethical frameworks where '[t]he best that I can hope for is to incorporate the voices of performers and allow them to speak in their own voices rather than interpreting them through my voice'.³¹

The last piece in this section is by Richard Martin, and he combines textual analysis and ethnography to discuss three 'explorer trees' and show some of the ways there are struggles over the meaning of exploration, and colonisation, in northern Australia. He argues that utilising ethnographic and textual analyses together helps us go 'beyond simplistically politicised interpretations of these trees into the realm in which non-symbolic, non-representational meanings are generated and re-generated without end'.³² In his article, he is concerned with revealing how text, in the form of the explorer trees, can transform space into place. He argues that the trees generate 'a series of conflicting and overlapping explanations that cannot be reduced to a single or even dual interpretation'.³³ Martin is not only concerned with the 'writer' or the 'reader' of the text, but rather emphasises the 'creative representations which make meanings proliferate', critiquing the 'textual tradition of "reading" settler-colonial artifacts'.³⁴ In so doing, Martin complicates our understandings of Australian histories

and identities, and suggests that the trees should be read for 'suggestion of other divergent responses, including new ones, where the meaning of exploration and colonisation is created, and re-created, along with the experience of place'.³⁵

Though texts can generate a series of different readings and interpretations, not everything can, or should, be spoken about or critiqued. The idea that all textual productions by Aboriginal people are something that anyone can access and mine for their own purposes is a continuation of colonial-Aboriginal relations of power and knowing. The questioning of this right, or a refusal to adhere to this persistent aspect of colonial power, is a deeply political act. When Scott expresses reluctance to talk about Noongar culture and spirit, he is refusing the reader access to certain parts of him and his community. Ravenscroft's challenge of the approach of white readers to Sykes's autobiography as a text which will finally tell them for certain Sykes's racial origins, is also a critique of regimes of colonial power. When Nicholls asked Petyarre to comment on her work and its representational aspect about breasts and fertility, Petyarre states that it is 'true'. Nicholls asks, 'Are you able to say more?' and Petyarre replies, 'No. True, it's true, but I won't say more. Not a word. Secret.'³⁶ Though the text may be out there, all aspects of it are not necessarily, nor should they be, available for reading and interpretation.

The articles gathered in this section of collection all show the desire for a deeper understanding of Aboriginal culture, knowledge, and histories, and turn to text as a way to access these different stories. When text manifests it makes available a whole network of discourses about knowledge, power, history and culture. Understanding Aboriginal text as stories in a broad and interconnected way, without the hindrance of temporal or spatial borders, releases the full possibilities of the power of Aboriginal cultural production. Scott suggests to us that 'Story is layers and interpretations; let's have a think about this and provoke.'³⁷ This section invites readers to think deeply about the power of Aboriginal text and provokes us to consider the many possibilities found within interpretations of these stories. And there are so many texts to read and stories to be told. As Aboriginal people — as Noongar

people, as Wiradjuri people, as Eora people — we have always produced texts. Aboriginal text is everywhere.

Notes

- 1 Stephen Muecke, 'The Scribes', *Meridian*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1985, p. 42.
- 2 Cliff Watego, 'Backgrounds to Aboriginal Literature', in Emmanuel S. Nelson (ed.), *Connections: Essays on Black Literature*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1988, pp. 11-23, 11.
- 3 Jack Davis quoted in Watego, p. 11.
- 4 Mandawuy Yunipingu in Liz Thomson (ed.), *Aboriginal Voices: Contemporary Aboriginal Artists, Writers and Performers*, Simon & Schuster, Sydney, 1990, p. 103.
- 5 Lionel Fogarty, *New and Selected Poems: Munaldjali, Mutuerjaraera*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1995, p. ix.
- 6 Marcia Langton, 'Aboriginal Art and Film: The Politics of Representation', in Michele Grossman (ed.), *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003, pp. 109-24, 124.
- 7 Michael Dodson, 'The Wentworth Lecture. The End in the Beginning: Re(de)fining Aboriginality', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 1, 1994, p. 6.
- 8 Oodgeroo Noonuccal, *We Are Going*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1964; Mudrooroo, *Wild Cat Falling*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1965.
- 9 Jack Davis, 'Need', in *Black Life: Poems*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1992, p. 7.
- 10 Ian Anderson, 'Introduction: The Aboriginal Critique of Colonial Knowing', in Michele Grossman (ed.), *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003, pp. 17-24; Michele Grossman, 'When They Write What We Read: Unsettling Indigenous Australian Life-writing', *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 39-40, September 2006; Mudrooroo Narogin, *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1990; Anita Heiss and Peter Minter, 'Aboriginal Literature' in Anita Heiss and Peter Minter (eds), *Macquarie Pen Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2008, pp. 1-8; Penny van Toorn, 'Hegemony or Hidden Transcripts? Aboriginal Writings from Lake Condah, 1876-1907', in this volume, pp. 384-407.
- 11 Anderson, p. 18.
- 12 Van Toorn, p. 384.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 388.
- 14 Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, 'Preface: We Remain, Forever', in Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm and Josie Douglas (eds), *Skins: Contemporary Indigenous Writing*, Jukurrpa Books, Alice Springs, 2000, pp. vi-xi, vi.
- 15 Anne Brewster and Kim Scott, 'Can You Anchor a Shimmering Nation State via Regional Indigenous Roots? Kim Scott talks to Anne Brewster about *That Deadman Dance*', *Cultural Studies Review*, in this volume, p. 518.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 513.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 519.
- 18 Christine Nicholls, 'Old Lady Mob', in this volume, pp. 450.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Jennifer Biddle, 'Breasts, Bodies, Art: Central Desert Women's Paintings and the Politics of the Aesthetic Encounter', in this volume, pp. 424-48; Erin Manning, 'Relationscapes: How Contemporary Aboriginal Art Moves Beyond the Map', in

- this volume, pp. 458-78.
- 21 Biddle, p. 425.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Manning, p. 475.
- 24 Ibid., pp. 475-6.
- 25 Alison Ravenscroft, 'The Production of Whiteness: Revisiting Roberta Sykes's Snake Dreaming', in this volume, p. 408.
- 26 Ibid., pp. 415, 409.
- 27 Ibid., p. 408.
- 28 Ibid., pp. 421.
- 29 Katelyn Barney, 'Gendering Aboriginalism: A Performative Gaze on Indigenous Australian Women', in this volume, p. 487.
- 30 Ibid., p. 493.
- 31 Ibid., p. 494.
- 32 Richard Martin, 'Reading' the Landsborough, Leichhardt and Gregory Explorer Trees of Northern Australia in Cultural Studies and Anthropology', in this volume, p. 539.
- 33 Ibid., p. 524.
- 34 Ibid., p. 525.
- 35 Ibid., p. 540.
- 36 Nicholls, p. 455.
- 37 Brewster, p. 234.

Hegemony or Hidden Transcripts?: Aboriginal Writings from Lake Condah, 1876–1907

Penny van Toorn

Sutton vs Stahle

In the winter of 1876, Robert Sutton, a young Kerrupjmara resident of Lake Condah Mission Station in south-western Victoria, took the unprecedented step of issuing a summons against the station superintendent, Reverend John Heinrich Stahle. He charged Reverend Stahle with assault. A shocked and outraged Stahle duly appeared before the local magistrate. The magistrate dismissed the charge and severely reprimanded Sutton and his two Aboriginal witnesses. He warned them that if they ever told a similar story again they would be put in the lock up.¹ The magistrate's message was clear: although Stahle had no legal right to use physical violence against the Aboriginal people in his care, should he happen to do so, the victims were not to bring the matter to public attention. By threatening to lock Sutton up for calling violence by its name, the magistrate was not only pushing colonialism's coerciveness out of sight, he was issuing a clear message to Robert Sutton and his people: 'you must behave *as though* your are satisfied with your lot, or you will be punished'.

What we see in the magistrate's orders is the drawing of a line between what Yale political scientist James C. Scott has called 'hidden and public transcripts'—that which can safely be said publicly—and that which must remain concealed.² In *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), Scott examines what he describes as 'the fugitive political conduct of subordinate groups'—those covert, indirect modes of physical and ideological dissidence

that dare not speak their own name.³ These hidden forms of resistance pose a challenge to some major tenets developed within Marxist theory. Scott argues that followers of Gramsci in particular have tended to overestimate the effectiveness of hegemonic control because they have looked only at public transcripts, leaving hidden transcripts—that is, concealed and disguised expressions of resistance—out of account.

Traditional understandings of hegemony, Scott argues, have failed to consider two possibilities. The first possibility is that powerless groups, far from being unable to imagine political change:

have learned to clothe their resistance in ritualisms of subordination that serve both to disguise their purposes and to provide them with a ready route of retreat that may soften the consequences of possible failure.⁴

The day-to-day survival of powerless peoples may depend upon their ability to *feign* willing consent to their own subordination. This pretence involves observing the boundary between the public and hidden transcripts. To violate that boundary would be to commit an open act of insubordination, a risk-laden luxury that very vulnerable groups are seldom able to afford, especially if they are living within total institutions such as slave plantations or Aboriginal reserves.

The second possibility overlooked by theorists of hegemony is that dominant groups have their own reasons for concealing resistance to their ideological leadership. As subaltern peoples tactically hide their contempt for the powerful, the latter may hide their knowledge of being defied and despised, and may concomitantly hide the degree to which they must use physical coercion to preserve their position of dominance.

Powerful and powerless alike are thus bound up in a conspiracy of silence about physical oppression and resistance. Both act out a public performance of control and subordination. This principle is neatly encapsulated in an old Ethiopian proverb: ‘when the great lord passes, the wise peasant bows deeply, and silently farts’.⁵ Here, not only does the peasant’s expression of contempt remain anonymous, inaudible, and

unprovable, the great lord also preserves his dignity by pretending everything is sweet. The peasant's deep bow and the lord's serene bearing are both part of a performance of hegemonic order; the foul smell is a protest expunged, a protest without trace, as though it never happened. Scott's approach is not without problems of its own, but it does broach an important question: if hegemonic control is invariably accompanied by at least a threat of physical force, how is it possible to gauge the degree to which a group may have been ideologically manoeuvred into genuine, spontaneous submission, as distinct from being physically coerced or threatened into a *pretence* of submission?

Strategic performances

These questions are especially pertinent in postcolonial contexts, where the Eurocentric biases of Gramsci's 'hegemony', Althusser's 'ideology', and the Frankfurt school's 'false consciousness' are now becoming apparent. As During has pointed out, these theorists assume 'that both sides are citizens of a single state and work within a shared cultural horizon', which is clearly not the case under colonialism or in the postcolonial world.⁶ Gramsci's theory of hegemony, for example, was based on a distinction between civil society, which promulgates an ideological predisposition to consent and conformity, and the state, which insures discipline through direct rule and physical coercion. Ranajit Guha has pointed to the Eurocentricity of this model, suggesting that the colonial state is fundamentally different from the metropolitan bourgeois state which established it. Guha argues that:

The difference consisted in the fact that the metropolitan state was hegemonic in character with its claim to dominance based on a power relation in which the moment of persuasion outweighed that of coercion, whereas the colonial state was non-hegemonic with persuasion outweighed by coercion in its structure of dominance. We have defined the character of the colonial state therefore as a *dominance without hegemony* ... For there can be no colonialism without coercion, no subjection of an entire people in their own homeland by foreigners without the explicit use of force.⁷

Guha's argument is grounded in the history of the Indian subcontinent, which differs in several respects from that of Australia. In Australia, there were two contrasting orders of persuasion and dominance. In areas where free settlers were numerically and economically dominant, and where colonists did not rely on Indigenous knowledge or modes of production, the Australian colonies resembled the British bourgeois state where hegemony outweighed coercion. Yet Aboriginal people (and convicts in the early years) lived under direct rule and physical coercion on reserves and missions, in prisons and children's homes, and on pastoral properties in some regions. In these institutions, coercion clearly outweighed ideological controls.

On Aboriginal reserves and missions, civil and state spheres were rolled up into a single institution where ideological apparatuses such as school and church were combined with physically coercive state apparatuses such as gaol, children's dormitory and forced labour camp. Many factors militated against overt Aboriginal protests. Oppressive as they were, the reserves were viewed by many Aborigines as their only place of asylum and/or their only option for staying on or near their traditional country. Individuals who complained could be exiled to distant reserves far from kin and homeland. A sustained chorus of Aboriginal complaints could lead to closure of the reserve altogether, and thus the loss of the whole group's traditional or adopted home.

Reserve superintendents too had their reasons to pretend the Aboriginal residents were happy. The reserves were funded by government and church money on the understanding that they provided protection, schooling, religious teaching, and other forms of 'improvement' for Aborigines. At Lake Condah, Reverend Stahle's salary was paid by the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines which was in turn accountable to the government and to taxpayers. Lake Condah mission station also received some funding from the Church of England Mission Society. To protect his own position, Stahle had to pretend his charges were enjoying his protection. Aborigines and mission superintendents thus entered into a strange collusion: each had their reasons for engaging in a public performance of hegemonic order.

In Victoria during the later decades of the nineteenth century, reserve and mission managers and other government officials generated public transcripts typical of those produced by powerful groups. They were discursive performances that affirmed, naturalised and justified their power over Aboriginal people. For public view, these administrators painted flattering portraits of themselves and the reserve system, portraits that concealed or euphemised 'the dirty linen' of the white man's rule.⁸

These pretences of benevolence made it possible for Aboriginal people, in their own public transcripts, to make certain kinds of modest claims on their self-proclaimed 'benefactors'. Without raising fears of sedition, or fundamentally challenging protectionist policy, Aboriginal people could request additional food rations, better housing, and other incremental improvements to their living conditions. Much of their correspondence with government officials, and their testimony in official inquiries, was of this non-threatening kind. As such it typifies the public transcripts of powerless peoples. For the most part, the public transcripts of Aboriginal reserve and mission residents were discursive performances of subordination, not manifestations of ideological or cultural assimilation. Complaints and requests were usually made politely and deferentially, and were signed with the conventional formula, 'your most obedient and humble servant'—a poignant form of words given that they were forced to live, quite literally, in servitude.

This formulaic, deferential language worked to camouflage bitter feelings that could not be expressed openly. The camouflage had its cost, however: the Aborigines' deference appeared to hail white officials as superiors, and to ratify white domination. Yet knowing they were likely to be punished for anything resembling open rebellion, the majority of Aboriginal residents on the Victorian reserves stifled overt expressions of anger and resentment. Sometimes for years at a time, they refrained from all but the most covert and oblique modes of resistance. To do otherwise was to risk being beaten, deprived of food and clothing, exiled to distant stations and separated from their families.

Yet from time to time, these performances of paternalistic

care and submissive acquiescence would suddenly collapse into open expressions of mutual contempt and hostility. While anger and racial hatred periodically disrupted colonialist public discourses of protection and improvement, Aborigines likewise periodically dropped all pretence of gratitude, obedience, and equanimity, and protested against actions of individual reserve managers and/or oppressive policies formulated by the Protection Board.

Doublespeak

If dissent is kept *entirely* hidden within a tightly knit group, it is obviously not accessible to present knowledge via the written archive, nor is it guaranteed to be preserved in oral memory. One can therefore only guess at the total extent of Aboriginal people's hidden transcripts. Given the elusiveness of hidden transcripts, one may question how is it known that they circulated on a continuous basis at Lake Condah. Why, for instance, are public protestations such as Robert Sutton's legal action against Stahle viewed as signs of *chronic* resentment and resistance, rather than as mere flashes of anger in an otherwise peaceful existence?

The answer to this question is two-fold. First, when open dissent breaks out, it does not spring out of nowhere. Robert Sutton's legal action against Stahle could not have been mounted without some degree of preliminary discussion, advice and preparation. Charging Stahle with assault was thus the culmination of a series of consultations and actions that remained hidden until the moment Stahle received the official summons to appear in court.

Second, the ongoing nature of hidden dissent is suggested by the fact that between times of open protest, the public transcripts of subaltern groups may contain coded, sanitised, oblique expressions of resistance.⁹ These veiled protests may remain entirely hidden from the dominant group, yet as a form of doublespeak they express subaltern people's chronic dissatisfaction. In September 1877, for example, Stahle thrashed two fifteen-year-old boys for alleged sexual misconduct with two teenage girls. One of the boys was John Sutton Jr, younger brother of Robert Sutton who had taken Stahle to court for assault the previous year. The other boy

was Henry Albert, a member of the Green family who were closely connected to the Suttons. As part of their punishment, Stahle made the boys write letters of confession and apology to Captain Page, head of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines (BPA). Stahle's aim was to shame the boys by forcing them to expose their actions to official scrutiny, just as Robert Sutton had exposed Stahle's actions in court fifteen months previously. Yet the boys' letters are also readable, against the grain imposed by Stahle, as another allegation of assault. John Sutton Jr in particular says almost as much about Stahle's punishment of the boys as about the boys' actions with the girls. His letter to Page may be read as a complaint disguised as an apology. He describes how Stahle:

called us up to his house and gave each one of us a good whipping and after that sent us to work in the rain, and after we were done working he gave us another good beating. This is all what done to us.¹⁰

The final words of this letter—'this is all what done to us'—suggest that Stahle's 'good beatings' were felt as a violation by John Sutton Jr. Given his brother's earlier protest against Stahle's use of violence, could John Sutton Jr possibly have believed Stahle's whippings were unequivocally just and good? It is reasonable to assume that like most families dealing with a recurrent problem, the Suttons would have discussed Stahle's behaviour among themselves and with their friends. The boys' accounts of being beaten by Stahle may therefore be read as oblique offshoots of a hidden transcript that had existed at least since the lead-up to Robert Sutton's court case. These letters of confession put Stahle's violent propensities once again on the public record, yet unlike Robert Sutton's, the boys' accusations were made at Stahle's command, and were so camouflaged and ambiguous that no one (including myself) could see them unequivocally as a mode of protest.

The 'Grateful Aborigines' petition

Subordinate groups may signify acceptance of their position not only by remaining silent, but also by actively proclaiming themselves to be satisfied with their lot. Why can't subaltern

peoples' expressions of contentment be taken at face value, and read as evidence that potential unrest has been hegemonically controlled? One gauge of a people's power is their ability to speak for themselves, and be seen to do so. When Aboriginal people protested against the degrading conditions under which they were forced to live, the authorities often attributed their protests to the influence of 'interfering whites'. When they expressed their gratitude and contentment, however, the authorities insisted they were speaking freely and spontaneously for themselves. Overt expressions of contentment cannot be taken at face value, not only because powerless people risk punishment if they show dissent, but because their voices may either be drowned out, mediated, or ventriloquised in distorting ways.

In September 1877, the same month as John Sutton Jr and Henry Albert wrote their letters of confession, Stahle recommended to Page that the boys' fathers, John Sutton Sr and Thomas Green, along with Billy Gorrie and Jackie Fraser, be refused work certificates. He alleged that while away shearing the previous year, they had spent their money on alcohol and 'came back to the Mission Station in rags'.¹¹ In protest against Stahle's unwillingness to let them go, the men refused to work on the station. Stahle stopped their food and tobacco rations but found the situation so trying that he earnestly requested the Board 'to take steps in the matter'.¹²

Stahle took steps of his own to show the board how disruptive Sutton's group were. He wrote a petition to Captain Page on behalf of nineteen Aboriginal men who, he asserted:

requested me on their own account to write for them to the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines informing them that they are dissatisfied with the conduct the men

Tommy Green
 John Sutton
 Billy Gorrie
 and their boys
 Henry Albert &
 John Sutton Jr.

I asked the men why they wished me to forward their names and they said that they are desirous to express their thankfulness for that which is done for them by the Board and also to tell them that it is their desire to go on quietly & steadily to labour on their own home ... [A]s the Aborigines have requested me to forward their names along with the expression of the thankfulness to the Board—I considered it my duty to comply with their wish. I have the honor to be

Sir
Your obedient Servant
J. H. Stahle⁴³

After Stahle's signature appear the names of nineteen men, five of whom sign for themselves. The remaining fourteen names, all with identical crosses beside them, are added in Stahle's writing.

Taking this petition at face value, we might read it as proof of the power of hegemony, a confirmation that the majority of Aboriginal residents at Condah consented willingly to their lot. A second possibility is that the document may have originated in the signatories' wish to maintain a *pretence* of contentment. Stahle had cut off the 'troublemakers' food and tobacco rations, and was refusing their requests for certificates to obtain employment outside the station. The nineteen petitioners who declared themselves dissatisfied with the conduct of Sutton's group, and satisfied with Stahle's management, may well have been trying to shield themselves and their families from any blanket disciplinary measures they feared the Board might have been considering. A third possibility is that since fourteen of the nineteen signatures and crosses are in Stahle's writing, they might have been made without the signatories' full knowledge and informed consent. If such was the case, Stahle may be seen as literally writing the public transcript of the Aboriginal signatories, ventriloquising the Lake Condah majority's enunciation of consent to their own subordination.

The 'Aboriginals' Narrative'—a suppressed and hidden transcript
At Lake Condah there is evidence to suggest that John Sutton Sr. and his group harboured resentments against Stahle and

the Protection Board on an ongoing basis over many years. Sometimes their protests alternated between being suppressed from above and deliberately concealed from below. Such was the case with a document known as ‘The Aboriginals’ Narrative’ which contains the story of its own difficult emergence from the hidden to the public realm.

In March 1878, an incident occurred at Lake Condah that angered John Sutton Sr and other senior men on the reserve. Stahle failed to look into the men’s allegations that two of the younger men had engaged in sexual misconduct with two young women. Stahle’s inaction appeared both to defy Christian morality and to slight one of the senior men’s traditional responsibilities as uncle to the young women involved. Remembering perhaps how their own sons had been physically beaten for sexual misconduct, John Sutton Sr and Thomas Green were surprised and angered that Stahle made no move even to reprimand the alleged culprits. When the men were gathered for ration distribution—a humiliating weekly display of the men’s impotence and Stahle’s power—tensions escalated to such a degree that Stahle shut the ration store and sent for the police. Sutton and his group tried on several occasions to notify Board and Church officials of their grievances against Stahle. Their complaints were either blocked or explained away by Stahle. Yet these grievances continued to circulate in the Condah community where they were a powerful focus of resentment against Stahle.

John Sutton Sr and the other men did not forget what had happened. In May 1880, twenty-six months after the incident occurred, they tried to make their complaints known to a visiting church official, but he was hurried away by Stahle. Stahle’s attempts to suppress the men’s story in fact helped keep it alive. Two months after the church official’s visit, in July 1880, John Sutton and his group enlisted the aid of a local white man, Mr. F. Elmore, who wrote down their complaints in detail. The document is headed ‘Aboriginals’ Narrative’ and consists of four closely written foolscap pages. It is signed with crosses by John Sutton, Thomas Green and Billy Gorrie. The men kept this document to themselves for a further four months until November 1880, when they sent it to Captain Page, to whom Stahle was accountable. In total, this set of

Aboriginal complaints remained hidden for thirty-two months, before finally being exposed to official scrutiny.

Whenever John Sutton Sr and his group enlisted outside help to put their grievances on paper, Stahle ascribed their recalcitrance to 'white interference'. Stahle's position in the middle of a bureaucratic hierarchy was a difficult one. On the station, he could behave autocratically; in relation to his Aboriginal charges, he wielded almost absolute power. On the station he expressed hostile attitudes which others might not have revealed to those they governed, attitudes which a more self-disciplined manager might have kept hidden.

Officially, Stahle's role was to look after the Condah people's day-to-day welfare. Yet since his abrasive managerial style could be construed as a sign of unfitness for the job, he would not have wanted everything that went on at Lake Condah to be known outside the station. Powerful as he was in the closed Condah setting, he occupied a relatively powerless position in the government and church hierarchies. In official communications with superiors, therefore, we often see him choosing his words carefully, and attempting (not always successfully) to respect professionally appropriate principles of discretion. Stahle, in effect, had two sets of public and hidden transcripts, the boundaries of which shifted depending on whether he was speaking up the power hierarchy to those who paid his salary, or speaking down to the Aboriginal people whose lives he controlled. What he could say openly to each audience had often to be hidden from the other.

The problem Stahle faced was keeping these two audiences from speaking to each other. He was safe from criticism from above as long as word of his actions and attitudes remained confined to the station, or was conveyed to the Board solely by himself in carefully chosen terms. Such was not the case, however. As the younger Condah residents learned to read and write, and as the older ones gained support from local whites willing to write on their behalf, Stahle found it increasingly difficult to control the flow of information into and out of Condah station. The technology of writing enabled the Condah Aborigines to communicate with the outside world without Stahle's help and without Stahle's knowledge. Protests or requests which they might have been too afraid to make to

his face they could now make in writing, behind his back, to his superiors who could call him to account for his actions.

Supporters of John Sutton Sr and his group, such as Mr Elmore and local Justice of the Peace, J. N. McLeod, undermined Stahle's power by breaking his monopoly over the channels of communication between the Aboriginal residents and the Board. Through such intermediaries, the Condah residents could bypass Stahle and convey their grievances directly to his superiors. When the 'Aboriginals' Narrative' was sent to Captain Page in early November 1880, he forwarded it to Stahle with a request to 'please explain'. Stahle duly explained by labelling his accusers liars, profligates and rebels. In his letter to Page of 6 November 1880, he boldly asserted 'All the statements made in the "Aboriginal Narrative" are false and unfounded', but had to add lamely '(with the exception of those to which I have referred as being correct in my letter)'.¹⁴ Stahle was clearly rattled. Later the same day he wrote a second letter to Page refuting the latter's remark that Mr Elmore 'seems a nice old gentleman'. Furious at Elmore's involvement, Stahle asked 'whether proceedings could not be taken against a man like Elmore for forwarding such statements to those in authority without having made any enquiry into the truth of them?' Fearing his credibility was shaky, Stahle sent Page a collection of favourable remarks culled from the Lake Condah visitors' book, together with 'a few lines from Miss Gregory [the school teacher] testifying to the correctness of my statements'.¹⁵ One wonders whether, under the circumstances, Miss Gregory could possibly have declined to corroborate Stahle's word.

'Dangerous wanderers'

The boundary between hidden and public transcripts is a zone of constant struggle. By limiting what can be said publicly (as distinct from what is publicly known or thought), dominant elites lock up much of the latent power of subordinate groups' knowledge. They can seldom entirely prevent counter-hegemonic discourses from coming into being, but by keeping expressions of dissent from being freely transmitted, they can stop them spreading between subordinate groups and being translated into large-scale, coordinated political actions. The

restrictions placed on Aboriginal people's movements under the reserve system meant that they had limited opportunities to transmit their hidden transcripts beyond their own reserve boundaries. The more cut off each reserve was both from non-Aboriginal society and from other Aboriginal reserves, the narrower the social reach of the Aboriginal residents' hidden transcripts.

Yet no reserve could be hermetically sealed altogether. People wrote letters to relations and friends on other reserves, and sometimes to non-Aboriginal friends as well.¹⁶ At Lake Condah, Stahle is known to have intercepted some of these letters. Occasionally people gained permission to visit relations on other reserves, and they maintained contact with Aboriginal people who lived near but outside the reserve. Another channel of communication were the so-called 'troublemakers' who were banished periodically to distant reserves by Orders in Council. Also influential were those who slipped through the net of the reserve system altogether, and carried hidden expressions of dissatisfaction between reserves.

When hidden transcripts are transmitted for the first time between isolated cells of an oppressed group, members of that group can recognise themselves *as a group* for the first time. They learn the extent to which their political circumstances and living conditions are shared, and see the degree to which their feelings of anger, humiliation and so forth are held in common. Without adopting an essentialist approach to Aboriginal people or any other group, it is reasonable to suggest that those who live within the same structure or system of domination are likely to have a common body of shared experiences, patterns of behaviour, speech-habits, ideas and feelings about their circumstances. In so far as their conditions of subordination have been similar it is valid to assume there will be some family resemblance between their hidden transcripts (as well as between their public ones).¹⁷ By carrying hidden transcripts *between* different reserve communities, itinerants could ignite a new, politically formidable sense of social cohesion among previously atomised groups. The hidden transcripts of different groups could thus coalesce and consolidate into more fully developed counter-hegemonic public transcripts that in turn supported open expressions of

insubordination. For these reasons, Stahle and other reserve officials regarded itinerant and unconfined Aborigines as a potentially serious political threat.

One such 'dangerous wanderer' was James Scott, who arrived at Lake Condah Mission Station in early November 1880.⁴⁸ At that time, the 'Aboriginals' Narrative' document had sat dormant for four months in the hands of John Sutton and his group. It is surely not coincidental that just after James Scott's arrival at Lake Condah, Sutton and his group sent their damning narrative to Stahle's boss, Captain Page at the Board. Because Scott did not live on the reserve, he may have been more willing than the permanent residents to risk airing his inflammatory views within Stahle's sight and hearing. Scott could leave the reserve at will so that, unlike the permanent residents, he did not have to bear the brunt of the superintendent's acrimony in the long term. His brazenness may well have stimulated others into showing their resentment more openly. As well as being an influential speaker, Scott may have exerted considerable political influence as an audience — an outspoken outsider in whose eyes the men may have wished to appear similarly forthright. This 'dangerous wanderer's' outspokenness may have triggered the Condah men's decision to unhide their hidden transcript, take their document out of mothballs, and make their grievances known to Captain Page.

Stahle seems not to have connected Scott's arrival at Lake Condah with the men's decision to send their damning narrative to Captain Page. However, within days of having explained his side of the 'Aboriginals' Narrative' to the Board, he wrote again to Page complaining about Scott's disruptive influence:

I am quite alarmed about the half-caste James Scott. Whenever & wherever he sees a few men sitting together he joins them & commences his yarns [about] what ought what could & should be done with regard to this place & that they should not rest until the Government would give them their rights ... It is a matter of the greatest regret to see men who have been for over two years contented happy & cheerful go about with the same sulky &

discontented look as some of them have done some two years ago.¹⁹

Stahle believed (or wanted Page to believe) that that prior to Scott's arrival, the Condah men were 'contented happy & cheerful'—hegemonically controlled, in other words. He believed (or wanted Page to believe) that Scott had caused the men's discontent, yet he half understood that there was some connection between their present 'sulky and discontented' look and the troubles of two years ago, recounted in the 'Aboriginals' Narrative'. Stahle seems oblivious to the possibility that the men had been carrying grudges from years ago, or that their cheerful countenances were masks worn to avoid aggravating him. He appears to have thought their anger and resentment had been quelled in 1878. In fact, the documentary evidence suggests the men's bitter feelings had merely gone underground and that Scott's talk, as well as introducing new information and ideas to Lake Condah, was acting as a catalyst bringing the Condah men's *existing* hidden transcript into public view.

On the same day as Stahle informed Page of Scott's activities, his wife, Mary Stahle, wrote to Page without her husband's knowledge, telling him how serious the unrest at Lake Condah was becoming:

Scott [is] telling the blacks how badly they are treated—and how they should not rest until their wishes are fulfilled, until they become their own masters, not to be led like children any more.²⁰

Mary Stahle's letter covert communication with her husband's superior tells of the presence of a new Aboriginal public discourse on the reserve. James Scott was not agitating merely for additional food or tobacco rations, nor was he urging the men to repudiate Stahle for failing to live up to the ideals that allegedly validated colonial domination. He was renouncing the hegemonic public discourse of protectionism altogether. Echoing the talk of abolitionists and freedom fighters, Scott was taking the far more radical step of repudiating the very principle by which Aboriginal peoples' lives were controlled by

anyone but themselves.

Itinerants such as Scott could potentially electrify an entire region by carrying previously isolated hidden transcripts from place to place. The Board for the Protection of Aborigines, already contending with complaints from Aboriginal residents of Coranderrk, Ramahyuck, and Ebenezer reserves, appear to have seen James Scott's activities at Lake Condah as a serious political threat. They acted swiftly to isolate him and curtail the effects of his visit. They ordered Scott to leave the reserve, and called in the police to confiscate the Aborigines' firearms. They also transferred John Sutton to Ebenezer Mission Station, threatened to expel those who had written letters of complaint and instigated regular fortnightly police visits to the station.²¹ Again, state authorities were drawing a firm line between what could be said publicly and what must be hidden.

Women's voices

Relations of domination and subordination exist within, as well as between, colonising and colonised groups. As a group's internal political structure shapes its external relations, so its dealings with outsiders affect the group's internal political dynamics. The early Lake Condah residents were a relatively homogenous cultural group; almost all were members of the Kerrupjmara people.²² As time went by, however, Stahle exploited and intensified factional divisions in the community, to the point where John Sutton and his group accused the manager of treating 'the blacks like dogs while the half-castes are told to come in'.²³ Over time, the make-up of the Condah community was changing as a result of sexual unions between white men and Aboriginal women. How did Aboriginal women view their political position? What kinds of public and hidden transcripts did they generate as individuals, as members of families and as constituents of the Condah community as a whole?

While Stahle clashed with Aboriginal men over rations, work certificates, and the right to control sexual conduct on the station, he also endeavoured to direct the lives of Aboriginal women in matters to do with their sexual relations, the custody of their children, and their place of abode. With

one notable exception, the Condah women wrote to government authorities on matters pertaining to themselves and their immediate families, rather than as representatives of larger groupings.²⁴ Some women's voices are elusive, refracted several times through the writings of other people, including Stahle, who usually insisted the women were happy and contented at Lake Condah.

While women such as Annie Rich and Margaret Green used highly mediated and meek modes of address, Maggie Mobourne was an outspoken female warrior. She detested Stahle, his family and the Condah school teacher, and, when angry, she expressed her contempt openly. From the late 1890s onwards, Maggie Mobourne, acting both alone and with her husband Ernest Mobourne, challenged Stahle on a range of issues.²⁵ The records show, however, that the Mobournes alternated strategically between overt and covert resistance, sometimes protesting bluntly and directly but at other times pleading abjectly or refracting their complaints through the voices of high-ranking government officials. Clearly, the Mobournes played a crucial role in an *ongoing* subculture of resistance, yet they adjusted their tactics as circumstances changed from one moment to the next.

In early 1900, Maggie launched three trenchant, public blasts against Stahle. After he reproved her for her husband's and children's absence from prayers, Maggie's anger boiled over and could not be hidden any more. In a letter to the *Hamilton Spectator*, she accused Stahle of being a treacherous hypocrite who:

doesn't practice what he preaches. He's not a fit person for the position he holds but is dragging us down to hell rather than helping us to rise. What I say here is true and I can take a solemn oath before God and before any Christian people as I have proofs for his falsehoods. We who know his ways often wonder he is not punished by the Master he professes to serve.²⁶

Maggie also wrote two petitions, one to D. N. McLeod, MLA, Vice-Chairman of the BPA, the other to a local Justice of the Peace, Mr Duffit. The former is worth examining in detail:

Mission Station

Lake Condah
February 27th, 1900

D.N. McLeod, Esqre. M.L.A.
and Vice Chairman

Sir

Having returned in September last to the Mission Station with the object of endeavouring to live in peace and in accordance with the rules of the Station I am sorry to inform you that Mr Stahle seems to take every opportunity to find fault with us, and it seems as if our efforts to live peacefully are of no use here because Mr Stahle seems determined to annoy us and to take every opportunity of reporting us to the Board for insubordination.

On the 18th inst. Mr Stahle spoke in a threatening manner to me and stopped our rations, which he denies and I say that he is a liar and has always been. (See full particulars in another letter) and he doesn't treat us justly. I would ask you to get up an impartial Board of Inquiry to investigate and see fairness and justice.

I am prepared to substantiate my statements to be true and also can get the majority here as witnesses to prove that we have been living peacefully.

I am

Sir

Yours respectfully
Maggie Mobourne

(We the undersigned corroborate the statements given above)

Signatures

Ernest Mobourne

Robert Turner his X mark

Thomas Willis his X mark

James Cortwine his X mark

Jenny Green her X mark

Albert White

Isaac McDuff X

Bella Mobourne

Fred Carmichael
 Louisa White her X mark
 Edward P. Cortwine²⁷

This petition seems at first glance like a triumphant outburst of previously silenced voices, a loud and strident protest against Aboriginal oppression. However, the politics of this document are more complex than they might initially appear. First, only a small proportion of the Condah community signed Maggie's two petitions. Eleven people (at least three of them close relatives)²⁸ added their names to the petition to D. N. McLeod; ten signed the petition to Mr Duffit. Against these small numbers we might compare Ernest Mobourne's politely worded petition of 2 July 1907, to which no less than forty-eight people appended their names. Although Maggie's petitions said what others might have wanted to say, it appears that many of the Condah residents may still have been too afraid to join Maggie in saying the unsayable against Stahle.

The second issue complicating the politics of Maggie's petition to D. N. McLeod is that it did not begin as a petition at all, but rather as an individual letter. Powerless groups may hide not only their rebellious ideas and feelings, they may also conceal the extent to which they constitute themselves as a group. Maggie wrote the body of her petition to D.N. McLeod in the first person singular, beginning with 'I am sorry to inform you that...', and ending with 'I am, Sir, Yours respectfully, Maggie Mobourne'.²⁹ When she described the wrongs committed against 'us', she meant 'against Ernest and herself'. Initially, Maggie spoke for herself and her family, not as a spokesperson for her community. Nonetheless, as soon as she obtained wider corroboration of her charges against Stahle, her letter was effectively transformed into a petition. In contrast to other petitions,³⁰ the signatures on Maggie's document were appended as a postscript. After her signature, a note was added, saying 'We the following corroborate the statements given above', after which eleven signatures appear. The most radical and daring aspect of Maggie's letter is perhaps not its content or vituperative tone, but the fact that it becomes a site upon which (a few) Aboriginal protestors constitute themselves momentarily as a visible political group.

A third significant element in Maggie's petition (and her letter to the *Hamilton Spectator*) is that, for all her sharp criticisms of Stahle, Maggie's claims did not amount to an attack on protectionism or Christianity per se. She fired her shots at Stahle's character—his hypocrisy, his cruelty, his lies—but did not lash out against the systematically oppressive effects of colonialist ideology as institutionalised through the reserve system and the church. Strategically or otherwise, she did not denounce Christian principles but invoked them as a source of standards Stahle was failing to live up to. She did not denounce protectionism as such, but accused Stahle of failing in his duty of protective care. Her protest was that of an individual who, being persecuted by another individual, attempts to assassinate the character of her oppressor by showing how he fails to live up to his own professed standards and ideals. Maggie clearly did not pretend to consent to her own subordination, but nor did her letter and petition articulate the more radical emancipatory politics espoused by the 'dangerous wanderer' James Scott. Although Maggie's petition openly expressed feelings of anger and frustration, it neither advocated an anti-colonialist ideology, nor proposed an anti-colonial program of political action. Even so, Maggie and Ernest were banished to Lake Tyers.

The Mobournes were permitted to return to Condah in 1903, but were soon involved in conflicts with Stahle over Maggie's elopement with Dunmore widower, Henry Albert, and over Ernest's refusal to work or sit through Stahle's church services. In the midst of these conflicts, the BPA announced plans to close Lake Condah. In his best copperplate writing, Ernest penned a petition to the cabinet on behalf of elder Peter Hewitt and forty-seven other Condah signatories, requesting that the mission station not be closed down. This petition is a public transcript, a humble supplication in which 'the Aborigines residing at Lake Condah would earnestly pray the Cabinet to reconsider their decision and allow us to remain at Lake Condah'. Ernest supports his request by offering an idyllic narrative of the mission's history in which Stahle is characterised as a kind friend and benefactor:

Our fathers ... with their loved missionary Mr Stahle whose labours have blessed and who is still with us then put their minds and hands together fencing in the whole reserve ... and have built stone and wooden cottages for our use, a fine church wherein to worship God, a Mission House for their much loved missionary...³¹

In contrast to Maggie's angry letter/petition of February 1900, Ernest's document is signed by forty-eight people — the whole Lake Condah community. It was safe to sign Ernest's petition, because its humble, supplicatory tone reassured government and Board authorities that they were in control. There was one rupture, however, in this communal performance of subordination: the order of petitioners' names suggests that, despite Stahle's attempts over a period of three decades to eradicate the Condah residents' 'primitive ways', the community's traditional structure of authority had not been entirely destroyed. Although Ernest Mobourne penned the petition, his name does not head the list of signatories. This honour is reserved for senior law-man and clever-man Peter Hewitt, whose name is immediately followed by the names of other senior men, below which in turn appear the names of the other residents.³² The order of names may be read as a coded assertion of cultural and political autonomy, a sign of defiance that might not have been interpreted as such by those to whom the petition was addressed. Ernest's petition managed both to honour the Condah elders, and to conform to white epistolary decorum. The petition achieved its objective. Lake Condah was not closed down.

Articulating silences

In this account of Lake Condah Mission Station, which is based mainly on Protection Board documents in the Australian Archives (Victorian Office), I have been able to examine hidden transcripts only to the extent that they have *not* remained entirely hidden. This kind of archival research tries to read a silence by looking at its shadow, or its moments of breaking, in the written archive. Leela Gandhi has noted the importance of 'attending more carefully to the silence of the archive' and interrogating the 'construction of history

as certain knowledge'.³³ For me, here, it has sometimes been necessary to speculate on the basis of scant evidence, to acknowledge that archival silences can be inscrutable, and to remember that, like Stahle, I may be ventriloquising Aboriginal voices from a non-Indigenous position of power and privilege. Even with contextual knowledge, it is not always possible to determine whether absences and silences in the archive point to the presence of non-players, or tacitly express the equanimity of colonised subjects, or are the shadow cast by a hidden culture of resistance.

Elaborating Ranajit Guha's statement that 'there can be no colonialism without coercion', one might say that different (post?)colonial cultures, and indeed different regions and classes within nations, have been shaped by different varieties and blends of coercive and hegemonic control. At Lake Condah Mission Station, where civil and state apparatuses operated together, there is less evidence of hegemonic control than of realised or threatened coercion, less evidence of *spontaneous* consent to oppression than of *feigned* consent to avoid punishment. Like many other missions and reserves, Lake Condah was a place where, as Guha might have predicted, physical coercion clearly outweighed hegemonic control.

What role did hegemony play, then, in the oppression of Aboriginal people at Lake Condah and across the reserve system as a whole in Australia? Broadly speaking, I would suggest that while Aboriginal people were coerced into submission, most non-Aboriginal people were persuaded by hegemonic racist and colonialist discourses that such coercion was natural, just or a matter of necessary discipline. Until the late 1970s, Australian school children were taught that Aborigines offered no significant resistance to white settlers, and that those who lived on missions and reserves felt themselves fortunate to be protected and culturally uplifted. This hegemonic fiction of Aboriginal consent to the civilising mission was central to settler ideology. It blinded the majority of non-Aboriginal people to the devastating consequences of dispossession, cultural suppression, institutionalised violence, the breaking up of families and other 'dirty linen' of the white man's rule. In Australia, hegemonic discourses worked primarily to elicit the consent of the silent urban settler majority to the systematic

oppression of fellow human beings. Hegemony did its work less on Aboriginal minds than on the minds of those who wanted to reap the benefits of colonialism without ever having to admit they were morally culpable or personally implicated in Aboriginal peoples' suffering. Ideas about hegemony were thus themselves hegemonic. The myth that Aboriginal people were hegemonically controlled was itself a hegemonic force that helped—and is still helping—large sections of the white Australian population see themselves as innocent 'non-players' in an ongoing process of racial oppression.

Notes

- 1 Stahle to Ogilvie, 19 June 1876, Australian Archives Victorian Office (AAV) Series B 313/1, Item 106.
- 2 In ordinary usage, a 'transcript' is a written copy, however, James C. Scott uses 'transcript' to refer to speech, writing, and non-verbal actions.
- 3 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Yale University Press, Newhaven, 1990, p. xii.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- 5 *Ibid.*, epigraph.
- 6 Simon During, 'Post-Colonialism', in K. K. Ruthven (ed.), *Beyond the Disciplines: The New Humanities*, Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra, 1992, p. 95.
- 7 Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. xii, p. 24.
- 8 Scott, p. 18.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 10 John Sutton Jr to Captain Page, September [n.d.] 1877, AAV Series B313/1, Item 110.
- 11 Stahle to Page, 14 September 1877, AAV Series B313/1, Item 110.
- 12 Stahle to Page, 4 October 1877, AAV Series B313/1, Item 110.
- 13 Stahle to Page, 18 October 1877, AAV Series B 131/1, Item 110.
- 14 Stahle to Page, 6 November 1880, AAV Series B313/1, Item 115.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 The precise extent of these forms of personal correspondence is unknown. Few personal letters survive in the government files, but more may have survived in private collections.
- 17 Scott, pp. 223-4.
- 18 No relation to James C. Scott of Yale.
- 19 Stahle to Page, 12 November 1880, AAV Series B313/1, Item 115.
- 20 Quoted in Jan Critchett, *Untold Stories: Memories and Lives of Victorian Kooris*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1999, p. 154.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- 22 My thanks to Victor Briggs at the Koori Heritage Trust, Museum of Victoria, for this information.
- 23 F. Elmore for J. Sutton, W. Gorrie and T. Green to Page, July [n.d.] 1880; AAV Series B313/1, Item 115.
- 24 This is not to say that the issues they addressed did not have relevance for the

- wider Condah community.
- 25 Ernest Mobourne was first reported to the BPA for disobedience in 1892. My main source of biographical information about Maggie and Ernest Mobourne is Jan Critchett's *Untold Stories*, Chapter 9.
- 26 Maggie Mobourne to the editor, *Hamilton Spectator*, (n.d.), quoted in Critchett, p. 160.
- 27 From facsimile copy of Maggie Mobourne to D. N. McLeod, MLA, 27 February 1900 (AAV Series B337, Item 507), in Critchett, p. 242.
- 28 The relatives I have been able to identify were Ernest Mobourne (Maggie's husband), Robert Turner (her father) and Bella Mobourne (her sister-in-law).
- 29 Italics added.
- 30 For example, Peter Hewitt et al. to the Hon. Members of the Cabinet, 2 July 1907 (penned by Ernest Mobourne), facsimile copy in Critchett, pp. 243-4.
- 31 Peter Hewitt et al. to the Hon. Members of the Cabinet, Critchett, p. 243.
- 32 This pattern is followed also in petitions written on Coranderrk Reserve. See Penny van Toorn, 'Authors, Scribes, and Owners: The Sociology of Nineteenth-Century Aboriginal Writing on Coranderrk and Lake Condah Reserves', *Continuum*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1999, pp. 333-43.
- 33 Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998, p. 172.

The Production of Whiteness: Revisiting Roberta Sykes's Snake Dreaming

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Those troubled terms—‘black’, ‘white’, indeed ‘race’ itself—have been newly contested in recent critical theory as historicists and poststructuralists in particular have made moves to re-emphasise the historical contingency of racialised identities in the face of new efforts to reclaim ‘race’ for biology and genetics.¹ These critical theorists vary in the ways and the extent to which they see racial differences as culturally formed but they share concerns with questions of the kind: how do specific differences come to be markers of ‘race’, and how do they come to signify in the ways they do? What desires and investments structure a subject’s way of seeing these racialised differences? While this body of critical theory has arisen notably in the context of the United States, its terms of reference and the questions it raises are of increasing interest among Australian race critics. Here, I take up some of these terms and questions in relation to a particular cultural moment in Australia: the publication of Roberta Sykes’s autobiography, *Snake Dreaming*, and its reception by a non-Indigenous readership. I consider the ways in which white readers have produced racialised meanings from the text; in particular, how whiteness, blackness and Aboriginality have been read, and by what signifiers. Moreover, I will be suggesting that in order to produce the meanings of whiteness, blackness and Aboriginality that are proposed in the prevailing readings of *Snake Dreaming*, another set of meanings has had to be erased. Against the dominant readings of the autobiography, I ask whether there isn’t another story, right there on the

surface of the page, which white readers, including myself, have had trouble recognising, and, if this is so, what processes, and what resistances, were in operation to produce that blindness. For this is a text which can be read as destabilising the definitions of whiteness and blackness which have been mobilised by Sykes's white critics; it is a text which offers a critique of the very discourses which these reading practices have reinscribed.

A 'white' mother's secret

Snake Dreaming: Autobiography of a Black Woman is, by its generic placement, susceptible to certain reading conventions and expectations. Conventionally, autobiography is read with the expectation that it will disclose stories, even secrets, which have otherwise escaped the public record. While there are other approaches to reading autobiography, especially that produced in colonial and postcolonial contexts, a reading strategy still largely prevails whereby autobiography is expected to carry the full personal story.² In the case of *Snake Dreaming* it is the story of Roberta Sykes, prominent Aboriginal rights activist, that many readers have expected will be revealed, and, in a text which announces itself as the autobiography of a Black woman, these readers have expected to discover the answer to a particular enigma: is Sykes Aboriginal, or is she instead, as some have claimed, the daughter of a white woman and a black US serviceman? This then is a text which many readers have taken as promising full and certain knowledge, at last, of Sykes's racial origins.

These are hopes which the text does not fulfil. Instead, in *Snake Dreaming* Roberta Sykes can be said to make another move altogether, and that is to show the uncertainty and the contingency of racial identities: not only of her own, but of her white mother's and, by extension, racial identity more generally. Any hope a reader might have held for certainty of Sykes's racial identity is foreclosed. There are many ways in which *Snake Dreaming* can be said to do this, but one of the most significant ways is via Roberta Sykes's mother and her whiteness, a whiteness which *Snake Dreaming* figures as *provisional*. For Sykes's mother, Rae Patterson, is not given as an unambiguously white woman in *Snake Dreaming*,

although this is what most published readings have made of her. While *Snake Dreaming* has been represented in published reviews almost exclusively as being concerned with Sykes's search for her 'black' father and his racial origins—I will turn to examples of these representations a little further on—*Snake Dreaming* might be more productively read as a text profoundly structured around Sykes's search for her racial identity through her mother. It is in relation to Roberta Sykes's mother that Aboriginality is chiefly associated in each of the three volumes of *Snake Dreaming*. A reading practice which produces the mother as unambiguously white, and which only looks to the father for the grounding of a 'black' identity, can be seen as reproducing the race relations which this text describes and resists. It is a reading practice which reproduces 'race' as lying in the colour of the skin, and 'black' and 'white' as fixed and mutually exclusive terms.

There can be no doubt as to the significance of the mother in *Snake Dreaming*. She is as much *Snake Dreaming's* subject as is her daughter, who cannot be known without her. A question mark is raised over the mother's racial background in the opening pages and remains to the very close. At the very outset of the autobiography Sykes speaks of the importance of her search for her mother.³ *Snake Cradle*, the first volume in the three-volume autobiography, opens with Sykes wondering of her mother: 'how much of herself did she reveal? Why did she not want to be found?' (6) To read this only, or even primarily, about the mother's secrecy over the identity of Sykes's father is to erase another meaning, for at this moment the text is referring to the mother's secrecy over her own racial identity. This, as much as the identity of her father, is what Sykes comes to suspect has been hidden from her.

In the first few pages of *Snake Cradle*, the mother's associations with Aboriginality are subtle; they are ones of genre. *Snake Cradle* opens with the story of a visitation, Sykes's mother's premonition of a death. Roberta as a small child is awakened one night by her mother's very great distress and fear: there is a presence in her mother's room, a male presence, terrifying and foreboding. The room is searched, as it will be again repeatedly during this long night while the mother is wracked by the nightmarish visits. In the relative quiet of

the morning, a telegram arrives announcing the death of Rae Patterson's mother. The night visitor was Old Nick, death himself. This story about the mother recalls Aboriginal lifeworld where such premonition of death often figures: the mother's story is given as if it, too, might belong in that lineage.⁴

The story that immediately follows associates Rae Patterson with Aboriginality explicitly. Sykes recalls her early memories of her mother's Aboriginal relatives:

George was a very black man with loose but kindly features and, beside him, Maggie was pale, probably a white woman, with limp brown hair.

Years later, Mum evaded my questions about Uncle George and Auntie Maggie. It was her way to become angry when pursued on subjects she didn't want to answer. I gathered she was related to George in some way, and that they were the parents of a young girl roughly the same age as me, my cousin Betty. (11-12)

The trajectory of the text that follows is that of the young Roberta's quest for knowledge of her mother's racial identity, and hence her own. It is, however, a quest which will never find its end because of her mother's evasions. For Rae Patterson, the suggestion of coming from an Aboriginal family is dangerous, for both herself and her daughters:

'Is there any Aboriginal blood in our family?' I asked ...

'Every family that's been up here for more than two generations has got a touch of the tar,' she responded ... 'Almost every family,' she corrected herself.

'Well, why don't we ever say we're Aboriginal?'

'Because we're not! ... A touch of the tar doesn't make a person an Aborigine. Nobody in their right mind would want to be an Aborigine.' (173)

She reluctantly admits that the family might have a 'touch of the tar' but refuses any inference that this makes the family Aboriginal. She nevertheless at times introduces Aboriginal people to her daughters as family. There is Roberta's cousin Hiram whose father was Jackie Ryan, champion Aboriginal

boxer (74). When Roberta and her sister are sent to an orphanage at a time when their mother is too ill to take care of them, Rae Patterson tells them to look out for their cousin Valda, who turns out to be a young Aboriginal girl. And, of course, there is cousin Betty, whose father seems to be a relative of Roberta's mother. *Snake Dreaming* is shot through with such stories, where it is through the white mother that the associations with Aboriginality are being made.

It is quite possible that these Aboriginal people are family to Rae Patterson through her relationship with Sykes's father; that Sykes's father is Aboriginal. The argument I am making here does not exclude that possibility. Rather, my interest is in the fact that most readings of the autobiography exclude the figure of the mother as one through whom the association with Aboriginality may also be made. The mother is taken to be *only* white. Her unambiguous whiteness is taken as a given in almost all published readings of the text. This making the mother white is significant for what it must overlook in the text. It must overlook, for instance, the fact that the mother's whiteness is placed, quite literally, in inverted commas in certain places in the text;⁵ it is never taken as a given in the text itself. Rae Patterson is at times represented as white and at others not white; her whiteness is not fixed or certain. I suggest that Sykes refuses to name her mother simply as white because of the ways that Rae Patterson exceeds that term and its connotations of an exclusive identity: white, and white only.

Passing as white

While *Snake Dreaming* carefully marks the racial identities of those who people its pages, the racial identity of the mother is oddly exempt from this. Rae Patterson's is not named as white at all until well into the first volume (95). There are markers of Rae Patterson's whiteness before this. For instance, Rae Patterson securing a bank loan to purchase a house in the context of 1940s Queensland would seem to position her as white, but there are always hints of another story. In order to repay that bank loan, Rae Patterson cleans houses and does laundry for local people, compelling the young Roberta to help. Sykes writes: 'it seemed somehow to fit in with what I was learning at that time — that Mum and I were expected to do a lot of work

for white people generally' (69). Here, Rae Patterson is racially associated with her daughter, as against the 'white people' for whom she and her daughter must work.

In *Snake Circle*, the third volume of the autobiography, Sykes explicitly raises the possibility that her mother has been 'passing as white'. Here, Sykes speaks of her theory, 'put together from the tiny clues that had littered [her mother's] life ... that her family had been passing as white' (61). These 'tiny clues' are present in the stories Sykes recounts about her mother's life throughout the autobiography.

The practice of 'passing' is a paradigmatic case for critical race theory. In the work of Judith Butler, for example, passing as white is not understood within the paradigm of Truth: it is not taken to be a lie, or a deceit, but as a set of practices through which a subject is inserted into those social relations and their associated privileges which are read as belonging to whites.⁶ For Butler, being white is always a kind of passing. Whiteness is not a 'thing' but an ideal. The white subject is white to the extent that its practices approximate the ideals of whiteness: 'whiteness' then is something *all* whites approach but, as with all idealised self-images, can never reach. The practice of passing therefore can be seen as showing something of the constitution of race more generally and the contingency of all racialised identities. The white subject is not 'white' because of an essential quality held in the body, or on the skin, but by the position it occupies in a set of social relations, a position which successfully approximates the ideal white and which is associated with privilege. The white subject is the subject that can take up the position of white privilege.

These positions are historically mobile, with subjects read as black in one set of social relations and white in another. Noel Ignatiev in his *How the Irish Became White* recounts the making-white of the Irish in the United States in the course of the nineteenth century, a case sharing some features with the Australian one.⁷ As the 'Black Irish' succeeded in repositioning themselves within the dominant class relations, moving out of menial and transient work and into positions of greater privilege, they took up positions of whiteness. These positions are always highly contested. Irish migrants in the United

States were prominent in struggles against the emancipation of slaves, and fought against freed blacks for paid work in the newly emerging labour relations of post-slavery capital: through successfully negotiating a coveted position for themselves in these relations of capital, and by excluding their competitors, they gained their entry into the 'white race'.⁸ Further, race positionality moves synchronically as well as diachronically. In the Australian context, while the Irish are now white in dominant discourses of race, they occupy a more complex position within some Australian Indigenous accounts. For the Indigenous writer and critic Alexis Wright, for instance, the Irish are Indigenous because of their relation to the land in Ireland and their struggles over that land against British colonial interests.⁹ These examples suggest that race is produced relationally; moreover, it is neither fixed nor singular.

To take another example, Greek migrants in post-war Australia can be seen to have been positioned as black, at least until the 1970s if not still in some contexts. The derogatory term 'wog', with its association with the danger of infection, suggests that the Greek migrant was positioned as a carrier of illness into white Australia. That illness was the illness of the other, in this case of non-whiteness. (In the US context, the term 'wog' has been used derogatively to denote blackness.)¹⁰ As Greek migrants, like their Irish counterparts, have moved out of seasonal work and off assembly lines into positions of greater socioeconomic privilege, as they have moved into more secure positions within dominant class relations, they too have been whitened within Australian race discourses.

Passing as white therefore is not to pass from a 'true' race identity to an 'inauthentic' one; it is to move between two positions, one designated as black, or, more precisely, not-white, the other designated as white. This is why passing can be seen to produce anxieties, both for the subject who is said to 'pass' as white, and for the subject who is said to 'be' white. For the subject who passes, will they be white enough? For those who successfully occupy the position of white, will they be able to secure it, hold it? Is whiteness and the privileges accorded it at risk if permeated by the racialised other?

This is not to say that there are not profoundly held attachments to racial identities, or that racial identities are not deeply significant. It is rather to say that those identities are formed in the context of racialised social relations, and that the subject is produced as white or black according to historically shifting signifiers.

And, indeed, throughout *Snake Dreaming*, Rae Patterson is 'white' at those times when she succeeds in locating herself in a set of relations and practices in which she will be seen to be white, that is with those privileges denoting whiteness, and she is 'less white' when she cannot insert herself into these relations. So, to return to the example of Sykes's account of her mother's domestic work for whites. Here, Patterson's whiteness appears to be compromised, and while the reason isn't made explicit, if we take the suggestion that whiteness is about positionality and a concomitant set of practices, then it might be said that in domestic work Patterson was not comfortably positioned within these set of relations and practices. The work is done generally by poor and disenfranchised women, and in the context of north Queensland in the 1940s and 1950s, this is racialised: this is the kind of work done by Aboriginal domestic servants. This structural proximity to Aboriginal women's labour compromises Rae Patterson's fragile hold on her own whiteness.

Paradoxically, Rae Patterson puts herself in the position of a domestic servant, with its proximity to Aboriginal women's labour, in order to secure for herself and her daughters some financial security which will in turn offer some of the privileges of whiteness: through her work she hopes to gain some degree of financial security, some independence from the prying eyes of welfare, some justice. However, these privileges of whiteness turn out to be not only privileges but the very signifiers of whiteness. When Rae Patterson secures the privileges of whiteness, when she possesses the accoutrements of middle-class respectability, she will be read as white.

Rae Patterson desires to position her daughters as white through privilege. She sought the privileges of whiteness for her daughters in order that they would be seen as white. There were piano lessons and dance lessons, there were pretty lace dresses and patent leather shoes. To Sykes it seems that there

were times when her mother believed she had accomplished this making-white of her daughters, such that she ‘saw’ her daughters as if they carried the signifiers of whiteness on their bodies: ‘I began to realise that when Mum looked at us she didn’t see us. She patted our long golden locks, stared into our deep blue eyes, and fixed us up in dresses and hair ribbons to match the peaches and cream complexions she saw on us.’ (*Snake Cradle*, 173)

But, if Rae Patterson believes at times that she has succeeded in making her girls white through privilege, she knows that it is always provisional, contingent on the context she can produce for them. Thus, in the event of the rape of the young Roberta it is perfectly clear to Rae Patterson that Roberta is now not-white: that she is being positioned as a black girl, indeed as an ‘Abo’. This is why she was raped and why she would have been treated as if abject had she taken the case to the police. Rae Patterson must make her daughter white if she is to have the police take her case and their inquiries seriously, if she is to have any justice at all. Rae Patterson endeavoured to make her daughter white and this making white depended on whether she could mobilise her own whiteness as a context in which her daughter could, in her turn, be read as white. As Sykes says:

My mother’s valiant desire to be a white woman in a world she recognised as intrinsically racist, had, in the end, been a godsend for me ... I felt sure that, initially, only my mother’s ‘whiteness’ had prompted the police to begin their inquiries. (326)

Here Rae Patterson’s whiteness appears in inverted commas to denote its uncertainty. The text binds Rae Patterson’s whiteness inextricably with her desire for and practice of whiteness. Rae Patterson *is* white to the extent that she can successfully practise whiteness. Hers is a ‘valiant desire’, with all the bravery that those words connote. This is a story of race as struggle, violence and negotiation, rather than the colour of one’s skin.

'White' readers

The conventional expectations of the autobiographical genre have not been fulfilled by *Snake Dreaming*. Where a reader may have hoped to find certainty—in this case, certainty concerning Sykes's origins—there is only uncertainty. The text shows the groundings of this uncertainty: it shows why the quest for certainty of racial origins *cannot* be satisfied. Yet for some readers of the autobiography, *Snake Dreaming* remains at best an unfinished account of racial identity and origins, and, at worst, one that is untruthful. *Snake Dreaming* has been read as a text which withholds from or even lies to its readers.

The appearance of the second volume of Sykes's autobiography in late 1998 attracted a flurry of media attention which focused precisely on the question of the truthfulness of Sykes's alleged claim to Aboriginality. This is not a claim Sykes makes for herself anywhere in the autobiography, preoccupied as that text is with the *uncertainty* of origins. Nevertheless, Luke Slattery in *The Weekend Australian*, for instance, charged her with claiming an Aboriginal identity, and then set about proving it to be false. Under the heading, 'Sykes is not Aboriginal, says the one who knows best ... her mum', Slattery maintained that Sykes does not have 'a drop of Aboriginal blood'.¹¹ His claims were based on a report in the Brisbane *Sunday Sun* twenty-five years previously where Rae Patterson is quoted as saying of her daughter: 'Her father was a negro [*sic*] soldier ... I am Roberta's mother and I am white.' For Slattery, this 'telling testimony' from her mother undermines the credibility of any claims Sykes might make to Aboriginality. At the same time, Slattery also recalled how very unreliable Rae Patterson has been on the question of Sykes's paternity in the past. Sykes's father, Slattery wrote, 'was variously described to her by her mother as Fijian, New Guinean, or part-Negro and part-Cherokee Indian'. Slattery's account slides over the implications of this, and Rae Patterson's words are made to take on the weightiness of truth: her words now can fix the question of origins once and for all.¹² Slattery has here 'improved' upon Sykes's own efforts: he has done what Sykes was unable to do, and that is made the father's racial origins certain. Moreover, Slattery elides the other constitutive uncertainty of Sykes's narrative and that is the uncertainty of the mother's racialised

identity. The mother says she is white, Slattery reports, therefore she is white, and only white. Slattery now can make a set of clear and certain claims: the father is not Aboriginal, the mother is white, and therefore their daughter cannot have ‘a drop of Aboriginal blood’.⁴³

The kind of reading practice which propels commentary of this kind takes Sykes to be the sole producer of textual meanings. It is Sykes who makes herself Aboriginal in her text, it is Sykes who claims this alleged heritage through her father (only), it is Sykes who makes her mother white (only). But, given the evidence from the text, we might need to ask: what of the reader’s part in the production of these meanings? What discourses about race prevail such that these meanings are available, while others are less so? What suggests the kind of reading that Slattery, like many others, has performed?

Most published commentaries read *Snake Dreaming* within discourses which have white and black (including Aboriginal) racial identities as dichotomous and mutually exclusive. Like all dualisms, this one produces the ‘inferior’ term as the dependent one. Therefore ‘blackness’ is intelligible only in terms of whiteness: in other words, ‘black’ stands in for ‘not white’. The subject who exceeds or destabilises this dichotomy is not taken to be both black *and* white. This possibility is excluded by the logic of the dualism where black is really ‘not white’: one cannot be white and not white. This logic produces those practices of racialisation whereby the subject is either resolved into a single identity — white or black — or sentenced to an ‘in between’, neither white nor black. This refusal to allow doubleness or ambiguity is raised by Sykes in the prologue to the final volume of her autobiography:

‘I wish you wouldn’t keep calling yourself BLACK. You’re not BLACK.’

I’m surprised that this white woman would think I should take her wish-list on board, as if I have no wishes of my own.

‘So — am I white?’ My question is rhetorical, my dark skin and hair a brazen confrontation.

‘Well, no. You’re not black and you’re not white. You’re perhaps sort of somewhere in between.’ (v)

Given the logic of the dualism where ‘black’ stands in for ‘not white’, the ‘in between’ is not a third position at all. It is another ‘black’. It is the position the subject falls into when the requirements of whiteness have not been met.

If Sykes is read as black, or, as her interlocutor puts it, ‘somewhere in between’, her mother is resolved into a singular whiteness in most commentaries.¹⁴ Even among those reviewers who offer more sympathetic readings of the autobiography than those which appeared in the daily press, and who are sensitive to the story of racial tensions the autobiography describes, the mother’s whiteness remains a clear and certain thing. Cassandra Pybus, reviewing the final volume, *Snake Circle*, for *Australian Book Review*, reasserts the father’s importance in the mystery of Sykes’s racial identity and reasserts, too, the certainty of the mother’s racial identity: ‘The problem for Sykes is that she does not know her country or her people; she cannot say who her father was. Her white mother will not tell her.’¹⁵ Dianne Dempsey, reviewing *Snake Circle* for the *Age*, similarly writes: ‘Sykes has always maintained that her white mother refused to divulge her father’s race.’¹⁶ Anne Summers published a sympathetic reading of the second volume, *Snake Dancing*, in the *Age*, placing the text in a wider historical context and so broadening the terms of the debate. Her essay begins by quoting from an important passage in the volume, where MumShirl, Aboriginal community and cultural worker, is shown challenging Roberta — not for her claims to Aboriginality but for her seeming refusal to stand by that identity:

She said she had heard that I was telling people I wasn’t Aboriginal, and asked if I knew how much this insulted Aboriginal people?

‘Well’, I replied, ‘I can’t prove that I am. I have reason to think I am, but I can’t prove it.’

‘But,’ said MumShirl, ‘can you prove that you’re not?’¹⁷

Summers, however, pulls short of showing the fuller meanings of this passage. The extract leaves undisturbed the prevailing assumptions that it is Sykes’s father whom Sykes believes may have been Aboriginal. There is nothing in Summer’s extract

to suggest that it is Sykes's mother's background which Sykes has reason to believe is Aboriginal. Yet the next sentence in the same passage draws a very different picture: 'my mother', Sykes says, 'was secretive about her own ancestry' (153).

There have been some important exceptions to this reading practice.¹⁸ One of these is by Aboriginal novelist and critic Alexis Wright, who, reviewing the first volume of the autobiography for *Australian Book Review*, put her finger on the complexity of race relations which Sykes's autobiography describes when she observed how:

Sykes explores the depth of the personal veneer surrounding every Australian who is, like it or not, part of the hidden history of black and white contact in this country. Secrets taken to the grave choke every cemetery in Australia.¹⁹

This 'hidden history of black and white contact' lies at the heart of Sykes's autobiography, carried in particular by its story of the white mother who might be the carrier of an Aboriginal heritage for her daughter. In reading practices which produce the mother as only white, the history of black and white contact is once more hidden. This is not to suggest a conscious choice to hide or deny that history. It is instead to suggest that the history of black and white contact of which Alexis Wright speaks is hidden because of a disavowal,²⁰ a disavowal of the kind: 'I know that contact between black and white has occurred in this country but, still, I believe that it has not.' That is, a repression of the knowledge of black and white contact and the effects this may have had, including on whiteness. Contact with Aboriginality must transform whiteness or, in the terms of racist discourses, 'pollute' it. This is the 'brush with tar'. The desire to hold on to the belief that there has been no contact between whites and blacks, 'not in *our* family', is very strong and is represented powerfully by Sykes in her portrayal of her mother. The kind of disavowal which Sykes describes in her text, and which is evident in the reading practices of some of her critics, has powerful effects, ones which cannot be underestimated in Australia at this historical juncture.

This opens up questions concerning the investments readers might have in the maintenance of the white/black dualism. If *Snake Dreaming* is read as problematising prevailing notions of whiteness, showing that it is never the pure thing that White Australia wishes it to be, and that it is not fixed and certain, but unstable, not natural but contingent, then there is the troubling question: what certainty of racial identity exists for the 'white' reader? Sykes's text implies that white readers cannot take for granted the stability of our own whiteness, and suggests the disavowed proximity of Aboriginality in White Australia's history.

Reflection

Although this essay on the reception of Roberta Sykes's autobiography *Snake Dreaming* was written in the context of whiteness studies—which was just then emerging as an academic discipline in Australia—it is as much indebted to another moment, thirty years ago now, when at the 1984 Women and Labour Conference in Brisbane I first encountered the powerful challenges to white feminism made by a number of Aboriginal women, Jackie Huggins, Lilla Watson and Jo Wilmot among them. These women resisted feminisms that sought, however unwittingly, to colonise Aboriginal women by re-centring white women as the speaking subjects who could speak for and about Aboriginal women and Aboriginal cultures. Huggins, Watson and Wilmot were arguing against white feminists' claims to know, and to speak for, Aboriginal women, arguing that white women saw gender relations in Aboriginal cultures through white feminist interpretative frames that distorted Aboriginal cultures, making them appear as versions of western cultures. More than this, they argued that white women's knowledge of themselves and their own culture was itself limited. White women, they argued, were blind to their own colonising impulses, historically and into the present.

This moment held formative possibilities for the many young feminists in the University of Queensland auditorium that day who, like myself, found themselves in the deeply uncomfortable position of being the far-from-ideal objects of Aboriginal women's gaze. The effect was surely redoubled by the fact that the women were insisting on our blindness.

Since then, questions of the visual field of race and how vision

is shaped by our desires to see—and not to see—have increasingly entered into critical race studies. In this essay, the emphasis is on the many non-Indigenous readers of Sykes's trilogy who were unable to see that Roberta's association with Aboriginality came through her 'white' mother and not her 'black' father. Here, by 'white' and 'black' I mean those highly provisional and movable *positions* that are written by and read within racist regimes as fixed and naturally formed categories based in skin colour. The paradox for Sykes was that her text critiqued the very discourses of 'black' and 'white' that her non-Indigenous critics mobilised against her. What desires shaped these critics' vision?

How to read 'black' and 'white' in Australian literary and autobiographical texts remains highly contested, as it must. The question of how to deconstruct this troubling and violent pairing, how to speak about its continuing effects without giving it new life, is as urgent now as it ever was. At the time of *Snake Dreaming's* publication, Alexis Wright said: 'Sykes explores the depth of the personal veneer surrounding every Australian who is, like it or not, part of the hidden history of black and white contact in this country. Secrets taken to the grave choke every cemetery in Australia.' Those histories of contact remain secret so that the fantasy of whiteness can be sustained. Recent fiction, including by Wright among others, pushes the fantasies of a knowing white subject to its limit; indeed, to breaking point. These are new moments in the long history of Aboriginal women and men 'talkin' up'.²¹

Notes

- 1 For an account of recent arguments of natural scientists on the genetic constitution of 'race', see Charles Shepherdson, 'Human Diversity and the Sexual Relation', in Christopher Lane (ed.), *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998. In critiquing some discourses of race—specifically those concerned with whiteness and blackness—I use the same vocabulary which I am critiquing: 'black', 'white', the word 'race' itself with its connotations of an essential meaning carried on and in the body. One of the paradoxes and limitations of critique is that it reproduces the very terms it seeks to undo.
- 2 The limits of autobiography as a genre and of the reading practices conventionally associated with it have been critiqued in the context of colonial (textual) relations where Indigenous lifeworlds are understood to exceed the generic expectations. For a discussion which resituates Aboriginal 'autobiography' as testimony, for instance, see Rosanne Kennedy, 'The Narrator as Witness: Testimony, Trauma and Narrative Form in My Place', *Meridian*, vol. 16, no. 2, October 1997, pp. 235-60.
- 3 Roberta Sykes, *Snake Cradle*, first volume of *Snake Dreaming: Autobiography of*

- a Black Woman*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997, p. 8. All subsequent references to this work appear in parentheses in the text.
- 4 See Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Tellin' it Straight: Self-representation within Indigenous Women's Life Writings' in Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2000.
 - 5 See *Snake Cradle*, p. 365; and in the third volume of the autobiography, *Snake Circle*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000, p. 242. Subsequent references to this work appear in parentheses in the text.
 - 6 Judith Butler, 'Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge', in Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge, New York, 1993, pp. 122-38.
 - 7 Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, Routledge, New York, 1995.
 - 8 On the questions of the Irish immigrants and the anti-slavery movement, see William Freehling, 'The Divided South, Democracy's Limitations, and the Causes of the Peculiarly North American Civil War', in Gabor S. Boritt (ed.), *Why the Civil War Came*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996. Also, see David Roedigger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Verso, New York, 1991.
 - 9 See my interview with Alexis Wright in 'Politics of Exposure: An Interview with Alexis Wright', *Meridian*, vol. 17, no. 1, May 1998, pp. 75-80.
 - 10 For a discussion of the foreigner as black in twentieth-century literary discourses in the United States, see Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1995.
 - 11 Luke Slattery, 'Sykes is not Aboriginal says the One Who Knows Best ... Her Mum', *Weekend Australian*, 24-25 October 1998, p. 11.
 - 12 In *Snake Circle*, Sykes herself comments on the *Sunday Sun's* report of 1973, noting: 'Mum's own racial background had not been questioned. As long as the papers described her as "white", she wasn't obliged to clarify and neither did she object', p. 242.
 - 13 By way of a reply to her readers, Roberta Sykes published an essay in the *Australian* in which she spoke of her incomplete knowledge not only of her paternity but of her parentage, and she referred to both her mother and father when speaking of her wish to be known for who she is, not who her parents might have been: 'I hoped my book made clear the fact that knowing so little about my parentage has been of tremendous disadvantage in that I do not have the luxury of being able to make any claim at all in terms of clan or extra-familial relationships, but rather I have always hoped to be judged on the basis of what it is that I have done and do, rather than what my mother or father may have done or who they might have been.' The implications of this went unnoticed in the press, where Sykes continues to be represented as the daughter of a Black American serviceman and a white woman. Roberta Sykes, 'In the Public Interest?', *Age*, 24-25 October 1998, p. 27.
 - 14 Jon Marsh wrote in the *Age*, under the heading 'Aboriginal voices turn on one of their own', claimed: 'Dr Sykes, in her autobiography *Snake Cradle*, says she was raised by a poor, white, single mother who told her various stories, the most consistent being that her father was a black US serviceman'. Jon Marsh, 'Aboriginal Voices Turn on One of Their Own', *Age*, 17 October 1998, p. 3. Kevin Meade, writing for the *Weekend Australian*, argued that: 'Dr Sykes says in *Snake Cradle* that her mother was white and her father, whom she never met, may have been a black US serviceman', a claim he was to repeat a few days later. Kevin Meade, 'Activist had black view of racist world', *Weekend Australian*, 24-5 October 1998, p. 11, and Meade, 'Writer's Snake Claim Speared', *Australian*, 21

HISTORY, POWER, TEXT

- October 1998, p. 5.
- 15 Cassandra Pybus, 'To Harvard and Beyond', *Australian Book Review*, July 2000, p. 6.
- 16 Dianne Dempsey, 'Political, Personal, Powerful', *Age*, Saturday Extra, 8 July 2000, p. 7.
- 17 Anne Summers, 'Under the Skin', *Age*, 10 October 1998.
- 18 See Anne Waldon Neumann's reading of *Snake Cradle* in *Meanjin* in which she speculates on Rae Patterson's 'mixed descent', Anne Waldon Neumann, 'Pity, Terror and Admiration', *Meanjin*, vol. 57, no. 2, 1998, p. 374. Also see the Indigenous writer Sonja Kurtzser's essay in *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 16, no. 34, 2001, pp. 101-11.
- 19 Alexis Wright, 'Secrets and Shame', *Australian Book Review*, November 1997, p. 33.
- 20 In psychoanalytic theory, the formula for disavowal is given as: 'I know very well, but still ...'. For a concise description of this, see Slavoj Žižek, 'How did Marx Invent the Symptom?', in Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London, 1989, p.18.
- 21 Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' up to the White Woman*.

Breasts, Bodies, Art: Central Desert Women's Paintings and the Politics of the Aesthetic Encounter

Jennifer L. Biddle

This essay is concerned with a culturally distinctive relationship between breasts and contemporary art from Central Desert Aboriginal women, specifically, recent works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Kathleen Petyarre and Dorothy Napangardi.¹ Contra to the dominant interpretation of these paintings as representations of 'country'—cartographic 'maps' of the landscape, narratives of Dreaming Ancestors, flora, fauna, species—my argument is that these works bespeak a particular breasted experience and expression, a cultural way of doing and being in the world; what I want to call a *breasted ontology*.

This breasted ontology is literally manifest in the ways in which these paintings are produced and, in turn, experienced by the viewer. That is, these works arguably engender a bodily relation between viewer and image. This viewing relation is not a matter of a viewing subject who, kept at a distance, comprehends an object of ocular focus and vision. Rather, this relation instead is one in which the viewer relinquishes her sense of separateness from the canvas; where a certain coming-into-being in relation to the painting occurs. One does not so much know these works cognitively as lose oneself in them. Through viewing these works, as it were, one becomes vulnerable to their sensibilities in so far as they incite an enmeshment, an enfolding, and encapturing, even in their materiality.

These works are profoundly affective: haptic, kinaesthetic, tactile. They are, in Deleuze's sense, 'sensation' in so far as what is painted is lived — experienced as sensation — in the body of the viewer herself.²

I am not concerned with what these paintings mean but what they do. And what they do, to put it crudely, is to engender a way of being otherwise at threat. As I have explored elsewhere, these paintings have arisen in a context of ongoing assailing effects of colonialism — dispossession, displacement, land rights, native title.³ They can be seen as a certain writing back to what John von Sturmer argues is a historically enshrined institutional incapacity of Europeans to 'recognise' Aboriginal ways of being.⁴ If these works operate to produce ontological affectations, they do so in a climate where there has been a no uncertain failure to hear.

I want to juxtapose here a difference between *hearing* — that is, a cognitive processing of word, meaning, information — with a more bodily and affective experience, in order to illustrate a shift currently taking place in contemporary Central Desert painting. Over the last decade, a number of related changes have occurred in both formal aspects of these works, and their presentation in art galleries and coffee table books. In terms of form, there is an increasing absence of so-called 'icon'-based figures in these works — a form reliant upon a Dreaming story and/or iconic de-codings — to a form which increasingly has no conceivable 'icons' at all. Further, no longer do Dreaming stories — the dominant contextual presentation of these works as they make their way from desert communities to the galleries of London, Paris, New York — accompany these works. A minimal use of titling, often in English-only, is becoming more common. Finally, there is a movement towards what might be called a greater formal abstraction in these paintings, at least in Western aesthetic terms.

These changes indicate an important shift in emphasis. The emphasis currently appears to be less on what is being signified — place, site, Ancestor — than on signification itself. Or to put that slightly differently, these works are performative in the sense we understand from Judith Butler — they

bring into being what they purport to represent.⁵ It is their very materiality which needs analysis. In so far as the Dreaming has an ontological status, it needs to be understood actively; how acts of repetition, materially, constitute it. Repetition is constitutive. Perhaps increasingly, in the kind of colonial and postcolonial contexts in which these paintings take shape, a context necessarily of threat, the imperative to perform these acts is even greater.

What are the intercultural political possibilities engendered by this distinctive movement on behalf of women artists? In order to explore the possible implications of these works, I must further explain what I mean by *breasted ontology*. Put crudely, my argument is that the affectivity of these works is engendered by the materiality of the mark; not *what* these marks mean but *how* these marks are made. I identify below five axioms of so-called *breasted ontology*.

Axiom one: these works derive from marks made on the breast. That is, the breast is a primary site for Ancestral imprintation.

Contemporary women's art in the Central Desert arises from marks first made on the front of the body—the upper chest, arms and breasts—in a women-only ceremonial ritual Dreaming performance that Warlpiri call *Yawulyu* and Anmatyerr/Alyawarr call *Awelye*.

At the most general level, the marks and designs of *Yawulyu* serve to highlight the size, weight, movement and, specifically, the fall of the breast. And it should be noted preliminarily that these marks are both material and visual, haptic and scopic—that is, they are felt as they are made to be seen (and more felt than seen by the women who adorn them).

What is privileged is the fallen breast, and hence, age is here valued. To be a proper *Yawulyu* performer is to be post-child-bearing age. The very aspects of the breast that the bra is explicitly designed to constrain and mask and hence, in our cultural terms, the most taboo aspect of the aged breast—its 'fallen', 'saggy' nature—is here exalted. It is the very capacity of the breast to move, to quiver, to tremble and shake, which is valued.⁶

The larger the surface for painting the better. Warlpiri women equate ceremonial leadership prowess and potency

with large breasted-ness. Size itself is accentuated by the mark. Sometimes the breast appears widened by concentric circles and half-moons; sometimes elongated by vertical lines; all of which end, not incidentally, just at the nipple. The areola for Warlpiri, at least in relation to inscription, is of no consequence. The nipple is never incorporated into the design but rather, serves as its nadir, the point literally which the inscription works to accentuate. And, as I return to below, the nipple is also, of course, the literal site of feeding, of fecundity.

Not only the ochre designs but also the dance of *Yawulyu* itself is performed precisely to emphasise this weight and fall of the breast. A certain slow speed jump forward is made where the feet don't actually leave the ground and yet manage to slowly, measurably, compel the dancer forward, undulating the breast vertically each time — far more the point it seems than any actual distance covered. The breast rises, falls, slaps, rhythmically against the body with a thwarted start and stop so that the breast moves, vibrates and stills again, a tremulousness produced of both flesh and design.

This rhythmic, repetitive, rocking-like movement arguably mimetically repeats the suck-suck-pause pattern of the infants' feed, marked by lulls and waits and pulse as much as by flow. The breast is compelled downward towards a no-longer static or inert ground — country — that simply provides a platform for the dancing. But this is ground — country — which is enlivened by the pounding of the dancer's feet, the slapping of the breasts in rhythm with the singers' voices and the swirling of the dust engendered, which appears as almost an active partner to the dancers, moving, rising up to meet the breast in 'fall', like the infant, pulling for a feed.

Axiom two: the breast marks as it makes and makes as it marks.

It is not only that the breast is itself inscribed but that the breast itself inscribes. Here the breast is figured as a writing instrument which makes marks as felt as they are seen, as material as they are visual.

What we see depicted in these paintings is not a breast of 'natural' fecundity. Rather, this is a breast represented as always already-marked, worked by exacting and precise techniques of ritualised inscription and performance. In this

sense, the breast represented is neither naked (Walpiri have no term for naked or bare breast) nor is it, strictly speaking, ‘human’.

In the early collections of acrylic paintings produced by Warlpiri women at Lajamanu, and Anmatyerr/Alyawarr women at Utopia, breasts are the dominant motif.⁷ What we see in these early works from Utopia, particularly, is the breasts themselves. Breasts in pairs, single or double, always painted up, always, it seems to me, mid-dance, for it is their procreative potency which is here represented. Disembodied from the bodies of the dancer, these painted-up breasts are both foreground and background, at once floating and fixed. The outline of their shape disappears in contrast to the very ‘stuff’ of the dots, lines and marks they engender. For these are fecund breasts; breasts that drip, seep, weep. These breast mark and make. These are breasts which are productive and reproductive in a far more active way than western notions of ‘lactation’ suggest.

What makes painted-up breasts generative is that they repeat an initial Ancestral imprintation of country. How marks are put and re-put on breasts, and in turn, on canvas, engenders efficacy in the same material terms initial Ancestral potency was engendered.

Ancestors first roamed an unmade and unmarked landscape as they traversed the country, fighting, defecating, hunting, as people do today, and transforming their so called ‘subjective’ and profoundly corporeal experiences and expressions, as Nancy Munn first called them — blood, semen, breast milk, bones, piss — into the ‘objective’ geographical features of the landscape during the time of what Warlpiri call *Jukurrrpa* — the Dreaming.⁸ Even if disengaged from the body of Ancestors, these sites, places, and marks continue to hold precise affiliations and identifications, as well as powerful and potentially dangerous forces. Hence, the constitutive power and effect associated with putting these marks by contemporary Warlpiri — rejuvenating country or species; controlling fertility; causing illness and healing; regulating social relations and relatedness are some of these effects.

Warlpiri call these marks *kuruwarri* — a complex term meaning Ancestral presence, essence, trace and birthmark

and/or freckle. *Kuruwarri* are thus both the marks and traces left in country as it was made and the marks that people now put on ground, skin, canvas — not as representations of country but as country. Arguably, what Dreaming Ancestors themselves discovered as they marked, made, imprinted the landscape, is exactly what is repeated by contemporary painters. What these paintings demonstrate is a procedural enactment of how it is that canvas, country, skin are knowable — mark-able, make-able, as the same stuff.

Kuruwarri also means ‘birthmark, freckle’ — a much overlooked aspect of the meaning of these marks. The emphasis on country, the concomitant interpretation of acrylic paintings as ‘maps of country’ has resulted in an understanding of the only possible referent, the over-determined signified, of *kuruwarri* signs being the literal cartographic country itself. No doubt, this results from the protracted and equally over-determined history of Warlpiri-European relations, that is, the result of ongoing assailing effects of land rights, royalty negotiations, native title. And it is not insignificant that acrylic paintings have been submitted in evidence in land hearings. Warlpiri women regularly performed *Yawulyu* at early hearings and, effectively, had the way in which the Land Rights Act was interpreted changed, to have maternally linked kin included in notions of primary ‘owner’, as Hamilton has argued.⁹

What gets overlooked in this context however is that *kuruwarri* are embodied traces and imprints. Embodied originally by Ancestors — these marks have visceral effects because they are visceral remains. In turn, they provide a necessary material intercorporeal means for linking Ancestral bodies to human bodies in crucial ways. It is not only in country itself that Ancestral visceral presence resides but these presences (located in certain sites and affiliated with certain species) can enter women’s wombs, cause conception and, in turn, leave birthmark, freckles and other identifying traits of specific kinds of subjectivity upon individuated Warlpiri.¹⁰ This is why the term *kuruwarri* also refers to corporeal imprintation. The fleshly traces of birthmarks and freckles are indicative of how ‘skin’ is literally, materially, the same ‘substance’ as country, in that it is equally a medium in which Ancestral traces reside.

Cicatrices—ritual scarifications—provide a literal exemplification. Historically, these ridges, lines and gullies were made by incising the skin and the incisions were then packed with site-specific country for the permanent housing of country in the flesh.

This left a permanent mark for both sight and touch—a trace at once reminder and remainder—an affective material impregnation of person with country. According to Christine Watson, Kukatja people liken cicatrices to the ridges made in sand drawing.¹¹ The cutting of the head and other forms of scarification in mourning and bereavement ceremonies and, of course, circumcision and sub-incision ceremonies, indicate the degree to which the somatic surface of the body is, like country itself, understood and treated as a text for Ancestral imprintation. Warlpiri (also) call cicatrices *kuruwarri*.

This fleshly viscerally imprintable texture of country literally likened to skin is recreated each and every time *kuruwarri* is put, through three constitutive processes:

First, the body and the canvas are covered, coated, in totality. In *Yawulyu* (women's ceremonial Dreaming ritual) the breasts and upper shoulders are first rubbed, coated with oil, emu fat if it is available or, more likely, cooking oil, baby oil or butter.

Each and every act of inscription proceeds, as it were, from scratch. The activities of Ancestors who initially roamed an unmarked, unmade landscape are here literally recreated by the conditions of contemporary inscription. *Jukurrpa*—the Dreaming—is not something which happened once and for all in some absolute past but is repeated, recreated, remade continuously, indeed, one could argue that the condition of *Jukurrpa*—its constitutive repeatable form—is in fact structured by, to borrow Derrida's framework, iterability.¹²

'Ground' itself is similarly treated. Prior to ceremonies, not only are stones and sticks which might hurt feet carefully removed but the site is brushed, raked, smoothed over, bulldozed even, if the event is a large one; gestures that simultaneously erase and renew.

Canvas is treated in the same manner. Despite already offering what 'we' might think of as a 'blank' surface, canvases are first coated in entirety with one or more (in the case of

Kathleen Petyarre) background ‘colour’ prior to any other paint application. This ‘background’ preparation of the canvas makes the productivity of the mark—Ancestral imprintation—possible.

Warlpiri use a particular word for this process: *maparni*. *The Warlpiri Dictionary* defines *maparni*: ‘to anoint [with oil (JARA)], paint, grease (with fat/oil), smear, rub on, rub with’.¹³ Through *maparni*; through anointing, a simultaneous erasure and renewal—a transformation of the profane into the sacred—occurs and thus a site is rendered receptive to the inscription of *kuruwarri*.

Second, marks are made in, not on, the surface. Warlpiri styluses literally drag the mark behind them, the way a finger or stick is dragged through the dirt and leaves a trace in its wake. In *Yawulyu*, a stick wrapped repeatedly with thread is used; in acrylic painting, a paintbrush, but more likely the finger will be used to ‘put’ the *kuruwarri*. There is a friction between stylus and surface. Something happens *between* implement and surface.

In other words, the *kuruwarri* sign is not only understood as an imprintational trace but it is literally produced as one. These are not so much visual or aesthetic signs as they are literal marks. And I think here of Derrida and other scholars’ emphasis on the gramme, the graph, the glyph, the appreciation of writing *as inscription*—an appreciation which allows me to focus on writing as a material phenomenology; not that which refers, defers, to speech, sound or word, but rather as a force itself with effects.¹⁴

Third, the mark is made to move: to quiver, to shake, shimmer. The sense of *kuruwarri* as material imprintation is further evinced in how the *kuruwarri* are themselves inscribed prior to any other marking. *Kuruwarri* signs are put and re-put. Ochre will be dragged and re-dragged on breast; paint will be applied, thick and dark on canvas once, twice, again. A physical frisson as stylus meets flesh again and again—infant mouth to breast-like, it is above else the productivity of the meeting between the two that matters and is literally manifest, in the making of the mark.

This imprinting of flesh will literally continue in the ensuing ‘outlining’ of the *kuruwarri*. The impression is

almost that *kuruwarri* are the spaces left over from tracing. For in *Yawulyu*, the red ochre of the *kuruwarri* mixes with oiled colour of the skin such that what one ‘sees’ is not the *kuruwarri* so much as the white ochre traces. The very shape of the *kuruwarri*—its apprehension as a figure—is manifest only in, through and by the trace which surrounds it. Literally analogous to the signs of Ancestral presence in the landscape, the trace is the determinative, indeed, the only form through which such manifestations of presence are ‘seen’.

What is evinced here, it seems to me, is the ‘staging of an appearance-as-disappearance’, to borrow a phrase from Roland Barthes.¹⁵ For what is most crucial—the virtual signs of Ancestral presence—disappear as they appear only in repetition. At a crude level, this seems to me to augment the very way in which country itself is only known in and through the repetitions—the marks, rituals, songs, stories—that Warlpiri tell of it, rendering a landscape, a place as known through such cultural ‘tellings’.

But this ‘appearance-as-disappearance’ manifests in terms more compelling yet. For there is an imperative in this movement, in this vacillating, oscillating, at once appearing and disappearing *kuruwarri*. This doubling 3-D effect, this vibrancy, this tremulousness of the text, is perhaps the most remarked-upon characteristic of Central Desert Painting. The seemingly ‘alive’ nature of the canvases creates, as Barbara Glowczewski has put it, ‘a movement which ... invites us to penetrate the texture of the canvas’.¹⁶ The efficacy of *kuruwarri* marks depends precisely upon this ebullient potentiality; a simultaneous animating of both breast and country. The simultaneous animation of both mother and infant’s body is crucial to successful breastfeeding—dependent as the breastfeeding relation is on this mutual mingling of fluid and flesh, that enlivens both mother and child and drives both to continue this pursuit of need and nourishment, pleasure and desire.

Warlpiri call this vibrancy, this 3-D effect, ‘shimmering’, according to Francoise Dussart.¹⁷ It is important to stress this potency is not simply available in these *kuruwarri* signs (as has been previously interpreted), they must be rendered in precise ways to become efficacious, to become performative,

in and through the kind of work I've described here. The 'latent law' of *Jukurrpa*, of the Dreaming, as Michael Jackson has put it, must be 'reanimated' to be effective.¹⁸ As with the Law of lactation — supply equals demand — so too does country require the labour of human efficacy to ensure its fecundity.

In *Yawulyu*, the aim is to outline the design until the background becomes saturated, so that the *kuruwarri*, the Ancestral force, enters the body and 'feeds' the woman. The rhythmic, repetitious marking and re-marking literally press the *kuruwarri* mark in. Christine Watson describes Kukatja sand drawing as causing physical vibrations to the ground which radiate with Ancestral potency.¹⁹ Arguably, the penetrative imprinting 'dots' in Desert acrylic painting, and in Petyarre's work particularly, enact a similar effect.

What is 'inside' is brought 'out'. Penetration effects emergence — the movement is bi-directional — and it is this that creates the quivering, the shimmering, the nervous-liveliness of texture.

What specifically is repeated is the movement from what Warlpiri call *kanunju* (what is secret, 'underneath' or 'below' — where Ancestors now reside having once emerged to walk the landscape and where, in most cases, they have returned to rest) to what is *kankarlu* (what is in the world as it is seen and known 'above' and in the 'public' domain). In and through the performance of a given *Yawulyu*, Ancestral presence manifests itself: it is brought *kankarlu*, above and into the present.²⁰

In short, a certain embodied expression of Ancestral presence is effected: in *Yawulyu*, it is through the productivity of the breast that one 'becomes' ancestor, 'becomes' country. The surface of the body, somatically rendered the same as the surface of the country, allows for this intercorporeal exchange, this inter-changeability by making the two *almost* identical. This intercorporeality makes for what Warlpiri describe when witnessing a particularly good *Yawulyu*: they don't say, for example, that Naparrurla is performing or enacting a particularly convincing *Ngurlu* or *Kurlurkuku Jukurrpa* (Mulga Seed and/or White Dove Dreaming) — as we might speak of an actor's successful 'portrayal' or 'depiction' — but indeed, *Yapa* say that she really is 'that one now, that *kurlurkuku*, that White Dove'. And for the same reasons, *Yapa* don't say of a

painting—‘gee, that really “captures” the Dreaming well’, or ‘fantastic “execution”’, ‘great representation of Ngurlu, Ngapa, Yankirri’—they say ‘*Jukurrpa nyarnini, pijirrdi nyarnin jukurrpa*’—Dreaming really, strong, true, Dreaming.

The rendering of the breast commensurate with country is not a one-way process. The aim of both *Yawulyu* and acrylic painting is the care of country—as part of a larger series of what have been described as generalised ‘increase’ ceremonies in which the livening-up of country—rejuvenating, re-vitalising, ‘feeding’ certain places, species and persons accordingly—occurs.²¹ This rejuvenating potential of ceremony is perhaps particularly crucial in a context where country is no longer literally inhabited; where acrylic painting, *Yawulyu* and/or other ritual performances, constitute the only kind of ‘care’. Re-creation of country in the contemporary context includes an essential pedagogic function: the teaching about country which is no longer inhabited to children who have no other access to country outside these manifest presentations of it.²²

We might think of this in terms of *yapa* living an already intercorporeal, an already syncretic, open relationship to and with Ancestral bodies in their varying manifestations.

If there is no body as such, but only ways of being bodily in culturally and situationally specific terms, then ‘becoming’ country becomes thinkable in a very literal sense.²³ If *yapa* ‘become in relation to country’ (and I think here of both senses of ‘becoming’, as ‘coming into being’ and as ‘suit, befit’) it is because their own bodies are not produced as bounded, bordered, discrete. If one can speak, in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, of a cultural ‘corporeal schema’²⁴—what Rosalyn Diprose defines as a ‘set of habits, gestures and conducts formed over time in relation to other bodies’²⁵—one would have to argue that for *yapa*, this schema is formed, necessarily, in relation to Ancestral bodies and for women, honed and attenuated through the breast. What makes up, what makes for, the potentiality of such a corporeality imbibes, embraces, opens out to, and equally introjects Ancestral habits, sentiments, sensibilities.

Axiom three: the breast mark is a relation; the mark is a relation to. In the case of these contemporary works, the tremulousness, the animation of the text — the very frisson between mark and surface, depth and background, presence and absence — becomes itself the central motif. The ‘inter’ — what links the human to the Ancestral, what links the mouth of the feeding child to the breast — and the material conjoining of subjects; in other words, attachment.

By a notion of attachment as mark, I mean to suggest two things. First, that these marks, in a technical semiological sense, are indexical as opposed to the more traditional interpretation of them as iconic. Second, I mean a mark dependent upon a relationship in which differentiation is always troubled; in which absolute differentiation is not secured or guaranteed. The difference between ‘surface’ and ‘mark’; absence and presence; human body and ancestral are not fixed or final. As we know from Derrida, such differences remain indebted to and dependent upon their so-called ‘other’; the debt to and detour via something else which he claims is necessary for all signification.²⁶ The very frisson of tension, texture, textuality is the binding relation necessary for the differentiation we call the mark (writing).

In the case of the Warlpiri breast, the ambiguity of the debt — the ongoing relation to another for any claim to identity, meaning — is paramount. The literal incapacity to feed oneself, or to breastfeed alone, is here enacted by the very conditions of inscription. *Yawulyu* inscription is always done by another. It would in fact be physically impossible to self-inscribe, at least in terms of ensuring aesthetic integrity. Moreover, the determinative relation for breast-painting up is *kurdungurlu* to *kirda*, that is, matrilineally related so-called *kurdungurlu* or ‘managers’ of the particular Dreaming paint so-called *kirda* or ‘owners’ of the design. Thus, the very manifestation of Ancestral-becoming is shared across, made relational literally, between *kirda* and *kurdungurlu*, ‘managers’ and ‘owners’ of the design. This relation ensues in the dance performance, where the manager ‘oversees’ and ‘bosses’ the owners; not a happy compatibility but a tension-filled (at least enacted) struggle, which can escalate. Not unlike the infant’s ongoing relation to the mother, it is the battle for differentiation in the

face of dependency that is critical.

What I want to evoke here is not so much the primary object relation of psychoanalysis but a particular phenomenological reading of attachment in which attachment retains its productivity. The carnal taking-in of the breast to feed and to be fed begins a lifelong and ambiguous intercorporeal relation to others. The literal imbibition of nipple, skin—the physical ‘latch on’, mouth to breast, the ‘blind recognition’ of empathetic bonding, shared intentions, synchronous movement, mirror imaging; the pleasures, intentions, and sentiments of the mother’s body—will mark and make the subject socially and culturally subject to. She will remain throughout her life indebted to, defined by and in *relation to* the bodies of others—and specifically here, the materiality of country as breast, country as body.

What, after all, does breastfeeding teach the infant, according to Winnicott, but about the very aliveness of the mother?²⁷ For the first object is not an object at all but another body; as Merleau-Ponty puts it, ‘the very first of all cultural objects, and the one by which all the rest exist, is the body of the other person as the vehicle of a form of behavior’.²⁸

Axiom four: it is country who is fed; it is country which feeds (the ethnographic reading).

There are no infants figured in paintings from the Central and Western Desert. Full stop. The omnipotent and omnipresent ‘infant’ here is country itself. Country is writ even larger because it is never in and of itself represented as or rather, it is always represented as it is materially made and manifest, providing the background ‘surface’—skin, country, canvas—readied, hungry, primed for the mark.

Kathleen Petyarre’s *Untitled* (1990) is a doubled, ambiguous figure: both feeder and fed; ancestor and human; mother and monster. Here, arguably, the impossible imperative of the breastfeeding relation is evident. This is no maternal gift or sacrificing mother, the stakes here are clear. This is a difficult and dangerous relationship, all consuming, auto-cannibalistic, self-destructive even. A troubled and treacherous attachment: engorgement, the milk fever, mastitis; the voracious infant that feeds feeds feeds and will not settle; the terror and

likelihood of an all-consuming relation; the law of lactation and its impossible demand. The excessive, unrelenting task of what the mother has been asked to carry has become the explicit theme (and arguably, what all these paintings are about).

This is not Melanie Klein's (cum-Bettleheim's) 'good enough' mother. This instead is the 'terrifying mother'. Klein describes her. It is actually an introjection of the child's perceived threat of the mother's all-consuming desire.²⁹ Significantly, Klein argues, the child's dread of the so-called terrifying mother is intensified when the child cannot see the mother. In her account, the presence of the real, loving mother diminishes the introjected dread of the terrifying mother.³⁰

To translate: Country is starving without care. Country is figured as infant. Country can only remain fertile, productive if in fact it is looked after, tended to, cared for, fed, properly. And that means work. Ritual, ceremony, what Warlpiri call in English 'business', is a labour of lifelong attachment. Ancestors are dependent upon humans for the making and keeping of their viscera — species, flora, fauna, social relations and relatedness — animated, enlivened, activated, in a word, attached — to lived sentiments and sensibilities.

Not only is country replete with marks and meaning and potencies but these forces are highly ambivalent and potentially dangerous if not tended to in the right way by the right people. The very potencies which stop people from travelling outside their own inhabited country, that make people fearful about entering other people's country; that make people increasingly anxious and frightened of their so-called 'own' country if it has not been inhabited for a long time, are particularly likely in the contemporary era, due to displacement, resettlement, community life.

Not occupying country — not 'seeing' it in Klein's sense — increases anxiety. Not seeing country — not being able to 'look after' country — in the contemporary context is particularly likely, particularly dangerous, particularly anxiety-invoking. The so-called contemporary Aboriginal condition is defined by the violent separation of person from country. The affective dimensions linger, fester and threaten. In this sense, contemporary artworks by women can be seen as both compensatory

and reparative; a certain attempt to ward off as it seeks to soothe, mother's hands-like, what is an irreparable wound.

Axiom five: to view these works is to participate in their workings. Arguably, all of these contemporary works by women bespeak a specifically female take on the Dreaming, a culturally distinctive intimacy of breasted relation and relatedness. The somatic syncretism of mother and infant is here evidenced: indebted and dependent, with marks so fine as to be undifferentiated from background; what is foreground, what is background, vacillates and shifts again. Radiant vibrancy, pure animation: it is movement itself which emerges as signified. An animated tremulousness, the quivering enlivening design on breast as it dances, the fierce suck of the infant, the pull and rush of the let down, milk as it seeps and weeps, aqueous movement that surges and flows without definite borders but not without pattern, a carving, incising patina. Simultaneously visible and yet rendered invisible, the dots have the effect of making invisible the operation that made them possible: the incapacity to differentiate self and other; a two-way interaction between the tangible and the visible whereby reversibility is enabled. The saturation of the canvas, the saturation of feeling during the feed, the global and multiple pleasures which proliferate, are seemingly only artificially stopped — contained — by the edge of the canvas. This is fecundity in its most literal sense, engorged and dripping, life source, as country is to human and as human marking — making — is to country.

The effect is more ontological than ocular. The movement insists that we enter the surface of the canvas; to move, like the mark, the Ancestor itself, *kanunju* and *kankurulu*, down into and to emerge out of again. This is not a geography or a cartography of the breast. My analysis here is explicitly against the dominant idea of these works as 'maps' of country. The vital ingredient necessary in classic Western cartography — perspective, that is, fixed objects against an equally fixed background plane — is here eschewed. There is no where, no way, to position ourselves, as spectators, outside this experience and expression. Can the infant 'see' the breast? Or the mother the infant as it feeds?

If there is perspective at all here it is vertical rather than horizontal—a three-dimension texture that ripples and undulates. The surface tissue of the canvas re-signs and re-assigns and disappears altogether. There is no focal point for these paintings, or if there is (as in some of Petyarre's) it is vortex-like in its draw, pull and force. That the entire canvas is covered in this totalising experience and expression means that there is no interference, no halting of one's encapturing within the rhythmic mesmerising repetition of line and movement.

The effect is to merge subject with matter—a merging not only of Ancestral body with country, not only Ancestor 'skin' with 'surface' of canvas, but with the body, the skin, of the viewing subject. These works captivate literally. Our bounded bodies, like that of the Ancestors, dissipate. In viewing these paintings, it is impossible not to become immersed in the fleshly enfoldings of their animation. A certain dissolution of the self occurs. A movement, a becoming, which cannot be grasped as knowledge or cognitive fact but can profoundly be witnessed³¹—indeed, must be witnessed in these and only these terms, for there is an exigency in this work that cannot be ignored.

A chiasmic meeting, in Merleau-Ponty's sense occurs; a mutually constitutive relationship between human and so-called non-human, between Warlpiri/Anmatyerr/Alyawarr and Ancestor, between canvas and mark, viewer and viewed.³² A chiasmic reversibility in a fleshly sociability where canvas (skin, country) becomes the medium for intercultural and intercorporeal exchange, what Laura Marks might called 'haptic visuality' whereby 'the eyes themselves function like organs of touch.'³³ There is a metamorphosis in the impact of this embrace of the aesthetic. An evocation of the proximity of mother and child; to see is to touch and be touched. This reversibility both describes and enacts an ongoing interaction between the flesh of the body, the flesh of others and the flesh of this cultural world.

As I have described elsewhere there is no small gift on offer here.³⁴ What is explicitly on offer is our participation in this ongoing responsibility to make, to remake, country; an invitation to partake in a denial of the differentiation of body

from canvas, country from Ancestral body, viewing subject from painting subject, *Kardiya* from *Yapa*, Whitefella from Black. There is an imperative to make the body of the viewing subject enlivened through the very act of viewing these works in precisely the same terms in which Ancestors first enlivened country with their own viscera, and in turn, which Warlpiri use to enliven their own bodies, country, canvas; an animation of the body that is country and the animation of a body which is made country. The demand here is to witness a life world in these and only these terms; an imperative that ‘we’ as viewers equally experience a world made in and through the act of our viewing. To be charged literally with fecundity; to be held, child to breast, relationally — the crucial incarnate participant in a fleshly animation of an embodied embrace.

There is perhaps also a certain holding at abeyance evident here, a ‘don’t get too close’ movement, more noticeable perhaps in the work of Dorothy Napangardi — to be held by, to be clasped firmly; not however to crush. An increasing disassociation, an acknowledgement perhaps even, black and white literally as Napangardi’s is, of the ultimate futility, of the very possibility — the radical political embrace — these works engender.

This is an enactment — at once expression and experience — that is anything but language dependent. This is instead a profoundly wordless occasion. This is an occasion that does not require translation, transcription, white linguists’ white pages. In refusing to position Warlpiri, Anmatyerr/ Alyawarr as subservient to English — the cathectic likelihood of misunderstanding, misspellings, misunderstandings is disallowed. In the contemporary move to use minimal titling, and English-only titling, there is, in fact, no need to speak, to explain, at all. In not opting for the vernacular, there is a profound protection of it in pushing the potential it always already affords — the potential of a distinctive cultural writing that requires no translation at all.

The very kernel of the intercultural encounter is found — not as understanding another way of life but as inducing a reorienting of a bodily imperative that feels difference as a ‘felt reality of relation’ in Brian Massumi’s terms.³⁵ In entering the painting — in being imprinted by it — we experience its relation

effects; the condition of its emergence, its animational fecundity, corresponds to our animation by it.

To view these paintings is to enter the ambiguity of a specific relation to—a marking and making which requires our participation. It is the spectators' witness which is required to complete, to animate, this incarnate productivity. The breast's fecundity relies on the demand of the child to feed; just as country relies on the labour and witness of the living to ensure it remains not only benevolently oriented to the human but productive in relation to it.

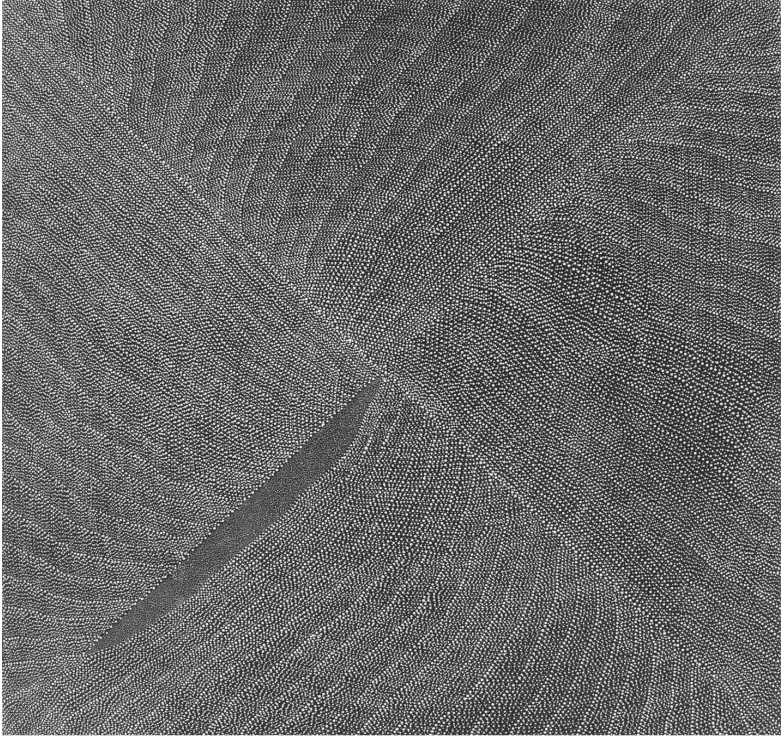
It is however a particular witness we are being asked of here. Fred Myers has defined the Dreaming in the Central Desert context as 'a sensory form to be experienced'. In his account, the Dreaming 'is a manifestation of it but not an account of what it is.'³⁶ In this sense, contemporary art positions Whitefellas to witness precisely a 'sensory manifestation that is not an account'. No longer are sacred sites, named Ancestors, animal tracks and prints depicted in contemporary painting. No longer do accompanying Dreaming stories 'tell' us narratives or provide information on country, skin group or artist. What is being asked here is not a case of recognition, nor is it a claim for land rights—what von Sturmer claims Aborigines have been demanding for over two hundred years and precisely what has, and is being, denied by the state.³⁷ What we are being asked to witness is a cultural way of being, a writing proper, that cannot be spoken back to, that cannot be better written by others. Sacred text as it is written, not what is writ, this is a bodily imperative that relies on our response as a no uncertain demand for responsibility.

Notes

- 1 This essay draws on fieldwork with Lajamanu Warlpiri supported by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (AIATSIS); the Department of Anthropology, Sydney University and the Department of Anthropology, Macquarie University. I am grateful to Kathleen Petyarre and Penny Hoile of Gallery Australis for permission to reproduce the works included here and to Christopher Hodges, Utopia Art Gallery, for his help in locating Kathleen Petyarre's untitled woodcut.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W Smith, Continuum, London and New York, 2003 (1981).

- 3 Jennifer L. Biddle, 'Country, Skin, Canvas: The Intercorporeal Art of Kathleen Petyarre', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2003, pp. 61-76; 'Writing Without Ink', in Alison Lee and Cate Poynton (eds), *Culture and Text*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000, pp. 170-87; 'Inscribing Identity: Skin as Country in the Central Desert', in Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (eds), *Thinking Through the Skin*, Routledge, London and New York, 2001, pp. 177-93.
- 4 John von Sturmer, 'R Stands For ... An Extract from a Mabo Diary', *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, 1995, pp. 101-16.
- 5 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge, New York, 1997, and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge, New York, 1993.
- 6 It isn't arbitrary that younger women are recalcitrant to perform Yawulyu in public or, if they do so, prefer wearing a bra to dance, putting the bra back on after they are painted up in an act which both conceals the so-called 'naked' breast and simultaneously constrains its movement. Shame, I have explored in my work, is a dominant Warlpiri experience and expression, one particularly likely to be incited by colonial contexts, attitudes, sentiments. The preference for many younger women, and even some older women, to adorn a bra in Yawulyu is, arguably, indicative of both the degree to which the bra has become part of the 'habitus' of contemporary bodies and, in turn, the degree of kurnta or shame potentially engendered by not wearing one publicly. See Jennifer L. Biddle, 'Shame', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 12, no. 26, 1997, pp. 227-40.
- 7 For Lajamanu Warlpiri see Judith Ryan, *Paint Up Big: Warlpiri Women's Art of Lajamanu*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1990, and for Utopia see *Utopia Body Paint: Australian Aboriginal Art*, Exhibition Catalogue, Austral Gallery, St Louis, ND.
- 8 Nancy Munn, 'The Transformation of Subjects into Objects in Walbiri and Pitjantjatjara Myth', in Ronald M Berndt (ed.) *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology*, University of Western Australian Press, Perth, 1971.
- 9 Annette Hamilton, 'Kinship and Gender', in Sylvia Kleinert and Margo O'Neil (eds), *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000, pp. 60-75.
- 10 Mervin J. Meggitt, *Desert People: A Study of the Walbiri Aborigines of Central Australia*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1962, pp. 270-80.
- 11 Christine Watson, 'Touching the Land: Towards an Aesthetic of Balgo Contemporary Painting', in H. Morphy and M. Smith-Bowles (eds), *From the Land: Dialogues with the Kluge-Ruhe Collection of Aboriginal Art*, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1999.
- 12 Jacques Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context', in *Derrida, Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1990.
- 13 Warlpiri Lexicography Group, Warlpiri-English Dictionaries, Centre for Cognitive Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, 1986, 'Verbs', p. 24.
- 14 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976, and Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context', particularly. Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo (eds), 'Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies', in *Mesoamerica and the Andes*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1994.
- 15 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. R Miller, Hill and Wang, New York, 1975, p. 10.
- 16 Barbara Glowczewski, *Yapa: Peintres Aborigènes de Balgo et Lajamanu*, Baudoin Lebon, Paris, 1991, p. 121.

- 17 Francois Dussart, 'A Body Painting in Translation', in Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy (eds), *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1997.
- 18 Michael Jackson, *Minima Ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998, p. 132.
- 19 Watson.
- 20 As argued by Glowczewski, p. 121.
- 21 Nicolas Peterson, *Change and the Aboriginal: A Traditional Life, A Conservative History*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1970.
- 22 See for example Warlukurlangu Artists, *Kuruwar: Yuendumu Doors*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1987.
- 23 As is argued by scholars such as Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*, Routledge, New York, 1999; Rosalyn Diprose, *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment, and Sexual Difference*, Routledge, New York, 1994, and Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2002; Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1994.
- 24 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Child's Relations with Others', in J Edie (ed.), *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, and Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1964.
- 25 Diprose, *The Bodies of Women*, p. 105.
- 26 Jacques Derrida, 'Difference', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982.
- 27 Donald W. Winnicott, *Psychoanalytic Explorations*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1989.
- 28 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, Routledge and the Humanities Press, London and New Jersey, 1989, p. 348.
- 29 Melanie Klein, *The Selected Melanie Klein*, Juliet Mitchell, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1986.ed.
- 30 Klein, p. 92.
- 31 By witness, I mean the culturally specific and ontological sense that Basil Sansom evokes in the Aboriginal context, that is, the determinative reliance on the other's presence and acknowledgment—the other's 'witness'—to constitute an event as happening, as meaningful, as mattering. See Basil Sansom, *The Camp at Wallaby Cross: Aboriginal Fringe-Dwellers in Darwin*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1980.
- 32 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Intertwining: The Chiasm', in *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1968, pp. 130-55.
- 33 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2000, p. 2. Marks is here characterising 'intercultural' cinema as marked by 'haptic visuality' but her analysis of the way in which this cinema of the displaced and diasporic operates in terms of inciting corporeal memories and history because of a necessarily traumatic (postcolonial) relationship to memory and history, can well be extended to the work of Petyarre.
- 34 Biddle, 'Country, Skin, Canvas'.
- 35 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2002.
- 36 Fred Myers, 'Ontologies of the Image and Economies of Exchange', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 31, no. 7, 2004, pp. 1-16.
- 37 von Sturmer.



- 1 Kathleen Petyarre
Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming (After Sandstorm), 1998
Synthetic polymer on Belgian linen 122 x 122 cm
Private collection
Courtesy of Kathleen Petyarre and Penny Hoile, Gallerie Australis, Adelaide



- 2 Kathleen Petyarre
Untitled, 2004
Line drawing
Photograph courtesy of Christine Nicholls
Image courtesy of Kathleen Petyarre and Penny Hoile, Gallerie Australis,
Adelaide



- 3 Kathleen Petyarre
Untitled, 2004
Line drawing
Photograph courtesy of Christine Nicholls
Image courtesy of Kathleen Petyarre and Penny Hoile, Gallerie Australis,
Adelaide



- 4 Kathleen Petyarre
Untitled, 1990 (from Utopia print series)
Wood cut 45 x 30 cm
Photography courtesy Christopher Hodges, Utopia Arts, Sydney
Image courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales
Courtesy of Kathleen Petyarre and Penny Hoile, Gallerie Australis,
Adelaide

'Old Lady Mob': Interview

Christine Nicholls and Kathleen Petyarre

Kathleen (born Kweyetemp) Petyarre, one of Australia's foremost living Indigenous artists, was born between 1931 and 1940 on her family's vast desert estate, Atnangker, located almost three hundred kilometres north east of Alice Springs in arid, spinifex country. Petyarre, an Eastern Anmatyerr woman, saw a white man for the first time when she was around eight or nine years old. Hiding behind a group of small bushes, Petyarre and her siblings reported their 'discovery' of the strangely coloured man to their father, Kngwarreye, who tentatively approached the man, generously offering him life-giving water and delicious bush food.

Since that fateful day, Kathleen Petyarre has been fascinated by the machinations of white people and their society. When adult educator Jenny Green arrived at Utopia in the late 1970s, Petyarre eagerly joined in batik classes. Kathleen Petyarre has gone on to achieve considerable national and international celebrity as a visual artist.

Christine Nicholls spoke with Kathleen Petyarre in September 2004, when she met Kathleen with her sisters Myrtle and Violet, to talk about new work that was exhibited as part of the 'Body Painting Series', at the Coo-ee Gallery, Sydney, opening on 11 November 2004, in an exhibition titled 'Arnkerrth: Kathleen Petyarre, Abie Loy'. Christine spoke again with Kathleen in December 2004 (with Penny Hoile of Gallerie Australis, which represents Kathleen) specifically for the 2004 special issue of *Cultural Studies Review* on Indigenous art. Kathleen was asked about aspects of her work discussed at the symposium 'Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming' held at the University of Tasmania in March 2003, to which she had been invited but had been unable to attend.

22 September 2004

Christine Nicholls: Kathleen, what can you tell me about your new body of work, about these new paintings?

Kathleen Petyarre: These paintings are our *Arnkerrth* (Mountain Devil Lizard) body painting from the old days, when we would paint up our bodies and dance — they are paintings about our body designs from those old days. We used yellow and white ochre. We put them on our skin, on top of red ochre body paint. We also had black. We used little sticks — *tyepal* — to paint that ochre on our bodies.

Christine Nicholls: What makes you want to paint these works?

Kathleen Petyarre: I've been thinking a lot about those old days and how we used to put that body paint on ourselves. I've been thinking back a lot, how we don't do it now. The last time we really did this body painting and dancing and singing was when we went to Sydney long time ago for a land rights meeting: all the Petyarre mob — Myrtle, Gloria, me — Auntie Emily Kngwarreye, Rosie Kngwarreye, Lena Skinner and all the Pitjantjatjara and other mob.

Christine Nicholls: Are you able to say any more about the ceremonies that inspired these paintings?

Kathleen Petyarre: This body painting (that is, in Kathleen's recent work) is for women-only ceremony. It's painted on our stomachs and thighs like an apron — in those days (we wore) no pants on our back or front side, just naked, naked backsides. (Laughing) Naked! There's (a) string belt, and underneath was the ochre paint. The ochre paint goes half way up (our bodies) — from knees up to waist. We wore hairstring belts around our middles, with strings hanging down over black, white and mainly yellow ochre paint underneath. This is really Old Law for Anmatyerr dancing ladies, not for men.

Auntie Emily Kngwarreye and my big sister Myrtle gave this ceremony and body painting to the rest of us.

Christine Nicholls: Were all age groups, young girls and older women, involved in these ceremonies?

Kathleen Petyarre: This one is for grown-up women, not for little kids or little girls. We don't do it now, any more. We put on *Arnkerrth* (Mountain Devil) paint designs— my big sister Myrtle is the boss for that. It's part of the *awelye* ceremonies— not love ceremony, that's different one. It's *Arnkerrth* (Mountain Devil) Dreaming body paint and dance ceremony, only for grown-up women.

Christine Nicholls: Can you remember the first time that you saw Anmatyerr ladies doing these dancing and painting-up ceremonies?

Kathleen Petyarre: When we were little kids, we'd see all the Old Lady mob do these Mountain Devil dances with the body paint. We'd watch them all painting up, then dancing, Myrtle and me. We would be hiding behind the trees, looking, and sometimes, copying. We would follow all the Old Lady mob, me and Myrtle, while they did these dances in those old days. We'd follow our Grandmother and Mother mob doing these dances in the old days.

It's a proper important thing, following this ceremony, this dancing. Dancing, dancing, big clouds of dust and earth would rise up from ground when all that Old Lady mob would be dancing.

Christine Nicholls: Did all of you girls, all the sisters, like watching at the Old Ladies dancing?

Kathleen Petyarre: Me and Myrtle, we'd watch'em and follow'em with our little billy can and our little swag. We'd get witchetty grub, little lizards and goannas, cookem and eat'em and follow that Old Lady Grandmother mob when they did the ceremony dancing.

We loved copying those old ladies in those old days. While we were standing hiding behind the trees! When they couldn't see us! We'd hide, and copy the old ladies dancing, like this (Kathleen and Myrtle demonstrate, amidst peals of laughter)

standing behind the trees, and when they caught us copying them, Grandmother would call out, ‘Go back you mob!’ Grandmother’d yell out, ‘You’re too little! You’re too little to do this dancing! Go away you mob!’

Kathleen Petyarre: This is still the Mountain Devil painting, still part of Anmatyerr women’s ceremonies. It’s white because the hail has been coming down in big white iceblocks, around Christmas time. The hail covers Atnangker, *Arnkerrth* the Mountain Devil Lizard’s country, we mob’s country, my country. But it’s not Hail or Rain Dreaming—no way, it’s Mountain Devil Dreaming, country, ceremony. The important thing in this picture is it’s Mountain Devil ceremony, Mountain Devil Dreaming and Mountain Devil country. It shows where *Arnkerrth* that Old Lady Mountain Devil is dancing by herself, travelling around Atnangker, sometimes travelling alone, sometimes coming back to her country Atnangker—that’s the country belonging to Mountain Devil, this is all coming from ceremony. In the old days we would often use white *ngunja ngunja* and smash up little rocks, mixem up with water, for body painting, to show this Dreaming. Same way we would paint this on to our legs or use as body painting on the top part of our bodies—usem same colour, same design. White, red, yellow. No black. White is *ajulkwa*, important thing here on this painting.

When we were painted up our legs and bodies we looked like we wearing little aprons *ngajalarra*—the leg paints looked like little skirts or little pants. Not now—we wear petticoats and skirts for this ceremony. Not now—finished. We just do paintings on canvas now, but same ceremony, same story.

Violet Petyarre: My paintings that you see here are all part of the Anmatyerr women’s ceremonies—*awelye*. Especially, they are about the dances for *Arnkerrth*, the Mountain Devil Dreaming. They show the way that she, that Old Lady Mountain Devil, walks around our country, with all the little ones too, the little mountain devils who walk around with that Old Lady, looking around for ants, because they’ve got to eat something, walking around every place round our country, following the Old Boss Lady Mountain Devil, *Arnkerrth*. In

the old days we painted these designs with little sticks onto our chests—we were naked and putting these designs on was like putting on clothes. These designs are like clothes for us. Some of these designs were painted on to this part of our legs too (indicating her thighs). Another mob would be singing the *Arnkerrth* songs (while we painted them onto our upper bodies) and another mob would be dancing, but it was all one ceremony for sure. Those dances took a long time in the olden times—that old lady, auntie for me, that old Emily poor thing, she'd take on all of these ceremonies.

In the old days we only used red colours, white ones and yellow—no blue, no purple, but now we use canvas we can use any colour—that's what you see here! That's enough—*kwiakulai*—I've finished.

30 December 2004

Christine Nicholls: So, what goes through your head while you are painting your art works? What do you think about while you paint your Mountain Devil paintings?

Kathleen Petyarre: Well, in my head is my memory of a long time ago in the bush, my grandmother teaching me, the old ladies dancing a big ceremony, and me just watching when I was a little girl, and then later, when I was still a little girl, but a bit bigger, I was joining in the dancing too. That always goes around in my head when I paint my work. Myrtle, Nancy, Violet, me, we were little when we started, and we learned. We all know that olden-time dancing, learning when we were little—that's what's in my memory when I paint. My grandmother would decide when it was time for the Mountain Devil ceremony to be performed—and two women would be standing around with *nulla nullas*, and stick them right down into the sand. The women would paint the *nulla nullas* first, white, red and yellow ochres, and black, they are the colours of the mountain devils and they show how the mountain devils change colours. Then the old women would wait and grab a mountain devil and start to sing and wait and watch for that mountain devil to change colour. We grabbed, we looked, we waited until we saw her (the actual live mountain devil)

change colour, and then when she was changing colour all the time, we'd let her go then, and then the ceremony would start. That's the big Law—we were only allowed to start that ceremony once the mountain devil had changed her colour.

We'd begin by carrying bags of red ochre on our backs from Atnangker, to start that ceremony. Once she'd changed colour and we'd let her go we'd start the singing and clapping properly. It would happen round about the hot time every year but before rain time—and we would always perform the Mountain Devil *Arnkerrth* ceremony three times, late in the afternoon, then at night, then (at) knock off time or teatime. One old lady would dance the Mountain Devil part, that woman would always be my grandmother. Grandmother would put that pattern into the sand, and when I was little I'd be calling out, 'I want to learn', and I would go in and try to change it, change that pattern in the sand, and Grandmother would chase me away. Grandmother would yell out, 'Go back! Go back you little girl, you're only a little girl, go back!' And I would say, 'I want to learn Grandmother, Grandmother, I want learn, so that I can take up that law for the family, so I can carry that law, when you pass away.'

The other women would be singing and another mob would be painting up with little sticks, painting here first (indicating upper arms and making a sweeping movement across them) across like that (indicating horizontal axis), from the upper arms and across and down the chest then down their chest, then painting down the titties, going this way (indicating vertical axis), then straight down the thighs (indicating vertical axis again with a sweep of her hands simulating painting), then when we were fully painted up, then we girls and young women and old women would put on our hairstring belts, and headbands, made with hairstring and cocky feathers. It was for the girls' initiation ceremonies we did this and they are very secret and I can't say more.

Afterwards, after the ceremony, we would eat a lot of food—kangaroo, goanna, perentie and rabbit.

Christine Nicholls: One of the members of the group involved with this conference and the book, Jennifer Biddle, I think, has written that there is a lot in your work about

breasts and fertility— can you comment on that, please?

Kathleen Petyarre: True.

Christine Nicholls: Are you able to say more?

Kathleen Petyarre: No. True, it's true, but I won't say more. Not a word. Secret.

Reflection

By way of reflection I offer previously unpublished interviews with Kathleen Petyarre on the subject of time, and the passing of time. These interviews were conducted on 1 October 2008 in Melbourne and continued on 7 October 2008 in Adelaide.

Christine Nicholls: Kathleen, as we've discussed, we're going to talk about *time*. Would you like to start by talking about the happiest times of your life?

Kathleen Petyarre: It was happiest time of my life when I was growing up as little kid, out longa bush with my father at Atnangker. In those days nobody humbugged, my father was there, my mother was there, mother was smarter, nobody humbugged or teased me [because] my mother was smart and stopped 'em—that's why I am smart myself, because of my mother.

My grandfather and grandmother bin grow me up too—I really loved them. I just followed them, I loved follow[ing] them, then after little while, I'd go back [to my] father, go back [to my] mother.

Now looking back I know I was happy because I was with my family all the time and because we stayed close.

Today, so many alcoholic[s], so many violent [people], fight over nothing, not like early times, old times, when no one ever humbugged for me or for anyone. Nowday I try to stop humbug—I tell them off all the time, I say, '*You fellas go and drink somewhere else!*' But it's hard, hard in my life now.

Different then.

Those time. Old days.

I loved my country, I loved going round with all my family, all my sisters, looking for bush tucker. It was early days, long time ago. It seems like a dream, those early days. But Altyerr [Dreaming] goes

on today, still the same.

When I look back on those days my happiest time[s] [were] when I ran around that spinifex country carrying my yam stick and my firestick. I really *loved* that spinifex country—I bin go all over that spinifex country looking for goanna.

Christine Nicholls: Were there any hard or difficult times when you were younger?

Kathleen Petyarre: I really didn't want promised husband, old man. I was married a long time ago, when I was young girl. Teenager. It wasn't happy time.

Only one good happy thing happen then. My father, Kngwarreye, you know, he was brother for Aunty Emily [Kngwarreye], same father different mother, my father decided to pass me down the *Arnkerrth* [Mountain or Thorny Devil] Dreaming. Chose me. So he gave it to me—big Dreaming, big story, painting. Said I'm the only one who can know the whole thing, story, painting—from all the sisters and brothers. So all the sisters are allow paint *awely* [women's body painting, ceremonies and rituals] and brothers could paint other things, but only *I* could paint whole lot of our country Atnangker—*Arnkerrth* [Mountain or Thorny Devil] country. So I'm only one doing that whole country now.

Later my daughter was born Amaroo, after my promised husband passed away. Margaret's father was government man, white man, worked for Amaroo Station, looked after all the bulls. Worked for the government. Nice bloke. We didn't get married. Just friends.

Christine Nicholls: When you think about those old times, do you feel like you are now a different person?

Kathleen Petyarre: Yesterday, when I was lying in bed worrying for everything my mother came [to] me in a dream—her spirit comes to me all the time when I feel depress, sad, because of all the humbug today, because of all the drunks [in] the family nowday. So different from those old times. Healthy then. My mother come[s] to me as spirit and she says like questions '*Mwerr?*' [Are you well, healthy, good?] 'My daughter, you're *mwerr*, you're all right? You right?' And I say, 'Mother, Mum, I'm ok, *mwerr*'... She say '*Kel mwerr*'. [Ok, that's good!] And Dad too, Dad he come sometime and see me.

Visit. So those old [days or times] haven't disappeared. Long, long time ago [those] early days, but still with me now, but still, still happening now. Right now. Those old people are with me. All the time.

My mother was Rain Dreaming—that was her country. When it rain, him [she] follow the rain, him [her] spirit follow the rain, that's when him [her] spirit come to me, when it rain. My father and mother, I go back and see them when I want to. I'm a *ngangker*, witch doctor, [traditional healer], can do clever things, so can move back to past time then back again to now-time. Move between. Can move between time of then and now, nowday and then. I sometimes see my two uncles too.

Christine Nicholls: Is there anything else you'd like to say about time? What if you could make a wish about time?

Kathleen Petyarre: But if I could make wish I like to move straight back into them old days out in spinifex country—good. Life good then—*all the time*.

Christine Nicholls: Is there anything else, about time, in the past, present or future, before we finish?

Kathleen Petyarre: I want to pass on my *Arnkerrth* Dreaming before I finish up—one of my grandsons might be the one to carry [it] forward. Not drinking, him. I'm beginning to teach him painting now. He wants to learn. Carry forward. I hope.

Relationscapes: How Contemporary Aboriginal Art Moves Beyond the Map

Erin Manning

Three examples

1. *Mina Mina* (Dorothy Napangardi Robinson, 2005) measures almost two metres in height (198 x 122 cm). Black on white, its white emergent through the black dots, it encourages us to look-across, to move-with the fragile dotted lines that compose its labyrinths. 'Looking at' is too stable for this shifting landscape that moves, already, in many directions at once. This movement-across is not a symmetrical one that would obediently follow a horizontal or vertical perspective: it is a vibrating movement, a resonance that forces itself upon our vision, transforming it into a politics of touch. This is a politics of touch because what the painting compels is not a static viewing but an activity of reaching-toward that alters the relation between body and painting, creating a moving world that becomes a touching of the not-yet touchable. This touching is rhythmic. It occurs not on the lines or with the points but across the vista the painting elaborates, an experiential vista that is already more-than the space of the canvas can convey. These are more than traces, they are material becomings toward a worlding immanent to the experience of viewing. The becoming-world called forth by this black and white painting is a creation of an event of which I am part. It takes me not somewhere else, but right where I can become, to a force-field that is an eventness in the making, an exfoliation of experience.

The painting envelops space, creating new spacetimes of experience, new viewing bodies. It literally quivers with its dissonant becomings. This is not a metaphor. Spacetime is ontogenetically recreated through the process. The painting has incited me to move, and with the movement I have altered the dynamic of viewing initially set forth by this viewing experience. I become part of the composition, part of the activity of relation through which the painting achieves its morphing form. I feel its limits, its openings, its diagram.

Deleuze writes: 'We do not listen closely enough to what painters have to say. They say that the painter is already in the canvas, where he or she encounters all the figurative and probabilistic givens that occupy and preoccupy the canvas'.¹ A painting's diagram is expressed in this already-thereness, in the virtual event out of which the painting emanates. James calls this a terminus, by which he means the end-point that virtually envelops the beginning, creating the potential for the event to take place. *Mina Mina's* diagram comes together through the dotted black line on the upper right side of the canvas, a line that almost cuts off the corner from the rest yet embraces the painting as a whole. This self-embracing gesture is not only a compositional device, it is the painting's imminent force, a tension that constrains the experience to the singularity of its own eventness, a shapeshifting process.

Mina Mina speaks of salt lines, a mapping not of a territory but its passages, the traces it leaves in the landscapes it uncovers. A map is discovered here, not uncovered. This is a durational event, an *activity* of mapping that directs our bodies not toward its representation but toward its liveliness. This mapping is a creative vector of experience: it maps the future, not the past, leading us toward a recomposition of experience, a collaborative striation that smoothes the space of encounter.

2. *Alhalkere* (Emily Kame Kngwarreye, 1991) covers the whole wall. Three metres wide, it is powerful in its vivid evocation of the land, dancing with both grace and force. A-signifying traits merge to create a nonrepresentational, nonillustrative and nonnarrative field: 'marks that no longer depend on our will or our sight'.² The diagram can be felt emerging from the deep reddish burgundy spilling from the top left-hand corner of the painting. It is as though the rest of

the painting overflows from this dark corner, merging into a transformative activity of dot-painting, overpowered, finally, by yellow dots that transfuse with the surface, becoming surface, dense and airy at once. This quality of yellowness becomes the asignifying trait that propulses the canvas into an event. This event is rhythmical: it moves between the red and the yellow, creating a quivering that dances the passage from the dot to the surface to the rhythm in between. For diagrams are ‘a chaos, a catastrophe, but ... also, a germ of rhythm in relation to a new order of the painting [that]... unlocks areas of sensation’.³ Felt in *Alhalkere* is the very act of painting, the materiality of rhythm.

Alhalkere activates time-lines that are like plateaus of experience. Refuting the ‘purely optical’, *Alhalkere* makes palpable the immanent materiality of colour and shade, of movement and rhythm. Demanding an active listening, it breathes surface and depth, noise and calm even while it carefully creates a minimalist gesture, a diagram of restraint that covers not the space as such but a sensation that is clear and precise. This precision is what allows the body—of the painting, of the viewer—to evolve with every encounter. It is what allows the painting to be both here and there, alive in its Aboriginal context in and beyond Australia. This precision, it seems to me, catches us by surprise in each of Kngwarreye’s paintings. It is felt like a colour, but really it is a force that holds the painting to itself and allows it to be much more than a painted surface. *Alhalkere* takes form through the activity of Dreaming, its diagram culminating in the almost uniform yellow that invites us to weave our own stories, to dance the eventness of the layerings of experience.

A map? Only if we conceive it as a layering-in, a dotting-to-infinity, where the folding-in is also a folding-out. Not a direction, but a dance, a palimpsest alive with the resonances it creates. It leads us nowhere in particular, capturing us in its passing.

3. *Arnkerrthe* (Kathleen Petyarre, 2001) speaks to the movements of a Mountain Devil Lizard. But this square painting, asymmetrically symmetrical, does much more than that. One metre twenty squared is a forceful enclosure for a becoming-movement. Squares seem to seek diagrams that

conform to their limits. Petyarre resists these limitations, creating a becoming-body of movement-across that subtly emerges on the right quadrant, shading down through the otherwise almost-straight lines. There is a shadow here, a passage not yet quite actualised, that challenges the structure, bringing a fragility to its inner limits. On the lower left hand quadrant, the line thickens and there is a sense of duration moving toward a tremulous centre point. This point is not fixed: it is the pulsation of an activity of duration that envelops the whole painting. A meeting point, rather than a vanishing point. This point is what Deleuze would call haptic, evolving from a line to a touch that is distinct from its purely optical function. The Mountain Devil Lizard's passage is not one simply to be followed, but one to be lived via a politics of touch that must remain a reaching-toward, a touching untouchability. Touching here is completely interwoven with the painting's diagram which emanates from the elastic point at its centre, scrambling the painting's parameters, shifting the constraint from the square to the triangle, from the triangle to the parallel line, from the parallel line to the shadow to the speed of the dots to their fragile mergings into new spacetimes of experience. Passages already travelled, actualised in their transformations, alongside passages set as markers for future explorations. The movement is squared with a difference, a differential becoming-elastic moving across the formation, a becoming-form barely visible yet felt. If this is a map, it is not a topography. Its diagram is the process active between these directional tendencies and between their textures. The diagram is the evolution of the shadow that moves-with, its lizarding creating relational matrices, circles in the square.

That dreaming been all the time⁴

To paint the landscape with acrylics is a relatively new form of art for the Aborigines of Australia. Until the early 1970s, the creation of the land through stories was narrated mostly on other media—sand, bark, wood. In the desert, the sand paintings marked trajectories not only on the sand, but with/in it. Today, acrylics produced in the desert are a voice of transition, marking the uncanniness of the future-past of the land, its mappings, its dreams, creating presents in the making.

Dreamings—*Jukurrpa*⁵—are an integral aspect of life in Central Desert society and it is in the main these Dreamings we experience through Aboriginal art.⁶ Stories told for more than forty thousand years, Dreamings not only speak about the landscape and its vicissitudes, they create spacetimes out of which landscapes are prehended and lived. This creative alchemy sustains not only a reciprocal relationship to the land, it is also an enactment of the Law. Dreaming evokes the lived landscape as mythology, spirituality and lived experience as all of these coexist with the Law that upholds them. To dream is to take response-ability seriously. I return to the Dreaming here to explore how the Dreaming-as-event takes form in the work of contemporary Aboriginal artists, creative mappings of a future-present. Returning to what the Dreaming does in Aboriginal culture will clarify what it can do in the context of more abstract renderings of its lived potential.

Life is Dreaming in the sense that the coordinates of spacetime out of which everyday lives emerge are significantly in line with creation and recreation of the land and its Laws. But even this is too simple: the land is not an extension of the Aborigines—it *is* them. To be the land is to *become* in relation to it, in relation not to space itself, but to the strange coordinates of a topological relationscape that embodies as much the Law as it does the grains of sand that symbolise it. The land and the Law are not two, are not juxtaposed. They are not sustained in a present-future symbolism. They are one: a becoming multiplicity.

The challenge to a spacetime of the Dreaming is a performative one that in turn alters all dimensions of experience. To understand a Dreaming as a story of creation is to touch only one aspect of the concept. Dreamings are mythological and cosmogenic stories that are not simply stories of creation (with all attendant dramas and misunderstandings, love stories and disappointments) in the Biblical sense, they are also stories of the creation of the future-present. For a Dreaming to be perpetuated the community must recreate it—it must be sung, drawn, danced. Ritual performances are not concerned simply with remembering the Dreaming, but living it, keeping it alive as it keeps them alive.

All Dreamings are sustained by multiple guardians. Members from different clans are *Kirda* and *Kurdungurlu* for the Dreaming,⁷ which means for instance that while one person is responsible for the iconography of the Dreaming's location, another will be responsible for parts of its story. An individual cannot single-handedly decide to paint a Dreaming, even if he or she is *Kirda* for that Dreaming. The *Kurdungurlu* must be included in the process. Relation is already inscribed in the Dreaming whose pastness the present activates. The trajectories of the songs that populate the spacetime of the Dreamings is similar. No one ever owns a complete trajectory. For songs to be sung, communities must be assembled, sometimes even inter-tribally. The Law is played out in this relationship of reciprocity. A sharing of the land is not simply a theoretical concept for the Aborigines, it is a performance that creates a present-passing.

'To paint a Dreaming is at once to regenerate one's forces and to connect the object or the person to the earth and to the spacetime of the hero who "dreams" the life of people and their environment'.⁸ To dream is never an individual affair. Even night dreams in Aboriginal communities are extended beyond the individual body: my dream may be your dream experienced through the vessel of my becoming-form. The earth-as-body is the support not only for the traces of ancestral bodies, but for the metamorphoses of experience in the present, a mnemonic for the Law of the Dreaming. To dream is to be in contact with others, to dream their dreams: 'The agreement of others is necessary. An oniric vision is attested as "real" only on condition that it is connected to pictorial forms and narratives ... that have been transmitted for hundreds of generations'.⁹ There is never a single version that works for all Dreamings, but as many versions and contexts as are necessary for the story to be composed again.

Associated with the Dreaming is a certain birthright. In Aboriginal Central Desert society, you are born where the Dream enters you. To be born in Warlpiri is 'palkajarri' — 'becoming body'.¹⁰ A virtuality actualises itself in the birth, a virtuality that is crystallised through a verse of a song that will be sung for generations to come. This song will 'belong' to the becoming-body in the form of a Dreaming for which he

or she will remain Kirda. To become-body is to materialise as song, as Dream, as rhythm.¹¹ It is not to materialise individually but to be sung again, to become as a multiple body of communal experience. 'Warlpiri philosophy does not oppose images to the substance or the essence of things. The two are indissociable.'¹²

The cosmology of the Dreaming must be understood as both actual and virtual.¹³ It can be thought as an overlapping of the two, where reality and dream are not opposed but superimposed. Aborigines of the Central Desert animate time in space. In their rituals, the present is ancestralised not as a nostalgia for the past but as a becoming-present. The past and future, the actual and the virtual are traces of becoming whose dimensions are experienced in shifting continuity as through the spiral of Nietzschean eternal recurrence. When time is activated in this way what emerges is a time-line that is not linear. The present is always in the mode of performance not of a forgotten past but of a remembering future-present.

Experiencing-with from afar

Arnkerrthe, *Mina Mina* and *Alhalkere* are prehensions of Dreamings. Prehension is a Whiteheadian term that draws perception into activity, transforming the oppositional model of viewer/receptor into a directly relational experience. To 'prehend' the Dreaming is to move-with it, composing with it an experiential world. Prehension turns perception into an event, ridding perception of its dependence on essence or representation. To prehend the Dreaming involves more than narrating an instance of it. It is to call forth the activity of the land's eventfulness and to pull this eventfulness into the present-passing such that a new actual occasion — a world — emerges.

This is not a pre-mapping of experience. Prehensions populate actual occasions in an activity of relation whereby perception cannot be separated from experience, nor experience from the world. Prehending the Dreaming, paintings such as *Alhalkere* feel the resonance of what a Dreaming can be, drawing its eventness onto the canvas. Transversally political, these paintings call forth a new way of seeing, a seeing-with that moves the body. This elicited movement-with

is affective: its tonality (its modalities, its resonances, its textures) alters both what a body can do and how the world can be experienced.¹⁴ To experience *Alhalkere* is to feel the recomposition of a living landscape that is not separate from my viewing body, that in fact repositions my viewing body in the living landscape it conceptually proposes. *Alhalkere* is the Dreaming insofar as it incurs concern for the event that is the shapeshifting of experience. Moving-with its own eventful becoming, *Alhalkere* becomes a metastable system that cannot be thought outside the experiential field it opens. Whether here or there, what *Alhalkere* does is ask that we have concern for the Dreaming.

Concern is not an identity-based practice. Concern for the Dreaming is an ethics of encounter with the unknowable—an event in the making—that far exceeds the specificity of a specific piece of land. This is not to dismiss the importance of land-claims in Aboriginal politics nor to romanticise space as ephemeral. It is to take the immanent materiality of the Dreamings seriously and to believe that what paintings such as *Alhalkere* do exceeds the parameters of their landmarks. This concern is for an event, not a pre-determined location. It is not based on an identity politics that would promote an exclusive dialectics of inside/outside. Experience itself is at stake, *in the making*. The fluidity of experience does not speak of an empiricism guaranteed simply by pre-informed historical circumstances. It speaks, also, to a kind of radical empiricism, where what is to be felt is also to be invented. Because Dreamings are never there once and for all: as Jennifer Biddle points out, ‘Dreaming stories and “icons” [do] justice to the force and effect of these paintings in the material terms they themselves effect’.¹⁵ The immanent materiality of these paintings call forth an empiricism that is directly experienced, that is directly relational. And that is how they reach me, ten thousand miles away.

For James, the relation must be ‘accounted as “real” as anything else in the system’.¹⁶ The relation is not composed after the fact, it is immanent to the event. The event cannot be predicted because it is different each time. Prehensions are infinitely variable and produce an infinity of actual occasions. As events of concern for the Dreaming, these paintings ask to

be lived again. The repetition of the act—the painting of the dots, one at a time, for hours on end—is a differential living-with that belongs to the territory of Aborigines even as it exceeds the very notion of stable territory, calling forth worlds that extend far beyond what geography can map.

‘To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced’.¹⁷ Radical empiricism is a practice that Aboriginal ‘dot painting’ makes felt. The intimacy of relation is experienced in the pulsations of the dots, in the rhythms of the layered surfaces at play, of intensities interweaving. These paintings ask us to move (move away! come closer! look again!), figuring movement such that what is felt is not the representation—the figure—but the act of feeling itself, its affective tone. These felt relations create conjunctions *and* disjunctions, asking, as Kngwarreye is famous for saying, ‘a whole lot’, calling forth a directly perceived relation with their own materiality that succeeds the dichotomy between unity and disconnection, bringing to the fore the force of the event rather than simply its putative content. They map not a place but a diagram out of which a taking-form emerges.

Of maps and dots

To speak of maps is always to return, in some sense, to the evocative work of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (c. 1932–2003). Clifford Possum’s art has been revered for its precision and breadth, which is not surprising as he was one of the more experienced artists among those who painted in the early years of the Papunya Tula movement. Clifford Possum’s map series, created between 1976 and 1979 are well known in their emphasis on Aboriginal practices of map-making.¹⁸ These ‘maps’ draw out the challenging reorganisation of spacetime the Dreaming makes possible even while ostensibly doing so within the vocabulary of a Westernised concept of a map. In these early acrylic paintings, Clifford Possum sought to clarify both his relation to the land and the interrelatedness of the Dreamings for which he is custodian. In the Central Desert, a particular individual is identified not only with a network of trails, animals, food and landmarks passed down through

patrilineal descent, but with myriad interrelated components that keep all of these categories open. A person's birthplace, where their parents or grandparents were born or initiated, extended residence networks, all of these factors influence the positioning of the individual with/in his or her Dreamings. To think of Dreamings as discrete spaces is both to underestimate the ways in which Dreamings challenge linear spacetime and to forget the relational aspect of ownership within Aboriginal culture. The Dreamings no more belong to the land than they do to the people. The people and the Dreaming are co-extensive, they are ontogenetic networks of reciprocal exchange. A Dreaming is not an entity, not a place. It is a movement, a song and a dance, a practice of mark-making that does not represent a spacetime but creates it, again and again.¹⁹

To assume a regular passage from past to present to future is to be imprisoned within Cartesian coordinates which have little to do with Central Desert culture. For Aborigines of the Central Desert, the past is *activated* in the present, not passively remembered. Culture and politics in the Central Desert are there for the (re)making, challenged and expressed by an opening to certain stories of creation that intertwine in complex and infinite ways the present and the past, the human and the animal, space and time. The collective memory of the past-future is passed on from generation to generation through sand paintings, dances and songs that shift the story in spacetime. To think of the future as a linear progression in time is to underestimate the ways in which time passing entails an actual shift in space and vice versa. The Aboriginals today are not reliving their past. They are recreating their present, endlessly, making use of a topological structure in which time is embedded in shifting space.

The itineraries of the Dreaming must be seen not as a plane that can be adequately captured on a two-dimensional surface, but as functioning in many dimensions at once. As Clifford Possum paints them, the Dreamings are like knots where the actual meets the virtual in a cycle of continuous regeneration. The itineraries of the Dreaming are rule-bound but not fixed: these knots of experience are always shapeshifting across spacetime. Timespace is at the heart of this complex art as are conceptual slidings, performative experience, rituals

of emergence and disappearance. This timespace is not haphazard: Dreamings must be performed lest they disappear into disuse, their songs forgotten or unsung.²⁰

The country for which Clifford is response-able forms a wide arc with a radius of some one hundred kilometres centred approximately two hundred kilometres northwest of Alice Springs. It stretches from Waltunpunyu, west of central Mount Wedge in the south, up through Napperby and Mount Allan stations, northwest as far as the blue hill of Wakulpa just north of Yuendumu, and northeast across Mount Denison and Conisten Stations.²¹ This is Anmatyerre country from the perspective of a Cartesian geography. Topologically, Anmatyerre country is more complex.²²

Topology departs from the angle-line coordinates we have learned to rely on in our perspectival teachings about the landscapes we inhabit. The learnings that allow us to conceive of landscapes as perspectival entities operational *in* time space are in the main Euclidean. In Euclidean geometry, we know one space from another not primarily by the ways in which our bodies *create* that space but by the ways in which we *inhabit* or *enter* it. Space becomes an inarticulate container. By privileging inhabitation (where space always pre-exists experience), Euclidean geometry enables a rendering-abstract of space: it is abstract in the sense that it is empty before our arrival. Because of this abstraction of space, what is measured in Euclidean geometry is considered concrete: planes and contours are concretely categorisable as entities beyond and unaffected by the extensions of my body. This means that I do not associate the landscape with my body. My body and the space are not one: they are always two, 1+1, body+space. It is due to this linear grammar of geometry that the coloniser is able to assert that seemingly empty space is uninhabited.

Topological spacetime refutes this dichotomy between the abstract and the concrete. Topological spacetime is not 1+1 but $n+1$, always more-than. This more-than can be conceptualised as the Dreaming: it is the conceptual event of locating land, body, space, time, experience all in one moment, one moment that embodies the perpetual movement of time. Topological rendering connects relationally nature and existence where no single element of nature is a permanent support for changing

relations. In this relational network of experience, *innovation* is at stake even while the traditions of the past carry weight in the present. Innovation does not mean the erasure of the past. It means creating a foundation for the shifting relations of past and future in the present. Ontogenetically, through the Dreaming (which means through the land *and* the Law), the multiplicity, ‘the many become one and are increased by one’.²³

Topology refers to a continuity of transformation that alters the figure, bringing to the fore not the coordinates of form but the experience of it. Topologies suggest that the space of the body extends beyond Euclidean coordinates to more abstract spacetime. In topological geometry, I am both here and there, actual and virtual, real and abstract. Topology potentially deforms linear progression, rendering the concrete abstract. Topologies are as current as are Euclidean geometries. Even our bodies are topological. As Masumi asks, ‘What if the body is inseparable from dimensions of lived abstractness that cannot be conceptualised in other than topological terms?’²⁴ To think topologically is to begin to think beyond coordinates. It is to envisage the body in metamorphosis, a body that is continuously qualitatively altered by the worlds it creates.

Journeying from Dreaming to Dreaming requires an abstract relation to spacetime that departs from Euclidean geometry. To engage the Dreaming topologically is to break down the dichotomy between the abstract and the concrete, setting them side by side as aspects of a singularity. The Dreaming does not function wholly abstractly or wholly concretely. It lies somewhere in between, with moments that are performatively actualised and moments that remain virtual. This continuity of the actual and the virtual creates a Law of alliance which is neither concrete nor abstract. This Law of alliance rests on an implicit understanding that spacetime is as spiritual as it is physical, as topological as it is geographic. The landscape moves, and with it, the Dreamings shift and bodies metamorphose.

A map of the landscape that relies on x/y coordinates asks me to already be able to position myself in space. Turn your body this way, it says, face this direction. To read a Cartesian map is to ask a preformed body-concept to conform to its

gridding. Topological spacetime works otherwise. This is why Clifford Possum did not always render the Dreamings in a 'geographically accurate' way. To understand the 'geographically accurate' we must already have had the experience of the x/y grids of the mapping of Euclidean space that takes for granted that our journeys begin and end in directions that can be pre-gridded. It is to suppose that a body never shape-shifts, that it always sees from the same perspective and within the same conglomerate of potential relations.

Clifford Possum's maps do not ask to be read in this way. This is because he painted his great map series by moving the canvas around him. The land shifted and with this shift so did its relations. Instead of strictly linking locations in gridded geometrical space, the canvas's attention turns to the Dreaming's intensive movement on a painted surface. This immobile voyage moves toward experience rather than location: Possum takes his bearings not with a concept of due north but with the living relation between Dreamings. 'The sites and journey lines relating to each narrative strand are correctly positioned in space and with respect to one another, and also to at least one other strand, so that two or more Dreamings tie in with each directional re-alignment.'²⁵ What is at stake in Clifford's maps is not the omnipresent observer's bird's eye view of the landscape operating according to pre-established coordinates of spacetime, but the relation between one Dreaming and another from the standpoint of the painting (dreaming) body. Like a tracker who continuously updates his or her bearings and alignment in space with each change of direction in the chase, Clifford Possum is not creating an archival representation of his land, he is creating his land/ his Dreaming in relation to his communal painting body. He is not *representing* the Dreaming but *indexing* it in the passage from the virtual to the actual.²⁶

The Western tradition of landscape art has taught us to read paintings (and most perspectival visual phenomena) as maps. Perspective is not innate, however: it is taught. Recent research in fact suggests that humans orient more by the shape of the space than by its visual cues. That means that we orient rhythmically, responding to the movements of topological twistings and turnings.²⁷ This way of feeling space

as duration foregrounds the proprioceptive sense, inverting the relation of position to movement. When movement is no longer indexed to position (when mapping becomes an event), position begins to emerge from a relation of movement itself. For Clifford Possum, Dreamings emerge relationally. Whether or not they are all spatially 'correct' in relation to pre-given landmarks is not an issue to him because what matters is not the position—not where they lie as such—but what they are capable of *in relation* to the emergent bodies the Dreamings make possible.

A fissure emerges between cognitive mapping and orientation. What Clifford Possum is trying to do with his great maps is to orient the Dreamings in relation not to a void, but to a becoming-body of the future-past. To orient is to actively engage in the process of mapping. It is to make maps even as we read them. This has for thousands of years been the practice of the Aboriginals of the desert, a practice that has taken the form, among others, of drawing in the sand. These traces—the shapes in the sand—were used to teach people about time and space as they intersect. To draw a circle could mean many things: a campfire, a waterhole. What is important—and how their 'meanings' are read—depends on the direct perception of relation as it takes form. What such mappings teach is to locate an intensity of reaching-toward, not an entity. The landmark is not outside but part of my becoming-body, a worlding.

What is calculated in the mapping is not distance (if you ask Clifford Possum about distance he will speak in terms of walking days, or car hours). What is calculated is experience + ability. How do I get there? The 'how' of directionality creates a permutation such that spacetime shapes itself around continuous shiftings. The ground trembles. The desert is not one space: it is the many overlapping spacetimes of experience that Aboriginals call Dreamings. These Dreamings can be drawn into maps, but such maps will never lead us anywhere if we expect them to do the walking for us. At most, these maps will help us back-grid our experience.²⁸

Landing sights

Clifford Possum has described his map series as land titles. This series of paintings followed in the wake of important

protests claiming Aboriginal rights to land at a time when outstations were not yet the norm and Aborigines of different tribes were forced to live together in imposed centres such as Papunya. As a political statement, his maps could be seen to perform a kind of active reading of the land, using the Dreamings (as would be done often subsequently to challenge the destruction of land by mining and road building) as a way to position himself and his people within the land rights movement of the Central Desert. But to understand this as a straightforward reclaiming would be misleading, because it would imply that the land as such was what was at stake. Clifford Possum was not delineating landmarks on a cognitive grid. He does not own the land, nor would he claim to. What he owns is a particular relation to the land. Aboriginal understanding of land must by extension alter what is usually meant by land titles. It is not the space-itself that the Aborigines are calling for through their art, but the topologies of spacetime the land incites in relation to Dreamings of which they remain an active part.

Land rights as painted by Clifford Possum are dimensions of experience. The folds of this experience are the rituals that make up the reliving of the eventness of the Dreamings. Synesthetically, through a dynamic interference of the senses, Aboriginal rituals call forth new sense-dimensions directly emergent from the land. To touch is not simply to touch, it is to reach-toward the experience of sensing-with²⁹ that is the Dreaming. Clifford Possum's paintings are alive in their multi-dimensionality, not only as examples of 'abstract' art that has 'content' but as a rethinking of abstractness itself. Clifford Possum's maps engage the concrete by means of the abstract, synesthetically creating an experience of land whose claim is not for ownership, but for the eventness of experience.

The spacetimes of experience created through Clifford Possum's map paintings can be thought as a topological hyper-space of transformation. It creates relays that are not simply geographic but experiential, proprioceptive, where space and time fold into one another.³⁰ Space here is performed, folding into durations that become part of the materiality of the painterly event. Be it the land 'itself' or acrylic, the point of the Dreaming is that it is not a location or a representation. It

cannot 'exist' in a Euclidean spacetime, but must always move topologically, situating itself in relays that are changeable depending on seasons and moods.³¹

Although most topologies are non-Euclidean, topologies are not necessarily non-Euclidean. The effort here is not to create a dichotomy that would suggest that there are specific experiential states to which the Central Desert Aborigines have direct access as opposed to the spiritually impoverished urban dweller who can only think in terms of Euclidean coordinates. The point is rather that experiential space is topological and gets re-gridded within Cartesian coordinates in part because such geometric grammars seem easier to capture. To think topologically is to think dynamically: it is to situate the movement of thought at its transformational vector, deforming it into its potential. When we re-render the form static, when we stop the process, we are shortchanging the experience.

Within topological transformation, an infinite number of static structures can emerge. This would begin to explain the complexity of Aboriginal life today. To suggest that Aborigines live exclusively in transformation would be as senseless as to say that all urban dwellers are only sustained by Cartesian maps. The potential of experiential space is everywhere present. The question is how we map it, how we live it, how it transforms us. The transformation of a topological figure into a static instance creates an object. This object—be it a doughnut or a coffee cup, both of which belong to the same topological figure because their shapes can be deformed into each other without cutting—stands for itself. What is interesting about it is not necessarily its shape but its process: the fact that its ontology is one of continuous deformation. To create an object is one thing—to create a relationscape another.

Dancing the dream

Deleuze speaks of marks made accidentally. These accidental marks are free—free of the medium, free of the context of their representation. They are not unconscious but hyperconscious. They are marks out of which new concepts are born. To watch Emily Kngwarreye paint was to watch a woman dancing, her whole body engaged in the act, the plane of composition

emerging directly from her shoulder along the elbow, wrist held firmly, painting with both hands.³² She was not a writing woman, she was a dancing woman, her wrists taut with the activity of reaching-toward and moving-with. Her paintings reflect this intensity of movement, the wholeness of the emergent line or dot, its activity of creating the becoming-form of the body-land-canvas. In this movement-with, she creates the improbable, unspeakable not because she cannot articulate it, but because its dimensions are as infinitely complex as the Dreaming she evokes.

Kngwarreye paints the reaching-toward out of which dancing dreams are composed. This reaching-toward is an almost-touch: it touches the not-yet through which futurity will emerge. Painting the untouchable is an event that instills time in space. It is to pre-paint, to pre-accelerate the urgency of the taking-form these extraordinary paintings propose. This suggests a noncoincidence always present in the act of mark-making, a rhythmical disjunction that recalls the latency or the virtual in any actualisation. To actualise in this sense is to make-present both the future and the past. This potential is always within the act of painting as a concrete aspect of creation.³³ Unfortunately, the untouchable too often becomes articulated as the unconscious (the has-been-touched). Kngwarreye's art is not unconscious. What she paints is absolutely real, eventful, its untouchability always an incitation to touch.

It is the rhythm of the land I see in Kngwarreye's relationscapes, a rhythm that refuses to subjugate the image to the text, the dance to the music. The rhythm is all around, it is the 'whole lot': the weather, the seasons, the births and deaths, the rituals and performances, the body painting and batiks, the Dreamings eventfully pursuing the journeys that will create future spacetimes of experience. These rhythms are sensations of the boldest kind, sensations that alter the very core of what it is to sense. There is no inside/outside to the sensations: they are as much of the body as of the land, extending synesthetically beyond all comprehension of three-dimensional spacetime, leading us not toward a dimension as such but toward a topological hyperspace of relationscapes, to an immanent transcendence that is profoundly of the land, of

the here and now.

Experiential work defies description. As lines become planes become topologies, the singular mark synesthetically transforms the whole. The colours reflect not only off one other but within the shades they help create. These shades are events: Dreamings in the making.

Topological geographies create new art histories. Red against yellow, black against brown, dots, lines, circles, footprints, all of these gestures toward the Dreaming extend themselves beyond a body or a canvas, creating a movement of thought. This movement of thought provokes response-ability: I cannot but move. I cannot but sense the shades of difference that create the activity of the land. I cannot but respond relationally. I cannot engage and then refuse the immanence of the 'whole' these paintings generate.

This is the power of contemporary Aboriginal art. It incites cross-cultural transformation at an artistic as well as a political level, asking us to rethink the map, the landmark we presumed we could locate, the direction we thought we knew how to follow. In the end, we remain foreign yet politically—relationally—charged. A qualitative change has occurred shifting us from the realm of the passive observer toward the political: the topological hyperspace we encounter through Aboriginal art has qualitatively altered our capacity to relate on shifting ground.

Relationescapes abound. They are not strictly relegated to the Aborigine and their experience of the Dreaming. Emily Kngwarreye was not the first to annihilate figuration. What art such as that of Kngwarreye, Napangardi, Petyarre or Possum does is create a movement of thought, a movement that is *marayin*, at once painting, song, dance, sacred object and power word. Through their work, we move toward a topological hyperspace of experience, asking once again how emptiness is configured, how topologies extend our worlds, rhythmically (de)forming them, and how maps that sense-across create durations which eventfully alter what experience can be.

Notes

- 1 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 2003, p. 81.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- 4 Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri in Vivien Johnson, *Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2003, p. 16.
- 5 *Jukurpa* was earlier referred to as 'Dream Time'. It means both Dream (story) and Law.
- 6 Many of these observations are also valid for other Aboriginal peoples. Rather than make wide claims about Aboriginals as a whole, however, my focus here is on the Aboriginals of the Central Desert and the ways in which their art practice continues to sustain the Dreaming.
- 7 *Kirda* 'own' given countries and have primary economic and spiritual rights as regards these spacetimes. *Kurdungurlu* are guardians for the countries owned by the *Kirda*. *Kurdungurlu* ensure that *Kirda* fulfil social and ritual obligations associated to the Dreamings in their care. They also affirm that the *Kirda* maintain the responsibility of associated sites and access to economic resources of their country. In ceremony, *Kirda* and *Kurdungurlu* interact closely. Their roles are complementary: when *Kirda* have their bodies painted for ritual purposes, *Kurdungurlu* grind the ochres, do the actual painting and give advice on appropriate symbols. The roles are reversed for other sites and Dreamings (Christopher Anderson and Francoise Dussart, 'Dreaming in Acrylic: Western Desert Art', in Peter Sutton (ed.), *Dreaming: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Viking Press, Ringwood, 1988, p. 95).
- 8 Barbara Glowczewski, *Les rêveurs du désert: Aborigènes d'Australie*, Plon, Paris, 1989, p. 83. All of Glowczewski's work is originally in French. My translations throughout.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- 10 It can also happen that the birth of a child happens in a 'no man's land', a zone that is not part of that clan's Dreaming itineraries. In this case, the person will create his own clan in relation to the dream of conception associated with his passage from the virtual to the actual (Glowczewski, *Les rêveurs du désert*, p. 206).
- 11 For the Yolngu, a single word, *marayin*, designates at once painting, songs, dances, sacred objects and power words (in Barbara Glowczewski, *Rêves en colère avec les Aborigènes australiens*, Plon, Paris, 2004, p. 311).
- 12 Glowczewski, *Les rêveurs du désert*, p. 212.
- 13 To consider the Dreaming as a finished narrative is to overlook the fact that for each Dreaming site there is the potential of emergence of other associated Dreamings. Dreamings by definition are mobile, leaving traces that remain to be deciphered and performed. To perform is not an accessory of the Dreaming. It is the way the Dreaming affirms itself and is actualised. Dreamings are sites of negotiation rather than entities. As with the sand drawings, the creation of stories demands a continual erasure. To create is to start again. As a member of the Warlpiri at Lajamanu states: 'Our Law is not written. It is firm, like a rock, a becoming trace, like the sea that rises, that ebbs and flows' (in Glowczewski, *Rêves en colère*, p. 302). For an excellent reading of virtuality, see also Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Affect, Movement, Sensation*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2002.
- 14 Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, Free Press, New York, 1933, p. 176.
- 15 Jennifer Biddle, 'Country, Skin, Canvas: The Intercorporeal Art of Kathleen Petyarre', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2003, p. 61.
- 16 William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Longman Green and Co, New York,

- 1912, p. 42.
- 17 Ibid., p. 42.
- 18 These paintings are entitled Warlugulong (1976 with Tim Leura), *Warlugulong* (1977), *Kerrinyarra* (1977), *Mount Denison Country* (1978) and *Yuutjutiyungu* (1979).
- 19 ‘Without the story, the painting is nothing’ (Michael Jagamara Nelson in Vivien Johnson, Michael Jagamara Nelson, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1997, p. 133). This notion of story has been quite difficult for ethnographers, curators and consumers of Aboriginal dot painting to understand. Johnson writes: ‘The “correct” ascription for a particular design element in a painting is in fact not always so readily determined—not even by the artist himself’ (Johnson, *Michael Jagamara Nelson*, p. 134). The imposition of truth misses the point of the Dreaming. The stories themselves must be told correctly, but how they are performed varies greatly. A story told by the wrong person is unauthorised, a concept far more important than the ‘inauthentic’. Copying or standard forms of authorship are not the issue. What is at stake is working out the correct relation between the Kirda and the Kurdungurlu as well as being able to recount the stories by singing their trajectories: most paintings are sung even while they are being created. To criticise a painting on aesthetic grounds is to criticise the artist’s Dreaming—the artist’s very Becoming.
- 20 Dreamings can fall into misuse due to the death of a Kirda, or they can re-manifest themselves in a dream. Dreams, shared in performative rituals with the members of a community, can re-become Dreamings this way, creating geographies that re-stratify in time, creating new lines of flight.
- 21 Vivien Johnson, *Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2003, p. 21.
- 22 Topology refers to mostly non-Euclidean geometry where figures are subjected to deformations so drastic that all their metric and projective properties are lost, creating an elliptical geometry that challenges the very notion of stable form (Richard Courant and Herbert Robbins (eds), *What is Mathematics: An Elementary Approach to Ideas and Methods*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996, p. 235).
- 23 Alfred North Whitehead in David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (eds), *Process and Reality*, Free Press, New York, 1978, p. 26.
- 24 Massumi, p. 177.
- 25 Johnson, *Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri*, p. 92.
- 26 Jennifer Biddle also makes this point in her very interesting article entitled ‘Country, Skin, Canvas’. She writes: ‘The potency of Petyarre’s work arises, arguably, from the very materiality of marks made in the Central and Western Desert context. It is not what these marks represent but how they are made that is determinative. To stay within the Piercian framework, these marks are not so much “icons” (signs which look like what they represent) as they are “indexes” (signs which remain existentially tied to what they “represent”). Central and Western Desert marks are “indexes” in so far as they embody original Ancestral potency. This potency does not simply arise. It must be enacted by precise repetitions and regulatory operations—what might otherwise be called Law.’ (p. 64).
- 27 The Möbius strip is a type of topology.
- 28 For a more on back-gridding and its relation to movement, see Massumi.
- 29 For a more detailed exploration of the conception of sensing-with or reaching-toward, see Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 2007.
- 30 Massumi writes: ‘The folding of the Euclidean and non-Euclidean into and out of each other is itself understandable only in topological terms. This

hinge-dimension between quantitative and qualitative space is itself a topological figure—to the second degree, since topology already figures in it. It is a topological hyperfigure. The non-Euclidean, qualitative, and dynamic is more encompassing than the Euclidean, quantitative and static, by virtue of this double featuring' (p. 184).

- 31 I am not saying the Dreamings themselves walk away. To understand the landscape of the Dreamings as topological it must first be clear that we are not talking about points on a grid. Uluru remains Uluru. What changes is the intensive movement of the relationscape. By intensive movement I mean the relational network between my prehension of Uluru and its condensation in spacetime. To say that Uluru is stable is to suggest that space is there to be encountered (and left behind). The point of Aboriginal land claims is that space is alive.
- 32 Videos exist of this experience of dancing-while-painting or painting-while-dancing.
- 33 Deleuze writes: 'So the act of painting is always shifting, it is constantly oscillating between a beforehand and an afterward: the hysteria of painting' (p. 80).

Gendering Aboriginalism: A Performative Gaze on Indigenous Australian Women

Katelyn Barney

Introduction

The bitter smell of coffee lingered in the air like smoke and the echo of laughter and music whispered in my ears. I was at the Judith Wright Centre waiting for Indigenous Australian female singer/songwriter Toni Janke to perform. I watched the audience file in and take their seats in the theatre. I smiled at my friend Mark and his sister Louise who had both come along to watch the concert with me. There was a hush over the audience as the lights dimmed and Toni came on stage. The backing CD started and the sounds of guitar, drums and ethereal sounding flute reverberated through the theatre. Toni began to sway to the music and then her strong, smooth voice began performing her song 'Jewel of the North'. I also moved to the slow beat and listened carefully as Toni sang, 'we sang all the old songs back then, and we laughed and we danced once again'. Then the applause wrapped around me and embraced me in its warmth. I looked over at Louise and noticed she had a puzzled look on her face. She caught my eye and said in a hushed tone, 'It's certainly not what I was expecting.' I wondered, what did she mean by this statement? Did the performance not 'sound' how she was expecting? Did Toni not 'look' how she assumed Indigenous Australian performers should look? Was she surprised that the concert was performed by Indigenous Australian women? I wondered how many other people in the audience were also thinking that it was not what they expected. Were the Indigenous Australian women performers aware of these audience expectations?

Each time I recall this experience it tells me about how Aboriginalist discourse works to fix, confine and sustain non-Indigenous audiences' expectations of Indigenous Australian women performers. Indigenous Australian women who perform contemporary music are intensely aware that Aboriginalist discourse hinders them and they perform a diverse range of styles, languages, places and identities in order to resist, negotiate and challenge Aboriginalism.

Drawn from Edward Said's theory of Orientalism,¹ the term 'Aboriginalism' has been used by scholars in the Australian context to refer to specific ways of representing Indigenous Australian people. Broadly defined, it refers to the tendency of (largely white) scholars to use 'culture' as the key analytical tool for knowing social difference and for explaining issues in colonial contexts.² Music performance is one arena where Aboriginalism is visibly and sonically at play. One of the most common Aboriginalist representations of Indigenous Australian people is, as Indigenous female performer Lou Bennett points out, 'basically a man, out in the desert, black skin, flat nose with a lap-lap on, standing on one leg, resting against a spear.'³ In performance contexts Indigenous singer-songwriter Deb Morrow notes that another typical Aboriginalist construction is a man playing 'didjeridu, clap sticking, full black, with paint all over them. And that, that's all they are. Anything less than that is not Aboriginal.'⁴ Lou's and Deb's comments raise questions: in what ways are discourses of Aboriginalism gendered? Does Aboriginalism have consequences that are different for men and women?⁵ How does Aboriginalism affect performance and specifically Aboriginal women performers? As a non-Indigenous researcher, how does my own research and writing work within and against Aboriginalism?

What is Aboriginalism?

The earliest references to the term 'Aboriginalism' can be found in the work of Vijay Mishra. In 1987, Mishra drew on Said's *Orientalism* to develop the term Aboriginalism in order to describe the attempt at the 'reduction of a culture to a dominant discourse' which overpowers 'the plurality of Aboriginal voices'.⁶ A number of authors have subsequently examined

historical and contemporary expressions of Aboriginalism in various contexts including education, film and literature, anthropology, archaeology, media and theatre.

Aboriginalism has the effect of silencing Indigenous Australians and views Aboriginal people as ‘fearsome and dangerous, childlike and passive or primitively attractive but not as capable of self government or equal civil or moral subjects. Essentially they will be spoken about or for but cannot speak themselves.’⁷ Hodge describes Aboriginalism as being ‘ideally constituted to act as an ambiguous instrument for ideological control’.⁸ Similarly, Attwood shows that Aboriginalism is characterised by an overarching relationship of power between coloniser and colonised and suggests that Aboriginalism, like Orientalism, ‘produces authoritative and essentialist “truths” about indigenes, and which is characterised by a mutually supporting relationship between power and knowledge’.⁹ Bradford also argues that Aboriginalism works within the dynamics of knowledge and power, suggesting that Aboriginalist discourse ‘locates authentic Aboriginal cultures in a remote past where they can be safely quarantined from notions of progress and development and denied the possibility of change or adaptation’.¹⁰

A number of scholars emphasise that anthropologists, historians and others have been, and continue to be, responsible for the construction and dissemination of Aboriginalism. Certainly, Aboriginalism exists not only in academic discourse, filtering through into the general culture as stereotypes such as those identified by Bennett and Morrow. But before addressing Indigenous Australian women performers’ perceptions of how they are imagined and constructed by audiences, I would now like to examine some examples of Aboriginalism from anthropological texts. As Muecke notes, rather than viewing texts as locations where the desire to speak is liberated, we need to critique them as sites of multiple exclusions.¹¹

Aboriginalist representations of Indigenous Australian women
 Critiques of Aboriginalism rarely feature in anthropological or ethnomusicological discourse and with the exception of Moreton-Robertson there has been very little discussion of the specific ways that Aboriginalist discourse constructs,

works against and affects Aboriginal women.¹² As McConaghy, among others, points out, Said's *Orientalism* presents us with a notion of colonialism as non-gendered.¹³ Said states that 'Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand'.¹⁴ Lewis emphasises that the 'him' of this quotation is significant — for Said, in *Orientalism* at least, Orientalism is a homogenous discourse articulated by a colonial subject that is 'unified, intentional and irredeemably male'.¹⁵ Lewis acknowledges that although Said discusses the impact of discourses of gender in his later work, in *Orientalism* he 'does not question women's apparent absence as producers of Orientalist discourse or as agents with colonial power' and gender only occurs in the text 'as a metaphor for the negative characterisation of the Orientalised Other as "feminine"'.¹⁶ Lewis argues that women did produce representations that constituted Orientalism, and while there is a wealth of literature on gender and Orientalism, scholars working in the Australian context have not yet drawn on this work to critique Aboriginalism in relation to gender.¹⁷ How, then, is Aboriginalism gendered? What does this discourse mean in relation to Aboriginalism and its relationship to gender?

White male anthropological representations of Indigenous Australian women

Anthropology has played an influential role in constructing Aboriginalist notions of both 'Aborigines' and Indigenous Australian women. My analysis here does not attempt to give an exhaustive account of Aboriginalist representations, nor does it try to condemn these images and texts. As Muecke reveals, anthropological accounts 'traditionally excluded the possibility of dialogue with the Others' and regarded traditional forms of Indigenous Australian cultures and music alone as 'authentic', valuable and therefore worthy of scholarly consideration.¹⁸ Historically, male anthropologists dominated Australian anthropology and their primary objects of study were Indigenous Australian people and cultures.¹⁹ In their early anthropological texts, Aboriginal women were 'invisible,

or represented as inferior, or possessions or victims, or both. White male anthropologists viewed the native scene through their own phallogocentric lenses, and were dependent on male Aboriginal informants.²⁰

Women representing 'other'

Henrietta Moore writes that in the early 1970s the new 'anthropology of women' began by confronting 'the problem of how women were being represented in anthropological writings' by men and the initial problem was quickly identified as one of male bias which was seen as having three 'tiers'.²¹ According to Moore, the first bias is that of the anthropologist who brings to research various expectations and assumptions about the relationships between men and women; the second bias is one inherent in society; and the third bias is one imbedded in Western culture.²² Feminist anthropologists saw the primary task as one of deconstructing this three-tiered male bias by focusing research on women and anthropological writings about Indigenous Australian women proliferated during this period.

Phyllis Kaberry was the first non-Indigenous female anthropologist to represent the lives and culture of Indigenous Australian women.²³ Her 1939 book, *Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane*, was based on her research in the remote Kimberley region of Western Australia; it highlights the significance of Indigenous women and focused on the cultural and religious heritage of Aboriginal women at a time when 'few outsiders paid any attention to the lives of Indigenous people, let alone women'.²⁴ Since the work of Kaberry, many women anthropologists attempted to challenge the three-tiered bias and claimed a deep concern for Aboriginal women and their traditions.²⁵

Kaberry's text at least emphasised the roles of Aboriginal women at a time when Aboriginal women were represented only in stereotypical ways or not at all. Her views of 'the Aboriginal woman' as sharing with men an equal ownership of land, a common religious heritage and having sacred and secret ceremonies restricted to women challenged some of Aboriginalism's key myths. Kaberry's focus on 'traditional' Indigenous women was part of her campaign to contest the

view, argued by male anthropologists in the early part of the twentieth century, that 'traditional' Aboriginal women 'were no more than "domesticated cows"'.²⁶

Kaberry's failure to acknowledge the impact of colonialism on Kimberley Aboriginal life has been criticised by Indigenous academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson, who states that Kaberry's 'methodology allows for an illusory absence of colonisation which is preserved and felt in the presence of its absence'.²⁷ Similarly, Toussaint notes that Kaberry 'appears from her ethnography to have worked *unquestioningly* in a colonial era and she aligned herself with pastoral families, some of whom held more power and authority than 1930s Aboriginal women and men'.²⁸ Certainly Kaberry was working in a period in Australian anthropology that was strongly aligned with and influenced by Aboriginalist and colonialist agendas.

Non-Indigenous female anthropologist Diane Bell's book *Daughters of the Dreaming* was first published in 1983 and was received at the time as a 'challenge to certain cherished assumptions concerning the role of women, particularly in the sphere of religion'.²⁹ Bell asserts that Aboriginal women have a parallel culture to men, are social actors who have status, power and authority to enact social agency, and 'are autonomous, independent ritual actors who actively participate in the creation, transmission and maintenance of the values of their society'.³⁰ Yet *Daughters of the Dreaming* could be viewed as an Aboriginalist text in its positioning of Bell as a knowledgeable expert on Aboriginal women with the authority to represent and document Indigenous women's secret and restricted knowledges in a public text. Bell has been highly criticised by Indigenous Australian women academics such as Jackie Huggins, Moreton-Robinson and others who have challenged Bell's right to speak for Indigenous women.³¹ Similarly, Moore suggests that white women anthropologists, like Bell, want to challenge men's right to speak for women, but in the process find themselves 'unintentionally speaking for other women'.³²

Hamilton, however, emphasises that Bell's text must be commended because it 'opens up a certain perspective, one which has received little credence or even attention before'.³³

Bell herself states that her aim is to articulate an ethnography that was ‘feminist, engaged, ethically grounded, collaborative, relational and enmeshed in ever-expanding political contexts’.³⁴ However, her intentions must be questioned because — like Kaberry, Berndt, and others — Bell documents information about women-only ceremonies, information that today is considered restricted information.³⁵ Bell argues that ‘my economic and emotional independence of the world of men meant that I was “safe” with women’s secrets’.³⁶ While she acknowledged that information about women-only ceremonies was secret, she still documented it in a public text.

Certainly, the work of women anthropologists attempted to challenge assumptions concerning Aboriginal women. However, representations of Indigenous women by these anthropologists reveal that they, too, have contributed to the production of Aboriginalist discourse about Aboriginal women. Moreton-Robinson argues that ‘when white women anthropologists write about Indigenous women, they do so in the conventions of representation bounded by their discipline, university and politics and white Australian culture.’³⁷ There have been many other representations of Indigenous women by non-Indigenous women scholars,³⁸ and a number attempt to challenge and actively resist Aboriginalism in their work by moving beyond the traditional frame of reference to deal with social change, include and acknowledge the voices of Indigenous women, and situate Indigenous women not as objects within texts, but highlight the fullness of the lived experiences and multiple subjectivities of Indigenous women in the present. Certainly, part of the challenge for any non-Indigenous scholar researching Indigenous Australian people and their cultures, myself included, is to resist speaking for Indigenous Australians and emphasise Indigenous perspectives in order to actively challenge, shift away from and move beyond Aboriginalism.

Aboriginalism in performance

Despite the growing body of academic literature about Indigenous Australian music, critiques of Aboriginalism and colonialism are yet to take centre stage in this area of study.³⁹ There has been a noted scarcity in scholarly examinations

of Aboriginalism in relation to contemporary music performance.⁴⁰ With the exception of Lawe Davies, there has been little academic examination of the ways in which Aboriginalist discourse fixes expectations of Indigenous Australian people performing contemporary music and further, how Indigenous Australian performers respond to these expectations.⁴¹ There has also been a lack of examination of the specific ways Aboriginalism works to hinder Indigenous Australian women who perform contemporary music.

Aboriginalist discourse creates expectations and assumptions on two levels: how Indigenous performers should look and also how they should sound. Aboriginalist images of painted up black (mostly male) bodies wearing red headbands and dressed in loincloths are a dominant Aboriginalist representation in tourism, books and television. Aboriginalism also creates the expectation that the music of Indigenous performers will 'sound' Aboriginal, and therefore be linked with 'culture'. For example, when Indigenous female duo Shakaya were interviewed on ABC Radio, the first question they were asked was 'So, do you think there's anything particularly Aboriginal about your music?' Naomi Wenitong and Simone Stacey from Shakaya responded: 'We're trying to, we want to create a bit more sound where we can use a didjeridu and have actually used didjeridu in our songs. We'd like to do a lot more stuff with traditional instruments you know.'⁴² Their response suggested the pressure to conform to the image constructed by Aboriginalist views of Indigenous performers by including sonic markers of Aboriginality such as didjeridu in order to legitimise their music and their identities.⁴³

Neuenfeldt points out that the didjeridu is an integral element of an Aboriginal 'sound' in contemporary music and further suggests that 'having an identifiable "sound" ... is a major requisite for candidature for entry into the "universal pop aesthetic"'.⁴⁴ Aboriginalist expectations of the didjeridu are linked 'with the implicit inference that Aboriginal instruments, music (or musicians for that matter) are primitive, unsophisticated and low tech'.⁴⁵ Other recognisable ingredients of an Aboriginal 'sound' are clapsticks and lyrics sung in Indigenous Australian languages. Under the Aboriginalist gaze, the inclusion of Aboriginal 'sounds' into contemporary

songs by Indigenous performers ‘serves to “legitimise” them in the sense of creating overt linkages to past and present forms of artistic expression’.⁴⁶

Indigenous Australian women performers play around, within and against such musical constructions by actively negotiating, challenging and using them while blurring and merging the borders between contemporary and traditional Indigenous musical expression through the use of a wide range of musical styles and instrumentation. They make deliberate musical choices about how they, as performers, will look and also how their music will sound. Certainly, the Indigenous Australian women I interviewed are acutely aware of Aboriginalist stereotypes surrounding Indigenous Australian performance, understand how culture is used to legitimate performance and use a range of strategies to work within, against and around these Aboriginalist constructions.

Indigenous women performing within/against Aboriginalism

Sarah Patrick

Brisbane-based Torres Strait hip hop performer Sarah Patrick notes:

White Australians think they know our culture but they know nothing. They just know what the media feeds them. They see a didjeridu, they see a corroboree, they see a group of black people painted up, they go ‘oh, that’s their strange little rituals, that’s culture’.⁴⁷

Sarah’s statement highlights her awareness of Aboriginalist expectations of Indigenous performance. Certainly the Indigenous Australian women performers I interviewed are aware of these stereotypes and myths surrounding Indigenous Australian performance and understand how culture is used to legitimise performance. One of the premises of Aboriginalism is the perpetuation of stereotypical notions of a primitive Indigenous people engaging in strange and exotic rituals that sharply distinguish ‘them’ from ‘us’. Like many Indigenous Australian people, Sarah rejects this representation of Indigenous identity and performance and argues that:

What makes you black is actually your spirituality and your ties to family more than anything. Particularly knowing your family and knowing where they come from and knowing your tribe. That to me is more of a marker of Indigenous culture identity, um, as opposed to the markers of oh paint, costumes, didj. To me that's a stereotypical view that, that's a white view that's been forced upon us, um, and it's not the reality.

For Sarah, her Indigeneity is based on her family connections and her inner guiding beliefs rather than any visual or sonic markers of Indigenous performance. She also emphasises that non-Indigenous expectations of Indigenous performers being 'painted up' with ochre and playing didjeridu represent a clichéd view, which has been forced on Indigenous people. However, she does allow herself creative freedom to incorporate elements of Torres Strait Creole at times in her music, for example in her song 'Where Itzat':

With a smile like the sun you's a whole lotta fun
 The kinda wantocs sistagels chase at NAIDOCs
 You's are black-tastic, black-tabolous
 Black-wonderful, black-marvellous
 Native as platypus yea I like that
 Black is where it's at — I love black boys yo and they love me!

Sarah points out that 'White Australians have a perception which is stereotypical but not necessarily the truth and that's not helped by portrayals in the media'.⁴⁸ She further notes:

What you'll find with most Indigenous rap is that instead of using Afro-American terms I do it in Island language terms, so instead of saying 'brother' we say *bala*, like *gumma* is well, in the city it means just a good looking person you see a nice looking guy it's like 'Oh *gumma*!' However when you go back up North into the islands it still just means like a beautiful woman, like a girl, but that's changing [laughs].

Although Sarah does incorporate elements of her Torres Strait Island background in her music, she also emphasises that:

It's not done in a methodical way—like you obviously don't sit down with a song and go 'Oh! I'll put in this here because I have to have the markers', for me necessarily like in terms of Indigenous culture, the one big marker that people don't understand is that it is the inner, rather than the external. Just like, yeah cool, I can paint up as much as the next person but that doesn't make me any more black than anyone else.

Sarah sets out openly to resist Aboriginalist expectations of Indigenous sounds in her music and, although she does not necessarily plan to incorporate elements of Indigenous musical expression, sometimes 'it just happens'.⁴⁹

Briscoe Sisters

The Indigenous duo from Cairns, North Queensland, the Briscoe Sisters (Deline and Naurita Briscoe) have also successfully been grabbing audiences' expectations by using hand clapping and singing a number of contemporary songs in the Aboriginal language from their region in Mossman in North Queensland—Kuku Yalanji.⁵⁰ They point out that they do not often come across questions about the legitimacy of their performances. Their song 'Wanju' on their live album is sung in Kuku Yalanji and English in two-part harmony and accompanied by acoustic and electric guitar, drums and bass.⁵¹

One of the sisters, Deline, states that 'Back when I was about seventeen I just thought "Hey we should do a song in language" just because it's how we talk so I thought why don't we just do a song in language so we did that.'⁵² Deline emphasises that:

A lot of people think that the Aboriginal culture and languages are lost and when we get up and sing it just opens their eyes to see no there is a culture, there is a language for you know every section of Australia. But, yeah and I guess because ... every time we sing, we sing a language

song so it's hard. If we didn't sing language yeah we maybe would be asked that.

Further, Deline notes, 'There's a lot of people out there that don't know that Aboriginal people still have their culture because they think that's all lost and they've got no culture 'cause I've heard those statements before too'. The view that all Indigenous cultures and languages are all lost is a marker of Aboriginalist discourse, implies that Aborigines and their music making are dying out and also situates authentic Aboriginal cultures in the past. By singing in their language the Briscoe Sisters are resisting this perception and challenging the Aboriginalist myth that Aboriginal people cannot adapt to modern times.

Like some other Indigenous women performers, the Briscoe Sisters incorporate their language into their music as a way of preserving their Aboriginal language through song. Deline states:

Actually a lot of times when we sing in language, people from our area, Kuku Yalanji especially, when they've moved to the cities or they've moved to Townsville or whatever, we finish [and] they're crying 'cause they've never heard our language sung like that before, and so it's a new thing for us and our tribe, clan, all of that, to have our language sung like that.

However, many of their songs do not incorporate elements which audiences might identify as 'Aboriginal' (for example, 'Check it Out', 'Lonely Souls' and 'Broad Road'). They sing about a diverse range of issues including workplace prejudice, relationships, child sexual abuse, friendship, and other topics and accompany themselves on guitar and hand percussion or sing *a capella*. The Briscoe Sisters then, are resisting non-Indigenous people's expectations on dual levels. Most of their songs resist Aboriginalist constructions and expectations of what styles of music Indigenous Australian people perform, and also how they should sound, by not including musical markers of their Indigeneity. Yet at other times they incorporate some lyrics in language which challenges the

Aboriginalist assumption that Aboriginal languages and cultures have died out and the colonial myth that Aboriginal people are incapable of adjusting or adapting to the present.

Monica Weightman

The beginning and ending of the title track on Monica Weightman's CD *Lost Generation* incorporates the song 'Darnley Island Too Far Away', a song that Monica's father sang during his childhood on Thursday Island.⁵³ The opening is sung by Monica and two male vocalists in unison and accompanied by clapsticks:

Teb teb ka nalai e
Kara nas barki
Bakiamudari tumem ka
Erub ka deraimeli e
Nole ka erdari
O diya mi diya
Darnley Island too far away

Monica states:

It's a wonderful story. We've retraced the writer's steps and I spoke to his descendants up there on Darnley Island, they're still there. But ... his name's Leui Thaiday, the guy who wrote that and he was a songwriter. He was a pearl diver and a songwriter. Apparently he was forever making up songs so we spoke to his relatives on Darnley Island, they gave us permission to use it, and ah the mask on the CD.⁵⁴

The inside of the CD case also features a painting of a wedding mask by artist John Dow, which signifies the 'cycle of generations'. Most of the songs on Monica's album (including 'Here We Go', 'Miss You', 'Middle of Nowhere) do not draw on features that audiences could identify as musical markers of her Indigeneity and Monica notes:

I got asked a question from a South African woman. She said to me, about the instrumentation, like 'do you use

the didgeridu and stuff?’ and I said, ‘Well, no I don’t.’ And I probably would be reticent about putting it on my, or within my music because that’s not ... where I come from, you know. We’re talking more about drums and Islander drums, that’s sort of more where I come from. So there is this general conception that, you know, all Aboriginals play didgeridu.

Monica’s statement points to the localised nature of Indigenous musical sounds and emphasises that she is aware that the sound and image of the didgeridu has become fixed in the minds of many non-Indigenous people as a symbol of Aboriginality through out Australia and overseas. Neuenfeldt notes the didgeridu has become the ‘primary aural and visual musical icon of Australian indigeneity’.⁵⁵ Monica resists Aboriginalist expectations by only incorporating sounds which she feels are culturally appropriate while at the same time contemporary music has provided Monica with the tools to connect with her Indigenous heritage.

Deb Morrow

Other Indigenous women performers, like Deb Morrow, attempt to openly resist Aboriginalist constructions of Indigenous performance by not drawing on any typical musical elements—such as didgeridu, clapsticks or the use of Aboriginal languages—that could be identified by audiences as forms of traditional Indigenous Australian musical expression. The title of Deb’s CD *Flight of the Emu* (2001) is meaningful to Deb because, as she states, ‘Emu’s my main totem, that’s the one that drives me most’. The CD cover includes a sketch of an emu in red facing a black and white photograph of Deb. The emu’s head is close to Deb’s profile and signifies Deb’s closeness to and affiliation with her totem. The significance of an emu taking flight is explained by Deb in the following way:

As you know, emus can’t fly, but there’s a traditional story about how she used to fly once and she lost her flight through she came to the earth because she wanted to dance with brolga, and brolga tricked her into coming to the earth so once she stepped foot on the earth she lost her

flight and that's when the world started getting created and things started going wrong, and we've ended up here.

Here there is a certain tension between images and sounds because the songs on Deb's album do not draw on any musical elements which audiences might identify as 'Aboriginal'. Like Lou, Deb deliberately resists Aboriginalist stereotypes of Indigenous performance by trying to 'steer away from it as much as possible, because they're [clapsticks and didjeridu] not something I was brought up with. I wasn't brought up traditionally, I don't think my tribe actually ever blew a didjeridu.' Deb explains that she uses instruments that are available to her, and she challenges the Aboriginalist beliefs that Aborigines are frozen in the past, unable to adjust or adapt to the modern world, asserting 'we're a progressive culture and we've progressed and we've been forced to be, to move into a modern world, so I use what's been given to me and that is my guitar, electrified instruments, drum kits'.⁵⁶

A big question which arises is how can these Indigenous women be resisting Aboriginalist constructions when, on the surface, incorporating elements of traditional musical expression and visual images could be read as meeting Aboriginalist expectations of Indigenous performance? There is a tension apparent here — these women are trying to resist one-dimensional Aboriginalist constructions of Indigenous Australian performance yet at the same time they want to be free to explore, experiment and draw on their cultural backgrounds in their music and self representation. It is not surprising that this contradiction exists because just as the myths projected by Orientalism and Aboriginalism have no rationality and are grounded in 'prejudices based on doctrines of evolutionary difference and intellectual inferiority' the responses by Indigenous women performers to Aboriginalism in performance are equally varied and diverse.⁵⁷

My relationship to Aboriginalism

I now want to step back and pose the question, as McConaghy does, is it possible to speak about Indigenous Australian people from outside Aboriginalism?⁵⁸ Writing about Indigenous Australian issues, peoples and cultures is inherently political.

As a non-Indigenous woman I am mindful of Sharpe's warning that 'none of us escapes the legacy of a colonial past and its traces in our academic practice'.⁵⁹ An important question for me is: how is my gaze different? In some ways I feel that I am resisting tendencies to view women as secondary. First, by engaging with Aboriginalism in relation to performance and focusing on Indigenous Australian women, I am taking a crucial step towards 'moving beyond the exoticised projections of the imaginations of Western anthropologists'.⁶⁰ Second, by asking questions about Aboriginalism I am drawing attention to the ways this discourse works to create and sustain expectations of what Indigenous Australian women performing contemporary music should sound and look like, and how Indigenous Australian women respond to these expectations. Third, and perhaps most importantly, at every turn I am putting in place strategies that aim to privilege the voices of Indigenous Australian women performers, emphasising their diverse voices, performances and styles in order to resist how Aboriginalism excludes Indigenous people as authorised speakers.⁶¹

After undertaking interviews with twenty Indigenous Australian women performers for my doctoral research, I was overwhelmed with the many challenging ethical questions posed by feminist researchers about representation and writing. How can I represent the performers best? Given that one of the central tenets of feminist research is to empower women's voices and experiences I also question whose voices should I include, when and how often? How can I include a 'chorus of voices'?⁶²

Concerned with the issues of representation, authority and authorship raised in my own writing, I am continually attempting to incorporate quotations of Indigenous women performers from my interviews with them. The words of Kathy Charmaz resonate with my own thoughts:

I prefer to present many detailed interview quotes and examples in the body of my work. I do so to keep the human story in the forefront of the reader's mind and to make the conceptual analysis more accessible to a wider audience.⁶³

At the same time, I am constantly reminded of Holman Jones's fear that the text might contain 'too many of the author's voices and too few of the voices of those she studies'.⁶⁴ Lincoln and Denzin note that one way to respond to these issues of representation is to move to 'including the Other in the larger research processes that we have developed'.⁶⁵ I attempted to do this by sending drafts that included Indigenous women performers' statements to the performers themselves for their comments, additions and approval of the representation of their voices. This involved a process of negotiation and consultation with performers.

The best that I can hope for is to incorporate the voices of performers and allow them to speak in their own voices rather than interpreting them through my voice. Yet despite my intentions, ultimately the work remains my interpretation of their words. I am still left wondering if my representations of performers is what they had hoped for? 'How do I "unlearn" my privilege as a white woman scholar?' throughout the research process? Is it possible for a non-Indigenous researcher and Indigenous performers to have an equal voice in a research project like this? Like Holman Jones, I feel that 'I am not wise with answers, but alive with questions'.⁶⁶ I cannot escape the fact that I am a non-Indigenous female scholar engaging in a representation of Indigenous Australian women, and that I am constructing or producing knowledge about Indigenous women performing contemporary music. As Attwood asks, is it 'possible to have any worthwhile non-Aboriginal knowledge about Aborigines or is it inherently flawed because of the political — that is colonial — circumstances in which it was created?'⁶⁷

Conclusion

A month after the performances by Toni and Sarah at the Judith Wright Centre, I ran into my friend Mark's sister Louise by coincidence at Indooroopilly Shopping Centre. 'Hey, Kate!' Louise exclaimed, 'I meant to tell you, thanks heaps for inviting me to that Indigenous music gig.' 'That's OK,' I said slightly bemused at the memory of her comment that the performance wasn't what she had expected. 'I ended up buying Toni Janke's CD from her website and I've really

been enjoying listening to it,' Louise said excitedly. 'Really? That's great,' I responded trying to hide the surprise from my voice. 'Yeah, I was playing the CD the other day and then Mum said to me "you wouldn't know that she's Indigenous just by listening to her music, would you?"' Louise rolled her eyes and continued her story, 'And I said, "Well Mum, just because she's Indigenous doesn't mean she has to be blowing a didgeridu or wearing a head band!"'

This narrative illustrates that contemporary music provides Indigenous women with a powerful podium to change audiences' expectations, educate non-Indigenous people about the diversity of Indigenous people and break down Aboriginalist perceptions of Indigenous Australian performance. The comment that 'You wouldn't know she's Indigenous just by listening to her music' suggests that Aboriginalist constructions of Indigenous performance continue to pervade the minds of many non-Indigenous audiences and certainly the performers remain acutely aware of these expectations. But when Indigenous Australian women performers take the stage, their voices and performances are attempting to educate non-Indigenous people through performance about the diverse identities, songs and musical styles performed by Indigenous women musicians.

Today, Aboriginalism continues to take many varied and at times contradictory guises in relation to Indigenous women performing contemporary music. Indigenous women performers emphasised to me that some audiences expect 'traditional' musical instruments, languages, costumes and 'paint', while others have perceptions of 'real' Aborigines as being an 'other-worldly' and much desired 'other' to the non-Indigenous imagination.⁶⁸ Aboriginalist discourse is constructed, controlled and maintained by a dominant non-Indigenous culture and appears to continue to have a strong hold in the minds of many non-Indigenous Australians. As a result, Indigenous Australian people, as Muecke acknowledges, are faced with a 'totalising concept of Aboriginal culture' and often expected to 'display this essence, or this or that skill, as if culture were an endowment of a totality'.⁶⁹

Rey Chow reminds us that we live in an era in which

the critique of the West has become not only possible but necessary and describes this task of critiquing colonial power and representations as ‘dismantling the claims of cultural authority that are housed in specific representations’.⁷⁰ The contemporary music performances and recordings by Indigenous Australian women are exciting and exhilarating not only because they are talented musicians but because they provide potent examples of the ways these women are able to sing, perform, speak, and play their way through Aboriginalist assumptions to self-define more diverse and dynamic identities as Indigenous Australian women.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank all the talented Indigenous Australian women performers who have, and continue to, participate in my research. In particular, I am grateful to Lou Bennett, Deline and Naurita Briscoe, Toni Janke, Deb Morrow and Sarah Patrick. Many thanks also to Liz Mackinlay, Steven Knopoff and the referees for their thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

Reflection

A number of performers have emerged since the publication of the article—including Jessica Mauboy and Thelma Plum—and performers continue to perform within and against Aboriginalist expectations in diverse ways. A recent example of an Aboriginalist image was the DVD cover of the 2012 film *Sapphires*. While the Australian DVD cover showed the four Aboriginal female singers who play the Sapphires at the front, with their manager in the background, the United States DVD cover depicted their manager at the centre with the four women faded into the background. Some critics argued this was clever marketing for the US audience, yet it could also be read as a parallel to early anthropological texts where Aboriginal women were relegated to the background and silenced.

Since the publication of this article, my research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women performers has continued and I continue to consider my own relationship to Aboriginalism. What is my role as a non-Indigenous woman scholar in this context? My response has been to shift to a more collaborative research framework. One of the performers who I interviewed for my thesis, Lexine Solomon, invited me to work

collaboratively on a project exploring the contemporary music of her fellow Torres Strait Islander women performers. Together we travelled across Australia interviewing Torres Strait Islander women performers and have since published and presented at conferences together. I have also undertaken a collaborative research project with Aboriginal researcher Monique Proud about music making in her own community of Cherbourg in Queensland. In this way, I hope my research can resist Aboriginalism and continue to work towards building ongoing dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

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‘Can You Anchor a Shimmering Nation State via Regional Indigenous Roots?’ Kim Scott talks to Anne Brewster about *That Deadman Dance*

Anne Brewster and Kim Scott

This interview focuses mainly on Kim Scott’s novel *That Deadman Dance*. The main topics of conversation include Scott’s involvement in the Noongar language project (and the relationship of this project to the novel), the novel itself, the challenges of writing in English, the resistance paradigm and Indigenous sovereignty and nationalism.

The Noongar language project

Anne: I wanted to ask you about your very different books. What’s it like looking back at *Kayang & Me*, the book that you finished before *That Deadman Dance*?

Kim: Well, it’s a continuing project actually. *Kayang & Me* was a way to thank Hazel Brown as much as anything. And it began me on a lot of language work which I’m still doing. I’ve got a couple of books coming out later this year, bilingual books. They’re Noongar creation stories from along the south coast, where we’ve connected the informants, or the work of the informants in 1930, with their descendants today. So Aunt Hazel’s uncle, Bob Roberts, her father’s brother, was one of the informants. The politics of archival and cultural material is very much about returning it to community. We got the group to invite people to a meeting in Albany and in front

of everyone there we gave them their dad's or their uncle's or their grandfather's stories back and within about ten minutes everyone was crying. I had taught myself a version of the International Phonetic Alphabet, which is what this early 1930s material was written in. I read the stories back to the descendants of the informants and we recorded it all. And then a few months later I cross-referenced all that with all the other South Coast linguists' work, trying to get a dialect back.

Anne: So these were stories written in Noongar?

Kim: Yeah, in Albany, in 1930. Gerhardt Laves was the linguist's name. There's a website about him that David Nash has put together. We had another weekend where we played with those stories, illustrated them. We put together fifty copies of each of the three stories on a DVD with me, Roma Winmar and Iris Woods reading the stories aloud in Noongar. We handed them out at the community meeting. We had an exhibition of the artwork in the Noongar centre in Albany. We did the DVD with a couple of Elders — Auntie Hazel and her brother — showing us, doing oral history, telling us about the old camping sites, the dancing grounds, which each story is connected...

So this represents the return and consolidation and enhancing of archival material, which is what *Kayang & Me* is about: archives and oral history working together. And relationships between people with that heritage. As for my current literary activity, given the imperatives on an Indigenous literary writer, the strong pressures to do something like supply ammunition for the cause ... I don't know if that gets the best out of literature. In the most recent book, I've tried to work with ambivalence, and complexity, lots of points of view and ...

Anne: In *That Deadman Dance*?

Kim: *That Deadman Dance*, yeah. And the other work—that community work, the regeneration and consolidating of culture in its own community and empowering people

through the sharing of that in a controlled way—is the politics, for want of a better word. The literary stuff is about provoking and trying to open doors to a much wider audience, arousing interest in this other stuff. I'm almost in the position of creating a sort of cultural literacy, so that I can have references through the novel to this other work. This is definitely the case with *That Deadman Dance*.

One of the Noongar stories that I work with, which I refer to in the opening page and touch on again and again, is about a Noongar man entering a whale and making it, through song and controlled violence, take him from the place east of Albany to somewhere in Albany. It's all in language. The story talks about an affiliation, a spiritual affiliation with the ocean, pre ice age, and creatures in the water with whom you are really strongly affiliated, spiritually. In these Noongar creation stories there are very powerful protagonists, there are a lot of quests and people prepared to innovate, trusting their heritage. Bobby Wabalanginy [in *That Deadman Dance*] is like that.

So that gave me some courage—doing that other work—to have a character who is so confident in himself and his heritage that he'll willingly and readily appropriate new cultural products, new ways of doing things. He just does not have it in his mind that anyone could ever want to conquer another's country, because he was so connected with it: you're the same, you and your country. How can anyone ... how impossible ... so that is what I'm playing with.

So that sort of cultural work, which comes out of *Kayang & Me*, is continuing in *That Deadman Dance*. You say they are different books. I see the last page of *Benang*, for instance, as a fictional individual wanting to be part of cultural consolidation stuff with a very small community of descendants. So *Kayang & Me* takes that up as does this language project.

Anne: You have talked about the relationship of fiction to archival and community work. Are they different processes which complement each other? Is the relationship between them a political relationship?

Kim: Not so much political, although it's partly in the context of politics. No, it's connection stuff. It's really nice to work in

a literary way with words and language and with the cleverness that one may have in that realm, with a community of descendants of place (the South East, South Coast, Western Australia). I've come to think that there's really something deep in sound, a sort of purity in Indigenous languages, a spiritual component.

In 'The Wasteland', T.S Eliot closes with Sanskrit; he heals himself: 'these fragments I've shored against my ruins'. I thought: that's what language can do. The idea of being linguistically displaced and dispossessed, even in one's own country; and then language comes back and ones makes oneself an instrument for it and for the spirit of place.

Bobby Wabalanginy

Anne: This reminds me of the subtitle of *Benang*: 'from the heart'. It seems to me that *That Deadman Dance* is also centrally about feeling. It's a story from the heart, from the body and from the land. I was talking to you earlier about the ending which I read as tragic, as filled with despair.

Kim: Originally my intentions were to end the novel on the upbeat. But I'm not convinced that that is the best way to use literature — as political ammunition. It's too reductionist, and you don't get the strengths of it. So with this novel I wanted ambivalence and a lot of generosity. No real strong baddies in there. So the story itself, until the end, doesn't fit the conventional narratives we have of our shared history. Ending it like I did, I thought might be a way of setting up all sorts of resonances to do with possibility and loss. I hope the story is about creativity and spirit, about strength: strong Noongar characters. And about possibility being lost. And so the connection between the resolution and the conventional historical narrative does, I hope, a lot of political work through those resonances. This is a reasonably positive story, a story of affirmation. And the ending reminds us how it intersects with the historical narrative, the theme of which is something close to defeat.

The title, 'That Deadman Dance' is a reference to the military drill, Flinders' military drill turned into a dance and kept going as a dance. When I think about that, I think ... wow, what a powerful thing to do, to turn a violent drill into a dance. Appropriating cultural products of the other. And perhaps one can do that with a novel. Early in the book, Bobby Wabalanginy has some pages that he shows to his descendants ... you know, when they come to see him in the camp and he's a broken, defeated, embittered fella. For me the ending is sad and bad, but it is still ambivalent ... is this what has really happened ... ? And then after that ending [Bobby as a defeated, embittered fella] is that bit, earlier in the book [chronologically], where he offers these few pages on which he's attempted to document some of his stuff. You know ... there's an oil skin ... his whaler's journal. And that's a tradition, like with Bessie Flowers, from which one can make a literary tradition with really strong Noongar roots.

So the Dead Man Dance was a powerful act of appropriation ... or was it the beginning of something like the end ... ? You know, it's a dead man doing it. But the fact that the Noongars appropriated the dance and the fact that you can write a novel as a Noongar person, is in itself expressive of continuity, in that the resolution of that novel—the end, the last page—is not the end. There are possibilities still.

Anne: I was intrigued by Old Bobby. He seems like a time traveller, like he travels into our time and is talking to us.

Kim: No, no, that's commodification.

Anne: He's 'entertainment' for the 'tourists'?

Kim: There's some hurt in that. The commodification. He's a convenient black fella.

Anne: He seems also to have *maban* (clever man) qualities. He manipulates audiences very effectively. As you say: all right everybody is laughing at him, but when people are laughing at you, you've got their complete attention. They're receptive and you can do something with that.

Kim: And you've got them vulnerable as well. It's a giving away of defences.

Anne: I thought that the novel aligned Bobby's storytelling with the practices that various Noongar people were performing on the landscape.

Kim: Yeah, it also helps signal that the story's not over yet. In the novel there's a linear resolution, but there's a couple of other things going on. There's the Old Bobby telling stories. He's not in a strong position, but he is not completely out of the picture in terms of power and, as I mentioned; he has that little journal. The novel begins with him scribbling on a piece of slate. And there's other times when he's playing with language. It's open to possibility. The idea of the journal has to be a thin strand because that is an aspect of our reality.

And the Dead Man Dance may have been a mistake, you know—him learning that dance, and doing so much appropriation of the cultural products of the Other; being a little bit nonstrategic. I'm allowing for the possibility that that is a mistake. But the thin strand that is not a mistake is that journal. As a novelist, you see where I am there. As a novelist I'm working in that tradition of keeping the culture and stories alive.

Anne: So was performing the dance a mistake? Do you mean generally that Bobby was mistaken because he was too generous and open and giving?

Kim: No, he takes on the military dance that becomes the Dead Man Dance. He's an expert at that and he fancies that his whole dancing quality is all about rhythm, for example, the dancing on the ship. I think it's really important, that idea of rhythm. In some of that he may have erred. He's not quite the dancer he thought he was; or perhaps the dance as a form is not necessarily the form that's going to powerfully speak to this mob—the ones that get up at the end of the novel, dismissively; he hasn't got them. But just possibly, writing is [the form]. So it's not a mistake what he did there ...

That explains the whole sequencing of the novel as well. If I had Old Bobby's storytelling at the end it wouldn't really work, in my opinion. But to have him as an old storyteller early in the novel shakes it up, makes it a little bit awkward for people. If I had the old storyteller at the end he would certainly appear defeated. Having his storytelling early like that, and then a little glimpse — when he is talking about defeat (that is, when some of the descendants come see him) — a little glimpse of his attempts to work with language (that he gave up on) is enough. This harks back to the 'writing never arrives naked' thesis.¹ Bessie Flowers, Manjat, the whole Noongar literary tradition, are linked into those sort of things, the possibility.

Anne: ...and the ending?

Kim: The whole ambivalence of that ending then is ... 'it's a mistake'. You can read it as 'well, he was fucking stupid wasn't he ... ?'

Anne: The novel seemed to me to present a positive, optimistic scenario initially. To some extent the ending pulls the rug out from under you a bit ...

Kim: Oh yeah, that is the idea. My interest was in a positive story and to talk about Noongar people as very impressive. They were a little bit naïve and silly in some ways, because they were not being strategic enough, but I wanted to turn that into a strength. And then the possibility that I could finish it in a way that allowed it to resonate in really interesting ways with the overwhelming well-known narrative of defeat, and the discordances, means that it becomes political in a way that works with the strengths of story. That's the whole new bit for me you know. Can I do this? Can I make a positive yarn and still make it political? Using the stuff of fiction to do what nothing else can do ...

Anne: I read it as your melancholy getting the better of you ... [laughs]

Kim: Well, there is a fair bit of that in there. Issues like: what is it to be a novelist today? We've got very limited power. We're like a dancer ... [laughs] one of those artists that's most easily commodified perhaps. You know it's the dance that does the work for you. I want all these things in there. I'm not saying it's one or the other. And that's the ambivalence that you can do really well in stories. Story is layers and interpretations; let's have a think about this and provoke. It's not a haranguing thing; it's not a lecture.

Anne: It has poetic resolution. A powerful, affective closural scene. The book isn't very strongly plot driven. Rather, it has a number of mini plots.

Kim: Yeah ... If there is one it's strategic thinking versus something like creativity.

Anne: Going back to *That Dead Man Dance*, I thought it had some comedy in it and there is humour in the dance that ends the book. There's an element of fun in the dances, but the tragedy is in the turning away of his audience. That was for me a very traumatic moment. There was a level of attention that is ethically required at that moment — as a courtesy — and the withdrawing of that attention felt like a hostile act.

Kim: Yeah, no, on one level, being a novelist, I was just thinking about creativity of course, about the creative arts and commodification ... [laughs] You know like Bobby Wabalanginy's name means 'all of us playing together' ... from the root word 'waban'. So, on one level there's a little bit of the novelist's bitterness in there — creativity, play, trust in spirit and creativeness. The novel is in part an expression of that, but it's also ... these are not good times ... and the whole spirit that I try and work with is always in danger of being turned into something less than I would hope it is, if that doesn't sound too arrogant. But there's the intentional fallacy. That stuff's all in my head.

Anne: Do you mean the spirit you work with as a novelist or as someone working on these Noongar cultural projects (for example, language reclamation)?

Kim: Ah, it's all the same thing. To me they're really one. I'm a literary novelist; I don't see that as working against being a Noongar person. I see that as absolutely the same thing. And some of my inspirations I have listed in the acknowledgments [the Afterword] of *That Deadman Dance*. There are many instances: Mokare² singing that song, the expedition journal, a diarist seeing the expedition journal structure and recitation, Bessie Flowers,³ the Noongars wanting to go on a boat, as Tiffany Shellam says.⁴ That whole spirit is there: we'll just take those new cultural products because they're in our place now and we'll see what we can do with them. They had that real confident trust in their heritage.

So because your heritage has been diminished, you do this other work that I was talking of earlier [language reclamation], and you get the inspiration from those fellas in early contact and that's what you work with. So in this novel, the characters are like those fellas in early contact and not a few generations into an oppressed culture. So you're not in the dead end of polemics, constantly reacting against the status quo with anger. You're trying to work with healing and the strength of the cultural tradition, the heritage. Not to be shrill, polemic or trapped in the paradigm that's being set up for us.

Anne: One of the things I wanted to ask you about was the episodes about whaling. The slaughter was rather horrific, given that it was for commercial profit. It made me wonder if ...

Kim: I'm glad it makes you wonder about that sort of stuff. It seemed to me it was partly a way to talk about the violence of colonisation, as a backdrop, as a metaphor. There's violence all around this fella Bobby and a couple of his mates. There's terrible things going on. But also, again, I wanted just to think about a [strong] culture like that and about individuals so willing to grab new forms.

It's the Dead Man Dance thing again. You can lead yourself into great trouble doing that. Here is a new technique. Menak strands a whale in the early days. That is a source of great wealth for Noongar people and festivity. When you've got technology it allows you to kill whales more readily and to make yourself a powerful person by sharing that wealth. And I hint that that's what is happening for Bobby and some of the others. They're welcomed in those other camps around the whaling base ... with all those young man impulses. There's something like arrogance in there. There're dangers in there. As there is the Dead Man Dance. A young man taking a form or a new technology and using it, you know — 'because I can do it, that's what I do, and this is my place'. There're dangers in that.

And so there is a need to think about this, to be strategic in a contemporary sense that relates to us. This is not a big thing in the novel, but it's part of what's big for me: living in an oppressed community, we carry all the markers of oppression, and we've picked up some really bad stuff in recent generations as well as hanging on to some really good stuff. It's worthwhile to think about that: the processes of decolonisation. So the whaling allows me, in an ambivalent way and, I hope, in a rich way, to think about those things. To look these innocents: they're surrounded with so much and they're about to be struck with enormous violence and people are dying all the time, but because they're young men, they're not completely cognisant of that.

In that older whaling story where the man enters the whale, he controls the whale; this doesn't sit comfortably with stereotypical notions of Indigenous cultural relations. What's implied in this story is controlled violence. It provokes thought because it moves away from — it questions and challenges — ideas of being in harmony with the environment. It makes it nice and complex for me. When the man enters the whale he controls it via song but also by stabbing, squeezing its heart. And he's trusting the song that is about a man doing exactly what he's doing. He's trusting that, and he's using the whale, he's working with the whale. He strands it at the end and he comes out of the whale. There are two women on the beach and he has delivered wealth to them. And that particular story,

a creation story, informs this novel. That story ends with him returning, heading back east, from somewhere like Albany, with a whole bunch of kids and two pregnant women. So he's returning to his home country as a powerful person with wealth and he has bestowed wealth on that community he's lived with. That connects to *That Dead Man Dance* and the whaling, the ambivalence of it. The whaling is good in some ways, but there're dangers in it as well.

The coloniser's language

Anne: I've been reading lots of books for the Commonwealth Writers Prize judging these last few years and I have been struck at how many people are writing historical novels. You have talked about the language recovery projects that you're engaged with in the Noongar community. But do you see any kind of resonances between *That Deadman Dance* and white Australian historical novels?

Kim: I'm not sure ... I think part of the impulse is to find heroes for oneself, to go back and to rework the most readily available historical narrative that you're given, as a Noongar person. But I imagine that's what others are doing. That's what Kate Grenville was doing, I think, with *The Secret River*: trying to find a place for herself that she's comfortable within this pretty harsh history. There's a difference though for colonised people, carrying the legacy of oppression, the imperatives are I think greater. The impulse to rework, to find a story you can tell yourself and your people. And, I guess, the more shook up the current times are, the more dispute there is about the question: what is that historical narrative?

Anne: It seemed to me *That Deadman Dance* was similar to *Benang* in that it was crucially interested in the relationality of white people and Noongar people, constantly going back to that edge. Cross-racial interpersonal relationships seem to be very important to you. I'm thinking in *Benang* of Harvey and his grandfather and in *That Deadman Dance* of Bobby and Dr Cross.

Kim: Yeah, I think that's part of the literary thing. You know, the relationship between reader and writer. The novel's a very intimate form, one on one. I'm reluctant to talk about Noongar culture and spirit. But I do think about human centeredness and that linguistic ability that you see in those early contact situations. I have Bobby and Wunyeran working with that ability to use language to get people closer. And then there's the whole business of spirit in the coloniser's language, that's an interface too and I'm reproducing that in those Noongar and non-Noongar characters.

Anne: The spirit of the coloniser's language ...? Do you mean the spirit of the colonisers in *their* language?

Kim: No, no, I mean the Noongar spirit in the coloniser's language. At one stage I was using the working title 'arose a wail', meaning the surfacing of a whale, but also the inarticulate cry of anguish, the 'cussing' of Noongar consciousness in the English language. This is a butting up of sorts, an intimate butting up of difference, with the black and non-black characters. In all those things is that intersection, that meeting point. But I'd like to think it's from a strong Noongar centre. In my heart I'm trying to put myself or Noongar culture at the very centre of things. The Noongar spirit has to get into the language and then it's working. You find yourself butting up against people who *only* have that language in a sense.

Anne: Language is a way of conducting and undertaking and performing a connection, a dialogue. It's ...

Kim: ... interiority, put out there ...

Anne: ... in a ceremonial way. Your characters are straining for some kind of ethical contact. And although relationships draw on feeling, those feelings are made ceremonial through language.

Kim: Yeah, that is something that I care about. I like song for the same sort of reasons. Mokare⁵ doing that 'Oh Where have you been all the day Billy Boy' song. There is a practice that

some Elders have informed me of, that of Noongars exchanging song. When Noongars meet one another, you give your sound, you give your song; that's how you know people. I find that really worth thinking about. It appeals to me also because I like language, I like song and sound.

Anne: I guess in many cultures there's a sense that language doesn't work only between human beings. When people pray to God, for example, they imagine that they are engaging in some kind of spiritual communication through language. And I understand that when Aboriginal people go to country they call out to the spirits and greet them. So in this sense human language can work in other ways ... not just within the human realm.

Kim: Yeah, yeah ... that's what I said before, that spiritual dimension. I think you can do a real lot with English, mind you, but with Noongar language ... What I hope to do, is to have Noongar inform English. When you think about it, Indigenous language is the language coming from the people who first created human society here. That's starting to get pretty bloody serious, you know, to speak of things such as spirit and antiquity and continuity. As for myself, I think: what can I learn from Noongar language and stories? How can I share that in the translation process? You're not giving it away. You're value adding. Recreating new possibilities. I'm really interested in that sort of movement. That's a sort of 'schizoid' literary process. Where can I go if I trust myself and do the literary thing, the intuitive thing, and then the intellectual at a later date? And then the other bit is being with a community of descendants on country, doing these old sounds. What can we do together? I would like to try keep those two things going and separate and see how they cross-fertilise.

Sharing a heritage/The resistance paradigm

Anne: If I can change the topic, I'd like to task you about the limited rapprochement between politicians and Aboriginal communities. There seems to be very little will or courage on politicians' parts to undertake reform. Julia

Gillard saying recently ‘well it’s going to be very hard to close the gap’ sounded like she was setting up an excuse ...

Kim: Well, it might be almost impossible to do what they’re talking about in that sort of language ... ‘close the gap’. I work in the area of health and there’s a lot of research that indicates that the more Indigenous communities feel they have a sense of self-determination and a connection with their language and land, the better their health is. There’s a fellow, Michael Chandler, who has done a lot of research on suicide. In Native America there are terrible youth suicide rates, but when you isolate youth in communities, those that have a strong connection with their traditional classical heritage don’t have the same sort of problems. It’s an issue of discontinuity. Chandler talks about the paradox of change and continuity on an individual basis, particularly in adolescence. He argues that Native Americans tend to have a narrational sense of identity: relational and narrational. They can tell a story about how they connect with others and with their place and their heritage, whereas non-Indigenous people have this essentialist notion, ‘my birth right’: ‘I stay the same, an essence of me stays the same’. And it’s a fallacy to translate that to Indian culture. But you can see the attraction of doing so, for a culture that’s had its fundamentals denigrated, and great efforts made to destroy it and trash it.

The fundamental need is for collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. But I would argue what’s really fundamental is that sense of continuity and the strength that comes from things like language. For the nation state and this Australian identity crisis to be healed — as well as us (you know it’s Indigenous and non-Indigenous in it together today) — we need strong Indigenous roots in a regional basis. We can get to this position, as I found with the Noongar language project. And what I have Bobby doing a lot of in this novel is sharing a heritage. That’s really, really powerful. To have non-Indigenous people interested in Noongars, and in what we are speaking about concerning our heritage, is a really powerful position to be in. We very rarely get those situations where it’s Indigenous people giving and sharing and being valued for doing so. There’s only a minority

of us doing it. One example is tourism, which I think is a cheap version of that sharing of culture. *That Deadman Dance* says a lot about these sort of things, you know, the dangers of commodification versus the great power of sharing your heritage, and helping people through sharing that heritage. All that ‘closing the gap’ rhetoric ... I think if we could work on consolidating a heritage in its regions, in its place—a community of descendants sharing that with ever-widening circles of people—that would do a lot for Indigenous health and wellbeing. Particularly when you use what Aboriginal people offer as definitions of health and wellbeing—not just the physical but social, psychological, spiritual ...

Anne: It seems as though a lot of Aboriginal casualties are men. I know from the Bureau of Statistics that Aboriginal mortality rates are unique in the sense that the deaths are distributed pretty evenly throughout age groups which is unlike the mainstream figures. So there are many people, especially men, dying in their twenties, thirties and forties.

Kim: I don’t know for sure, but I often wonder about that paradigm of resistance. That’s what we have been doing and for absolutely understandable reasons. But it seems to me that there is enormous strength—although it’s really hard in a political sense to do it—in that givingness, that generosity, that spirit, that ‘look at what we were back then, let’s try and be like that’, and not buying into this bloody trap that we’re in. Particularly regarding the construction of masculinity.

Anne: Can you say more about that ‘trap’?

Kim: Well, I’m talking about the reactive, resistance paradigm, with all its attractions. But it’s the wrong narrative, I suspect, for us as Noongar people. Look at our early history ... that’s not our way. Yagan⁶ is often described as a resistance warrior but at an earlier stage of his life, his mob, it seems, were feeding farmers that would otherwise have starved. They kept them alive out of that enormous generosity of being the people that first created human society here. And the trust and arrogance that Bobby’s got were part of that generosity which

resonates with the Yagan story. And then there's the taking of flour from the flour mill—that is insisting on reciprocity: 'this is our way, it's give and take, brother, it's give and take'. And there's a bit of violence happens then ... 'you've broken our custom, you've got to do it this way or you're stupid, you can't live here'... and then the great sadness of Yagan's death. A couple of kids who he's befriended and trusts, shoot him on the sly. They've just got a gun with them and they shoot him while they're all sitting down together ... man!

So rather than buying into that polemic, let us insist on things like respect, reciprocity, the importance of continuity of place and relationships. Continuity of place I would argue—that's fundamental. And it's just really hard to get back to that because we've got this whole oppression thing. We've got to fight to expand the world again. But I would like to think there's ways of expanding that world again by trying to ignore polemics. Polemics is always there, resistance is always there, but that's not the big story.

Anne: The resistance model can lead to burn out ...

Kim: And you're playing on the white man's terms all the time. So for a man, there's violence, which would have been a ritualistic violence at one stage. You prove your masculinity through a dance, for instance. You prove your strength through a dance, which Bobby is so good at. Or through dodging spears. Rituals, you know: the spear fights. Stand there and wait till the last moment to move aside as the spear goes past. All that ritualised masculine strength and speed ... And what are we left with now at a community level? We're left with a non-ritualised violence and 'lateral' violence.

Indigenous nationalism and sovereignty

Anne: We were talking earlier about regionalism and you were saying that you were uncomfortable with the word 'national' when referring to Aboriginal communities and their literature.

Kim: The sort of things that word has been used to justify

make it a bit awkward for me to use. But if by the word we mean communities of people descended from those who first created human society in parts of the continent, then I am happy enough with it. In fact, that is why I am interested in it: it has produced pan Aboriginalism and rights as a strategy to create space for the real thing and the connection to the long continuities. That is of primal value. Continuity in place: from that you get the importance of relationship of all sorts. In literature — in terms of language and stories — continuity is really important for we Indigenous people because that's the culture, that's spirit. Culture is a manifestation of spirit. That's not an intellectual concept; that's what I feel.

I was saying to someone earlier today that I had a story in *The Best Australian Stories 2009* called 'A Refreshing Sleep'. It's a lightly fictionalised story. I was invited to sleep at the homestead of a massacre site, adjoining Ravensthorpe. It was a really rich experience. I've written a lot around this issue, the massacre of Cocanarup, in *Kayang & Me*. There's an old homestead there, and the people that own it reckon there are marks on the walls from spears that were thrown around massacre time. But the point I'm making is that spending the night there was a really rich experience for a range of reasons, which are in the story. I don't like new ageism or mumbo jumbo stuff but there was a strong sense of being welcomed by ancestral spirits. That's why Indigenous regional roots and connecting with and strengthening them, are very special. It's a privilege and a very important thing to draw strength from. You also need the other political strategies but they are inevitably reactive. And so I would argue that you need both those things. But if you haven't got the root stuff happening, it's limited: where can you go? You're playing someone else's game.

Anne: In *That Deadman Dance* you appear to use the idea of family and friends as a kind of model for cross-racial reconciliation or co-habitation. As if Noongars engaging with the white people to become family and friends provides a model for contemporary Australia. But can a non-Indigenous person be accommodated by the spirits of the ancestors and the place?

Kim: I think they can. I wouldn't want to move too quickly to that. I'm certainly signalling those sort of things. But that is not a quick movement. There are a number of other things involved there in the novel. Noongars were in a position of power. So that was the prime and very necessary thing. Once that is established, then there may well be other possibilities that come from that.

It's not dissimilar when you go to so-called traditional Aboriginal communities and you get a skin name. I don't want to speak for any other communities, but it seems to me that white people receiving skin names sometimes react as if they're really special people. But the giving of those names is really just about fitting white people into the Indigenous scheme of things. Again, the idea is that it's an Indigenous culture and heritage that you are being fitted into, not the other way around. So when you make that sort of shift, instead of saying Indigenous or Noongar literature is the niche within some other sort of literature, you start to think *it's all Noongar* and then literature has been accommodated within the Noongar heritage and tradition.

That allows you to start moving. And once you start thinking about all those things then more becomes possible. This is an Aboriginal nation, you know; it's black country, the continent. Some people are starting to think about: can we graft a contemporary Australian community onto its Indigenous roots? Possibly. I'm not saying we can. Possibly. But if you want to do that it would have to be in the regional way. Can you anchor a shimmering nation state via those regional Indigenous roots? It's a possibility. I'm not saying that's what we necessarily need. But *That Deadman Dance* is thinking about that possibility: what was going on then [at the time of first contact]? There was a strong belief in spirit of place. The Noongar were thinking: We own the place, it's ours, and we're loving, generous, gentle people and we can fit people into the scheme of things. And there's reciprocity involved. I find that a useful thing to think about because it makes me think about that heritage which I particularly value. It's important to strengthen it and consolidate it. It's a really strong and powerful thing that you can fit a lot of other stuff into.

Anne: And would you describe what you're talking about—the continuity of Noongar culture and people and connection with place—would you define that as Noongar sovereignty?

Kim: Yeah. That's a useful sort of metaphor. But sovereignty is a translation—it's a metaphor and it's strategic. It's not a Noongar word. Noongars talk about *birt* or *biirt* or *bidi* in other dialects. It becomes *birdiya*. *Birdiya* comes from the root word, *birt*, which means 'sinew', 'path', 'energy', the 'life force'. The orthography is not completely agreed upon. *Birdiya*, is one who's mastered that or, at least, understands it. There's a whole lot of things going on in there you know.

Anne: And those words could be an alternative for sovereignty?

Kim: Perhaps. They lead you towards the idea. I mention that after saying sovereignty is a metaphor, just to suggest... I'm not going to give an answer to it really. But that's of interest to me—looking at language and what concepts come out of it. I'm just touching on and suggesting there is something really deep and conceptual in these Noongar terms. As there is in *boodjar* for earth, and *boodjari* also means 'pregnant. *Ngangk* is 'sun' as well as 'mother'. *Bily* (or *bilya* in some dialects) is river and it's also navel or umbilical chord. So there's a lot more complexity in these concepts of connection and inter-relationship, than there is in the world-wide use of the term like 'mother earth'. There's an interrelatedness...

Anne: Between body and land ...

Kim: Yeah. And one of the words for hills is *kart*, which is also a word for head. Sometimes a group of hills will be called a word that also mean 'backs'. So there's the human form and other life forms latent in the landscape. *Nyitiny*, *Niertior neirdi*—cold, or the cold time—is sometimes used in Noongar as a word for what's elsewhere referred to as the dreaming. There're other words used for that, too. So conceptually, it implies a thawing. You can think of it—at least it seems to

me — as latencies and potentialities being realised, not always in the same way but from the same source, or spirit, I guess. You start thinking about those sorts of things which are at least as useful as a politically important, strategic concept like sovereignty. I'm not denying the importance of that term. But there are regional, Indigenous languages and I'm sure there are regional words everywhere which could be used instead of the term 'sovereignty'. There's a whole conceptual issue that is very useful to work with and to unpack.

Anne: To finish off I'd like to ask you if you think white critics, readers and scholars can play a role in the dissemination of Aboriginal literature?

Kim: Yes. Collaborations, and partnerships are very important in all these areas.

Anne: And what are your thoughts on reconciliation?

Kim: Not negative. But I'm wary that it's become like a 'brand' thing, a bland thing. I don't knock the sentiments behind it (though do we all agree on what those sentiments are?). Many of us use the word, but perhaps our usage doesn't necessarily involve thinking and reflection. There's a need for continuing 'cross-cultural' exchange, I think, for negotiation, and the reconciling to history — our different parts in it. How to be and live on this, the oldest continent on earth, where some of us are descendants of the people who first created human society here are, by and large, at the bottom of the heap, collectively ...

Anne: Thanks, Kim.

Kim: Thank you for giving me the opportunity.

This interview took place on 17 February 2011 at University of Western Australia, Perth, and 19 March 2011 at UNSW Writers' Centre, Sydney.

Notes

- 1 Penny van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2006.
- 2 One of the early Noongar characters documented in the settlers' journals. Kim Scott, *That Deadman Dance*, Picador, Sydney pp. 398-9.
- 3 Scott, p. 399.
- 4 Tiffany Shellam, *Shaking Hands on the Fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal World at King George's Sound*, UWA Press, Perth, 2009; Scott, p. 397.
- 5 This is the Noongar person who has been one of Scott's inspirations in *That Deadman Dance*.
- 6 An early Noongar warrior and diplomat.

'Reading' the Leichhardt, Landsborough and Gregory Explorer Trees of Northern Australia

Richard J. Martin

Introduction

Like many first-time visitors to Borroloola, I went to the town's small museum shortly after arriving to begin anthropological fieldwork in mid-2007. Located in the Northern Territory's oldest surviving police station, which dates from 1887, the museum was created in the mid 1980s as a result of the loving efforts of an amateur historian named Judy Cotton.¹ Inside the museum, amidst the flotsam and jetsam of the town's colonial history — weathered saddles, rusted stirrups, dingo traps, broken spectacles, glass bottles, moth-eaten uniforms, reproduced photographs, scraps of text — is the trunk of an ironwood tree (*Erythrophleum chlorostachys*) that was reportedly blazed by Ludwig Leichhardt during his first expedition from Moreton Bay to Port Essington in 1844 to 1845.² Originally situated on the edge of the Calvert River, the trunk was moved to the Borroloola museum in 1985.³ Rooted in iron now rather than soil, its location in the museum draws attention to the politics of heritage and history in this small town. With the Northern Territory Police Force's involvement in the violence of colonial settlement, the placement of the tree in Borroloola's Old Police Station Museum is in some ways an aggressively political act, illustrative of conservative attempts to portray the explorers as heroic founders of modern Australia. In many ways, this tree is a paradigmatic example of what Paul Carter called 'spatiality as a form of non-linear

writing; a form of history', the study of which reveals the process of 'transforming space into place' in 'the *intentional* world of the texts'.⁴ However, while seemingly amenable to such textual analysis manifesting a straightforward critique of the hegemony of nationalist imperial history, alternative responses to the 'Leichhardt tree' emerged as I completed fieldwork in Borroloola. These pointed to a continuing struggle over the meaning of exploration, and colonisation, in northern Australia.

Alongside the Leichhardt tree in Borroloola, in this essay I examine theoretical and methodological issues provoked by local responses to two other landmark 'explorer' trees. The first of these is a coolibah (*Eucalyptus coolabah*) marked by William Landsborough during his search for the missing explorers Burke and Wills in 1862. This Landsborough tree was destroyed by an act of arson in 2002 in an event that continues to provoke heated passions among the residents of nearby Burketown, northwest Queensland. Like the placement of the Leichhardt tree in the Borroloola Police Station Museum, the act of arson invites a politicised interpretation to serve contemporary identity politics. But, as I have suggested with regard to the Leichhardt tree, a more complex interpretation emerges through a combination of textual analysis and ethnographic fieldwork. The other tree is a boab (*Adansonia gregorii*) on the edge of the Victoria River in the Northern Territory, its botanical name bestowed by the botanist Ferdinand von Mueller in honour of the leader of the North Australian Expedition, Augustus Gregory. Marked by Gregory during his expedition of 1855–56, this Gregory tree is also a registered Aboriginal sacred site because of its connection to a ceremony for Ngarinman people living at nearby Timber Creek. I argue that, as with the Leichhardt and Landsborough trees, predominantly textual 'readings' of the Gregory tree are immeasurably enriched by ethnography. At the same time, all three trees remain meaningful in ways even the richest ethnography cannot exhaust, generating a series of conflicting and overlapping explanations that cannot be reduced to a single or even dual interpretation.

Seeking to avoid reductive characterisations of either cultural studies or anthropology, I argue that a combination of approaches from both disciplines provides a richer interpretation than either may accomplish on its own. Scholars in cultural studies and anthropology have historically engaged in debate about the relative merits of each discipline's methodologies, particularly in research addressing Aboriginal Australia, but I argue that such debate distracts from the possibilities of interdisciplinary analysis.⁵ With regard to the 'explorer' trees of northern Australia — marked by readable letters in the English alphabet, yet meaningful in other ways — I argue for an approach to interpretation that attends to textuality without attributing meaning solely to the 'writer' and 'reader' of the text, emphasising *creative* representations which make meanings proliferate. To do so, I critique the textual tradition of 'reading' settler-colonial artefacts, and draw selectively from work in material culture. As Marilyn Strathern argues, the analytical separation of social and cultural contexts from material things including texts renders the study of such things somewhat superfluous as they can only function to illustrate the systems within which their significance is produced.⁶ Similarly, the authors of a recent collection in material cultural analysis argue:

Rather than accepting that meanings are fundamentally separate from their material manifestations (signifier v. signified, word v. referent, etc.), the aim is to explore the consequences of an apparently counter-intuitive possibility: that *things might be treated as sui generis meanings*.⁷

This approach offers an alternative practice to the textual tradition of 'reading' things. While this alternative practice presents challenges, it offers a way to bring methods from cultural studies and anthropology into conversation with each other around the richly symbolic — but also non-symbolic, non-representational — explorer trees of northern Australia.⁸

Bicentennial politics and the old dead tree of Australian nationalism

Across the north of Australia, there is a constant summoning

of the colonial past, particularly within touristic space; lots of cafés have little historical displays and there are explorer-themed inns in many towns. There is also a long-established tradition of exploration literature, going back to the romantic epistles of Ernestine Hill in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s and the frontier histories of Glenville Pike in the 1960s and 1970s, to the constant reissue of explorer journals and narrative histories into the present, like Sarah Murgatroyd's bestselling *The Dig Tree: The Story of Burke and Wills*.⁹ Many scholars have addressed the mythology of the explorers in northern Australia, including the anthropologists Erich Kolig, Athol Chase, Kenneth Maddock and Deborah Bird Rose around the time of Australia's Bicentennial and, more recently, the cultural studies scholars Chris Healy and Stephen Muecke.¹⁰ Focusing particularly on Aboriginal understandings of Captain Cook, Kolig, Chase, Maddock and Rose describe accounts from New South Wales, Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia in which Cook is depicted shooting at Aboriginal people from a horse, bringing violence to the land. In Healy's analysis, such examples illustrate a broad contrast between Aboriginal responses to the story of Captain Cook and those of non-Aboriginal people. For Healy, Cook is 'an enduring icon, a huge network of narratives, images and ceremonies', albeit one best understood, in his view, within a racialised dichotomy.¹¹ As Muecke puts it, following Healy:

In Australian history, Captain Cook has become a pivot for these false perceptions of 'ancient' [relating to Aboriginal people] and 'modern' [relating to non-Aboriginal people]. This is perhaps why, as a sense of historical injustice drove people in the 1960s to do the work of assembling Aboriginal histories, the revisionist backlash that followed it in the 1990s centred on Cook as a necessary and heroic redeemer of white centrality, if not superiority.¹²

To support this argument, Muecke travels to a monument to Cook at Kurnell in southern Sydney and to the Captain Cook Motel in Cairns, contrasting his reading of these sites with the experience of touching a miniature souvenir model of the ship

Endeavour. For Muecke, the truism that history is ‘constructed’ supports his own interpretative reading of these things (the Kurnell monument, the Captain Cook Motel, the souvenir of the *Endeavour*) as part of what he calls ‘a negotiable world of heterogeneities’ that provides a necessary counterpoint to the arguments of conservative ‘historians’ like former Australian prime minister John Howard.⁴³ Muecke particularly critiques the then-Liberal parliamentary member for Cronulla, Malcolm Kerr, for objecting to the removal of non-indigenous vegetation around the Cook monument at Kurnell, interpreting this as an example of the further dispossession of Aboriginal people. However, Muecke’s assertions about politicised perceptions of explorers is arguably over-stated, neglecting to engage with the diverse and indeed heterogeneous ways in which figures like Cook are remembered outside the partisan context that he describes. Indeed, despite making reference to John Howard’s tenure as Australia’s prime minister throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, Muecke’s analysis seems to date from the earlier period, the 1960s to the 1990s, when the politics of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities were perhaps more polarised than they are today. Closer attention to current responses to the myth of the explorers reveals different approaches to the colonial past.

In the first volume of his classic history of Australia, Manning Clark records that the English ‘began their ceremonies in Australia’ when Captain Cook directed ‘an inscription to be cut on one of the trees near the watering place setting forth the ship’s name, and the date of their arrival’⁴⁴ In the late 1950s, Patrick White explored this in *Voss*. At the end of that novel at the unveiling of a statue of the disappeared Voss, the surviving characters reflect on what they see as the continuing presence of the explorer in the landscape.

‘Voss left his mark on the country,’ he said.

‘How?’ asked Miss Trevelyan, cautiously.

‘Well, the trees, of course. He was cutting his initials in the trees. He was a queer beggar, Voss. The blacks talk about him to this day. He is still there — that is the honest opinion of many of them — he is there in the country, and always will be.’⁴⁵

In Borrooloola's Police Station Museum, one such explorer tree is commemorated today in a display created for the bicentennial of Australian settlement by Europeans. For tourists following in the footsteps of the explorers—particularly Leichhardt, whose expedition from Moreton Bay near modern-day Brisbane to Port Essington near Darwin took him through the area of modern-day Borrooloola—sites like this Leichhardt tree are necessary and indispensable, making the intangible past somehow present, and past environments putatively the same.

In many ways the display in Borrooloola's Police Station Museum evokes what Manning Clark called English 'ceremonies', revisiting the moment of European settlement when Australia's Aboriginal population was summarily dispossessed of their land. Aside from some photographs taken by the ethnographers Spencer and Gillen in 1901, and several more recent images depicting Aboriginal people engaged in neotraditionalist activities like dugong hunting with harpoons, most of the museum's displays ignore the lives of the Aboriginal groups who presently live in the town and present a view of Australia's past that appears to be ideologically consistent with that described by W. E. H. Stanner in his 1968 Boyer lectures as a 'cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale'.¹⁶ As Stanner describes it, this form of active 'dis-remembering' extends beyond an ignorance of frontier violence (in which the police force commemorated in the Police Station Museum were involved) into a general lack of attention to Aboriginal people at all, beginning in the early twentieth century and lasting into the 1960s and beyond. In some ways the Borrooloola display substantiates this form of conservative history, highlighting what Mark McKenna calls the peculiar 'sense of fragility' felt by many locals in his study region of south-east New South Wales:

The belief that settler history needed to be sheltered and housed, to be made visible and given a physical presence, suggested that a people without a history were a people without a soul, a community without a shared memory.¹⁷



- 5 Leichhardt tree in the Borroloola Museum (photo: *li-Anthawirriyarra* Sea Ranger Unit, April 2013)

McKenna ties this sense of fragility to what he calls ‘a race to become “historic” in Australia, as if every park stump is a historical treasure’. Drawing on colonial archives relating to Bega Shire in New South Wales, he argues that settlers sought to distance themselves quickly from the early colonial period to replace ‘the “darkness” of thousands of years of Aboriginal occupation ... with a new creation story’.¹⁸ Here in Borroloola’s unprepossessing Police Station Museum, McKenna’s interpretation building on Stanner’s insight into the psychology of the Great Australian Silence seems borne out. Symbolising non-Aboriginal Australians’ cultural roots in the soil (albeit roots that have been chopped off to fit the tree into the display), this Leichhardt tree is posited as a tangible material link to the first Europeans in the southern Gulf in the textual material that surrounds and literally supports the tree. It is noteworthy that the display was created in 1985, three years before Australia’s bicentenary celebrations, when questions of Australian identity were at the forefront of the

national consciousness and funding was available for projects like the Borroloola museum. More recent displays like those in Canberra's Museum of Australia have pursued an alternative interpretation of Australia's past, but those like Borroloola's Police Station Museum continue to exist, evoking the conservative nationalist histories of previous times.

However, to interpret the Leichhardt tree in Borroloola only within this context is somewhat limited. The display is highly evocative of conservative histories and readily amenable to the type of analysis that critics from the 1980s and early 1990s pursued under labels like post-colonialism, but readings like this have become almost clichéd, shrill rejoinders in what are known as 'the history wars'.¹⁹ This conflict or 'war' dates from around the time of Australia's bicentennial in 1988, when Manning Clark famously declared that 'the coming of the British was the occasion for three great evils: the violence against the original inhabitants of the country, the Aborigines; the violence against the first European labour force in Australia, the convicts; and the violence done to the land itself'.²⁰ For Clark, conservative politics as exemplified by former prime minister Sir Robert Menzies represented The Old Dead Tree of Australian nationalism; the wartime Labor prime minister John Curtin, by contrast, was a younger sapling, whose premature death denied him 'the glory of teaching Australians how to cultivate "The Young Green Tree"'.²¹

But while Clark's symbolism is appropriate here, the comparison is not, reiterating problematic readings of settler-colonial artefacts like the explorer trees. When I first visited Borroloola in 2007, many of the local residents and interstate tourists whom I interviewed had not been inside the museum. Moreover, several of those who had visited the museum had failed to notice the tree, or had not accorded it much significance, dwelling instead on other displays. One pair of tourists who had rented a plane to retrace the journey of Burke and Wills — and ended up in Borroloola, far from Burke and Wills' track, when their plane broke down — spoke instead of their admiration for a display about an inter-racial relationship between a non-Aboriginal man and two Aboriginal women at Borroloola in the 1940s, finding in these photographs support for their understanding of the policy of reconciliation. Asked

about their motivations for following Burke and Wills, they spoke of the explorers' 'fatal flaw' in an interview I transcribed at the time: 'see they failed to engage with the Aborigines, that would have kept them alive, they were just pompous old Englishmen really, nothing like modern Australians, but you can sense the start of Australianness in their story'. Clearly, for these self-styled modern-day explorers, The Young Green Tree of Australian nationalism need not involve the repudiation of Australia's past, nor any simplistically politicised interpretation of this past along the lines laid out by Clark.

Indeed, contrary to McKenna's analysis and the argument of theorists like Svetlana Boym — who makes a distinction between intentional and unintentional monuments or readings thereof, unintentional monuments being those that introduce uncertainty, unexpected juxtapositions and colliding time schemes into their interpretation — it is worth noting that any presentation of the past in monumental form is necessarily polysemic.²² Just as Scott Sandage shows how African-American civil rights groups appropriated the Lincoln Memorial as a site for articulating their claims in the 1960s — 'in the process layering and changing the public meanings of the hero [Lincoln] and his shrine' — it is possible to document how monuments associated with the explorers have been reinterpreted across northern Australia to suggest all sorts of things other than and even contrary to their apparently intentional purpose.²³

As such, it is flawed to interpret displays like those in the Borroloola museum using overly deterministic analyses in line with Althusserian orthodoxy about the interpellation of subjects in support of dominant ideological regimes. Instead, the interpretation of things like the Leichhardt tree requires a broadly interdisciplinary approach to the study of culture; one that goes beyond the notion of culture as text or an ensemble of texts that can be read by the analyst 'over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong' (as Geertz puts it) to consider text as something arising from and referring to cultural practices.²⁴ Utilising anthropological methodologies, such cultural practices may be studied ethnographically.²⁵ However, through the interpretation of objects like these explorer trees I suggest that such things continue to produce new meanings

through the interaction of all the functions of the text, including the ‘reader’ and the ‘writer’, as well as the materiality of the medium itself. While I resist from attempts to ascribe agency—if not intention—to material objects, the study of the relations between humans and things in science and technology studies, and actor network theory, is relevant to the analysis of such meaning-making.²⁶ The productivity of this kind of theory is evident when interpreting the Landsborough tree at Burketown at Burketown and the Gregory tree (or trees) near Timber Creek, for which understandings of corporality, materiality and sociality are required.

Struggles over heritage in land rights and native title time

A shift to Burketown in northwest Queensland reveals a different interpretation of northern Australia’s explorer trees. The 150th anniversary of Burke and Wills’ journey from Melbourne to the coast of Carpentaria occurred in 2011. At Burketown—named after the explorer Robert O’Hara Burke as part of the Colony of Victoria’s unsuccessful attempt to claim this area from the Colony of Queensland—the town’s annual social ball was themed ‘Burke and Wills’ and numerous tourists intent on retracing the journey of the explorers passed through the town (even though Burke and Wills never travelled near the location of modern-day Burketown). The enterprising Diamantina Touring Company even organised a fully catered twenty-night camping trip costing \$5500 Australian dollars, involving travel from Melbourne to Burketown and Karumba.²⁷ Burketown lacks any sites specifically associated with Burke and Wills, so a tree marked by the explorer William Landsborough (who led a party in search of Burke and Wills when those more famous explorers failed to return home) was monumentalised. In his *Exploration of Australia from Carpentaria to Melbourne*, Landsborough wrote:

The importance of marking trees cannot be overrated. The marks should only be made on strong, healthy trees, and at conspicuous points; and the directions should be unmistakeably clear and accurate.²⁸



6 Landsborough tree site, showing replanted sapling alongside part of the destroyed tree (photo: R. Martin, June 2009)

True to his stated instructions, Landsborough left a trail of blazed trees from the Albert River to the Warrego River during his 1862 expedition, thereby describing a practical route for overlanding stock to western and northwest Queensland later followed by pastoralists in the frenzied land rush that occurred after the publication of Landsborough's account.²⁹ When I arrived at the site of the tree outside Burketown in 2007, however, I found nothing but a small charred stump. In December 2002, the Landsborough tree was destroyed in an act of arson.

I later had the chance to interview the volunteer curator of a small local history museum in the old post-office building at Burketown. In the late 1990s, Frank Thomas convinced the local council to grant him the lease over the old post office. He then filled this space with all sorts of brochures, maps, old photographs, newspaper clippings and displays, almost all of which relate to non-Aboriginal history. But in some respects the museum is a memorial to the tree, with numerous

newspaper clippings about the arson, as well as reproductions of historical photographs. The council lets Frank maintain a workshop out the back in return for his volunteer work curating and staffing the museum. For a man who spends most of his day talking to tourists about the condition of the road, I expected him to be garrulous about the tree but words failed him when I asked about it. 'It's just a waste', he said. 'It's gone now for good, a beautiful old tree like that'. A keen amateur woodworker, he crafted a number of souvenirs from the wood of the old tree, including a wine stopper he gave to me.

Many other non-Aboriginal people in the area were more expressive than Frank about the loss of the tree, interpreting the event in terms of the racial politics of the town. Queensland's then-Minister for Police and Corrective Services Tony McGrady (whose electorate of Mount Isa encompassed Burketown) described the act as 'un-Australian'. 'It is part of our history', he told the Australian Associated Press, 'and louts, the lowest of the low, have seen fit to destroy it, which is very disappointing for everybody.'³⁰ While McGrady allows that the arsonists may not have been Aboriginal, other commentators were less circumspect. Many locals I interviewed blamed the arson on a man of mixed-Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent who reportedly burnt down the tree in a berserker rage provoked by his eviction from the pub. As I came to know this community better over several years of fieldwork, I was offered various other explanations, including from one informant who told me '*everything is connected*' in such a pronounced stage whisper that I leant forward in my chair. It all began, he claimed, with a misjudged allocation of government housing to an Aboriginal family from Doomadgee. As soon as the bureaucrat who made the decision left town, the house was alight. This provoked a series of arson attacks that exacerbated tensions associated with the distribution of royalties from the Century lead and zinc mine and drew in the town's non-Aboriginal community, leading to the arson of the town's Shire Council building in 1999. According to this informant's interpretation, this arson functions in much the same way as Geertz's thick description of the cockfight in Bali, highlighting everything there is to know about Burketown and the broader southern Gulf if the anthropologist is simply

diligent enough to pursue all the different explanations.³¹ And indeed much later, at the end of a fieldtrip with a group of Aboriginal people, one of those present made a boast to me that he knew who was involved, stating: ‘we [local Aboriginal people] did it ... to show those fucking White cunts what it’s like, if they won’t respect us, we won’t respect them’.

But while this boast might be thought to resolve the question of what the arson meant—and furnish an account of a community riven by conflict between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people—other readings remain possible. My above informant’s boast may obviously be empty. It might also be self-serving, seeking to connect the arson to a supposed political campaign rather than a drunkard’s berserker rage or any of a number of other motivations arising from the politics of the town. Furthermore, while we might seek to privilege the above informant’s presentation of the act as politically motivated arson alongside an aggregation of different readings of the event, it seems more than a little rash to extrapolate beyond that to provide a structurally deterministic account, however heteroglossic such an account might be.

The event of the arson and indeed the symbolism of the tree remain meaningful in ways that even the richest ethnography can never exhaust, generating polysemic as well as polythetic readings without end; meanings that share a number of characteristics but cannot be used as a system or mechanism of classification. For example, on a repeat visit to the site of the tree in mid 2009 I noticed a new piece of graffiti on the information board: ‘The tree was burnt down (desecrated) by some of the “locals” in similar pattern as the Roper Bar Police Station, Jardine’s “Somerset” in Albany Pass and several other historical sites.’ It is tempting to interpret this inscription as the work of someone outraged at the loss of the tree, as it seemingly connects the arson with a concerted political campaign to damage or indeed de-create sites associated with colonial history (as the author’s solecism suggests). Alternatively, it is possible to see the note as a cryptic claim of responsibility by the arsonist, or an attempt by one of his or her supporters to credit this act to a supposed political campaign. Regardless of the interpretation, the attempt to explain the event introduces uncertainties, suggesting new

avenues of enquiry extending outside the region. Moreover, even in Burketown, where the Landsborough tree seemed to polarise opinion along Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal lines, alternative readings of the tree existed. Commenting on the arson, a senior Ganggalida woman stated:

Us older people are upset ... Our ancestors adopted those people into this area, into the Aboriginal tribe. My old Dad he wanted to include them ... Those explorers Burke and Wills or whoever it was, Landsborough, he brought that tree from England.

That tree was in fact a Coolibah, in many respects an icon of Australia's native environment, beneath which the jolly swagman sat in the folk song 'Waltzing Matilda'. But here in this elderly woman's narrative it is transformed into something else: a tree from England, but a welcome one, one that took root in the Burketown soil, where it was drawn into Aboriginal cultural landscapes as well as non-Aboriginal ones. More straightforwardly racialised interpretations of this event and the symbolism of this tree exist in Burketown and the broader Gulf region, but research that resists such simplistic interpretations produces a far richer account, highlighting hidden complexities as well as ambiguities.

The living tree

At Timber Creek in the Northern Territory, the Gregory tree beside the Victoria River provides a further example of the merits of research combining predominantly textual 'readings' of things with more open-ended ethnographic fieldwork, revealing a variety of meanings apart from or in addition to this tree's connection to conservative nationalist history. It is significant that the Gregory tree or Gregory trees (several trees are marked) are still alive, and are still so healthy they were brimming with fruit when I visited the site in June 2011. These trees are surrounded by texts that tell of the lives of the explorers—and indeed the explorer's own hand (or that of his amanuensis) is apparent in impressively neat copperplate script, marking the date June 2nd 1865—but they also suggest non-symbolic, non-representational meanings. When I visited



7 Ganggalida people inspecting the Landsborough tree display (photo: R. Martin, July 2012)



8 Gregory tree (photo: R. Martin, July 2011)

the site, those with whom I travelled got as close to the trees as they could, pressing their hands against the bark, 'as if to touch its possible deeper meanings', as the novelist Michael Ondaatje puts it in another context.³² A young non-Aboriginal woman at the site actually licked the bark of a tree, following the instructions on an information board that identified medicinal properties therein that were supposedly exploited by Aboriginal people in pre-colonial times. It is difficult to understand such actions as obeisance to the dictates of history; there is clearly something else happening here, evoking comparisons with the adoration of the cross in Christian ceremonies, a kind of tree worship suggestive of animism or 'new animism'.³³ These trees are significant for their connection to the explorers, but they are clearly significant for other reasons too.

Unlike the trees at Borroloola and Burketown, these Gregory trees are also significant to Aboriginal people for their connection to a Dreaming. They were recently registered under the *Northern Territory Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act* 1989, thereby receiving the highest protection possible under Northern Territory law. 'This place', I was told, 'is for [a Dreaming figure] ... left a couple of bottle [boab] trees.' The complexity of the associations between landscape, ancestors and totemic beings suggested here has been described by anthropologists elsewhere in terms of 'processes of metamorphosis, imprinting and externalisation', whereby things created by ancestral beings are 'thought to contain something of [the ancestor] himself within it ... imply[ing] a consubstantial relationship between the ancestor and his objectifications'.³⁴ However, when I was talking about the significance of these trees with a senior Ngarinman person, he repeatedly emphasised their connection to the explorers:

When Gregory first come into the country there they [Aboriginal people] make friends with him ... They [Aboriginal people] nearly spear him when he first come in [but] they [Gregory's party] make friends with them [Aboriginal people], give them jam and tea. People from everywhere used to have ceremony ... That bin stopped when Gregory come in. They didn't have right [to stop

people practicing ceremonies]. People bin get quieten them down, get hats and everything. That story from my Granddad and Dad's Granddad.

While this quotation vividly expresses a sense of injustice associated with the past, the story seemed to be offered in a spirit of reconciliation, reflecting a change in Aboriginal relations to the past. Indeed, a week or so later this man commented:

We [Aboriginal people] don't like to call you Whitefella. It [Whitefella] is like Blackfella. But like you don't call us Blackfella anymore ... I don't hear Whitefella call us Blackfella. That [being called Whitefella] must be hurting you. Like we happy with [being called] Aboriginal. But we gotta find another word [for you].

Like the senior Ganggalida woman whose response to the arson in Burketown I quoted earlier, these comments reflect a repositioning of Aboriginal identity in regard to narratives of the past. Such comments provide an insight into the kinds of revelation made possible by combining textual and ethnographic analyses, going beyond simplistically politicised interpretations of these trees into the realm in which non-symbolic, non-representational meanings are generated and re-generated without end.

Conclusion

The divergent symbolic uses of the explorer trees of northern Australia might be cited as evidence of a broad contrast between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of thinking about the colonial past and the post-colonising present. But this contrast needs to be problematised. The social life of the three explorer trees I've discussed here highlights overlaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of thinking about trees, even in the overtly political context suggested by the association of the trees with European explorers. Reading the meaning of these trees without diligent ethnography carries the risk of merely producing a politicised interpretation, captive to contemporary forms of radicalism.

In Burketown, where I spent the most time trying to get to the bottom of what the Landsborough tree meant, some of the oldest Ganggalida people with connections to the area remember the stories of their elders, about the arrival of non-Aboriginal people when their own parents were young. A Ganggalida woman named Alice Gilbert was born near the site of the Landsborough tree towards the end of the nineteenth century. In the late 1960s, ethnographer John Dymock recorded her account of what she called Wild Time.³⁵ She described how non-Aboriginal people came to Burketown first without firearms; they were fought off, and then had to go away and invent better weapons in order to kill Aboriginal people when they came back. Stories about such Wild Time, retold by Alice Gilbert's elderly daughter Eva Gilbert, have been critical in securing Native Title rights and interests for Ganggalida people. In this context, the colonial past is ineluctably present, part of the historicity of the contemporary world. Heritage sites particularly dramatise such historicity, becoming central loci for struggles over identity.

In Burketown, where persons unknown burnt down the Landsborough tree, the struggle is ongoing, present in everyday life in all sorts of ways, as 'different stories vie for a place in history'.³⁶ In early 2012, the Burketown pub — reputedly the town's oldest surviving building — also burnt down, generating another swirl of rumours. The cause of that fire remains unclear. Nevertheless, while the struggle over identity continues, to construe it simply as a conflict between a dominant national memory and another counter-memory (Aboriginal or otherwise) risks deploying a hopelessly essentialised notion of authenticity insofar as contemporary Australian identities are partly formed in relation to things like explorer trees. As Stuart Hall puts it, identities are 'the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past'.³⁷ While scholars might seek to deconstruct such authenticity as identitarian mythology, we ought to take identity seriously. This means 'reading' the Leichhardt, Landsborough and Gregory trees not just for evidence of a pre-existing conflict between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Australia but also for the suggestion of other divergent responses, including new ones, where

the meaning of exploration and colonisation is created, and recreated, along with the experience of place.

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Notes

- 1 Judy Cotton, *Borrooloola: Isolated and Interesting 1885-2005*, Government Printer, Darwin, 2005.
- 2 Leichhardt disappeared somewhere in the centre of the continent on his third expedition in 1848. As a result, much interest has historically been shown in trees marked with the letter 'L' as a guide to the explorer's probable route on that expedition. Some debate continues as to which trees were actually marked by Leichhardt during these expeditions and which were marked by other explorers including George de la Tour and William Landsborough (who both also used an 'L'). I refer to this 'L' tree as a 'Leichhardt' tree throughout this article because that is how it is presented in the Borrooloola Museum.
- 3 Darrell Lewis suggests that this removal was occasioned by the threat of termites at the Calvert River site. D. Lewis, personal communication with the author, 21 March 2013.
- 4 Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2010 [1987], p. xxii.
- 5 The tone of this debate is well captured in exchanges between David Trigger and Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, on the one hand, and Sandy Toussaint and Stephen Muecke on the other. It is noteworthy that outside the overtly politicised context of the 1990s, such debate appears to have died down, suggesting that interdisciplinary work is increasingly possible. See David Trigger, 'Review Article: Australian Cultural Studies: Radical Critique or Vacuous Posturing', *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1993, p. 607; Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, 'Anthropology and/or/as "Cultural Studies"? A Response to Trigger', *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1993, p. 614; Sandy Toussaint, 'Review: Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies by Stephen Muecke', *Oceania*, vol. 66, no. 2, 1995, pp. 171-3; Stephen Muecke, 'Cultural Studies and Anthropology', *Oceania*, vol. 66, no. 3, 1996, p. 252.
- 6 Marilyn Strathern, 'Artefacts of History: Events and the Interpretation of Images', in Jukka Sikkala (ed.), *Culture and History in the Pacific*, Finnish Anthropological Society, Helsinki, 1990.
- 7 Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell, *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, Routledge, London, 2007, p. 3.
- 8 The work of Nigel Thrift and others offers insights into such non-symbolic

- interpretation, albeit in a way that remains avowedly 'experimental'. For Thrift, material objects are part of hybrid assemblages imbued with relational agency; his non-representational theory critiques the 'methodological fetishism' of the conventional disciplines, calling for a 'poetics of the release of energy that might be thought to resemble play'. Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*, Routledge, London, 2008, p. 12.
- 9 Ernestine Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness*, Robertson & Mullens, Melbourne, 1940; Ernestine Hill, *The Territory*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1951; Glenville Pike, *Queensland Frontier*, Rigby Limited, Adelaide, 1978; Sarah Murgatroyd, *The Dig Tree: The Story of Burke and Wills*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2002.
 - 10 Erich Kolig, 'Captain Cook in the Western Kimberleys', in Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt (eds), *Aborigines of the West*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 1979; Athol Chase, 'Aboriginal Perspectives: A Comment', in John C. Tothill and John J. Mott (eds), *Ecology and Management of the World's Savannas*, Australian Academy of Science, Canberra, 1985, pp. 166-7; Kenneth Maddock, 'Myth, History and a Sense of Oneself', in Jeremy Beckett (ed.), *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*, Aboriginal Studies Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, ACT, 1988, pp. 11-30; Deborah Bird Rose, 'The Saga of Captain Cook: Morality in Aboriginal and European Law', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, vol. 2, 1984, pp. 24-39; Deborah Bird Rose, *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill Stations*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1991; Chris Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997; Stephen Muecke, 'A Touching and Contagious Captain Cook: Thinking History Through Things', in this volume.
 - 11 Healy, p. 11.
 - 12 Muecke, 'A Touching and Contagious Captain Cook', p. 154.
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 - 15 Patrick White, *Voss*, Random House, London, 1994 [1957], p. 443.
 - 16 W. E. H. Stanner, *The Dreaming and Other Essays*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2009, p. 189.
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 - 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 84-5.
 - 19 Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003.
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 - 25 For an account of text as 'a metadiscursive construct' referring to 'actual cultural practices' see Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (eds), *Natural Histories of Discourse*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, p. 2.
 - 26 The anthropologist Bruno Latour is a key exponent of these theories. See *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

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- 29 Gwen Trundle, 'Landsborough, William (1825-1886)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 5, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1974.
- 30 Ivy Jensen, 'Vandals Burn Down Historic Tree', *North West Star*, 23 December 2002, p. 1.
- 31 Geertz, 'Deep Play', pp. 1-37.
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- 33 Nicolas Peterson uses the term 'new animists' to describe those influenced by the deep ecology movement and other anti-modernist views. See Nicolas Peterson, 'Is the Aboriginal Landscape Sentient? Animism, the New Animism and the Warlpiri', *Oceania*, vol. 81, no. 2, 2011, pp. 167-79.
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IV: Reflection

Roundtable Discussion with Katrina Schlunke, Chris Healy and Stephen Muecke

Crystal McKinnon, Eve Vincent
and Timothy Neale

This is an edited version of a conversation that took place in Sydney in August 2014, between the editors of this volume and former and current editors of UTS Review and Cultural Studies Review.

Tim: Katrina, Chris and Stephen, I was hoping we could begin with you talking about how you each came to engage with questions of indigeneity in your work?

Stephen: I went to Western Australia for my first job in 1974. In Melbourne I'd scarcely met an Aboriginal person except for Bruce McGuinness at a Monash University party. He opened my eyes to a few things. In Perth I joined the University of Western Australia Anthropology Department and there were Aboriginal students there whom I met and befriended, a lot of that being through the Ronald and Catherine Berndt Department where there was a very heavy focus on Indigenous Australia. My boss—I was employed to teach linguistics—was working on Aboriginal English issues and that took me up the Kimberley to be research officer on a project about Aboriginal English and primary school teachings. Then I came back to do my doctoral work up there. So that's the short version.

Katrina: I grew up in a town where [the] Indigenous presence was recognised and the massacre—which I came to write

about in my PhD—was common local knowledge. Growing up in that part of New England there were, of course, various Indigenous friends at school. But then, when I went to Melbourne University, my first exposure to thinking about Indigenous issues came from Lisa Belleair and the Indigenous liaison room or office. You could go as an undergraduate to these Friday afternoon drinks or talks, and that was fantastic. It was really a bit more like a groovy group you wanted to have a lot to do with, and I went to theatre and got involved in little bits of artwork. That was my introduction to one Indigenous world. And then formally, in terms of education, it was Greg Denning's course on Alternative Ethnographies that first began to talk about how there was more than one story about a particular incident. But when I came to do my PhD, in a sense, I didn't start out looking at indigeneity. I started out looking at whiteness as it was produced in the face of Indigenous realities.

Chris: For me it begins as a secondary school student in the late 1970s. As an ambitious kid I entered a public speaking competition in Year 10 and ended up in the regional final making the case for land rights in Benalla! Later at Melbourne Uni that translated into a set of connections through my involvement with anti-nuclear activism and an introduction to Fitzroy Indigenous politics as a volunteer at the Aboriginal Legal Service (I was a law student for a few years). But an engagement with Indigenous politics was a very ordinary experience for someone in the Left in Melbourne in the late 1970s in secondary school and the 1980s in university. When I went to do an MA in the United Kingdom I was influenced by work at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, like the *Empire Strikes Back*, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, *Race and Class* and the Black Audio Film Collective. That work made me think about indigeneity in Australia differently and was partly why I came back to Australia to do a PhD. But before I did that I worked at UTS putting together the syllabus for a new public history program with Ann Curthoys and Paula Hamilton. Ann was very insistent that there be a strong Indigenous presence in the course, and so I put together an advisory committee that put me in touch with people at

Tranby Community College [now Tranby Aboriginal College] and ultimately with the beginnings of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-op. So those connections with new energies in Indigenous cultural production supplemented my earlier experiences with political indigeneity, which together with the influence of critical thinking around 'race' in the UK is why I ended up seriously considering the role of indigeneity in relation to Australian historical consciousness in my PhD.

Crystal: As non-Indigenous academics engaging with Indigenous subject matter, do you feel that those projects come with a certain set of responsibilities?

Stephen: I've always been conscious of needing to have a narrative about how you have the right to participate. In the days of good old 'theory,' you might think your authority comes directly down the tube from Michel Foucault. You might be deluded into thinking that. But then in the engagement with the Indigenous projects then, yes, you do have to say how you got there, and got involved and what that means. Responsibility has to be earned rather than just carried and that then influences how you write about it, I think. In the process, authority gives way to a more participatory kind of writing.

Chris: That's at the heart of *Reading the Country*. I think the central question of the book is 'what is this responsibility?' and maybe how is one to act and/or not act with responsibility. In *Forgetting Aborigines* I wrote about a major 1961 anthropology conference. I'd always know that anthropology took upon itself a particular responsibility to speak on behalf of, and for, 'Aborigines' in the absence of public Indigenous voices in Australia, but in reading accounts of that conference it just was incredible to me how that it seemed perfectly reasonable for those anthropologists to be assuming that responsibility in 1961. It was incredible because, twenty years later, that was deeply impossible for me. Instead, I was a law student being ordered around by Indigenous lawyers and managers in a grotty terrace house in Fitzroy. What right did I have to speak about anything 'Indigenous' from that position? A completely different enculturation in relation to questions

of responsibility once there's a serious Indigenous presence at the table, and my own personal history is that Indigenous people have always been at the table as a vital creative and challenging presence; certainly not objects to speak about.

Katrina: There's something about refusing to be a particular sort of responsible person, too. When I was doing work around Bluff Rock, talking to people whose great grandparents had participated in that massacre, one of the people had an original diary that I was wanting to transcribe. The purposes for which I was going to use that diary were not what this older woman would have wanted. So, you're there with an ethics form asking them to sign off on you behaving responsibly, but what's at stake is to not actually reproduce forms of behavior that have always actually benefited non-Indigenous people in terms of seeing the same histories again, because no new information enters the story because the records themselves are kept, say, only for family histories. I'm always curious about that sense of responsibility which I see from so many different Indigenous people, this idea of being responsible for people who they've got a connection to. On the other hand, trying to practice that as a non-Indigenous person and say, 'Well, we're both non-Indigenous so can I try and discipline you?' Can we insist on some connection or, are we just disconnected nuclei that can't actually stop behavior that needs to be stopped? Who is going to shut Keith Windschuttle up? Shouldn't it be my responsibility?

Chris: Thinking about what Katrina is saying, that sense of responsibility that I came across biographically was, by the 1990s, very quickly organised into institutional protocols that I associate strongly with the moment of 'reconciliation'. Too often the value of working with Indigenous people in universities or collaborating with Indigenous scholars got displaced onto a white-centered projects, which is what some versions of reconciliation became for me anyway.

Eve: I'd be interested to know how ethics committees have affected your work, Stephen, now that the responsibilities you carry are codified in such processes?

Stephen: I come from a pre-ethical era [laughs]. In the pre-ethical era you just headed out there and did it, no checks. With the codification, it's just a pain in the neck to be doing all that paperwork that you're pretty sure nobody's actually reading.

Crystal: Does it affect your relationships in the field?

Stephen: I do have different practices now. Whenever I'm tape recording I ask, 'I'm recording you but I'm not going to make any of this public unless I check with you first. Is that all right?' And they say, 'Yes,' and that's part of the signature. But actually getting people to sign a bit of paper in Broome would be awkward. With my early work I put in place what I thought were ethical things to do, which ethics committees still don't have any guidelines on. For example, when should an Aboriginal person be co-author as opposed to—well, we've given up 'informant'—a participant? Bizarre.

Chris: Were you nevertheless given training in ethics?

Stephen: Yes, famously. Professor Berndt says to me, puffing on his pipe, 'When you're out in the field,' and this is just after he told me where to get the chewing tobacco to give to people, 'don't have anything to do with Aboriginal women, don't have anything to do with Aboriginal politics.' It's like, you know, Freud and Marx [laughs].

Eve: We're going to move on. What role do you think the journal has had in fostering the project of Indigenous cultural studies in Australia? Perhaps you could start by talking about how the journal came into being.

Stephen: *UTS Review* comes out of a conversation I had with Meaghan Morris when she was at UTS. The reason it got that name was because she had the bright idea that the name would oblige the university to give some funding. I think I was probably pushing Indigenous content, soliciting articles, keeping an eye out for stuff in that domain. The other thing that jumps out at me as being notable was the collaboration

with Dipesh Chakrabarty around subaltern, Indigenous and multicultural histories.

Eve: Can you tell us a bit about that event?

Stephen: It must have been a bit of a gold-star event. I think it was pretty much Heather Goodall and Dipesh and myself having a conversation, and then Dipesh had two seminars which then went across two issues of the journal. From Dipesh's point of view, he was curious to see how the subaltern historiographical project would become inflected if it were relativised, so to speak, with these other historiographical modes. Also, Andrew Jakubowicz's presence at UTS was significant in keeping the multicultural aspect quite visible. Who else was involved? Lots of people.

Chris: It's interesting that Eve was referring to 'Indigenous cultural studies'. That event wasn't organised around that category. It was organised around historiography and history. Katrina and I were recently talking about how very little of the material you have collected together was produced with an imaginary called 'Indigenous cultural studies' in mind. There were other kinds of projects, other kinds of imaginaries being put to work.

Stephen: I would have first used that phrase myself—Indigenous cultural studies—in *Textual Spaces* in 1992.

Katrina: The key *Cultural Studies Review* volume that I had anything to do with was the one edited by Aileen Moreton-Robinson, which came out of a concern about what cultural studies was doing around the space for pan-indigeneity and Indigenous perspectives globally. Cultural studies has different moments. I think there was a feeling amongst people in Critical Race Studies that cultural studies wasn't doing enough about addressing ideas of whiteness as, perhaps, a better frame to use than colonialism.

Eve: We want to ask you to talk about the kind of relationship between broader public conversations going on about

indigeneity, colonialism, and the past and then what happens within the discipline and the journal. How did they map onto each other?

Stephen: I remember Keith Windschuttle came to one of those seminars with Dipesh when he was about to publish *The Fabrication of Australian History*. He was checking us out to see what ‘rubbish’ was going on there. But then the journal didn’t take on the Windschuttle conversation, as such, and my personal attitude was to ignore it, write to newspapers, stuff like that. Nonetheless, Australianness and nationhood was always strongly on the journal’s agenda.

Katrina: I can’t think of a particular moment where the journal particularly rushed to contribute. For me, I think the high and low moments really did go through those Critical Race and Whiteness conferences. They had such force in creating awareness of the full range of Indigenous intellectuals in Australia, realising that to bring them together you’re going to have to always be transdisciplinary. You had so many Indigenous people who wanted to really, say, contribute to the health area and apply critical thinking. They wouldn’t come to a cultural studies conference because, I think, it still had a kind of stigma of being too theoretical, maybe not real enough to make a difference in an Indigenous community.

Eve: There aren’t just those negative moments. I’m thinking of certain kinds of high points of public feeling in Australia around the push for an apology, the Bridge Walk, et cetera.

Chris: My sense is that the temporality of those kinds of movements and the temporality of the journal are different. I think of the way in which, since the beginning of *Cultural Studies Review*, debates around indigeneity in Australia have been central to public culture. It’s always there, from the Bicentennial through to *Bringing Them Home*, the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission, *Mabo* and on and on. The emergence of these formal, national political moments gets fed back into the journal in different circuits. But, it is also

important to say, first, that the journal doesn't exist on its own. What *Meanjin* is doing in the 1980s feeds into *UTS Review*, because, I think, it didn't want to just mirror what Jenny Lee had done at *Meanjin*. Second, these preoccupations come back in a variety of idiosyncratic ways. Dipesh's contribution comes out of an odd configuration: Ranajit Guha was in Canberra, and Dipesh does his PhD there, and then gets a job in Melbourne, initially in Indian Studies and then he gets to know people in the English Department who are reading cultural studies. They're very fortuitous circulations. The result being that people are trying to think about 'provincializing Europe' in relation to Australia years before the book is published.

Tim: I wondering if you could speak about how *UTS Review* and *Cultural Studies Review* have been sites or refuges for work that would otherwise maybe not have a home?

Katrina: I think one of the obvious areas would be that we have a new writing section. And that was always based on the idea that people might want to—I think these are Stephen's words—get to a point where they wanted to rearrange their thinking about something that could only be expressed by writing it differently.

Chris: I think it's important to say that the journal was established with institutional politics in mind. It was established as a way of claiming, 'This kind of work is important and valuable work across the humanities and we want to authenticate it.' Stephen and Meaghan set up a very distinguished international board, they put in place highly professional refereeing and reviewing processes for work that often didn't have a home anywhere else. They were saying, 'We're going to do this in a way that's going to get recognised.' So, it's part of a much broader way in which cultural studies established itself as central to the humanities in Australia from the late 80s on.

Stephen: I remember getting very excited by thinking I had discovered Sia Figiel, a Samoan writer who then hadn't published a book but was about to. She had a voice that had a strong tonality of the Samoan oral tradition, a storytelling writerly

voice, and that would have been hard to place elsewhere, I think. Meaghan also had an eye on the Pacific with people like Teresia Teaiwa from Fiji, who was more of a fictocritical voice, a creative theoretical language that was kind of unique.

Katrina: I think the journal has always shared an antipathy to, in Meaghan's words, a global theory as the norm, where an essay only has value in terms of its contribution back to the institutionalised grand theory. Instead an essay about a small museum, for example, might speak back to some of those global theories using either localised or a global understanding of a very different order. I think that's always been a key part of *Cultural Studies Review*, allowing both an intensification of the specific combined with a different perspective on something usually called 'the global'.

Chris: It's interesting, if you go back and look at stuff that was being done in Australia before the journal, the focus is overwhelmingly on questions of representation and often on ideology as false consciousness. That's not the starting point for *UTS Review* and then *Cultural Studies Review*. In a sense, Stephen and Meaghan are radically uninterested in representation except in relation to the constitutive processes of languages, images and histories in place that produce the terrain of what that can and can't produce. It's not about saying, 'These images of blackfellas on television are racist', but more about describing the cultural dynamics that make those kinds of practices possible or objectionable. Maybe it's one way of getting at what today we would call questions of affect.

Stephen: I think it was only after talking with Katrina that I started using the term affect. [laughs]

Chris: But you see it earlier in your work, otherwise why have you got Krim [Benterrak] doing his wacky pictures in *Reading the Country*? They're not representational, they're not saying, 'We're making good representations of blackfellas.' That's about being in place. It's about bodily forms of articulation and experience.

Katrina: But then you might get to that place because you just want to have an experiment. You arrive at what is an affective interpretation but the origin may have been, ‘Let’s try this.’

Chris: That’s right. I think that comes out of the engagement that Stephen and Meaghan have with French theory in the 70s and 80s.

Crystal: We were interested in terms of the meeting of Indigenous studies and cultural studies, where do you think it sits at the present?

Katrina: I’ve got a clear picture of three events in the next six months. One is an issue of the journal that Chris and I are working on, which will say something towards the Intervention, mostly through accounts of Indigenous artists in Central Australia. And then I’m thinking of the festschrift of *Reading the Country* down in Melbourne, something that was key in, say, my intellectual life and now kind of...

Crystal: Come full circle.

Katrina: Yeah. And then I’m thinking about Fiona Nicoll and Fiona Foley’s ‘Courting Blakness’ event up at UQ [University of Queensland], which is bringing lots of affective, critical interventions into both whiteness and, literally, the institutionalisation of Indigenous presence in universities through art and papers based around a physical material space. I think of all of those three as indications of where cultural studies and Indigenous studies are crossing over. What I’m saying is that it is a very lively space, but I would feel unable to predict the kind of forms or shapes it might take.

Chris: I don’t think there is something that I could recognise or point to that is called Indigenous cultural studies. I think of it more as about—how is it that work in cultural studies in Australia does and doesn’t connect with questions of indigeneity and with the work of Indigenous scholars? There are some really interesting things happening in that space. Stephen was talking before about Jon Altman picking up on work that

cultural studies wasn't doing. In that policy space that Jon connects with and that, say, Marcia Langton's had a big role in, and that people who are really significantly influenced by cultural studies, like Emma Kowal and Tess Lea, are coming at from a different perspective — what's interesting about that is that they're people who are influenced by cultural studies but are deploying other kinds of expertise. I think that will continue to happen. I think that engagement with Indigenous cultural production is a continuing challenge, whether it's the artwork that Jennifer Biddle's writing about or the work that Therese Davis and I are doing with Romaine Moreton around Indigenous television and filmmaking and the whole mainstreaming of some kinds of Indigenous cultural production. You could say that work is about question of cultural production and cultural criticism and the relationship between the two and the institutions that rely on and reproduce indigeneity. I think it's also worth mentioning that there's a whole other set of questions in relation to Indigenous scholars who are working in areas or questions that might not seem to be specifically 'Indigenous'. For example, Dr Misty Jenkins, a Gunditjmara woman who works on T cells at the Peter McCallum Cancer Centre in Melbourne. What might Indigenous cultural studies make of the new moment when Indigenous scholars who are doing things that have a different kind of relationship to indigeneity? AFL football has been in that world for 40 years, since Polly Farmer. He wasn't playing Indigenous football.

Stephen: No.

Katrina: Or was he?

Chris: And he was. I should say he's not only playing Indigenous football. I would hope *Cultural Studies Review* would be part of that.

Crystal: You're talking about the engagement with Indigenous studies or knowledges or cultural production and then you also talked about Indigenous scholars...

Chris: Yes, and that they're two different things. It's got a kind of personal aspect for me: my first involvement with Indigenous students at Melbourne was in tutoring someone in British History in first year. That was Tony Birch. He was writing stuff on the dockworkers' strikes of the 1890s. He wasn't producing Indigenous history, or was he, in writing about the dockworkers? Stephen would say he was both producing Indigenous history and doing something else, which was is right.

Crystal: So, 'Indigenous art' is art produced by an Indigenous person?

Chris: Or maybe not only or not always that. Tracey Moffatt was a very influential member of Boomalli in the late 1980s, but then a decade or more later and Tracey's in New York saying that she's got a very different relationship to the category, 'Indigenous artist'.

Katrina: Everyone here will have a different take on this, but I think non-Indigenous scholars could look more imaginatively across the range of scholarship being produced by Indigenous academics. I don't know whether we do as much now as we might once have because those fields are getting more specialised and what is cultural studies has been more clearly defined. There's a lot of great work coming from Indigenous scholars from the health area and the education area, but I don't see that coming back through cultural studies.

Chris: That really raises the question, what claims of expertise does cultural studies make in relation to indigeneity?

Crystal: Or are there any?

Chris: A much better way of putting the question.

Stephen: I'm not sure that cultural studies has the impetus it once had as an interdisciplinary field that both loosens things up and shook out their concepts and made them work quite hard. And then when you ask about its expertise, it's

not quite sure what that could be. I get that impression where Indigenous people's activities are probably increasingly professionalised. So you figure you can professionalise towards being an historian, I guess, more than you can towards being a cultural studies person.

Eve: There is a professionalisation of the cultural studies undergraduate degrees and masters by coursework, et cetera, but they lend to quite a different set of skills than everything we've been talking about?

Katrina: There's certainly that push at particular institutions: come do a cultural studies degree and we'll connect you up with particular professional creative industries or something like that.

Chris: In terms of cultural studies being something that both tightened up and shook up possibilities, I don't think it's doing that now. I don't think it can. It's clearly become something which is on the one hand institutionalised in a small number of places in a particular form and a whole lot of other places in a very fragmented range of ways. That's got an up side in that cultural studies can make compelling claims in relation to cultural research but a downside in that not all of those claims are incommensurate. The different iterations are actually not talking to each other. One of the things that happened when things were being shaken up was that people were interested in kinds of institutionalisation, but they were more contingent ones, not as grand as the visions now.

Crystal: Now everyone is a bit separate?

Chris: Yeah. Cultural studies in Australia has to be thought of in relation to the higher education system. Where it was coming out of in the 70s and the early 80s were not out Sydney University or Melbourne University. It was coming out of the institutions that would eventually get unified under Dawkins in 1988. There was real space there, real space for experimentation was really possible, whether it was in the Western Australian Institute of Technology, the NSW Institute

of Technology or other places. We're now in an education system where its unification, and standardisation produces fewer and fewer possibilities for experimentation and more and more demands to justify every aspect of your existence, professionally speaking. The modes are much more defensive, much more about securing and controlling territory, whereas cultural studies was much more about opening up new spaces.

Stephen: The expanding field versus the shrinking field.

Chris: We're in a field which is paradoxically shrinking even though it's much bigger. And maybe its imagination is shrinking.

Katrina: But on the other hand, we do have a presence in the ARC, we can train students in a particular way, and have a history similar to every other discipline in that way. John Frow used to famously say that cultural studies existed best when two disciplines crossed or met. I was a bit cross with him for saying that because I left Melbourne University to seek out cultural studies. It didn't have a presence in '88, '89, so I went to UWS, where yes it became 'disciplined' but was also seen so could be studied.

Eve: We opened our discussion asking about your personal journey. Could you each speak about your own projects now, in terms of this meeting of Indigenous studies and cultural studies?

Stephen: Well, cultural studies has really taught me a lot about how to describe things and I'm kind of just getting simpler and I just want to be able to describe things. I'm not particularly fussed whether it's called cultural studies anymore or not. Happy to call it ethnography. Ethnography is one of the methods of cultural studies, possibly the method of cultural studies that really worked for that discipline. My work in Broome, it's ethnographic work and has an ontologically pluralist aspect. It's about imagination. When you're looking at describing 'what I am seeing,' you want to see more than you did at first glance. What is that 'seeing more'? How do you write it? That's my current problem.

Chris: I'm doing two things that are connected to this discussion. I've got a project which is looking at imagining that, rather than Indigenous people being absent in the history of Australian film and television, as though they somehow become part of that history with *Jedda* or *Night Cries* or *Redfern Now*, that instead the whole history of Australian film and television could be written after indigeneity. In other words, Indigenous people were there from the beginning, literally, in the first movie footage being shot in the Torres Strait, meaning we can read back through the history of Australian film and television as if indigeneity is at its centre. The other area I've been trying to think through is around culture and sustainability. What would it mean to talk about cultural sustainability in this country? What are things that are actually happening that are bringing that into existence or making it impossible?

Katrina: I've got an unfinished Captain Cook project that's most of all been about searching for a way to write it. How to write each of the moments in which Cook is made to appear in the Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds of Australian settlement, or indeed made to disappear? That's been my problem. My other interest, back to dead white men, is the figure of Ludwig Leichhardt. He used two Indigenous guides in his first expedition and there's this very lovely feisty account of Charlie Fischer hitting Leichhardt, and his white party managing that in a particular way. I haven't read other accounts of that kind of interaction, so that's what I'm going through the State Library trying to find at the moment. I will always call what I do cultural studies because it kind of saved my intellectual life.

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- Barney, Katelyn, 'Gendering Aboriginalism: A Performative Gaze on Indigenous Australian Women', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2010, pp. 212-39.
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- Nicholls, Christine and Kathleen Petyarre, "'Old Lady Mob': Interview', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2006, pp. 11-15.
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Heather Goodall is an adjunct professor of History at the University of Technology, Sydney. Since 1975, she has worked closely in collaborative projects with Indigenous people, published as *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics* and the co-authored *Rivers and Resilience: Aboriginal People on Sydney's Georges River* (with Allison Cadzow), *Isabel Flick: The Many Lives of an Extraordinary Aboriginal Woman* (with Isabel Flick), and *Making Change Happen* (with Kevin Cook). She has interviewed graziers and cotton farmers in western New South Wales for her Black Soil Country project, and her work with Jodi Frawley on the Murray Darling River system has been published online as Talking Fish.

Chris Healy teaches Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne. His publications include *From the Ruins of Colonialism* (Cambridge, 1997), *South Pacific Museums: Experiments in Culture* (co-edited with Andrea Witcomb, Monash, 2006), *Forgetting Aborigines* (UNSW Press, 2008), *Assembling Culture* (co-edited with Tony Bennett, Routledge, 2011) and, with Maria Tumarkin, two special issues on memory and historical justice: *Journal of Social History*, vol. 44, no. 4, Summer 2011, and *Memory Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2011. He's currently co-editor, with Katrina Schlunke, of *Cultural Studies Review*, completing a book called *Travelling Television* and beginning a research project with Therese Davis and Romaine Moreton on indigenous film and television.

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HISTORY, POWER, TEXT

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History, Power, Text: Cultural Studies and Indigenous Studies is a collection of essays on Indigenous themes published between 1996 and 2013 in the journal known first as UTS Review and now as Cultural Studies Review. This journal opened up a space for new kinds of politics, new styles of writing and new modes of interdisciplinary engagement. *History, Power, Text* highlights the significance of just one of the exciting interdisciplinary spaces, or meeting points, the journal enabled. ‘Indigenous cultural studies’ is our name for the intersection of cultural studies and Indigenous studies showcased here.

This volume republishes key works by academics and writers Katelyn Barney, Jennifer Biddle, Tony Birch, Wendy Brady, Gillian Cowlishaw, Robyn Ferrell, Bronwyn Fredericks, Heather Goodall, Tess Lea, Erin Manning, Richard Martin, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Stephen Muecke, Alison Ravenscroft, Deborah Bird Rose, Lisa Slater, Sonia Smallacombe, Rebe Taylor, Penny van Toorn, Eve Vincent, Irene Watson and Virginia Watson—many of whom have taken this opportunity to write reflections on their work—as well as interviews between Christine Nicholls and painter Kathleen Petyarre, and Anne Brewster and author Kim Scott. The book also features new essays by Birch, Moreton-Robinson and Crystal McKinnon, and a roundtable discussion with former and current journal editors Chris Healy, Stephen Muecke and Katrina Schlunke.

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