introduction

DEBORAH ROSE AND PETER READ

We have been talking together about concepts of place for many years, and both jointly and separately we have come up against many horrific facts of damage, trauma, loss and irretrievable devastation. Debbie encountered this first and foremost in her work with Aboriginal Australians: What happens when sacred sites are destroyed? What are the effects of being dispossessed and having one's own existence denied? What are the consequences of extinction when the extinct ones are kin—members of the one totemic family? Debbie's engagements with ecological loss pressed her to consider extinctions and then to think of life itself in the context of desecration. Pete encountered these facts in his wide-ranging work with loss of place: What is the impact of destroyed homes and lost country? How do people engage with deliberate erasure of the sacred in recent war zones, with the vandalised cemeteries in Havana, or with a church in New South Wales where a black mass was conducted?

We began to wonder what shared themes might run through these issues, and how we might begin to address a process that violently tears apart the meaning of life and death, or dynamites it into oblivion, or submerges it beneath dams, or expels people, or forbids access, or hands places of love and commemoration over to others who take what is given so as to damage it. What are the consequences of the negligent failures that allow species, or places, or rivers, or wetlands to be killed off? And what of the process that crosses thresholds of death, denial and arrogance by claiming the final story as a form of victory?

We thought that an initial attempt to draw a few people together to discuss these questions at a small one-day symposium in 2004 would help us gain a richer and deeper understanding, and would enable us to formulate our questions more exactly. We asked our

contributors to ponder the nature of desecration. Could the term equally encompass people, land, plants, animals, rituals, things? Would any concept, or even working definition, of desecration be able to cross cultures and contexts?

In this collection of essays, Maria Tumarkin sees desecration not as 'a defacement of objects and rituals invested with the divine presence, but as a violation of people's inner worlds, the corruption of histories and legacies forged by their lives'. The person, she implies, is a sacred vessel whose desecration is the action of experts, news gatherers and writers who appropriate and violate their pain. Experts reduce the conflict in Sarejevo to 'a war of national and religious interests between ethnic groups'. It's true that experts study and write about others' pain beside their own, and all too often they rush to generalise. Yet, in a sense, the destruction of Sarajevo *is* a conflict of national and religious interests, in addition to the real experience of those who were there, their defiance—as Maria puts it—their faith, and their blackest of humour. Yet Maria does not advocate feeble silence or self-censorship in the face of wartime atrocities; what she wants is that everyone listen to survivors.

Diana Glazebrook's discussion of desecration concerns land. Refugees desecrate. Re-establishing oneself in another's land, however necessary, generates enduring and difficult relationships between the refugees and the owners of the resettled land. Diana writes about Irian Jayan refugees resettled by the UNHCR in Papua New Guinea. Here, for the owners of the land, is the desecration of one's ancestors, or of their spirit, or of their memories. For people whose spiritual roots connect with their ancestors born into that same land, payment of money or goods may not satisfy them. It may, in fact, be impossible to deflect the spiritual harm wrought by resettlement programs. Indeed, the refugees, deprived through violence of their own ancestral lands, may be powerless to prevent it. Worse, by being unable or unwilling to carry out the appropriate rituals to assuage the spiritual owners of a new country, they know they are desecrators.

Peter Read's analysis emerges from the desecration of graves in Colón Cemetery, Havana. Like the Irian Jayans in PNG, Cubans seeking refuge in the United States of America are the victims of violence, or the threat of it. Like the Irian Jayans, they don't belong in the new country, they wish they were back home. And like them too, by leaving, they may have abandoned rights to their own land—including the cemetery. Pete explores the dead in the realm of life and its desecration. Deceased Cuban ancestors, sometimes literally torn apart in the darkness of the ruptured tombs, perhaps suffer as much as those who survive, disturbed and distressed, in new countries. Pete grapples with desecration beyond the living body, and perhaps beyond the relationship between past and present. Like Maria, he examines contempt as a form of desecration.

While the first three papers deal variously with violence and people, Debbie Rose takes the argument further. Her understanding of desecration is that of permanent destruction,

whether to the environment or to living species, to the point where regeneration of that unique form is impossible. She calls this death twice-over 'double death'. The deliberate, violent destruction of Iraqi marshlands may, philosophically, be no different from accidental environmental destruction in Australia. Yet, in neither case may recovery be possible. Debbie holds that 'accidental' destruction is no accident; reason, the serpent in the garden, is its agent. By dividing humans from nature, the tree of knowledge chokes the tree of life. Nor is this a new phenomenon: the West has been following the serpent for millennia. The work that amplifies death destroys the capacity of life to bend death back into life.

In just four articles we have touched on many cultures, ethnicities and forms of desecration, and have raised deeply disturbing questions. The studies bring time, place, violence, living beings and the dead into a realm within which life that refuses obliteration is mortally confronted by violence that refuses life. To return to our question about the possibility of understanding desecration in ways that can remain both robust and engaged, these essays offer rich and resonating thought. Maria argues that people in every culture are entitled to own their own grief without having their lives and experience appropriated, interpreted and trivialised by experts. Diana's focus on the double bind of being both victim of violence and perpetrator of further desecration confronts us with the entangled dilemmas of people and place, violence and desecration, in contemporary refugee crises. Implicitly, her conclusions ask us to consider our position as settlers in other people's home countries. Peter Read wrote in an earlier draft of his essay that it is a universal human emotion that the bones of the dead deserve to be left in peace. A referee objected, saying that while perhaps that *ought* to be the case, clearly it is *not* the norm in very many areas of deep and prolonged conflict. But then again, is it not precisely because of one's human knowledge of people's connections with their dead that it is possible to consciously promote harm? And is this same human knowledge the basis by which outsiders find themselves empathetically engaged—appalled and moved to intervene against such violence? Indeed, is the desire to witness called forth by affronts that empathetically register as desecration, and does the desire to witness slide easily into another form of desecration, as Maria argues? Her emphasis on the obscenity of the devastating phrase 'we understand' suggests that empathy, while not necessarily facile, has the potential to become a form of desecration.

Perhaps the 'double death' that prevents regeneration and terminates tribes, species and whole ecologies could be endorsed by both human and non-human species as desecration. Double death seems to encompass all forms of desecration. It may be the ultimate desecration.