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Too Early Yet or Not Soon Enough?

Reflections on Sharing Histories as Process

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The concept of 'sharing histories' has been a key goal of the Australian Reconciliation process. It involves a widespread popular concept of history as a collection of facts, to which previously excluded voices can be simply added-in to make the collection more comprehensive. This article indicates differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' understandings of the concepts of both 'sharing' and of 'history'. It then traces the narrative shifts which tend to occur when complex memories previously retold in community settings are transferred to adversarial public platforms, resulting in simplification and polarisation. The article argues that the processes by which all groups construct and narrate their histories shape their historical content. Further, collaborating in these history-making processes offers more opportunities for generating new relationships than do confrontations between the simplified 'finished' histories which become weapons in intense public political conflicts. Finally, I suggest alternative approaches to 'sharing histories' that may allow the processes of collaborative investigation to take precedence over the arithmetical approach of collecting and adding up facts for new retellings of Australian pasts.

'SHARING HISTORIES' has been a key goal of Australian Reconciliation and it has proved to be as ambiguous and problematic as the Reconciliation process itself. This process was initiated in 1991 after the Western Australian Labor government forced its federal counterpart to abandon Labor's long-standing promise of national land rights legislation. The Hawke federal government offered 'Reconciliation' instead, with a pledge of funds over ten years to achieve the vision of real improvement in the national and personal relationships between Indigenous and colonising Australians.

The Australian version of Reconciliation was to have been a non-confrontational process, different from the formal charges and hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. There were to be public educational campaigns, the orchestration of high profile, feel-good symbolic events and support for locally-initiated collaborations between Indigenous and other Australians. The Reconciliation Council was under the direction of an Indigenous chairman and drew its membership, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, from widely bi-partisan backgrounds. 'Sharing' was an idea taken up strongly by the Council, suggestive not only of the personal contact and warm generosity of a shared meal but of the reciprocity understood to lie at the heart of Aboriginal culture and also valued within the various 'settler' religious traditions. And coming to a new relationship with the past was understood to be a central need in the process of changing the future. So 'sharing histories' became a major objective of Reconciliation.

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Yet even the grammar of 'Reconciliation' is ambiguous. As Fiona Nicoll has pointed out, there can be reconciliation *between* people, as they become reconciled *with* each other, resolving past conflicts and restoring or building new, positive relationships. But people can also become reconciled *to* something, usually an unfortunate occurrence, learning to live with something which seems inevitable.¹ In the media, from the tabloids and radio talk-backs to the ABC, and in the mouths of politicians on all sides, the phrase most often heard has been reconciliation *for* Aborigines, as if this were a new welfare 'hand-out', to be magnanimously granted to Aborigines or to be withheld if they did not appear grateful enough.

The 'sharing histories' goal was built on the new insights arising from many Indigenous life stories published over the last two decades, as well as the recent work of historians. All have forced an awareness that the official and dominant histories of Australia from the 1880s to the 1960s had ignored or suppressed many stories and voices, privileging instead an account in which Anglo-Australians, with a few Irish and Scots offshoots, were the sole actors in the national saga. A well-known focus of this published work has been on the prevalence of warfare, massacre and exploitation during what had previously been represented as a 'peaceful settlement'. While revisionists debate about the numbers who died, demanding that only casualties documented in the perpetrators' archives be 'counted', there has been no serious suggestion that these events were not widespread and often systematic. A less well-known but no less important focus of these recent histories and autobiographies has been the extensive evidence of interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people on a personal and collective level over the full two hundred years of colonisation. The expectation among the Reconciliation Council members and staff was that these recognitions could be reflected in a new telling of Australian history.

But the actual mechanics of 'sharing' have proved harder to pin down. In the Reconciliation Conference of 1997, the Council talked of Australia having had 'two timelines, two histories ...'² The approach tended to be the popular perception of history as a set of discrete, empirically testable facts, which could be assembled into a reliable, truthful account of the past. In this case, the stories and voices previously unheard could be regarded as additional facts, separate from the facts presently included in the dominant accounts, but able to be added up to create a new, joint and coherent account. What was far less evident was the recognition of entangled, interacting pasts and of contested interpretations of the same events, which could have been expected to arise from so many of the historians influencing the Reconciliation Council. This had receded further in

¹ Fiona Nicolls, *From Diggers to Drag Queens: Configurations of Twentieth Century Nationalist Subjectivity* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 2001) and 'On History, Memory, Indigenous Sovereignty and Whiteness', paper delivered at 'Remembering/Forgetting: Writing Histories in Asia, Australia and the Pacific', University of Technology, Sydney Winter School, 4-5 July 2001.

² *Overview: Proceedings of the Australian Reconciliation Convention, Book 1* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1997), 100.

the summary documents of this Conference, which sketched out only the goal of bringing two sets of facts together, of adding them up to make a new, single timeline which all Australians could claim.

In the final paper commissioned by the Reconciliation Council to argue the case for 'sharing histories', Ian Clark and a number of eminent contributing historians suggested the more flexible concept of a 'shared sense of history' involving 'a common sense of time and place through the created historical record'. But the document eventually returned to the sense of concrete facticity of the two 'histories' and the argument that they can be reasonably simply added together to produce ultimately a new, single version. The outcome proposed by Clark is close to a bargain in which settler Australians need to acknowledge Indigenous accounts of invasion, massacres and exploitation and in return, settler Australians will be entitled to align themselves to the ancient history of the Australian continent, in order 'to lengthen and strengthen their association to this land'. The final result will be a changed way in which 'Australian history is constructed and represented'.³ Along with its continuing concentration on the relations between Indigenous people and British settlers, this is still really the cumulative version of how to change history, by adding up the facts which are regarded as important by Indigenous people and adding them to those regarded as important by non-Indigenous Australians. The hope is for a sum total which will produce a unified, consensual account.

The main interests of the Reconciliation Council's paper were the processes of invasion and early relationships, leading to an assumption that there were only really two parties to the colonisation process: Indigenous and British. Parallel with the Reconciliation process, however, there has been the investigation and wide public discussion of the situation of the Stolen Generations, those many Indigenous people who throughout much of the twentieth century had been removed as children from their families by policies and practices of state and federal governments. This process built to a tense climax during the 1997 Conference when the Howard government delayed the release of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) Report⁴ on the separation of children and rejected out of hand many of its recommendations. The hectoring speech on this theme by Prime Minister John Howard at the Conference Opening prompted a significant portion of the audience to stand silently and turn their backs on him. While the outcomes of the HREOC Report were not directly under the control of the Reconciliation Council, the two themes of invasion violence and the stealing of children have become the main historical ones understood in public discourse to be associated with the Reconciliation process.

³ Ian Clark, 'Sharing History: A Sense of All Australians of a Shared Ownership of Their History', Documents of Reconciliation website, 2000: <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/car/1993/4/>

⁴ *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

There has now been a decade of Reconciliation, much of it under a conservative government that has made the interpretation of history front page news throughout its first two terms. In this context, what are everyday Australians saying about the relationship between their histories at all, let alone about 'sharing' them? In the 'Australians and the Past' project, I have been involved over the last three years with colleagues at the ABC and at the University of Technology, Sydney in asking three hundred and fifty Australians, from many different walks of life, how they learnt about the past, what they value from it and what they feel children need to know about the past.⁵ A proportion of these interviewees (nine per cent) were Indigenous Australians. Around one in five of the non-Indigenous interviewees raised, unsolicited, the issue of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal history, while the rest did not mention it at all, suggesting it has little claim on their attention.

The responses in which the issue was raised show variation, but there are general patterns in the way non-Indigenous interviewees spoke about what they called 'Aboriginal history'. For all these respondents, even those who regarded it with interest, Aboriginal history was seen as very separate from their sense of 'general' or 'Australian' history. For some it was because they equated it with pre-invasion cultural traditions and practices. For others it was because they regarded 'Aboriginal history' as the history of victimisation, brutality and warfare associated with the actual frontier of invasion. And for others again, it was because they regarded 'Aboriginal history' as being about very different experiences of the last two hundred years from those of non-Indigenous Australians. There was virtually no sense that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians had participated in the same activities or had intersecting relationships. Interestingly, there were a number of non-Indigenous Australians whose explorations of genealogy had turned up an Aboriginal ancestor. Even for them, whose very existence demonstrated intimacy and interaction, their frequent decisions to investigate Aboriginal history on this account was spoken about as a journey into a completely unknown and alien story, rather than into a variation on one with which they were already familiar.

A number of respondents were eager to implement what they named as the Reconciliation goal of having these various types of Aboriginal histories added-in to expand a unified Australian history. But others expressed hostility towards the 'reversed discrimination' which they regarded as the result of 'the rewriting of the Australian history to please the Aboriginal minorities'. Any suggestion that the generally accepted version of the past was changing at all as a result of public dialogue was resented by these respondents, despite one admitting that 'the Aboriginals have some validity in that regard, but I still find it disturbing on principle ...'⁶

⁵ 'Australians and the Past' project, University of Technology, Sydney, a survey conducted between 1999 and 2001 by telephone and face-to-face interview by H. Goodall, J. Connors, L. McCarthy, P. Hamilton and P. Ashton.

⁶ 'Australians and the Past' survey respondents, ME/20 and ME/03.

For the Aboriginal respondents, the concept of Aboriginal history was more important but their understanding of it rather different to those of non-Indigenous respondents. It often included an assumption that traditional cultures were a strong influence on Aboriginal experiences after the invasion as well as before and these interviewees stressed the suffering of the victims of violent invasion and later policies like removal of children. But their responses frequently expressed an awareness of the interaction of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, not only among the interviewees' own ancestors but in collective situations like participating in common work such as shearing and droving, as well as in joint processes like union organisation. For some this was an assertion of Aboriginal contributions to iconic Australian activities or industries, challenging the silence over Aboriginal participation, but for others it was just a fundamental assumption about the everyday life of the past.

Yet for all of those very frequent recognitions of interacting lives, as well as mutually contested interpretations of the same events, virtually none of the Indigenous respondents were interested in moving rapidly towards a simple, linear, coherent narrative of 'Australian' history to which all could lay claim. Instead, they had a strong sense of responsibility for the custodianship and the storytelling role of their histories. Their interpretation of 'sharing' was that Reconciliation should be making a venue, a forum, for Aboriginal voices to be heard, 'sharing' in the sense of telling their story and being heard respectfully and, hopefully, with some understanding and sympathy.⁷ They were uneasy about any suggestion of relinquishing custodianship of their stories. This was the case around the suggestions, so prominent in Heidi Norman's 'Sharing Histories' paper, that non-Indigenous Australians could lay claim to the millennia of Indigenous ownership of and traditional knowledge about the continent; suggestions which Aboriginal interviewees saw with some scepticism as a way for invading newcomers to stake a claim to 'belonging'.⁸

But uneasiness about such appropriation of a long past was not the only reason for Aboriginal caution. As one Indigenous interviewee suggested:

I think it's too soon for Aboriginal people to share in the one [history] at this stage. I think maybe somewhere down the track. A lot of people still do not understand the pain that some Aboriginal families have suffered, because of the Stolen Generation, or being separated ... I don't think on the Aboriginal side there's been enough closures to go that far. I think it's too early yet ...⁹

So there are significant differences in how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people regard the meaning and future possibilities of 'sharing' histories. The Reconciliation Council itself has demonstrated wide variations between the

⁷ 'Australians and the Past' interview, Tranby Series, October 2001

⁸ 'Australians and the Past' interview, Tranby Series, October 2001; Heidi Norman, 'Sharing Histories', paper delivered at 'The Public Right to Know' conference, Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, University of Technology, Sydney, November 2001.

⁹ 'Australians and the Past' interview, Sandra McPhellany, Tranby Series, October, 2001.

sources of its influence—which urge the recognition of invasion violence but also of entangled lives and contested interpretations—and its own concluding statements about a cumulative ‘new history’.

What some of the survey respondents suggest, but do not explore, is their recognition that histories are not sequences of stable facts which can be added and subtracted to reach the unarguable truth, but are instead interpretive narratives. Here they are closer to those historians who have recognised the constructed and contested nature of histories in many reflective academic works. This approach is still rare in public popular or official forums, but the practical engagement of history and the political process is now occurring on such a large scale in so many places that the discussion is forced to move beyond reflection to the practicalities of history making. From the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission to Reconciliation in Australia to the heritage interpretation of civil rights struggles in the United States, communities as well as historians are faced with making some sense out of not just divergent but intransigently opposed histories, each appealing to ‘facts’ and ‘truth’ for their authority.¹⁰

What is required to work in this situation is a recognition that histories are not sets of empirically testable facts, but are instead processes of formulating and mobilising narratives, always unfinished and always contingent on the teller, their purpose, the context and the audience to whom they speak. The relationship between the narrative and the evidence from the past on which it relies, while distinguishing history from fiction, is nevertheless always interpretive, never transparent or fixed. The shift from seeing *history as collection* to *history as process* allows a more constructive approach to answering the question of what ‘sharing histories’ might turn out to be. It directs attention to the question of how and when histories are told and retold, to gain an idea of the reasons they are expressed and deployed in particular forms.

It is widely acknowledged that the construction of consensual accounts of the past are of great importance to individual and collective constructions of identity. At a common-sense level, we are all aware of how we use our understanding of our past to shore up our sense of our selves. Much critical work has now been done interrogating how such processes actually work.¹¹ Building on studies like Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s *Invention of Tradition* and Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, scholars have explored the questions such as how ethnic and religious histories are mobilised in new state formation after the disintegration of dominant historical constructions, as is occurring in the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia.¹² Newly reunified states, like Germany,

¹⁰ Owen J. Dwyer, ‘Interpreting the Civil Rights Movement: Place, Memory, and Conflict’, *Professional Geographer* 52, no. 4 (November 2000): 660–71.

¹¹ James Clifford, ‘Taking Identity Politics Seriously: “The Contradictory, Stony Ground ...”’ in *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, eds P. Gilroy, L. Grossberg and A. McRobbie (London: Verso, 2000).

¹² Andreas Huyssen, ‘Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia’, *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000); S. Ahonen, ‘Politics of Identity Through History Curriculum: Narratives of the Past for Social Exclusion—or Inclusion?’, *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 33, no. 2 (February 2001): 179–94.

are also the subject of studies of how histories are being deployed to try to rebuild a sense of consensus, although here the unresolved questions arising from the Nazi past greatly complicate the new attempts to make the past serve the present.¹³ The relations between memory, history and identity are now frequently investigated in analysing the emerging diasporic and hybrid communities generated by colonialism.¹⁴ And, importantly for Australia, new work emerging in South Africa grapples with the role of histories both in building separate ethnic and religious identities and in potentially building a sense of collaborative participation in a new, non-coercive sense of national unity.¹⁵

It is hardly surprising, then, that similar approaches are to be found taking place in Australia, both locally and nationally. In an example unrelated to Indigenous histories, I have been observing such a process in the north western floodplain of the upper Darling River, where contestation is occurring around who is rightfully 'local' and has the authority to speak for the people and the 'country'. Graziers suffering economic and environmental decline are asserting a collective account of the past which justifies and celebrates their land use and social structure, while the incoming, economically ascendant cotton farmers are asserting a different historical account to justify their challenge to the social and political dominance of the grazing community.¹⁶

There are, however, perhaps even more deeply opposed sets of accounts relating to invasion and colonisation. One example is the set about whether particular Aboriginal people can claim Native Title, where the contested accounts of history go to the heart not only of Indigenous people's relation to their country but to settler Australians' sense of their right and authority to 'belong' to land. Another is around the history and terminology of the Stolen Generations: was a whole generation involved and were they 'stolen' or 'separated'? These conflicts have been aired and debated in the intensely politicised atmosphere since the conservative parties came to federal power in 1993, and it has been too easy to assume that these opposed histories were always divergent. The public process is seen to have simply brought to the surface these pre-existing fully formed accounts, like so many rocks buried whole and just waiting to be dug up and displayed or hurled at the enemy. But the public debate has not been the discoverer of these fully formed histories. Instead, it has shaped and largely created them. The polarisation of these histories is the product of the politicised public forums in which they are deployed. The adversarial nature of political struggle has transformed what were complex personal and collective memories into simplistic polemics.

¹³ Mary Fulbrook and Martin Swales, *Representing the German Nation: History and Identity in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Ahonen, 'Politics of Identity'.

¹⁴ Y. Saikia, 'Landscape of Identity: Transacting the Labels "Indian", "Assamese" and "Tai-Ahom" in Contemporary Assam', *Contemporary South Asia* 10, no. 1 (March 2001): 73-93.

¹⁵ D. Brown, 'National Belonging and Cultural Difference: South Africa and the Global Imaginary', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, no. 4 (December 2001): 757-69.

¹⁶ Heather Goodall, 'Telling Country: Memory, Modernity and Narratives in Rural Australia', *History Workshop Journal*, 47 (1999): 161-90.

The conflict around the Stolen Generations offers insights into the processes which occur when memories previously retold and circulating at family or community level are mobilised to serve in public conflicts. The ways in which Aboriginal people in north-western New South Wales recalled experiences of removal and 'apprenticeship' during the 1970s were varied and complex. Whether during interviews with me, a non-Indigenous interviewer, or when talking in family and community settings, the dozen or so people I observed drew many different types of experiences into their account. Some were tragic, painful and angering, others ironic and self-deprecatory, others humorous and still others were used to make a range of observations about everyday life under colonialism.¹⁷ People recall being seized and literally dragged away from stable and happy homes, others recall more bureaucratic separations that, although they led to unhappy experiences, did not occur with the savagery experienced by others. And still others remember families damaged by the oppressions and frustrations of colonialism, from whose distressed conditions children needed genuine refuge, but instead were treated with the impersonal humiliations of 'removal' and 'disposal'. At the Homes or at their places of apprenticeship, some men and women recall with horror the employers who beat, humiliated and raped them; but others recall with affection people with whom they shared warm personal friendships. A few found their work satisfying and interesting, although for most it was tedious and arduous. Some recalled with delight their careful planning to sabotage the demands and impositions of unreasonable employers; while others felt uneasy guilt about the strategies they had been forced to employ, like deceit and insolence, to protect themselves from cruelty and exploitation. These were obviously such enormous, multi-dimensional experiences that people continue to reflect on and reinterpret them throughout their lives. While the general events which individuals described remained consistent, their detailed memories as they talked them over were open to re-examination and reflection from many different angles, shared with community members had been through similar experiences and combed through for new significance over time.

These accounts of apprenticeship were different from the accounts given by activists addressing the public sphere in the 1920s and 1930s, when the Aboriginal political movements were battling a hostile and patronising government and public to have the removal system recognised and ended. Fred Maynard¹⁸

¹⁷ The disjunction between community and public contexts for retelling these stories is discussed in Heather Goodall and Karen Flick, 'Angledool Stories: Aboriginal History in Hypermedia' in *The Oral History Reader*, eds Alistair Thomson and Robert Perks (London: Routledge, 1997), 421-31; Heather Goodall, 'Aboriginal History, Narration and New Media' *Journal of History and Computing* 9 (1997): 134-43; and Heather Goodall, "'Speaking What Our Mothers Want Us to Say": Aboriginal Women, Land and the Western Women's Council, 1980-1985' in *Words and Silences: Aboriginal Women and Land*, ed. Peggy Brock (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001), 18-55.

¹⁸ Fred Maynard to J.T. Lang, Premier of New South Wales, 3 October 1927; Fred Maynard to K.B., 14 October 1927, enclosed in Aborigines Protection Board to Chief Secretary, 3 November 1927, both in New South Wales Premier's Department, State Archives Office, A27/915. Cited in Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics, 1770-1972* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin and BlackBooks, 1996), 149-70.

and Pearl Gibbs,¹⁹ in separate decades, each made impassioned speeches and wrote statements condemning the system. Each pared their description down to its most stark and simple outlines, stressing what they saw to be its fundamental dangers and injustices, rather than being diverted to the variations which arose from each child's case. Their accounts stressed those themes which were already widely circulating in public discourse at the time to express children's and particularly women's vulnerability: the issues of child labour exploitation and of the failure of men to marry young women they had impregnated. Not only were these themes accurately reflected in Aboriginal children's experiences of apprenticeship, but they were themes with which the non-Indigenous public was familiar and that could therefore be expected to elicit recognition and empathy.

By the 1980s the situation was different. Although Aboriginal activists achieved some public awareness of child removal policies in the 1920s and 1930s, this had been forgotten once the system changed and diversified in the post-war period. When the issue again surfaced in Aboriginal autobiographies and historians' work in the 1980s, there was some sympathy among the non-Indigenous public but also disbelief and a failure to recognise the interlocking effects of differing state policies and the plethora of alternative steps by which children could be taken away by either welfare or juvenile justice systems.

A series of new narratives began to emerge among those non-Indigenous people whose families had employed Aboriginal 'apprentices'. Grazing families in north-western New South Wales, for example, whom I was interviewing in the mid-1990s about environmental change, began to offer their memories of Aboriginal employees, interspersing their stories with defensive phrases like 'well, we didn't treat them badly!' or 'they never looked unhappy to me!' In an increasingly combative and adversarial public sphere, Aboriginal accounts again stressed the most basic elements of the processes they had experienced. Some of the same people I have heard discuss complex apprenticeship experiences when they were speaking informally in community settings have shifted gear when they were called on to make a contribution on the broader public stage. Anticipating disbelief and hostility, such speakers set aside the messy and ambiguous details of their experiences to focus on the starkly tragic and unequivocally unjust dimensions of those stories. As the interviewee from the 'Australians and the Past' project quoted earlier explained, she feels many non-Aboriginal people simply do not understand yet how devastating this policy was, and so this is not the time to offer any account which confuses the issue with ambiguity or complexity. People don't mention the sad situations of real family distress from which some children might have been taken, because they know that, although this was never the reason for the removal (far more children being taken from stable families than from unhappy or dysfunctional ones), such instances will nevertheless be used to lay blame for the removal policy on all Aboriginal parents and communities.

¹⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 February 1938; *Daily Telegraph*, 12 February 1938; *Woman Today*, April 1938, May 1938.

The details of the accounts brought into the glare of public debate are accurate, but what have changed are the focuses and the emphasis. The public accounts again resonate with forms of memory retelling that are commonly circulating in the wider public arena, as they did in the 1920s and 1930s. But these no longer focus on the difficulties of unmarried and abandoned young mothers. Now the more common narratives in wider use are those of the testimony of the trauma survivor and of the victim of child sexual abuse. These have also been common experiences among Aboriginal children separated from their families, but they were not the most usual way to express that vulnerability in earlier decades. Now this has become a more common and accepted element of publically stated Indigenous narratives, including those generated in the question-and-answer situation of the HREOC report and the ensuing court cases. The elements, while new in public, continue to reflect actual experience and to express the deeply underlying sense of vulnerability for Aboriginal children and young people caught in the net of 'separation'. As the incoming conservative government after 1993 rejected both individual and collective Aboriginal interpretations, the public atmosphere became even more intensely politicised. And it has become harder than ever to discuss the multi-dimensional experiences of removal in anything like the complexity with which people can reflect on these experiences within their community.

It is the emergence into the harsh, adversarial process of the political contests in recent Australia which generates polarised and simplified narratives, pared down to the most dramatic, clear cut and unambiguous examples. The narratives now invariably stress the individual experiences of removed children, and sometimes their families, but always in terms of the individual experience and tragedy. The interpretive frame is consequently narrowed, and many wider economic, social and land-related issues are discarded in this intensely focused approach.²⁰ Yet it arises because all sides feel under threat of attack and so they state their case in its most extreme form, leaving as few gaps as possible to avoid criticism and so as not to allow governments to wriggle out of their responsibilities. Elsewhere in this volume, Peter Read has described the disturbing and tragic conditions which predictably arise from generations of removal and repression and yet, in this politicised atmosphere, these simply can't be discussed.²¹ The upshot is that the stories which *are* told in public debate are closed narratives, with all the loose ends tied up and the messy ambiguities excised. There is no space allowed in these circumstances to reflect on these simplified and rigid versions of the past.

In adversarial conditions the versions which reach public forums are unlikely to reflect any complex memories which don't fit easily into the simplistic moulds of polarised positions. Notice what happened recently when Lowitja O'Donoghue tried to open up a more complex account of her removal by pointing out that she

²⁰ Norman, 'Public Right to Know' conference.

²¹ See Peter Read, 'Clio or Janus: Historians and the Stolen Generation', in this volume.

and her siblings were not literally 'stolen' because there may have been some form of parental consent involved in their removal, despite the difficult context which compromised any such consent. Immediately, Dr O'Donoghue found herself the subject of virulent attack from the government, including the Prime Minister himself along with the so-called Minister for Reconciliation, who gloated that O'Donoghue had therefore admitted that there were no 'stolen' generations. Even more disturbingly, she was attacked as well by some Aboriginal people, who accused her of undermining the campaign for just compensation for people who had been removed. The incident demonstrated clearly that the public sphere, in times of political confrontation, is the least likely context in which to stimulate real reflection on the past or to foster anything like a genuine exchange of interpretations or an atmosphere where there is enough trust to recognise the past of the 'other'. Instead, 'sharing histories' in public adversarial conditions is most likely to close down the histories and push everyone further into opposing corners of simplistic polemic.

Yet the need for a genuine Reconciliation is now more urgent than ever. If we are to move towards a more viable approach to understanding the past, we need to seek alternatives both to the add-on approach and to the politicised confrontation where closed histories are pitted against one another. Some possibilities have been demonstrated by Reconciliation activities at community level and others have been generated outside, or indeed in defiance of, the constraints of the Reconciliation process. The goal for any such alternatives would be to find ways to allow people to work with open-ended stories about the past rather than to confront each other with closed, defensive narratives. Concentrating on creating opportunities for collaborations and shared tasks rather than on precisely defined content at first seems a valuable strategy in achieving this goal.

One important possibility arises the emerging demand to break out of what Marcia Langton called the 'psychotic debate' between Anglo and Indigenous Australians:

Let's forget about this psychotic debate we keep having with white Australia and let's start talking to Asians and people from Eastern Europe and Africa and South America and talk about something else for a change ... How about us and the Timorese get together. How about us and the Cambodians get together, you know. That'd be so much more interesting and we could bring our experiences as human beings together you know, having been victims of human tragedies.²²

The Reconciliation strategy has tended to focus on the early invasion period as well as on policies such as that of child removal, which have both emphasised the Anglo/Aboriginal binary. Yet while the British Crown initiated the invasion, there have been participants in the long colonisation of the continent

²² Marcia Langton, from 'Australian Screen Stories', an interview with Philip Adams, broadcast on 17 May 1994, ABC Radio *National Late Night Live*, cited in Stephen Muecke, 'Cultural Activism, Indigenous Australia, 1972-1994' in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1998), 308-9.

who have come from many different ethnicities and countries. Their roles, however, have been various and the important issues have been class and colonial relationships as much as ethnicity and race. Mudrooroo,²³ Dipesh Chakrabarty²⁴ and Suvendrini Perera²⁵ have each argued that what is needed is to seek not to 'share histories' but to recognise the 'shared predicaments' in the experiences of Indigenous people and those immigrants who have been colonised in their countries of origin. Not only by comparing the course of colonisation in their various countries, but by comparing how colonisation in Australia has shaped the lives of them all, can we offer opportunities for trans-cultural investigations in which not only the answers but the questions themselves might be new.

Tony Birch has opened up such an exploration in his reflections on the relations between the experiences of Koories and East Timorese people.²⁶ The year 2001 offered many other starting points for such inquiries. One was the sequence of characterisations of both Indigenous and recently immigrant communities, particularly those 'of Middle Eastern appearance' and Muslim religion, which drew on a fusion of racial and sexual stereotypes. These characterisations each have a long history, which needs comparative analysis. The long-established use of differential racial inferences, like racial profiling and ethnic descriptors, in accusations of criminal behaviour has been intensified by its engagement with this sexualised racism. The occasions for the circulation of these discourses have been serious allegations and events of violent sexual attack both in the Aboriginal community in Victoria and in Bankstown, an outer suburb of Sydney. Sexual attack, whether as inter-family violence or on the streets, by men of any ethnic background including Anglo-Australians, has been the subject of repeated protest and calls for assistance by both Aboriginal women and women from within the Arabic communities and immigrant communities generally.

Yet their calls have most often been ignored, or, as has been the case over the last year, turned into a generalised attack on men of the Aboriginal or immigrant communities. In Australia invasion proceeded with extensive and well-documented British sexual attack and abuse of Indigenous women, yet this is seldom a discussed aspect of the frontier either in the Reconciliation process or in the recent generalised denunciations of Aboriginal men as sexual threats to Aboriginal and other women. Similarly, the long collection of evidence from immigrant women's organisations about sexual attacks and threats, and racial taunts by Anglo-Australian men against Muslim women and women of other religions and ethnicities has been ignored in a wave of media-fuelled panic about

²³ Mudrooroo, *Us Mob: History, Culture, Struggle: An Introduction to Indigenous Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1995).

²⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Reconciliation and its Historiography: Some Preliminary Thoughts', *Subaltern/Indigenous/Intercultural*, *UTS Review* 1, no. 7, (May 2001): 6–16.

²⁵ Suvendrini Perera, paper delivered at 'Remembering/Forgetting: Writing Histories in Asia, Australia and the Pacific', University of Technology, Sydney, Winter School, 4–5 July 2001.

²⁶ Tony Birch, 'The Last Refuge of the "Un-Australian"', *Subaltern/Indigenous/Intercultural*, *UTS Review* 1, no. 7 (May 2001): 17–22.

'Lebanese rape gangs' in Bankstown preying on 'Caucasian women'.²⁷ There are many similarities in the media and popular approaches to Indigenous and to immigrant, 'Middle Eastern' groups. There have been common patterns in the characterisation of the colonised 'other' as men who are sexually threatening and women who are simultaneously dangerously promiscuous and victimised (and therefore in need of 'rescue'). These patterns invariably result in denigration and containment of the whole 'other' community and almost never result in any practical support for the women who have been trying to highlight issues of their vulnerability to assault by the colonising population as well as from within their community and family.

Another area of common inquiry might be around detention and containment itself. Much of the experience of Indigenous peoples in colonised Australia has been about being detained or about trying to avoid confinement whether on reserves and missions, on the islands of coast and estuary, in 'training homes' as 'removed' and indentured children or in jails and police lockups. The savagely escalating trends to incarcerate non-European asylum-seekers not only in remote desert detention centres within Australia but now on tiny islands in struggling Pacific nations are an echo of this earlier and continuing pattern of dealing with difference by punitive and isolated incarceration.

A further area of inquiry might focus on the ways children experience colonisation and its continuing aftermath. Children have been the most vulnerable of all in the disorder of conflict, forced migration and incarceration. They have also been the subjects of particular policies of colonial governments, which in many places have systematically seized them and separated them from their families either as labour sources or to be resocialised as agents of cultural, social and demographic change. There are again many common patterns in how Indigenous children have been dealt with in Australia and Canada and other parts of the British Empire. There are also parallels, as the individual death reports of the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody demonstrate over and over again, between the experiences of Aboriginal children and those of refugees seeking asylum. The latter include the son of the Bedraie family and the many others, without family at all, being held in indefinite detention, or the daughters of Sharaz Kayani, denied access to their father at all because of prejudice over race, gender and disability as well as bureaucratic incompetence.²⁸

The list could be continued, but the argument is that there are many areas of comparison, where not only the parallels but also the differences can bring insights into the processes at work for both Indigenous and immigrant people and, ultimately, for colonising peoples as well. Such inquiries need comparative work and need many perspectives on the subject, so it is essential to build trans-cultural research teams, whether at community or institutional level. But in either case the goal should be to be formulating new questions and undertaking

²⁷ *Sun Herald*, 29 July 2001.

²⁸ Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, see for example the individual death reports of Malcolm Smith, Clarrie Nean and Mark Quayle, 1990, 1991.

the inquiries rather than on finalising the 'shared' outcome. The process would not be one of bringing finished and closed histories to be shared, but of sharing insights on these new questions as the inquiry process developed.

A related approach is of sharing subjects of interrogation and a possibility is a comparative study of the histories of conquest. Rather than the approach taken by Keith Windschuttle and *Quadrant*, attempting to justify the particularities of the British invasion of Australia, the alternative is to look broadly and seriously at the way conquests work. An example is the recent work of Shahid Amin, a historian of memory and nationalist politics and an editor of *Subaltern Studies*.²⁹ Amin's position as both a critical scholar and as a Muslim citizen in a period of rising communal violence has directed his attention to the popular memory of the histories of the Turkish conquest of India during the eleventh century. As a member of the cultural group of the conquerors, Amin is explicitly not taking the justificatory approach of the *Quadrant* group. He is not trying to rehabilitate or glorify the Turks. Instead, he is undertaking an interrogation which calls on all the tools of the cultural historian to analyse not only archival documentary material but popular songs, festivals and oral traditions to explore how a conquest actually worked. Who participated? Who collaborated? In what situations was violence used, against whom and why? And how did the conquered appropriate the conquerors? Some of this work has been done in Australia but not yet enough, sidetracked as it becomes into defensiveness and attempts to whitewash the British. But there has been little comparative work done, not only with other British colonies but drawing on the histories of non-English colonial experiences, including the Dutch in the Indies, the Spanish in South America, the Han in South-East Asia and the Islamic conquests in south Asia. This is consistent with the current reemergence of 'Empire studies', a comparative approach which refocuses attention on to the currents of power and ideas as well as wealth through colonial systems, but the argument here is to look beyond the European empires to those non-European conquerors in the region for parallels. This is work which will again most effectively be done with collaborative trans-cultural dialogue, between both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, including Anglo-Australians, each bringing questions and insights to the project.

While these are possibilities for formal research, the great strength of the Reconciliation process has undoubtedly been the community level projects in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have actually come together on collaborative projects. Here, despite the highly politicised atmosphere, the 'sharing histories' goal has sometimes stimulated new understandings and relationships. Where this has worked, it has been at least partly because the communities involved developed projects where they could share common tasks while the

²⁹ Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); 'The Other Perspective' *India Today*, 18 August 1997; 'Remembering the Musalman', in *Fussing Modernity: Appropriation of History and Political Mobilisation in South Asia*, eds H. Kotani, T. Fujii and F. Oshikawa (Osaka: Japan Center for Area Studies, 2000) and 'On Retailing Muslim Conquest of North India, or the Long Afterlife of a Martyred Warrior Saint, 1034 A.D to the Present', paper delivered at 'Remembering/Forgetting: Writing Histories in Asia, Australia and the Pacific', University of Technology, Sydney, Winter School, 4-5 July 2001.

actual histories remained open ended, where trust was built up during collaborative work without a detailed book-keeping balance of fact for fact, and where there remained space for reflection and ambiguity, re-evaluation and complexity.

The Myall Creek Massacre memorial near Bingara, in north-western New South Wales, is one example where a local project, despite conveying an unambiguous and closed historical narrative on one level, still fundamentally allowed a degree of interpretive flexibility. This was an area, probably like many others, in which high levels of violence occurred around the invasion but which also saw a great deal of interaction between Aboriginal people and their colonisers. It was out of the ordinary in having such a large amount of surviving documentation attesting to those interactions and giving glimpses of the people on all sides of the conflicts. The Myall Creek massacre is so well known because of the dogged and ultimately successful pursuit of the killers in 1838 by a local magistrate, despite general opposition and ruling class obstruction, all of which left a trail of archives behind.³⁰ But there were others, like Crown Land Commissioner Richard Bligh on the Macintyre River, whose detailed 1850s records survived to reveal his troubled realisation of the high level of racial violence and the contempt of the law occurring to hide it. Bligh's letters open up a window onto the Gamilaraay and Pikampul people as they coped with invasion, struggling to negotiate with the colonisers and protect their families at the same time as sustaining their links with their land.³¹ This early complexity in relationships was mirrored in the conception and preparations for the Myall Creek commemoration.

This locally initiated project, planned over many months by Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents, brought together descendants of the clan from which twenty-eight Wirrayaraay people died in 1838 and descendants of some of the perpetrators of the massacre. They stood side-by-side at the ceremony held in June 2000 to dedicate the memorial, without accusation or challenge, but with each group sharing a common sense of both the sadness of the site and the value of the communication the two groups had struck up.

The memorial stands on a hill on public recreation land overlooking Myall Creek as it winds peacefully across a private property. The walkway to the main memorial consists of seven small granite boulders, on each of which is a plaque with an engraved image and bilingual text in Gamilaraay and English, in itself a testament to the vigorous resurgence in traditional language recovery and learning which is occurring in the area. The plaques are simple and uncompromising, each representing an episode of the Wirrayaraay story—a productive life disrupted by the violence of a systematic and brutal attempt to clear traditional owners off the land to make way for cattle. The walkway leads just over the crest of the hill, to the main memorial which stands on the edge of the sharp

³⁰ Roger Milliss, *Waterloo Creek* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1994); Bob Reece, *Aborigines and Colonists* (Sydney: University of Sydney Press, 1974).

³¹ Richard Buchhorn, *Boobera Lagoon: A Focus for Reconciliation* (ACSJC, 1997); Heather Goodall, 'Authority Under Challenge: Pikampul Land and Queen Victoria's Law during the British Invasion of Australia' in *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples 1600–1850*, eds Martin Daunton and Rick Halpern (London: University College Press, 1999), 260–79.

drop into the valley. The single, massive granite boulder carries only one brief inscription:

In memory of the Wirrayaraay people who were murdered on the slopes of this ridge in an unprovoked but premeditated act in the late afternoon of 10 June, 1838.

Erected on 10 June 2000 by a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in an act of reconciliation and in acknowledgment of the truth of our shared history

We remember them. Ngiyani winangay ganunga.

What is most important about this memorial, arising no doubt from the enormous goodwill and patience demonstrated by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisers during their collaborative work over many months, is its quality of evoking a response beyond the spoken or engraved word. The towering boulder conveys, a little like the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC, a



Mrs Liza Duncan and her grandson Curtly Duncan, from Inverell, place a stone at the Myall Creek Memorial, June 2000

powerful sense of presence in its size and mass. And like the Vietnam monument, the Myall Creek memorial invites people to contribute their own stories and meanings. The final element is a shallow trench, encircling the central boulder on a radius of around two metres, into which those coming to the memorial have been asked to lay a stone from their own country and home. On the day of the dedication, this was an overwhelmingly moving process, in which one by one Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people brought small stones to lay in this circle around the centre. Some stones had tiny plaques, some had words written in pen, recording the community and country from which they came, others had no marks at all. Together, they were silent testaments to the acts of violence in other places but they were also revitalising gifts arising from many current, living community relationships to the country.

The significance of the memorial for Reconciliation lies in the months of cooperative work between many diverse groups and individuals. While there may be collaborations across cultural divides which do not produce such strongly communicative outcomes, the possibilities for future reconciliation should be measured by the quality of that working relationship and the shift in ongoing understandings as much as by their final monument, image or document. The most constructive outcome of such collaborations, whether community or academic, and whatever the technical form of their products, would be to have created opportunities for further conversations and exchange, rather than to have set the limits of any stories which are told there.

Some of the commentary on the Myall Creek memorial has stressed its assertion of a simple and now unarguable truth,³² but perhaps its greater strength lies in its quality of evocation. This complex site is in itself a creative history with open endings, encouraging people into thoughtful reflection of both past and future by its imaginative conception and quiet dignity. Not fixed or finalised, it continues to draw people each year on 10 June, and their contributions will allow the memorial to develop as a rich site for communication and, perhaps eventually, a real reconciliation.

Since the later months of 2001 a sense of crisis has deepened in Australia. A conservative government, seeking re-election, chose to draw on the old xenophobic fears of established Anglo-Australians and on the insecurities of newly immigrant groups by portraying asylum seekers fleeing war and persecution in the Middle East and South Asia as threats to the economic and cultural integrity of the nation. This sense of racialised crisis was intensified after the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States carried out by an Islamic fundamentalist organisation sheltering in Afghanistan.

The government position has involved a continuing marginalisation of the already-disparaged Reconciliation agenda. The minister administering the policy of mandatorily detaining asylum seekers, Philip Ruddock, is also the minister

³² See, for example, Richard Buchhorn, 'The Myall Creek Memorial' in the Newcastle Aboriginal Support Group Newsletter, August 2000.

responsible for Reconciliation. The two areas of policy have been conducted with a disturbingly similar commitment to media manipulation and to the aggressive assertion of simplified, polemical narrative 'explanations'. An example of government desire to control the historical narrative can be found in the treatment of the contentious Stolen Generations theme in the new monument to Reconciliation currently under construction in the national capital, designed within the government and built with only minimal consultation with Aboriginal people. The current Howard government has expended substantial amounts of media time and legal expense to deny the very idea that virtually a whole generation of children were taken unhappily from their families against parental wishes. A section of the new monument does show images of 'separated children' but as the worried reports of the members of 'Reconciliation Australia' indicate, the children are depicted as playing happily in foster homes.³³ The response from Indigenous people and the representatives of those who had been removed has been distressed and furious, expressing frustration that the monument was being used to represent only the Howard government's narrative that the removal policy was 'for their own good'. It seems even more urgent for these Indigenous people to counter the government position with their own pared down accounts of the tragedy they have experienced.³⁴

In this atmosphere, it is harder than ever to develop opportunities for collaborations on history where the processes of inquiry are on the focus rather than the already finished narratives. Yet such opportunities are needed more than ever if national history is not to continue to be a divisive, embittered confrontation between ever more rigidly simplified and closed collections of contradictory 'facts'. The responsibility rests therefore even more heavily upon historians and other analysts working in the public arena to resist the adversarial pressure to lock down narratives and to dig in for rhetorical trench warfare. Instead, there is now a great need to be alert to the processes of history making in order to conceive projects which allow shared work in the early stages of these processes, not only at the end. These will be projects, perhaps along the lines suggested above, which take the risk of not knowing the answers to all the questions at the outset. The public work which leads us into genuinely new relationships will be that which poses questions on which diverse groups of people want to collaborate and which fosters a strong enough sense of confidence to allow an exploration of complexities and ambiguities.

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³³ *Australian*, 29 November 2001, 21 January 2002.

³⁴ *Australian*, letter to the editor, 3 December 2001.