

but is it **history?**¹

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If we ... disown a realist and empiricist account of history, anything goes. We would have no means of distinguishing between history and myth, between biography and hagiography, between eyewitness reports and fairy tales.

Keith Windschuttle²

History is a reconstruction of the past that seeks a particular kind of fidelity within which the facts acquire their authority. Of all its devices, the narrative is the most compelling for it creates a sequence of factual events and connects them with a dramatic momentum that carries the history forward from starting point to conclusion.

Stuart Macintyre³

The inside of somebody making an effort resembles a factory, a workshop, a witch's lab.

Voice-over in Alexander Kluge's *Die Patriotin*⁴

How do we know something beyond the reach of our present experience? For space to become an imaginable, knowable place, it needs to be described or depicted. Sitting in my Melbourne living room I could know about Central Australia's MacDonnell Ranges from an aerial photograph, a tourism brochure, a book by a geologist or an Albert Namatjira landscape painting, to cite but four of many possibilities. One way of knowing, however, is regularly considered superior: that of seeing for oneself rather than relying on another person's description or depiction, however much she can rightfully claim to be an expert.

While the opportunity to see a place for oneself may be only a plane ride away, the past is always already beyond our immediate reach. In order to be able to imagine it, we rely on

memories and on relics, such as pieces of architecture, texts or images. We also rely on others who interpret these relics for us. They imagine the past for us, making histories of it.

Histories can be told, written, sung, enacted in front of a camera or on stage, or painted. Alex McDermott's paper 'Who Said the Kelly Letters?', published in 2002 in *Australian Historical Studies*,⁵ Peter Carey's novel *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), Reg Livermore's *Ned Kelly—The Rock Opera* (1974), Charles Tait's silent movie *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906) and Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly series of paintings are representations of a particular aspect of the Australian past. They belong to different genres but are all histories in the wider sense of that term. But the term 'histories' is also used in a much narrower sense, when it refers only to one variety of representations of the past: texts such as McDermott's 2002 scholarly article which are produced by historians in the context of an academic discipline and in accordance with its conventions. Professional historians are often held to be (and, even more often, consider themselves to be) experts who are more likely than others to fashion histories that are truthful—that represent the past as it really was. Not being able to return to it and see for ourselves, as it were, we tend to trust historians and their accounts of the past—more so, at any rate, than those of novelists, playwrights and painters.

In numerous instances, contemporary film makers, visual artists and writers have tried out new forms and experimented with novel techniques to represent the past and thereby create histories. Only a very small proportion of these experiments have been carried out within the context of the academic discipline of history. I doubt whether any of the 300 or so tenured historians working in departments of history or schools of historical studies in Australian universities would happily use the label 'experimental' to characterise their work. Only one academic historical journal published in English, *Rethinking History*, invites and publishes historians' experimental texts. That journal is comparatively marginal: it has been around for only eleven years, carries at least as many articles by non-historians as by historians and is probably read outside the historical discipline more so than within. The database Historical Abstracts with its more than 720,000 entries of academic articles, books and doctoral dissertations about post-fifteenth-century historical topics provides further evidence of historians' reluctance to experiment themselves or to engage with those who do: a search for titles or abstracts with the string 'experimental history' nets only four entries.

This may seem surprising, because in recent decades the discipline of history has undergone major changes on account of a proliferation of new methodological approaches and of new emphases on aspects of the past that had previously been ignored. Many historians now specialise in fields unheard of even thirty years ago, such as queer history and history of whiteness, to name but two of the trendiest areas of historical inquiry. Historians who once privileged the study of the written word now routinely draw on oral testimonies and visual images as historical evidence. Why did the discovery of new fields and the development

of new methodologies not prompt historians to look for novel forms of writing about the past? Why did historians' interest in photographs as sources, for example, not give rise to histories constructed from images (rather than from words)?

Historians' unwillingness to experiment may also seem surprising because in the wake of the 'linguistic turn' their work came under intense critical scrutiny. Historians have responded readily to feminist and postcolonialist critiques by reconsidering their choice of subject matter, but—in comparison with practitioners in other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences—they have seen little need to reconsider *how* they write history. From the 1980s onwards, anthropologists—who are almost as insistent as historians about the literary quality of their writing—have tried to address what they perceived to be a crisis of representation. In 1986, *Writing Culture*, a volume of essays introduced by George Marcus and Jim Clifford, circumscribed that crisis and, albeit somewhat clumsily, suggested ways out of it; that edited collection has arguably been among the most influential books in Anglophone anthropology these past two decades. In response to poststructuralist, feminist and postcolonialist challenges to their research and writing practices, many anthropologists have experimented with form when writing ethnography. Anthropologists have also claimed high modernist literary texts—and their authors—for their discipline's pedigree. Now the ethnographic writings of the surrealist Michel Leiris are perhaps as much part of the anthropological canon as texts by Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, the father of structural functionalism. Nowadays, Claude Lévi-Strauss is read because of his autobiographical *Tristes Tropiques* rather than because of his tome on kinship. Some of the most reputable anthropological journals, such as *Cultural Anthropology*, regularly publish writings that stretch and shift the boundaries of ethnography as a genre. By contrast, most historians—including the overwhelming majority of those who pioneered new fields—still write as if poststructuralism were, at best, a short-lived fad and as if the conventions of their genre were natural rather than historically contingent. In the historical discipline, there has been no equivalent to the existential angst that has beset many anthropologists and that has spurred new forms of ethnographic writing.

In the discipline of history, adventurous iconoclasts did not set a trend (as they did in anthropology). It is nevertheless worth reflecting on their contribution, however marginal it may have been—if only because such reflection sheds some light also on the practices of mainstream historians. What, then, distinguishes the texts of historians who do not accept time-honoured conventions as a given? Experimental histories are departures from conventional academic histories in that they do not privilege a single perspective on the past, are not couched within the realist paradigm, do not have a linear narrative structure whose logic is determined by chronology and a series of cause and effect relationships, are not written in the third person, and are not unambiguously non-fiction. Instead their authors

allow for multiple perspectives, draw on competing and incompatible epistemologies, employ narrative structures contrary to established generic convention, reflect on the act of writing about the past, and/or include fictional elements in their writing of historical non-fiction. I briefly discuss these five features in turn. In doing so, I draw on several histories, including my own *Not the Way It Really Was* (1992) about the colonial past and postcolonial present of the Tolai people of Papua New Guinea.

Historians engaged in experimentation often offer their readers more than one rendering of the past. While the authors of conventional histories explore different explanations of *why* something happened, those writing experimental histories sometimes juxtapose different versions of *what* happened without validating one of these above all others. In these cases, the reader, rather than the historian, becomes the final arbiter who is offered the opportunity to decide which interpretation of the past to follow. But rarely do these offers resemble that made by Akira Kurosawa in his film *Rashômon* (1950); instead, the historian presents alternative versions to subvert well-established or seemingly self-evident 'truths'.

Multiple perspectives may be the result of different epistemologies. In *Not the Way It Really Was*, I offered two versions of the death of the Tolai leader ToKilang—one gleaned from German archival sources, according to which he was hunted down and shot dead, the other obtained from Tolai oral testimonies which claimed that he allowed himself to be shot dead after demonstrating that he had the power to repel bullets. Regarding the latter, I reasoned:

A Tolai historian is likely to say: 'Experience has shown that this account could be factually correct.' A European historian is likely to say: 'Science tells us that this account cannot be factually correct.' ... The enlightened presumption that any phenomenon must be explicable within the parameters of a particular brand of natural science—otherwise it would merely be a sensory perception of something not actually, factually happening—is not a universal and eternal truth but a premise that has developed in a certain historical context.⁶

Yet in my own work and in that of others who have validated alternative epistemologies, the rationale for doing so was not to proclaim—à la Paul Feyerabend—that 'anything goes', or to let the reader choose between two epistemological precepts; instead, I wanted to unsettle the reader's assumptions and expectations by creating a particular constellation: the choreographed juxtaposition of two irreconcilable attempts to make a history of the past.

The juxtaposition of different versions of the past, of different voices narrating the past and of texts written in different registers, cannot be accommodated within a linear narrative. Historians have experimented with pastiche and montage techniques, thus deliberately borrowing from and letting themselves be inspired by film makers or by modernist writers such as John Dos Passos or Alfred Döblin. Greg Denning, perhaps the best known

representative of an experimental historiography, has drawn on techniques employed by playwrights (most famously in *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* (1992)). Regardless of whether film or theatre have provided inspiration for the development of new forms, those shunning the linear narrative that has served generations of historians have had high expectations of their readers. 'The best theatre in historical writing is that in which the Death of the Author is an exchange for the Birth of the Reader',⁷ Denning proclaimed, entrusting the reader with texts which always demand her active participation: 'The effect most worth producing for a writer, it seems to me, is a creative reader. We have to stir the exegete, make the critic, join them to a conversation ... Our readers need to be rid of their fear of flying.'⁸

Self-reflexivity is usually an integral part of historians' experiments. Experimental historians invite their audience to peer over their shoulder and witness how they go about writing history. They share their excitement, their sorrow and their joy—about the past, and about writing about that past. Most importantly, perhaps, they make readers aware of the circumspection with which they approach the task of rendering the past as history. They 'make a history which is more conscious of itself as an artifact' (Rosenstone),⁹ because they are convinced of the need to have 'an ethnographic sense of [their own] cultural persons' (Denning).¹⁰

Some historians have experimented with fictional elements in their texts, either to flesh out a past that cannot otherwise be known, or—once again—to offer alternatives to widely remembered, monumentalised or codified versions of the past. In *Peasant Fires: The Drummer of Niklashausen*, Richard Wunderli provides an imaginative reconstruction of historical events. The opening chapter begins:

Hans Behem's sheep were settled down for the night. Across the meadow Hans could see the black silhouetted hills of the Tauber Valley against an overcast sky faintly aglow from a full moon. Small, lumpy bundles that were his sheep huddled in groups of eight or ten in brown dirt patches where they had nosed through the snow to find meager shoots of grass. Hans was a young man, perhaps in his early twenties although he probably could not have given his exact age.¹¹

Concluding the introduction, in which he sets the scene for the story of Hans Behem, a shepherd-turned-preacher in fifteenth-century southern Germany, Wunderli freely admits: 'I made up most of that ... We do not know how old Hans was, or what his social position as a shepherd was, or even what kind of animals he herded.'¹² But Wunderli did not write historical fiction. He employs historical fiction as a device, and then draws the reader's attention to this device, leaving her in no doubt about the fictionality of certain sections of his text.

At one level, the experiment of a historian is comparable to that of an artist trying out new techniques. Thus Robert Rosenstone, whose *Mirror in the Shrine* (1988) about the experiences of three Americans in Meiji Japan is one of the best known experimental histories in English, wrote parts of his book in much the same way in which Jackson Pollock was pouring and dripping paint onto a canvas: they were both experimenting with techniques to see what the (aesthetic) effect would be. Rosenstone recalls that he put aside the 200 pages of conventional text he had already written to try something altogether different: 'I began a search for a new method—a fancy way of saying that I began to play on the page, to try this and try that and try something else in a period of experimentation that lasted for two years.'¹³ But Rosenstone also concedes that experimental history is not simply the result of playfulness or merely driven by a search for a different aesthetics. Introducing a collection of articles that first appeared in *Rethinking History*, he notes: 'none of the works ... are innovations for the mere sake of innovation'.¹⁴

In the sciences and in the arts experiments play very different roles. In the arts, a piece of work tends to be characterised as experimental on account of its form rather than its subject matter. An experimental novel is one whose writer deliberately violates existing genre conventions. Imagine, say, the first novel written without interpunctuation. Its author could have been driven by curiosity, or could have intended to prove a point. But he would also have pioneered a form that could subsequently be emulated by others. Not long after the publication of his experiment, any further novels written without commas and full stops won't be called experimental anymore. A literary work is experimental only as long as it is uncertain whether or not it is going to be successful, as there is no existing set of criteria that could be readily applied. In the arts, experiments always signal that the person conducting the experiment can claim to be entering new territory, doing something that has seemingly not been done before. Experiments fail if they are not copied by others. They succeed if they have set a trend—that is, if a repeat of the original experiment is no longer considered to be experimental.

In the sciences, on the other hand, experiments are driven by an interest in a given subject matter. The scientist conducting an experiment wants to prove or disprove a hypothesis, or simply explore a hitherto unknown field. Does the speed with which an object falls from a given height increase if the object's temperature is raised? Professional scientists are, however, not the only ones conducting experiments of this type. Children learn about their environment by conducting 'scientific' experiments: What happens if I immerse a book in a bathtub filled with water? Do its pages open? Is it possible to read something submerged in water? Such experiments, irrespective of whether they are conducted by a Nobel prize winner or a seven-year-old, often result in an increase in knowledge—not simply in the sense

that we know something in addition to what we knew before, but that our previous assumptions had to be revised. That is, what we have learnt from an experiment frequently could alter our understanding. But scientific experiments are also used to independently confirm a finding made by others; in the sciences, most experiments can be, and are, repeated many times, without thereby losing their status as experiments.

These distinctions may seem rather crude. To some extent, they reflect the *perceived* nature of scientific and artistic experiments, which have perhaps more in common than is generally assumed. Whereas the element of playfulness, for example, is easily overlooked in experiments done in the sciences, it is just as easily overemphasised in the arts. 'We talk freely of experimental writing as if its effects were harmless because they are sequestered in aesthetic domains', Stephen Muecke once observed.¹⁵

To ascertain the nature of experiments in history, it is useful to establish what prompts historians to experiment in their writings. Robert Rosenstone says that it was his goal 'to create, in short, a piece of historical writing suited to the literary sensibility of at least the middle, if not the late twentieth century'.¹⁶ He claims to have experimented also in response to what has been—outside the discipline of history—one of the most influential critiques of historians' adherence to a particular narrative form. In 1966, Hayden White wrote about history 'as perhaps the conservative discipline par excellence':

when historians claim that history is a combination of science and art, they generally mean that it is a combination of *late-nineteenth-century* social science and *mid-nineteenth-century* art. That is to say, they seem to be aspiring to little more than a sythensis of modes of analysis and expression that have their antiquity alone to commend them.¹⁷

While White can be conveniently invoked as an authority because he identified historians' reliance on one particular model—the nineteenth-century novel—he can hardly be held responsible for departures from that model. In fact, to appreciate the genesis of experimental histories it is necessary to focus on their subject matter rather than, as White did, on the content of the form. Significantly, the distribution of experimental texts across the various fields of historical inquiry has been very uneven. They include a comparatively large number of biographical studies. That should not come as a surprise, given that biography has long been considered the most literary of all genres of history writing and that biographers (many of whom do not identify as historians) have been at the forefront of attempts to blur the distinction between the categories of fiction and non-fiction. In fact, the most notable Australian texts to problematise that distinction are two biographies (of sorts): *Poppy* (1990) by Drusilla Modjeska and *Louisa* (1987) by Brian Matthews. Biographers become most deeply involved in the lives of those they write about. They also sometimes realise the limitations of a

linear narrative based on irrefutable facts when trying to portray the complex development of a personality. Rosenstone explains: 'I wanted to find new ways of getting close to my subjects, of seeing through their eyes and expressing the immediacy of moments in their lives.'¹⁸ By disregarding history's disciplinary conventions, biographers have been better able to write about a person's life beyond those aspects that can be factually known.

For my argument, the other concentration of experimental texts is of more interest. Twelve years ago, Stephen Muecke and Meaghan Morris edited an issue of this journal under the heading 'Is an Experimental History Possible?'. If one interpreted this theme in very broad terms, then four of the papers in that issue relate to it. Three of them are about Indigenous-settler relations in Australia. The geographical focus—Australia—is understandable: after all, the *UTS Review*, as this journal was then called, catered for a predominantly Australian audience. But weren't there other key themes in Australian history that could have lent themselves to being treated in an experimental fashion: Gallipoli, the goldrush, the Depression—or bushrangers in nineteenth-century northeastern Victoria, for that matter?

Yet there was nothing peculiar about Muecke and Morris's selection: many experimental histories are about fundamentally unequal relationships. In my own work as a historian I have written about a large variety of topics. My histories of postwar Germany, World War II Australia, the Rabaul volcanic eruptions and Australian refugee policies are—at least in a formal sense—conventional; only in my biographical projects and in writings about colonialism and indigenous histories in Papua New Guinea and Australia have I been experimental.

Greg Dening, too, developed his interest in experiments when writing about encounters between strangers and natives in the Marquesas. Richard Price, another author known for his experimental approach to writing history, flouted genre conventions when writing about the colonial past of Suriname. Debbie Rose's *Hidden Histories* (1991) and Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe's *Reading the Country* (1984), two important examples of an experimental approach to writing the Australian past (even though their authors do not identify as professional historians), are also about historical settler-Indigenous relations.

Those writing experimental histories have often done so because they sense that conventional histories are inadequate when representing the lives of the defeated, the marginalised, the colonised, the oppressed. They suspect that conventional historical narrative perpetuates the injustice it purports to merely analyse and represent. They are often driven by the urge to take sides and are looking for a form of writing that reflects their anger or despair or grief. Richard Wunderli claims that he is merely trying to convey something about fifteenth-century Germany to a non-academic audience.¹⁹ But it is one particular aspect of that past that motivated him:

When we hear the wondrous fantasies and angry songs of Hans Behem ... we hear voices of those people, the German peasantry, *whose voices had been lost to history*, muffled by the incessant hum of literate elite-culture. We must accustom our ears to strangely haunting sounds of peasant dissonance.²⁰

Wunderli departs from the conventions of his discipline because he wants his readers to be able to hear those sounds.

Historians who experiment in order to achieve the seemingly impossible—to make audible the lost voices of fifteenth-century peasants, for example—challenge a key feature of conventional academic history: posthumous selectivity. Conventional histories that have a beginning and a middle and an end and a narrative mimicking the linear progression of time tend to be whiggish—not necessarily in the sense that they serve to justify the writer's present, but in the sense that the narrative structure and the reliance on evidence are geared towards the explanation of effects and outcomes. They privilege pasts that can be traced and they neglect trajectories that end in cul-de-sacs. They are not interested in the excess of the past—energies and desires and capabilities that seem to resist their domestication in narratives proceeding from starting points to end points.

In my writings about colonial pasts and postcolonial presents in Papua New Guinea I suggested that as a historian I need to pay attention to the trash of history. I claimed that it could be found in everyday historical discourse: histories in the form of jokes, anecdotes, or gossip; 'in histories the European student of Papua New Guinean history might pick up during a game of cards, when helping to make copra, by listening to school children, or over-hearing women chatting at the market'. Rather than looking for grand counter-hegemonic, anti-colonial narratives, I was attracted to the subversive potential of trash:

The trash of history is comprised of instants, of images flitting past, of the unspectacular and the nonmomentous. Historians are often only too happy to ignore them, prone to identify grand historical moments and to think of the past in terms of processes, developments, and courses. I would like to dwell on them, not ... least because they disrupt the continuous flow of history. As if they were weightless for all their insignificance, they seem to float in mid-air, unaffected by the suction the present exerts on the past in the usual rendering of past into history.²¹

A focus on such trash, I hoped, would defamiliarise the present as much as the past.

The idea that the historian needs to subvert a view of the past that is informed by effects and outcomes and has no interest in 'rough outcrops and jagged prongs' had been put forward by Walter Benjamin in section N of the *Arcades Project* and in his theses on the philosophy

of history.²² He was not trying to suggest that the historian as *bricoleur*, as trash collector, ought to explore the dead-ends of history merely because they had been neglected by others—white patches in the past that if properly surveyed and mapped could yield PhDs, publications and promotions. Instead he conceived of the *bricoleur* as somebody on a mission to disrupt the sheer inevitable succession of outcomes.

For me, a rebuke by Max Horkheimer has been a key to understanding Benjamin's philosophy of history. It has also helped me to clarify what could distinguish an alternative historical practice. In his article about the collector Eduard Fuchs, Benjamin had written that the 'work of the past' should not be regarded 'as over and done with'.²³ Horkheimer, the editor of the journal where the Fuchs paper was to be published, reproached Benjamin for toying with an idealistic and theological concept. 'Past injustice has occurred and is done with [*abgeschlossen*]', Horkheimer maintained; if one denied such closure then one would have to believe in the Last Judgement.²⁴ Benjamin took Horkheimer's criticism seriously. His theses on the philosophy of history are evidence that he came to regard the notion of the *Unabgeschlossenheit* (incompleteness) of the past as crucial to his ideas about the work of the historian.

Assumptions about the *Unabgeschlossenheit* of the past seem to underlie many experiments in history. Rereading my own writings as well as those of authors such as Muecke, Price and Denning, I detect an impetus that seems concealed beneath the professed intention to foreground neglected or hidden histories or to focus on the trash of history. This impetus is not so much concerned with representations of the past, as with the past itself. It is not the form that the experimenting writer of history seems to want to manipulate, as that which is being represented—as if she took literally the question academic historians routinely ask each other over morning tea in the staff room and during conference breaks: 'What are you working on?', which requires the respondent to refer to the particular aspect of the past he or she is only writing *about*.

The impetus to work on the past as if it were something that could be manipulated (in much the same way in which scientists are manipulating substances in their experiments) and to tap into the hidden energies of a past that is by no means dead and over and done with, informs—and is explored in—much of Alexander Kluge's work.²⁵ In the 1979 film *Die Patriotin* (*The Patriot*), Kluge claims that it would be a misunderstanding to think that the dead are 'somehow dead', and introduces the 'surviving' knee of a German soldier killed in Stalingrad, which vouches for the energy and activism of the dead.²⁶ The film's main protagonist, Gabi Teichert (Hannelore Hoger), is not content with regarding the past as *abgeschlossen* and refuses to take the present as a *fait accompli*. She is a secondary history teacher who despairs at the curriculum and sets out to search for alternative histories. These are not alternative grand narratives (such as the Marxist history of peasants and their

struggles for emancipation to counter the bourgeois history of secular and ecclesiastical rulers). Rather they are histories of presents that do not, or not yet, exist, and of pasts that could not be used up in accounts of how what was became what is. Teichert is pursuing three strategies: she is looking for new evidence (new raw material), and literally digs up such evidence; she is conducting experiments much as a scientist would, engaging in experimental history in the older, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century meaning of that term, performing experiments on a broad variety of substances, knowing that such experiments would not uncover general laws; and she intervenes in the history of which she herself is part. Attending a federal party congress of the then ruling Social Democrats, and confronting delegates with her assessment that the raw material of German history is inadequate, Teichert blurs the distinction between the making and the writing of history.

Many experimental histories seem informed by a yearning for a different past (rather than merely a different interpretation of the past). Historians who experiment in their writings appear to distrust the conventional narrative because it so successfully purports to be 'a simulacrum of the structure and processes of real events'.²⁷ Commenting on her experimental representation of an incident in 1930s Mexico, Marjorie Becker writes: 'This essay is an essay that laments the way history occurred'.²⁸ Her text is mournful, but it is also hopeful—on account of a past that according to conventional historiography could not have taken place.

If Becker and others are indeed driven by the urge to intervene in the past, then they have carefully concealed that urge. Why else could their critics consistently misunderstand historians' experiments as evidence of postmodernist relativism? A relativist would claim that one history (one interpretation, one epistemology, one truth) is as good as any other, and that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is not only arbitrary but also immaterial. But those writing experimental history because they believe they cannot otherwise do justice to the past, 'make an effort' (Kluge). They do so on account of their investment in a truth—which, admittedly, may conflict sharply with truths that have seemingly been validated beyond doubt by concrete outcomes (which are supposedly set in concrete, to boot).

Or is the warning cry, 'relativism!', perhaps not primarily directed at the writings of historians who dare to experiment? Could it be that it is an expression of the fear that no conventional history will be safe once truth claims other than those based on the 'hard evidence' documented in footnotes are admitted as legitimate? Could it be that Keith Windschuttle (in his *The Killing of History*), for instance, is concerned not so much about Denning's alleged relativism but about the prospect that the distinction between fact and fiction, between history and myth, would no longer be considered self-evident if Denning's writings were recognised as legitimate history?

Gabi Teichert's supervisor calls her recalcitrant. Her understanding of history has little in common with what she is expected to teach. Despite its rhetorical insistence on innovation,

the academy does not reward experiments that challenge the legitimacy of established practices any more than an education department would encourage its teachers to confuse the making and the teaching of history. Experimental histories do not offer marginal improvements on the form of the historical narrative, which could be easily incorporated into the discipline's arsenal of methodological approaches. That partly explains the reluctance of historians to venture down the path of experimentation. Perhaps more importantly, experiments carried out by historians undermine the authority of the historical profession, which in turn relies on the manner in which a particular narrative form has come to be seen as the natural means of historicising the past. By problematising and reflecting on the deployment of narrative strategies, by drawing on literary imagination to reconstruct the past, and by deliberately undermining the idea that the past can be reduced to one sequence of factual events, historians who experiment in their writing potentially reveal the peculiarity of history's traditional generic conventions. And perhaps that is only a logical step if the intention is to challenge histories that accept as a given a past that is found wanting. Self-reflexivity could be a strategy that *wantonly* seeks to undermine history's authority.

Experiments in history are attempts to do justice to the past. They may be prompted by the insistence that the past is not *abgeschlossen* and that we need to remain open to historical possibilities. They have the potential to undermine the authority of the discipline (unless, of course, its representatives remain convincing in their insinuation that experimentation in history is an oxymoron). Thus much is at stake. Lest the term 'experiment' be taken to stand for an inconsequential dabbling in matters of form, it is worth contemplating its etymological connotations. The English noun 'experiment' has the same root—the Latin *experiri* (try, test, prove)—as 'expert', 'empirical' and 'experience'. The Latin *experiri* and *expertus* share the same Proto-Indo-European root—*per*—as the Latin *periculum* (danger), the Greek *peira* (trial), the English 'peril', 'piracy' and 'fear', the Old German *fara* (ambush), the German *Gefahr* (danger) and the Old Irish *aire* (vigilance). At least for historians, experimentation may well be an inherently perilous activity.

Within the context of the academic discipline of history, experiments are possible only as long as those conducting them are not found out: that is, as long as their colleagues do not realise that the undermining of the discipline's authority is integral to such experiments; that those conducting them are not merely searching for another (aesthetic) form but instead postulate the *Unabgeschlossenheit* of the past, hoping to be able to manipulate their subject matter rather than its representation; and that the charges of relativism and epistemological anarchism are beside the point.

In Australia, at least, the chances to stretch the limits of history's disciplinary conventions are now more limited than they were fifteen or twenty years ago. In the history wars, the majority of Australia's academic historians lambasted Windschuttle and his supporters in

the Howard government and the Murdoch press. If the academic discourse spurred by the publication of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (2002) were any indication, then Windschuttle's critics had a resounding victory. But that victory came at a high cost: in order to contradict Windschuttle, they used a playing field defined by him—and thereby implicitly endorsed arguments he developed in his earlier book, *The Killing of History*, in which he had attacked Denning and others who challenged the conventions of their discipline. In Australia, most historians no longer seem interested in engaging with those who challenge their discipline's conventions—Australian historians' reception (or non-reception, as it were) of Ross Gibson's innovative and original *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (2002) comes to mind as evidence in support of this observation.

How do we know a past beyond the reach of our immediate experience? Since the nineteenth century, professional historians have been trusted to be able to close the gap between the present and the past, and to represent the past as it really was. Experiments in history can play an important role in undermining that trust, and in encouraging those reading or watching or listening to history to shed their fear of flying. At the same time, experimental histories can sow doubt as to whether the past perhaps amounts to more than something over and done with, the history of which can be validated by reference to indisputable outcomes.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This is the revised text of a keynote address written for the 2006 Rethinking the Past conference at the University of Technology, Sydney. I would like to compliment Tara Forrest for organising the conference, and thank her for inviting me to contribute to it. 2. Keith Windschuttle, <i>The Killing of History: How a Discipline is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists</i>, Macleay Press, Sydney, 1994, p. 90. 3. Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clarke, <i>The History Wars</i>, rev. ed., Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2004, p. 29. 4. Alexander Kluge, <i>Die Patriotin: Texte/Bilder 1–6</i>, Zweitausendeins, Frankfurt am Main, 1979, p. 131, in my (admittedly loose) translation. 5. Alex McDermott, 'Who Said the Kelly Letters? The Question of Authorship and the Nature of | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Wild Language in the Cameron and Jerilderie Letters', <i>Australian Historical Studies</i>, vol. 33, no. 118, 2002, pp. 255–72. 6. Klaus Neumann, <i>Not the Way It Really Was: Constructing the Tolai Past</i>, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1992, pp. 24–5. 7. Greg Denning, <i>Performances</i>, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. xv. 8. Denning, p. 116. 9. Robert A. Rosenstone, <i>Mirror in the Shrine: American Encounters with Meiji Japan</i>, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. xiii. 10. Denning, p. 30. 11. Richard Wunderli, <i>Peasant Fires: The Drummer of Niklashausen</i>, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1992, p. 1. 12. Wunderli, p. 4. |
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13. Robert A. Rosenstone, 'Introduction: Practice and Theory', in Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone (eds), *Experiments in Rethinking History*, Routledge, New York, 2004, p. 3.
14. Rosenstone, 'Introduction', p. 2.
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16. Rosenstone, *Mirror*, pp. xiii–xiv.
17. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978, pp. 28 and 43.
18. Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 5.
19. Wunderli, p. xi.
20. Wunderli, p. 6; emphasis added.
21. Klaus Neumann, 'Starting from Trash', in Robert Borofsky (ed.), *Remembrance of Pacific Pasts: An Invitation to Remake History*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2000, pp. 71–2.
22. Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, part 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1974; Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagenwerk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1982; the translation of Benjamin's 'Schroffen und Zacken' as 'rough outcrops and jagged prongs' is taken from Walter Benjamin, 'Central Park', trans. Lloyd Spencer, *New German Critique*, no. 34, 1985, p. 33.
23. Walter Benjamin, 'Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker', in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, part 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 477.
24. Quoted in Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, vol. 1, p. 589.
25. See Tara Forrest, 'From History's Rubble: On the Future of the Past in the Work of Alexander Kluge', *Rethinking the Past*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2005, 429–48.
26. Kluge, p. 58.
27. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1987, p. 27.
28. Marjorie Becker, 'When I Was a Child, I Danced as a Child, But Now That I Am Old, I Think About Salvation: Concepción González and a Past That Would Not Stay Put', in Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone (eds), *Experiments in Rethinking History*, Routledge, New York, 2004, p. 28.