

‘I COULD FEEL IT IN MY BODY’: War on a history war

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As a way of making a contribution to this discussion and to think about what we can both build, and build upon, in Australia I want to begin by talking about the production of history in Australia. In doing so I will call on people, intellectuals and writers, whom I feel affiliated with, personally, creatively and politically. I am keenly interested in processes of cooperation and collaboration.

I believe such ventures that are central for a new way of thinking in Australia. We do sometimes, through necessity or desire, work individually. But for me this is no longer enough. I want to consider the relationship between political and intellectual solidarity. I am not interested in the notion of intellectual discussion as either an individual or pluralistic model of thinking. The first is for me too isolating and self-indulgent, while the second is too often a strategic comment made by those who only feign pluralism in support of the status quo and the maintenance of their own authority.

I will begin with some brief reflections on what I believe were the key motivations that drove the so-called history wars, and the persistent attacks on Aboriginal people in Australia over the past decade, which, of course, are inter-related. As a result of the discussion of colonial history in the last decade, and the concerted attempts to erase or sanitise colonial violence, enormous psychological damage has been done to both indigenous and non-indigenous communities alike. I am also particularly interested in the role of left or liberal historians in this debate, and their failure to engage competently in such a war, let alone win it. I want to end by discussing how we might put creative, political and ethical spaces into being in Australia; places where we can bypass these regressive debates and do something more productive.

I want to begin by commemorating somebody who did attempt to think in more creative

and intellectual ways about the past in Australia here - Minoru Hokari, someone who some people here would know. He was a visitor to Australia, to Aboriginal Australia, and a scholar originally from Japan who challenged our way of thinking in this country. This was a productive challenge for both indigenous people and settler/ immigrant communities. Minoru was the kind of person we desperately need, who offered a conciliatory challenge to those who have a narrow and at times exclusive notion of what it is to be Australian, to be an accepted member of the broader community or nation/state.

So I will read a poem, 'A songline for Mino', a poem published in 'Cultural Studies Review.'

A red vein on a body of dark bitumen
 leads the way to the emptiness of the crematorium.
 but still I feel myself lost along
 a boundary weave of hard wire
 while drifting away with thoughts of you

I stayed together with the light
 it resting with ease on my shoulder
 this warmth has come to meet me
 and it was Mino telling me to hold my sadness
 as within this quiet waited the moment
 of his journey home

in the wooden boat you laid down
 sleeping quietly with your song
 resting eyelids, lips and heart,
 in the shroud of skin you built
 to ease your body from home to home
 to home

when you left you carried with you
 the land of our loved children
 touching your soles of your feet
 lifting a flight of your soul

we send you on your way
 with a new song your companion
 Its voice will circle back to us -
 to where all we know
 we know more of now
 through the beauty of you

Mino our friend, loved friend,
 we will meet you
 in the rhythm of this song -
 it sways your life within each of us:

Mino, is here
 when we come
 to speak with others
 to call to ourselves
 he is with us

when we rest
 he is with us
 Mino is here
 Mino is here
 Mino.¹

(Thank you, Mino)

Now, the History War is a phoney war. We should stop thinking about this as a legitimate discussion on the production of history or of colonialism's past. This discourse, from the populist right or neo-conservatives, was never meant to be a meaningful discussion of history in Australia, except to the extent that it would provide a polemic to assist particular ideological positions. If anything this has been a cultural war (although I would avoid constructing merely another brand name) conducted by right intelligentsia, some politicians, and by media such as *Quadrant* magazine. It has been a debate within which the discipline of history has become a strategic plaything for those who realise that there is much more at stake than any noble claims to truth-seeking.

Although I fully recognise the value of the discipline of history and its place within academia, its ability to confront these polemicists in this dirty war is limited, in part, by its manners, or adherence to 'civility'. This debate is not about the sanctity of the footnote. It is a political struggle. Those who think it's about protecting disciplinary practices are missing a vital strategic point. Throughout the last decade or more conservatives in Australia have worked tirelessly to destroy the rights of indigenous people. I lay this squarely at the feet of the Prime Minister, John Howard, who has used and abused history in a variety of ways to ensure that his version of Australia's past is the one that feeds into ideas of what the Australian nation should consist of, and how it should construct its image of itself. (This is not rocket science; everyone here would

know this, I hope).

Over the last twenty years or more History has become a battlefield specifically in relation to the attention given to issues dealing with indigenous life and colonial behaviour. One key moment was the 1988 Bicentenary, another the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission of 1989, another the 1992 High Court Mabo decision and subsequent Native Title legislation, finally and most importantly the release of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's 1997 *Bringing Them Home* Report.

The struggle for control of how Australia's past and Australia's memory is reconstructed was influenced centrally by the outcomes of the *Bringing Them Home* report. But, of course, due the very selective manner in which the past is remembered in Australia some histories are replayed again and again, while others fail to exist at all.

For instance, during the recent police violence that occurred in Redfern, leading to the death of Thomas Hickey, we did not hear much discussion of history in relationship to that issue, with the exception on a convenient reminder of a history of the 'dysfunctional nature' of Redfern's indigenous community. We did not hear too much discussion of a history of violence against indigenous people, both in Redfern and throughout Australia, from various Australian police forces for over 200 years.

Lyndall Ryan and Henry Reynolds are two historians who have had their work crudely attacked by the right. They're not equipped to win a war against these polemicists, because they're, in fact, too decent. They're good people, they believe in what they do. They respect the discipline. They believe in the value of their discipline. This is the approach that they have adopted within the History War. I understand that. I respect that. But such a position is not going to equip them to take on people such as Keith Windschuttle and his supporters because they understand this battlefield very differently. They approach it very differently. They are not interested in the history profession's equivalent of the Geneva Convention.

A second issue here is the lack of engagement by anyone involved in this debate with

¹ Tony Birch (2004) "A songline for Minoru", *Cultural Studies Review*, 10(2):9-10.

indigenous intellectuals, historians, academics and community leaders. We are spoken about, not to. Some of us would also like to confront the views of so called liberal historians who claim to speak on our behalf, but in fact construct narratives which are at times more offensive and poorly constructed than the work produced by historians on the right.

This may come as a surprise to people, but it shouldn't. The level of authority claimed by some historians to speak for and on behalf of others is indicative of the level of conceit displayed by some in the history profession. We do not need historians claiming the moral ground for indigenous people. We do not need them to take up a fight on our behalf. We do not need them at all unless they are willing to recognise the autonomy of our voice, unless they are willing to share their own platform with us, and, in addition, to listen, for a change, to what we are saying without having either to patronisingly explain our position to us or feign outrage and offence when we *intellectually* criticise their work.

I would like to move on now to an issue that impacts on all indigenous communities in Australia. We need to shift the burden of carrying the memory of colonial violence on behalf of the white community. I want to introduce this comment by paying respect to the influential work of the poet, Simon Ortiz, a Native American writer and scholar. I want to read a work of Simon's, a poem, and then talk briefly about the philosophical and intellectual value of his work. The poem begins with an annotation; 'Could you believe that we were once this nation's children?' We need to believe and remember this.

Toby is sick.
Closely
he looks after his shadow.
Yes,
he is Indian.
He hides and tends
the shape of his face.
In the mirror
of Red & Bill's Café
in La Junta.

He is impossible
to talk with then.
His frozen tongue
is frantic
with prayer;
he wants to trust.

VA doctors tell him
not to worry.
That's his problem.

His cough
is not the final blow,
but the glass wall
stare so closely.
Makes him afraid.

Closely,
Toby tends his shadow.

So, Simon tells us 'you wouldn't believe we were this nation's children'. Toby tends his shadow in his shame and marginalisation. Toby tends to his own imprisonment; his self-inspection; a Foucauldian model of arranging and rearranging himself. Toby tends to the nightmare of colonisation's outcome. The poem is reminiscent of the status of indigenous people in Australia; people who have been marginalised to such an extent within the white nation state, that all its (the nation's) violence, all its bigotry, enacted and then denied (or forgotten), remains attached to indigenous people who suffer this trauma, internalise it and subsequently feel the shame of simply being who they are. We live with this because the wider community refuses to take on its responsibilities; because governments in this country have been historically deficient – morally, legally and ethically.

Indigenous communities across Australia have become the memory bank of white Australia's violence by proxy. It is time for white Australia to take over that responsibility. Perhaps it is time to make an ethical withdrawal of responsibility. Such a need has become more acute in recent years, with the outcome of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities *Bringing Them Home* report providing an opportunity for white Australia to take ownership of its colonial past in a more than selective manner. Unfortunately the backlash against *Bringing Them Home* has been more substantive than any acceptance of, and responsibility for, the colonial violence that it has provided

testament to. It was the delivery of the report that motivated the most ferocious elements of the History War; an orchestrated campaign conducted by the right in Australia against the legitimacy of indigenous memory.

If you were to read *Quadrant* magazine, in March of this year (2004), it targeted Greg Lehman, an indigenous writer and intellectual from Tasmania for some special attention.² He had written an article in the *Whitewash* book, a critical response to the scholarship of Keith Windshuttle edited by the conservative academic, Robert Manne. Lehman's is a rather short essay, but certainly not the most controversial or oppositional piece in the collection. Yet *Quadrant* made a decision to focus negative attention on Lehman in order to discredit him as he is an indigenous intellectual, whose credibility *must* be undermined in order that this ideological war be won. This is an orchestrated guerrilla campaign that we are dealing with. If people in the academy feel a need to engage in this battle then they should be prepared to fight with the same guerrilla tactics rather than claim the high moral ground.

I would like to introduce my next point by discussing a recent Australian feature film, Ivan Sen's 'Beneath Clouds', made in 2002. This is the story of two Aboriginal teenagers, Lena and Vaughan, who are on a road journey. They are both running away from and searching for home. The scene I will show highlights several issues that we should be concerned about when assessing the impact of colonial violence in Australia and its continuing disruption of indigenous well-being. Vaughan, the young Aboriginal teenager in 'Beneath Clouds' knows about colonial violence and its impact on the history of his country and place. He also knows, as he articulates in the film, that within a contemporary Australian landscape "nobody gives a shit" about this past; nobody will take responsibility for it. Through this realisation Vaughan believes that his life, his sense of self, is of little value.

The psychological impact of this also manifests itself in the belief that his own mother does not want him. Vaughan has little sense of self worth. This state of helplessness and low self-esteem emanates from the stark realities that impinge on the lives of many young indigenous people in Australia. In relation to the psychological burden carried by young indigenous people we should reflect for a moment on the circumstances that

² John Dawson (2004) "The Pentium Primitivism of Greg Luhman", *Quadrant* 48(3):32-6.

followed the death of young Thomas Hickey, the indigenous teenager who died recently in Redfern. After Thomas's death other indigenous young people from Redfern, some of them children wrote their protests and anger onto footpaths and walls; "Police murder, don't trust them" and "The police killed TJ."

Those children were not acting out of ignorance, as some have claimed. They were acting from a profound sense and knowledge of what has happened to them in the past, and what has happened to other indigenous communities and generations of indigenous children who came before them. We need to contemplate the impact of ongoing denials of a history of state violence on young indigenous people in Australia today.

I want to conclude this point with a brief scene from 'Beneath Clouds'. Vaughan, Lena and an Aboriginal elder are sitting in the back seat of a car. They look across to a hilly landscape. It is the place that Vaughan had earlier described to Lena as a site of massacre, where farmers had 'rounded up all the blackfellas and just pushed them off the cliff'. It is this and other sites of violence that have since been forgotten, denied, or deliberately erased from colonial memory. The excerpt from 'Beneath Clouds' conveys both a silence and a knowing. It conveys a truth. Each of them knows the violent truth contained in that cliff face. And we know – viewers, community, and nation. And how do we respond to this knowledge? We 'wage a war' around the footnote so that the waters of truth can be muddied enough that we can longer see our reflection.

<film excerpt from 'Beneath Clouds' screens>

I would like to conclude with what is for me a new beginning. A way of writing and thinking that is not stuck in an adversarial mode, of simply speaking back to the colonial master. I want to deal with issues of race relations and colonial history in Australia with an approach that is intellectually and ethically enhancing without losing my commitment to the political struggle. I want to move forward, and not get stuck with either backward colonial thinking or patronising liberal gate keeping.

My points of reference are intellectuals such as Minoru Hokari or Simon Ortiz. They are both, in a sense, 'outsiders' to Australia, but they are people whose views I have been drawn to and influenced by. I want to make similar links with others so that we do

not get stuck in a rhetorical revolving door of ideas that are not really ideas at all.

With this in mind I want to briefly mention another writer, a poet, and close friend of mine, Mammad Aidani, who came to Australia in 1979. When Mammad first arrived in Melbourne he wanted to link up with indigenous people. He did not want to live in this place without engaging with its First Peoples. When I met him in the late 1980s he told me that he wanted to learn the history of the place that he was in, the land and the histories that exist on the ground and below the ground. Rather than seek knowledge in the desert, the ubiquitous 'outback', out there somewhere.

I believe that Mammad Aidani's work has influenced indigenous writers. In return his work has certainly been informed by indigenous knowledge and writing. So, the dialogue Mammad and I had evolved over many years. He provided at times the necessary sustenance that is the antidote to my sense of gloom about Australia. (A comment that I make with some shame, considering that Mammad and members of his family have been the victims of torture). He's very much a political writer. His veins run with political energy.

I began to notice in recent years that Mammad had become incredibly frustrated with Australia. He had always been a gentle and patient person. But more recently I had sensed his frustration growing into real (and understandable) anger. His Wommora poem of 2001 and accompanying short essay, 'I Could Feel It In My Body' was, I believe, a final attempt as both a writer and a person deeply committed to social justice to reach a wider community. I want to read just a very brief excerpt from the essay and then read an excerpt from the poem.

I was standing at the tram stop on the corner of Bourke and Swanston Streets near Melbourne Town Hall, a day after the riot in Woomera had occurred. Feeling alone, as I usually do in this place. They were talking, two white people, as if I and others were not there. It sounded as if they were giving a speech to a big crowd of well-wishers. With their deliberately loud voices, as emphatically as they could, they gave the impression that they wanted us to hear their conversation. Their scorn and disdain was so strong that I could feel it in my body. My neck resumed its usual pain, a sensation that comes to me when I'm feeling abandoned in the confusing world of disrespect and dismissal. I felt as they were talking to me, to remind me that I'm not wanted here, because I look like *them* and others, those who had come to take over. First were the Chinese, then the southern Europeans, then came the Jews and the Vietnamese. And now, worst of all, Arabs and

Afghanis, and even worse, the Muslims.³

In the poem, 'Wommora', Mammad writes:

I travelled in a basket of hope
to share my dreams with you and find a place...

I told you that I have only one heart
and that is full of pain.
Let me smile, give me shelter
Give me home. Can you hear me?⁴

In this poem Mammad was making a final effort, asking people, to hear him, to listen; 'Can you hear me?' In the end, we did not hear him. No one would listen to what he had to say. I think that, not unlike Vaughan, in 'Beneath Clouds', Mammad came to believe that 'no one gives a shit'. So he left Australia. The last time that I saw him was at a conference in Footscray, in a discussion of this country's abuse of refugees and asylum seekers. Mammad stood up at the end conference and basically abused people for not really listening to the refugee voice; for speaking on behalf of the outsider rather than letting the outsider speak. This was an act of desperation and anger, I think. But it was all that Mammad had left. He then said to me, 'I'm leaving'. So he left Australia. He has been gone for more than a year now and has no intention of coming back. He also had said that there were many places he'd rather chance his life than in Australia, and many of those places were those that he had in suffered in. And I think that says a lot about someone's sense of having a place here. I feel that I let Mammad down. *We* (Australia) have let him down and I do not want such a thing to happen again.

We have 'to give a shit'. Ross Gibson and I have had an ongoing dialogue for some years now, and the last time we spoke it was about how do to devise a strategy that doesn't ignore important social and political issues without finding yourself ground down by in a regressive cycle of argument in something like 'The History Wars'. I do not want to ridicule the work of historians such as Lyndall Ryan or Henry Reynolds. I believe the attacks on them have been disgraceful. And I am sure they have been deeply affected. But I also think that we need to find a way where we don't get bogged down answering back to people who would prefer us to get bogged down with this. While we are engaged this way we are not getting on and doing other projects more

³ Mammad Aidani (2001) "I could feel it in my body" and "Wommora", *Overland* 164:34-5: 34.

productive things. So this is essentially what I grapple with, as there are expectations and responsibilities on Kooris in the academy to not let these racist polemics go unchallenged. I accept this. But how do we keep one eye on this while still moving forward without tripping up?

From my perspective I believe that is that there are so many people that I can work with in the future; other academics, writers, post-graduates, and grass-roots community people. And of course the poets, with whom I have an ongoing creative and political collaboration. Sometimes we are distanced from each other, in time and space, both real, and in Minoru's case, metaphysical and spiritual. I would offer in conclusion that we need non-Aboriginal people to develop ways of thinking with us. I would also offer my definitive comment on the history war. Of course it is a poem.

Footnote to a 'History War'
(archive box – no. 2)

(i)

they are nearer white
than half caste &
are but idle bodies

irresponsible, hopeless &
worthless, they are
a drain on our good will

insolent & defiant
they will not respond
to our kindness

or our care

(ii)

we are sorry
to trouble your souls
with our sickness

we suffer influenza
typhoid & sores
we suffer, Amen

also we are late
to wish you respectfully
a most happy new year

⁴ Aidani (2001: 35).

better late than never

(iii)

he is one pure
aboriginal man
of good behaviour

he carries a rancid leg -
its cure is medicine
& regular ration

he is sober & steady
a good working man
for a hard working day

who carries a rancid leg

(iv)

my colour debars me
my child is dead
& I am lost

we are broken into parts
our home left in the wind
& it grows colder here

my wife is aborigine
I am half caste
and I am, Sir, dutifully yours

I await your response

(v)

he wears a suit [issue no.6]
hat [issue no.7] & possesses
one pair of blankets

she has on loan
one mullet net &
two perch nets

their children are gone:
one [toxaemia]
one [pneumonia]

one [ditto]

(vi)

I am nearly bootless
& my colour is a curse
[too white, too dark]

I am to be recommended
within unit 4, [subfile 3]
for licence renewal

I am to be approved by you
via certificate [no. 71]
herewith in this body

within me, within me

(vii)

in the name of the Lord
we are servants of Christ
called as Apostles to Him

Praise be the Lord
& the Gospel of God -
the word of the testament

Brothers and Sisters
of the dark races
at prayer with Christ

become pure in the Lord, Amen

(viii)

we are in need of
a flannel, blanket
towel, hat & wire

1 shirt [white]
1 trousers [working]
1 tweed suit

needle & cotton
1 night dress &
1 chemise

we are, of course, obliged

(ix)

desire to report
half caste child
5 years of age

passed away
3 o'clock it was
just yesterday, of:

whooping cough

cerebral phlegm
& bronchitis

in the service of His Majesty

(x)

I seek with words
your gratitude
& kindness

to see my wife
my children
across the still water

I seek to touch
my daughter's
skin & heart

I seek only this from you⁵

References

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-- (2004b) "Footnote to a 'History War'", *Meanjin* 63(4): 135-38.
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⁵ First published as "Footnote to a 'History War'", *Meanjin* 63(4): 135-38. 2004.