

in-between
the memorial, the library
and the **lesbian**

Moments in Postcolonial Community

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Homi Bhabha wonders as he unpacks his library about the ‘contingent dis-ordered historical “dwelling” bestowed upon us by many of the most interesting books that we collect today’.¹ Similarly, I wonder about the limits of the contingent historical subjectivities that we produce. Do we acquire these contingent ‘dwellings’ as we buy our books or are they only available to those who can move? And do the specifics of experiencing these subjectivities in a settler culture, where the idea of Indigenous sovereignty and exposure of whiteness is at stake, transform how and what we can do? The movement of books is then juxtaposed with stories of embodied becoming within the space of hybridity in an attempt to show some of the limits of contingency and dis-order. Amid many possible readings we need to consider the ways non-Aboriginal people, within whiteness, remain ordered and certain. What does this suggest for the making of an ethical postcolonial community?

This paper is a multi-faceted engagement with the idea of hybridity and postcolonial community in a settler culture, questioning the relationships between movement, identity and knowledge through the figuring of the memorial, the library and the lesbian. The paper carries those concerns within its own creations. It was written on Gundungurra land, first presented on Eora country and may be read anywhere. I would therefore like to warn readers that I refer to the Myall Creek massacre, which may cause distress, particularly to the Wirrayaraay people.

— THE MEMORIAL

The memorial to the Myall Creek massacre is a very still space. It makes a particular quiet. To stand motionless at the massacre memorial is to stand in contrast to the movement that made the massacre possible. This massacre was one moment, perhaps not even the most

violent moment, in a bloody spree by a group of pastoral workers. They didn't only kill but tortured and raped, actions which are referred to in many sources as the 'saving' of Aboriginal women.² The literal bodies the killers tried to hide and the corpus of history that was invented in the claims of civilised settlement are here exposed and placed.

The memorial is quite new. It consists of a red dirt track that twists through the dry, dry grass and occasional tree until one arrives at a large granite stone, which is the marker proper. The serpentine path is the deliberate red of blood and the memorial the grey and white of mourning.³ Along the path there are smaller stone markers commemorating particular stages in the 1838 massacre of twenty-eight to thirty Aboriginal people.⁴ I first visit in the afternoon and it feels as if the heat is baking me into the ground. There is no-one else here and in this heat it is a surprise to see two kangaroos looking at me from over the fence and to find fantails leading me along the path. When I look down the slope from the main memorial where the group were murdered, the expansive, grand homestead of Myall Creek Station shimmers in the background, glimpsed through trees. I am standing in a space within a scene that includes agribusiness, reconciliation, murder, commemoration and ...

I return in the morning and another car pulls up behind. I fall into a brief conversation with the elderly man. I learn that he and his wife are visiting their son and daughter-in-law. He and his family are Sikhs and the daughter-in-law is a local. Another couple arrive. They are in their mid-thirties. The man is wearing a pro-land-rights t-shirt—'You are standing on Aboriginal Land'. The desire is overwhelming to ask them: How did they know about this place? What do they think? How do they feel? But such rushed questions reveal my own momentary need to run from this quiet. I want the noise of language to hold us in a temporary sameness. Then the desire to question falls away. To be still will suffice. This is a memorial unlike other memorials. There is no assumed style to do with the murmur of the last post. To come here as a non-Aboriginal person is to stay in space, to practise place, to be still.

In the car with the air-conditioning on, moving toward Delungra and then Inverell and on to my supposed ordinary home in New England I am cross that it is always out here, far from the cities, far from the front lawns where other Aboriginal deaths occurred that these moments happen. And to contingently end the moment of the memorial with distance covered, space claimed, questions the very highway. It is no longer a convenience of modernity but an unsatisfying, opaque memorial to the paths made by Aboriginal people which are now written over by those who rode and those who were driven. Where do our movements carry us? When do they end?

At the end of movement there was for Benjamin and Bhabha the unpacking of their libraries.⁵ Benjamin's occurred upon fleeing Nazi Germany, Bhabha's after a plane flight to Chicago. But before the unpacking there must have been an earlier moment of packing when those books were prepared for their movements, disrupted from their shelves.

We have been told to be prepared. We are in no immediate danger from the bushfires but we live in one of two streets considered 'high risk'. We should pack the most important of our documents, in case the police force us to leave, in case we are suddenly too afraid to stay. I need to pack my books. What shall I pack? They can't all come. The ideal is a box or two that I could carry to the car or take from the car depending on wind and time. But do I take books I know or don't know? I have known all these books as the comforting lining of my life. I have sat at my chair and lain on the day bed looking at them en masse, distractedly, intently—this has been the way I have known them most often, most familiarly. I want them all. Of course I have known some very intimately, written on them, torn pages and turned pages but at this moment that connection does not move me. I am a reader, not a collector of books.

Without thinking I put in the *Macquarie Dictionary*. I am not going to think about it. And then I notice the pile on the shelf under the disc holders. Hidden books that have hung around forgotten, unengaged with. The third one down is *The Fabric Decoration Book*. I will not let it go. It isn't even mine. But fabric decoration suggests something I could become. When I am older. When I am my mother. Every other book on my shelves exhausts me. Pathetically, momentarily covetous, I touch my PhD but I am not interested in opening it. I contemplate for a moment slicing off the spine and keeping it in my pocket for later. I suddenly realise that if push came to shove and only one box of books could be saved, I could tear my favourite pages and chapters from each of my non-fiction books and start again. My life: A Reader. This too makes me a buyer and not a collector of books.

Many of us don't only buy and read books, we carve them up. We take our favourite essay, the most stimulating chapter, and we invent pulp-backed, poorly bound things we make our students buy from the university bookshop. And we do not stop there. Filled with dark melancholy or celebratory pastiche we call these new life forms the course reader. These readers are usually unpleasant to hold; their past evokes nothing more than the print shop. They foretell a fragmented ride through an area of knowledge that reinvents what it is in the process. For these collections simultaneously refer back to the book they have been taken from while being pedagogically attached to the subject or course that they are contingently connected to. Their form is classically dis-canonical. We teach our students the ordinary form is hybridity.

We never launch our readers. Their lives are always that of mice in laboratories. Why not next semester grow another ear upon its tail, transpose a nose to its paw? The reader once lay between book and photocopied article on reserve, but as hybrids do it has powerfully undone both those origins. Now like an ideal simulacrum, like queer in its heyday, like nationalism perhaps, there is nothing to which it necessarily refers. This may well have had the result, for a particular set in a particular place, of reifying the value of the non-fiction text.

Fewer and fewer people will read it but those who do, really will. An older academic once told me that they used to list this strange new form—the reader—on their CVs. They wanted to reveal their creations and at least suggest the huge labour involved in putting one together. Now such work is assumed, performed without murmur and the ubiquitous yet fugacious reader is not recorded on anyone's résumé.

These readers are positive 'indicators', perhaps 'outcomes' as well, of 'responsive' teaching practices and transdisciplinary content. They are a salute in part to the fracturing of disciplines and the embrace of focused, student-centred pedagogy. They are 'meeting expectations'. They are a response to a sense that time must not be wasted and that the minimum reading must be accessible and ever available. But I am most of all positing the reader as a final undoing of Benjamin's and Bhabha's book-collecting imaginings. These readers are not up to the conjuring of exotic cities nor the idea that they might be reborn through being re-bought. We have in the form of the reader something that displaces the possibility of Benjamin's collector with their intense intimacy of ownership. But does this hybrid pedagogue guarantee we do knowledge differently?

The collector generally is the conductor of metamorphosis within the histories and traditions of colonialism. With their one stone flint, one *nulla nulla*, they own 'the Australian Aborigines'. They manufacture the extraordinary and the exotic through what they select and then contain the 'obvious', 'displayed' difference through the ordering principles of their placement within the collection. As Susan Stewart puts it: 'The collection replaces history with classification, with order beyond the realm of temporality'.⁶ This notion of invented time is also bound up with ideas of preservation and what Tom Griffiths calls the 'antiquarian imagination'.⁷ This is not just the world of history-making but can be seen in our national imaginings about what to do with the past when we make it other to ourselves.

The time of the Myall Creek memorial is a time of both past and present. It is not between past and present; it is past and present. Bhabha situates the unpacking of his library (again) in Chicago and suggests the notion of an acquired vernacular cosmopolitanism through the disorder of our books. To become vernacular cosmopolitans through our books we must believe that the book from Bombay or Oxford becomes a Bombay book or an Oxford book. We would have to believe that our act of collection allows the book and our reading of it to stand in for Bombay or Oxford. This act seems particularly colonial.

But Bhabha insists it is through their disorder that we become vernacular cosmopolitans, before the books are organised or categorised. This is another in-between space, another hybrid moment. Here we do not see the book as merely the Bombay or Oxford book (the fetishism of origins) but instead insist on connections between Rich and Nussbaum, Bombay and Oxford, that will undo and remake each in the process. Because we know these books we cannot deny the possibilities of their relationships. The boundaries between each book,

of authorship and origins, will not hold and we are back in the familiar terrain of porous borders and semiotic slippage of postcoloniality proper. Bhabha's essay via Benjamin celebrates the possibility of renewal through our collected books and his renewal has a particular hybrid cast. Bhabha, I think, would not suggest we tear out our best bits of Nussbaum or Rich and stick them together, for we do not need a literal hybrid but an in-between way of reading. This leads for Bhabha (in Benjamin's words) to '*the renewal of life through dislocation, translation and re-situation*'.⁸

I am uncomfortable with this for the light it shines upon the particular case of a settler culture like Australia where the effort for the postcolonial, white, non-Aboriginal Australian subject is not to disappear our own whiteness. The force of whiteness lies in its assumed normalcy and its unspoken-of centrality. The renewal of white lives through 'dislocation, translation and re-situation' is always more obvious and suggestively celebratory than the white privilege which usually remains. For particular white Australian subjects and the nation as a whole it is not the becomings within hybridity that are so important and need to be acknowledged but the continuations. In a hideous re-colonisation of the figure of the exile, white Australia places itself as the newly vulnerable figure, unable to go home and without legitimate claim to be here. Sara Ahmed's critique of the ways in which becoming is a becoming other is useful here and yet the pleasures of movement and desire are profound.⁹ Within a colonial/settler regime, what do we do with the pleasures of forgetting, of finding ourselves simultaneously reinscribing and living the movements of colonialism?

— COLONIAL HISTORY, NEW ENGLAND 1984

Desire was movement. You had to keep moving and you had to keep drinking. The score on the Bachelor and Spinster Ball circuit was usually one a year. One death, that is. We were drunk and fell in the river, we were drunk and drove off the road, we were drunk and drove over each other. But you had to keep on going, you had to keep yourself in perpetual motion—that was life. You drank all day and discovered really why kissing was so good and your body and hers felt like gods—divine. Our parents thought our feet were on the ground but they were on the accelerators. Throttles and bottles.

You didn't meet your old high school friends on the plane at the end of the university term (AUSTUDY paid an airfare then if you were more than twenty-four hours by bus or train from your home address). Those old high-school friends were in jobs or in relationships that kept them in the cities—they had re-located. And you didn't meet people of colour nor distinguishable queers. Instead there was the flying back to the country, the complicated connections from Melbourne to Sydney to Glen Innes that always required a minimum of four hours in the airport bar and then the sudden readjustment to the small, rickety twelve-seater that marked the passage back home. Going backwards, going home. You always met people you

knew. Once I knew the whole plane. For one part of the country could always afford that. The big parties, the air travel, the city connections and they always needed a few locals, back from school, down from university. That's how they thought. They were that sort of set. Cosmopolitans. This meant they knew the same sort of people whether they lived in Watson's Bay or Moree. They had access to a circularity of sameness that they called diversity.

But the countryside was still our shared place: the moneyed, the semi-moneyed and the poor, the black and the white. Except all of us used very different maps that only occasionally crossed over. For a moment at the bar of the agricultural show, for a moment at the Dundee sports. We goddesses of locomotion knew the rivers to swim in, the places to be; we knew where to go. We lost our lesbian virginity on blankets near a creek. This was classic stuff; stars and moon and revelation and it rained with us at the end so that the truck cabin was filled with the sweat of sexed bodies and wet wool. Some sort of primal settlement smell. Colonials still.

— ON BEING EXCUSED

No-one's parents asked where we had been until four or five in the morning; our positions were so well established—we were the unthreatening girls. And yet we knew absolutely we could never go back. We had moved to another country forever where nothing was as we expected. Lips didn't feel the same, fingers were extraordinary things and we were sucked out, heart first. Our desires were antipodean. Are these also the pleasures of being 'white' and becoming postcolonial? This 'entry into an arrangement, an assemblage of other fragments, other things, becoming bound up in some other production'.¹⁰ And weren't the silences of homophobia and the scratched-out racist routes we followed a part of those desirous productions, which meant we never saw and were never able to consider other possibilities? Our sexed intensities followed the well-worn colonial paths of opening us up to the new. We invested ourselves in spaces and places and believed we were in country never visited by another.

And we shouldn't forget the drugs. The earlier colonials had the opiates, their laudanum and spice. Lucky buggers. We had something less. Of course we had Bundaberg rum but because some of us were rich we had marijuana and later speed so we could slow down and speed up, enervate and proliferate with each line and each puff. We spent two summers on the bizarre edges of the Bachelor and Spinster Ball circuit. We drove to Gunnedah, Black Mountain, Holbrook, Dundee. We were excited, high, everyone's fantasy of getting out and off on it. We didn't notice the absolute non-Aboriginality of those gatherings. Our out-of-itness was along dry stretches of scrub and in Bundy-soaked halls where we collected stickers saying 'Got Ripped and Rooted at the Dundee B&S' and we put them next to our 'Feed the Man Meat' sticker. Just a joke. And then we flew out again. Were these bodies colonial or postcolonial? Were these pleasures queer or historically inscribed? Isn't movement always colonial here?

— MUCH HAPPENS IN-BETWEEN

The intense silences of the country began with the murders of Aboriginal people. Those silences are the magnificent edifices of whiteness. They are not the silences of not saying or not doing but the quiet of the power to disappear people, to ‘understand’ so completely that nothing is ever said. Those practised silences produced particular strategies for keeping whites together. In these communities at that time, we ‘white lesbians’ were knitted over into family until we disappeared entirely. We became one hundred percent somebodies who couldn’t be seen and we usually left quickly. This technique of vanishing was perfect for them and for us, for in the interstices of its silence we discovered another sexed self. But we couldn’t go home, not then, maybe now. But we couldn’t be like those diggers who lived forever and those pioneers whose stone-built selves always stayed and prospered. We were hybrids: dislocated, translated, re-situated and newly alive but we were still white.

So to be still at the memorial to the Myall Creek massacre is not to settle or claim, it is to stay in place within white race privilege without becoming something else. Perhaps it is a moment in Linnell Secomb’s ‘fractured community’¹¹ where the sameness of white is able to be exposed as a challengeable system that might transform one day to just one more difference. The Myall Creek Memorial is not my country. I have not begun to put into place the seeking of the multiple permissions from the many groups that created the memorial to stay or talk longer about it beyond that generosity granted to the passing tourist. For the ever-moving, ever-settling postcolonial this seems quite right.

— THE MOMENT OF THE MEMORIAL

The ideas of dislocation, translation and re-situation connect for me the seemingly disparate scenes of staying still at a memorial to massacre, of becoming ‘lesbian’ within the limits of locatability and the idea of what the possibilities of books, readers and collectors might now be. There is in each of these the acquisitive echo of Benjamin’s ‘renewal of existence’¹² that troubles each instance. Do we now collect experiences and identities as Benjamin once collected books? Is each claim to have transformed knowledge by undoing disciplinarity and to have challenged heteronormativity by becoming ‘lesbian’, challenged in turn by their privileging of change and movement? Within those identities and knowledges what remains in place? Within the specific space of this settler community the continuity of whiteness needs to be recognised, as in a different way do the ongoing connections between our ‘readers’ and global education as capital. The moment of the memorial is one space where the refiguring of movement, identity and knowledge can occur within a space that is both past and present.

How might this space of the memorial be understood as a community? For those engaged with the past as history, Wyshograd has set up an ideal of ‘a community that is deterritorialised

and a/productive'. But she sets this ideal community against 'the dangers of philosophies of community based upon the myth of autochthony'.¹³ This myth is, I presume, that of one group making absolute claims to originality and belonging at the expense of another. While it is easy to appreciate the anti-essentialist, pro-'denucleated' subject being put forward here, it still does not sound like a myth but a fact of settler communities. There are prior claims here and they are connected to the land.

Moving along highways, becoming more than myself, the complex exposure of in-between limits is not enough. Even the set piece of the library is in the end a possibility I should resist. The library containing collections or possibilities of hybridity cannot be relied upon to reflect the continuousness of settler colonialism—only the time and space of the memorial to Aboriginal massacre will do that. The stillness of the memorial to the Myall Creek massacre and the moment of visiting it mark a space of original community that is fully engaged with the reality of Aboriginal ownership of land and the ways in which that land was taken. Here we are reminded that a community of 'hospitality, of welcoming another'¹⁴ is impossible where the right to welcome is radically undercut by the 'autochthonic' reality. The memorial offers instead a space of unbecoming white, not a hybrid which still calls up those it is in-between but an unsettled quiet which suggests the possibility of eventual ethical community.

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2. Katrina Schlunke, 'Incommensurate Suffering: "Making" Women and Children in Massacre', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 16, no. 34, 2001, pp. 61–9.
3. *The Myall Creek Massacre: Its History, Its Memorial and the Opening Ceremony*, Myall Creek Memorial Committee, Bingara, 2001, p. 20.
4. There are many written versions of this event, but for the most comprehensive and contextualised account see Roger Millis, *Waterloo Creek: The Australia Day Massacre of 1838, George Gipps and the British Conquest of New South Wales*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1994.
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7. Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.
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9. Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality*, Routledge, London, 2000, pp. 119–23.
10. Elizabeth Grosz, 'Refiguring Lesbian Desire', *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, Routledge, New York, 1995, p. 184.
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13. Edith Wyschograd, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology and the Nameless Others*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998, p. xvi.
14. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1999.