

ESSAYS

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The “Great Australian Silence,” the “Cult of Forgetfulness” and the Hegemony of Memory

The anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner titled the second lecture of his 1968 Boyer Lectures “The Great Australian Silence.” Between the late 1930s and mid 1950s Stanner contends the nation was practising “a cult of forgetfulness ... on a national scale.” The specific focus of Stanner’s concern—general Australian historiography—is overlooked and his remark is now popularly understood to characterise a more broad sweeping “forgetting” of Aborigines. I have argued elsewhere that considerable information concerning Aboriginal history, the nature of dispossession, and contemporary circumstances was widely available and a constituent element of day-to-day life. Those iterating the populist cry of “Why Weren’t We Told,” the title of Henry Reynolds best-seller, are overlooking the range of material through an assortment of media that was in fact telling and to which they were exposed. Reynold’s question therefore is the wrong one. The quest should be on revealing and understanding the mechanisms of suppression. To this end guilt and shame are the oft cited suppressive instruments, and Australia’s maturity as a nation is said to remain burdensome so long as settler triumphalism suppresses an explicit account of Aboriginal-settler relations. In this discourse the processes of remembering and acknowledging emerge as beneficent universal virtues. However, one does not have to subscribe to notions of radical cultural relativism to wonder if the sort of imagined national redemption possible through frank acknowledgment of the fullness of our past is not in and of itself a hegemonic imposition of form. In considering certain aspects of traditional Aboriginal cultures and comparative autobiography this paper posits the ostensibly necessary

and moral force of remembering as a form of hegemony, and argues that notions of the nation's flawed past compromising a later maturity do not necessarily reflect traditional indigenous ways of understanding the aetiology of the present.

In 1951 the prolific journalist, author, and travel writer Colin Simpson¹ published *Adam in Ochre: Inside Aboriginal Australia*. (It was published in America in 1952, again in 1953, and 1954 saw its third Australian impression). It was one of the many books (amongst numerous other cultural productions) that turned its attention towards Aboriginal affairs during the period so evocatively described by the deservedly renowned anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner as the "Great Australian Silence." Stanner (1991:18-29, 24-25) contends that between 1939 and 1955 Australians were in the grip of "something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale." I have discussed elsewhere how the focus of Stanner's critique—general Australian histories and commentaries—has been overlooked (or conveniently ignored) so as to provide the specificity of his assessment a more all encompassing relevance (Rolls 2010; see also Curthoys 2008:247). So much is this the case that the title of Henry Reynolds's (2000) best seller *Why Weren't We Told* is taken as axiomatic by those confessing a primal confrontation with the distressing nature of the history of Aboriginal colonial and settler relations and its enduring legacy. Despite Reynolds providing much in his text pointing to the need for his title to be heavily qualified, its introductory commentary and general thrust lends the title credence.

In his aforementioned *Adam in Ochre* Simpson is pointed about the moral culpability of settler Australians and cynical about the efforts of absolution. It is worth quoting at length from the chapter "They are not Dying Out:"

¹ Simpson was the journalist who revealed the Ern Malley poems published by *Angry Penguins* were a hoax. The revelation was brought to Simpson in his capacity as a leading journalist with the Sydney-based news magazine *Fact* by Harold Stewart's (one of the poets) confidante, Tess van Sommers, who was the unwitting whistleblower. See Thomson 2002.

It is important that white Australians realize that the aborigines (sic) are here to stay. Once it is realized that they are not marked for extinction, the attitude towards them must change. If the patient is going to live, we can stop thinking about him in terms of the few well-chosen words for the card on the wreath that conscience dictates we must send. We were all set to write some pious sentiments about "man's inhumanity to man", meaning that we, the enlightened ones, bowed our heads with shame over the way grandfather fed poisoned flour to the tribe whose lands he took to run sheep—a piece of smarm that conveniently ignores the fact that we have been living on the proceeds of grandfather's bloody-handed pioneering ever since, and devoting only a pittance to the righting of the wrongs we talk so much about. Pity over what happened to the aborigines in the past has become the great Australian excuse for doing nothing much about them in the present (Simpson:187; see also 197).

Whilst it is true that "general Australian histories and commentaries" evincing sentiments like this, or other work more rigorously providing the corroborating evidence underpinning such sentiments, did not find their way onto educational curricula or syllabi at any level, more broadly such information was in wide circulation. Books, art exhibitions, magazines, newspapers and radio; low, middle, and high brow culture; all carried to a greater or lesser extent, and with greater or lesser vividness and sensitivity, accounts of Aboriginal dispossession and continuing nefariousness. The class and racial divides that fractured geographically so many country towns and inner and outer urban environments were there to be witnessed by everyone and wondered about by an enquiring mind.

Nevertheless, those now motivated by whatever impetus to turn their interests towards addressing the iniquitous position of Aborigines frequently proclaim a hitherto ignorance. As Chris Healy argues,

Non-indigenous Australians imagine again and again that they have only just learned about indigenous disadvantage—mortality rates, poverty, health, housing and educational opportunities, high imprisonment rates, substance abuse or sexual assault, take your pick—as if for the first time. These endless (re)discoveries of, and about, Aborigines are only possible because non-indigenous Australians forget their own forgetting (Healy:203).

Sarah Maddison provides a typical example in her recent text *Black Politics*.² Pointing to the limitations of her 1970s-80s" education, which according to Maddison was exacerbated by her family's middle-classness, she states she became "distressed by my own ignorance." It was not until her twenties when she "really began to come to grips with what it meant to be Aboriginal in contemporary society." A more interesting admission shortly follows: "It seems shocking to write this now, but at the time I had just not ever really contemplated the impact of our colonial history on the people most affected" (Maddison:xxxvii). This admission—to a refusal of contemplation—suggests something other than ignorance and the failings of an education system underlying one's general awareness of Aboriginal disadvantage and its precipitating factors. And it is to matters associated with this refusal that I now turn.

Guilt and shame are the oft cited suppressive instruments; the ultimately destructive psychological forces that led settler-Australians to avert their gaze and enquiry away from Aborigines and their iniquitous state. Bernard Smith judged guilt culpable in his 1980 Boyer Lectures *The Spectre of Truganini*. For Smith, until a culture grows "firm ethical roots" it cannot develop let alone survive. From 1788 until shortly before 1980 settler Australian "guilty awareness" of "the crimes perpetrated upon Australia's first inhabitants" had "locked the cupboard of our history" (Smith:10). Subscribing to a Freudian analysis of traumatic experience Smith argues that Aboriginal dispossession and bloody frontier conflict is for most settler Australians "a nightmare to be thrust out of mind" (Smith:17). Amongst many others, the political scientist and opinion columnist Robert Manne (2001; 1998:7-41), and philosopher Raymond Gaita (2000:57-130), have also written at length on the role played by settler guilt and shame in inhibiting Australia's moral maturity. Common to most

² In respect of the Stolen Generations, so too does Robert Manne (2008). For a critique of Manne's "alibi of ignorance" (Wolfe 2008:32) see Wolfe (2008). Also writing of the Stolen Generations, Meaghan Morris states "It is important to clarify that many (I would guess most) white Australians 'were not "aware" of what was happening' *not* because we did not *know* it was happening (we did) but because we were unable or did not care to *understand* what we knew" (Morris 2006:107, Morris's emphasis).

writing on this matter is the belief that the past will remain burdensome so long as settler triumphalism suppresses a full accounting of Aboriginal-settler relations and addresses the foundational seizing of sovereignty (see Rowse in Attwood & Foster 2003:22-3). Most recently this was iterated in the jousting of the so-called history wars. According to Attwood and Foster (2003:17), "debates over the Aboriginal past of Australia ... reflect a crisis over the moral basis or foundation of the nation ..." (see also Gooder and Jacobs 2000). Such concerns have found expression throughout colonial / settler history. Reynolds' *This Whispering in our Hearts*, which brings to attention those of concerned conscience and its manner of expression, commences "Major moral questions underlie the history of Australian colonisation ... They are questions which still concern us. They were there in the beginning" (1998:xi).

It seems needless to state but lost in much of today's moral posturing about Australia's history fact that suppression of detail troubling to nations and cultures is not peculiar to settler societies. Leela Gandhi (1998:4) explains how the "will-to-forget" is a common feature of decolonising nations, where often "a desire to forget the colonial past" arises. This "postcolonial amnesia is symptomatic of the urge for historical self-invention or the need to make a new start—to erase painful memories of colonial subordination". But as with settler societies, discomfiting history continues to irrupt rendering ultimately futile the suppression of burdens past. The urge to foreclose specifics of the past (or present for that matter) in order to fabricate a less compromised foundation upon which to imagine a sanguine future is a feature of both settler and decolonising nations.

Mechanisms of forgetting, for differing reasons, are integral to traditional Aboriginal cultures too. Well known is the suppression of names of the recently dead. Television programmes featuring Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders are obliged to carry a warning for indigenous audiences that the programme might broadcast names or images of those now deceased. Partly for this reason—suppressing the names of their recently dead—many traditionally-oriented remote Aboriginal societies and cultures have shallow genealogical recall, with

few remembering beyond the level of grandparents if that. As summarised by Basil Sansom (2006:154, 152-59), "The unremembering of persons is a letting go of history. When history is thus abandoned there remains no counter-evidence to the proposition that things as they are today are as they always have been." This points to another salient feature of Aboriginal societies and cultures. That which is new is incorporated into the eternity of the now of the Dreaming. In this way, for example, the water buffalo is not a recently introduced alien or pest but a particular manifestation of the rainbow serpent, which in itself is of comparatively recent origin, appearing for the first time, visually at least, c.3,000-6,000 years B.C. (Bowman & Robinson 2002:200; Altman 1982; Morphy 1998:50. As Sansom (2006:151) argues, for many Aboriginal groups "Emplaced traditions work ... to eliminate all memory of any historical departures from once-established norms." This is of little consequence in respect to the maintenance of traditional cultural practices, but it is of consequence when suppression is practiced to effect shallow recall against the "actual vicissitudes of human history" (Sansom 160). Land rights claims are one area where this is evident.

In the Finnis River case it became clear that the elders of an immigrant group felt duty-bound to edit history and withhold from their children the knowledge of an immigrant past. They returned history to the formula: "always was always will be" to assert that they had held the country they now occupied in all eternity and from the Dreaming (Sansom:160).

Although of a different magnitude, precipitated by a peculiar history but indicative of what seems to be a universal urge to deploy mechanisms of suppression to the service of particular interests, offending sections of the film *The Last Tasmanian*—in which Tasmanian Aborigines had earlier denied their identity as such, and used other descriptors to name themselves—were routinely blanked on video stock held by the University of Tasmania. It is inappropriate on the basis of moral, political or ideological principles to find favour with, say, the postcolonial amnesia of decolonising nations or the deployment of traditional amnesias for strategic purposes and fault the amnesia of settler societies. The will-to-forget and its corollary, a will-to-power, do not enjoy rectitude in the one instance and not the other,

for a similar order of self-interested tampering of the historical record is committed.

That holds true at least insofar as one subscribes to the redemptive value of historical disclosure, of the need to acknowledge the past in all its complex messiness in order for the nation to overcome its "legacy of historical shame" (Manne 1998:13). Such a linear, chronological notion of cause and effect with the present a sequel of cumulative pasts is not necessarily a universal. This can be illustrated through the example of autobiography. Autobiography is analytically apt for the nation is anthropomorphised in notions that it suffers unrelieved shame, carries a burden of guilt, and so on. Concluding *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson likens a nation's growth to the growth of an individual who suffers "characteristic amnesias" as s/he ages. Things like the consciousness of childhood which "cannot be "remembered"" are reconciled with the person one is now through narrative: "As with modern persons, so it is with nations" (Anderson 204, 205). Of pertinence is the characteristic of that reconciling narrative. In the Australian context Aborigines are made the subjects of a lineal narrative, or strategically adopt the subjectivity it offers. In this way they are somewhat ironically further encapsulated by the ideological apparatuses of the nation state.

Autobiography is "conventionally regarded as the coherent shaping of the past from the perspective of the unified self in the present" (Hamilton 1990:129). This is a western literary occupation and as such its form is beholden to the literary conventions developed within a western consciousness. This consciousness is crucial to the way in which the life of the self is perceived and portrayed, similarly the life of the nation. Discussing the narratives of lives that have survived from the Greek and Roman eras, Karl Weintraub asserts in contrast that

[t]he ancients did not put a premium on the life devoted to settling the quandary: who am I? how did I come to be what I am? in what sense am I a distinctive personality? and what complex interplay of external forces and internal characteristics accounts for my specific configuration? There was no need to use autobiography as a basic quest

for the self, or as a tool for self-clarification (cited in Brumble 1990:46; see also Gusdorf 29).

Post-Romantic western consciousness led to the posing of these questions concerning the self which have fundamentally determined the context and structure of modern autobiography. The privileging of egocentric individualism, and the historical reconstruction of life in sequential order, and the imposed teleological qualification or notion of progress upon this lineal depiction, are all features of conventional autobiographies.³ So too is the notion that each event in life, *as in the life of a nation*, influences one's subsequent life, as well as the realisation that one's life, *or the nation's*, could have been other than what it has been (Krupat 261; Brumble 1990:16; Brumble 1985:708).⁴

David Brumble (1990:46) argues that autobiographical narratives which issue from pre-literate cultures differ from conventional narratives in much the same way as do the narratives of the ancient Greeks and Romans. He reached this conclusion following his study of the then 600 published Native American autobiographies (1986:283). Several of these, but one in particular, indicate how the self and life is perceived when an individual is unfamiliar with modern autobiographical traditions, and is not acculturated to a western consciousness.

Gregorio, a Navajo hand-trembling diviner and shepherd, led a remote and predominantly solitary existence. He returned to his community only once every two or three months (Brumble 1986:276-77). Story-telling was not part of his life, either in first-person oratory or in any other form. A psychiatrist, Alexander Leighton, and his wife, were collecting Navajo life stories in 1940. Gregorio witnessed this and volunteered his own 15,000 word story, which he told over several

³There are gender differences in how the self is depicted in many autobiographies. The privileging of egocentric individualism is not as apparent in women's narratives, or the notion of progress. However, these characteristics are still more evident in non-indigenous women's narratives than in black autobiographies (see Hooton:101-03, 374).

⁴ Despite the challenges and opportunities posed by postmodernism and post-structuralism, few modern Western narratives have succeeded ultimately in emancipating themselves from such a reconstruction of the self.

days. Initially no attempt was made to rearrange Gregorio's story to fit within western narrative styles, and its first telling was kept intact (Brumble 1986:276-77, 282-83).

The differences between Gregorio's narrative and the narratives of acculturated Native Americans, or Native American narratives that have been subjected to some form of external control or interference (by a translator, transcriber, amanuensis, editor, or whoever) are many. Native American autobiographers who have had narrative control imposed upon them, even if not overtly—a simple question is all it takes to shape response—or who have had exposure to first-person story-telling traditions, produce narratives that closely resemble western autobiographical conventions. Gregorio's narrative lacks reflective self-consciousness and introspection. Childhood, that segment of life which Romanticism regarded as being critical in the shaping of the adult, is not mentioned at all. I'm arguing here that this is akin to omitting frontier history in an account of the nation. Events within Gregorio's life are not seen as determining, or in any way as shaping or altering the course of his life. A sense of progress is absent: one set of circumstances is not seen to lead into another. The early death of his parents, his marriage to someone he did not like, then remarriage to a "good" woman are events which simply happened. There is no association between an event and the life which follows (Brumble 1986:282-87). According to Brumble (1986:285), the chronological sequencing of events could be changed with no logical disruption to the narrative.

Discussing narratives of illiterate Native Americans, including Gregorio's, Brumble argues:

we do not find these Indians telling stories in such a way as to suggest exactly how they came to be just the men or women they were. These Indians tell of deeds done, of hardships endured, of marvels witnessed, of buffalos killed, and of ceremonies accomplished. They do not relate their tales each to each; their tales are not designed to work together to convey a unified idea of the narrator as an individual, separate, distinct, and different from what he or she might have been (Brumble 1985:708. His emphasis).

In other words, life stories such as this stand in stark contrast to conventional western autobiographical narratives. Similarly, anthropomorphising the nation with notions of a flawed past (childhood) compromising its later maturity and with redemptive prescriptions deemed necessary do not necessarily reflect traditional indigenous ways of understanding the aetiology of the present. One does not have to subscribe to notions of radical cultural relativism to wonder if the sort of imagined national redemption possible through frank acknowledgment of the fullness of our past is not in and of itself a hegemonic imposition of form, an emotional, psychosocial tyranny. Or at least the imposition of a set of doctrinaire assumptions about confession, guilt, the need for its extirpation, and the fruits such extirpation will bring. We should be alert to Frantz Fanon's warning, albeit in another context, that "Like it or not, the Oedipus complex is far from coming into being among Negroes ... This incapacity is one on which we heartily congratulate ourselves" (Fanon:151-52).

Critiquing the impetus for the movement for reconciliation between Aborigine and settler the respected anthropologist Peter Sutton writes that for Aborigines, or at least those furthest from urbane bourgeoisie sentimentality,

Remorse scarcely enters the picture, nor does conscience, nor does a feeling of guilt. Those who will these states onto traditional Indigenous minds are projecting their own Eurocentrism in one of those many later refinements of the colonial impulse that are based on a misplaced good will...

The non-indigenous reconciliationist's desire to engage in self-blame must seem unreadable, or at least merely exotic, to many Indigenous Australians. Blame in the classical Aboriginal scheme of things is consistently directed outwards to others not inwards to the self (Sutton:200).

To the extent that Aborigines embrace calls for the nation to atone for its colonial past, and many of the least disadvantaged and better educated appear to do so, it demonstrates both acculturation and the seductiveness of particular western forms. In a similar vein many recall and trace identity from ancestors that under traditional (classical) cultural practices would have long been forgotten. Not only is this a vital link on a personal level for many Aborigines, the need to

demonstrate such links is also a product of legislation, particularly the Native Title Act. One evidentiary requirement Aborigines need to demonstrate in applications for native title is that of unbroken cultural and genealogical continuity with the past.

Besides guilt and shame racism is touted as another of the instruments prompting a forgetting of Aborigines throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century. Literature in particular is signalled out for censure. Throughout the early part of this period very little literary fiction explored Aboriginal history or contemporary Aboriginal-settler relations. More popular work that was inclusive of Aborigines and Aboriginal issues, such as that of the prolific raconteur Ion Idriess, is held at best to be insensitive, at worst racist (see Shoemaker:39-98). Adam Shoemaker (56) argues that the "condescending conception of Aboriginal people which underlies Idriess's novels was one which was shared by the majority of Australians in the 1929-45 period." I have discussed in another paper how literature now suffering revisionist opprobrium when read in light of current moral and ideological concerns is not as straightforwardly nefarious, injurious or racist as critics portray (see Rolls 2010a). Of relevance here is that those now displaying, often ostentatiously so, sensitivity to Aboriginal welfare and history find further justification for their hitherto ignorance. Because Aborigines were not of particular interest to a sufficient number of authors, there were insufficient of the "right" sort of books to read, meaning those of some literary sophistication. The unstated inference is that this absence too was a consequence of guilt, shame or racism. On the other hand, admitting to reading those popular texts inclusive of Aborigines, such as Idriess's novels, is an admission of enjoying works now criticised for their racism. Of Idriess, Shoemaker (1989:139, 55-7) asks rhetorically "how many thousands of readers have accepted the implicit prejudices" against Aborigines.

Whatever the validity or otherwise of the above criticism, and fault certainly can be found, the salient issue here is that a great deal of popular work available between 1937 and 1955 was voicing issues—an Aboriginal presence, murderous frontier conflict, dispossession,

miscegenation, Aboriginal activism—avoided in that field of general historiography identified by Stanner as contributing to the “Great Australian Silence.” There is a poignant irony that literature now critiqued on the grounds of how it represents Aborigines (and others including women) is some of the very literature that did the telling belying the defensive “why weren’t we told.” If reader discernment is allowed and not foreclosed, it is possible this popular literature helped in sensitising a reasonably broad readership to issues avoided by those with more delicate, effete or learned tastes.

As noted, confessional iterations of the ostensible awakening to Aboriginal-colonial and -settler history presume an ailing settler nation and collective black suffering. A growing body of literature, particularly in the US and much of it published by black intellectuals, is critiquing an enduring identity of victimhood assumed by black activists. White guilt is pivotal to realising the objectives of this identity. An incident in the lead up to the US election—when a journalist recorded Jesse Jackson uttering the throwaway line that he wanted to castrate Barack Obama—exemplifies this discussion. Shelby Steele, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, provides an insightful analysis of Jackson’s outburst. According to Steele, Jackson, a prominent and effective activist in the civil rights movement, eschewed pursuing equality “out of a faith in the imagination and drive of his people”, and instead

pursued equality through the manipulation of white guilt. Their [civil rights activists] faith was in the easy moral leverage over white America that the civil rights victories of the 1960s had suddenly bestowed on them ... To argue differently—that black development ... might be a more enduring road to black equality—took whites “off the hook” and was therefore an unpardonable heresy (Steele 2008:26).

Obama’s ascension to Democratic presidential nominee embodied that “unpardonable heresy.” Obama did not seek office or broad white electoral support by exploiting white guilt—indeed had he done so his campaign would not have enjoyed the necessary support—but through emphasising individual responsibility, education, judicious decision making, and tacitly demonstrating the opportunities available outside moral leverage as the mechanism responsible for extracting dues. In

respect to the significance of individual Aboriginal responsibility in overcoming inequality and welfare dependency, the Australian Cape York leader Noel Pearson has made similar claims to Steele (whom he cites in some essays. See Pearson 2007:20-58).

The interest in this paper is not in the identity mobilised by Aborigines but in settler investment in the seductive qualities of “an ennobling guilt” (see Turner:45, 44-58). Those claiming to have become recently aware of Aboriginal history—including those asking “Why Weren’t We Told”—frequently empathise with Aboriginal suffering to the extent that Aboriginal pain and trauma becomes their own. As noted previously, in *Black Politics* Maddison claims to have been “distressed by [her] own ignorance.” In this claim she is not bearing witness to Aboriginal distress, or at least not that alone; she *herself* is acutely suffering. Maddison goes on to explain how her “response to this growing awareness was a paralysing guilt. The more I learned about Australia’s colonial history, the worse I felt.” Taking her guilt to an Aboriginal elder she was advised to get angry instead and she did (Maddison:xxxvii-xxxviii), which on one level at least continues her narcissistic empathising.⁵ Empathy per se, or the capacity to imagine walking in the shoes of another, should not be traduced. In respect to colonialism, however, the trauma iterated by today’s individuals is not isolable from broader socio-cultural and socio-political currents and exigencies. Ideology shapes if not prefigures the confected memory of past trauma. David Lloyd explains how,

[i]n the case of colonialism, the relation to the past is strictly not a relation to one’s own past but to a social history and its material and institutional effects and in no simple way a matter of internal psychic dynamics. The problem emerges as to how the transition from the level of the individual to that of the social can be theorized, since it is not self-evident that there is any necessary relation between the psychological and the social that is not already ideological (Lloyd:216).

⁵ See Cowlishaw (2004, 242-45) for discussion on the ‘narcissistic desire ... to improve the Indigenous population’ (244) and the narcissist’s investment in a ‘victimized Aboriginality’ (242). In a similar vein see Wolfe’s (2008) critique of Robert Manne’s (2008) propensity to make himself the subject of his recent writing on Aboriginal issues.

This helps explain (though of course not entirely) why subsequent generations frequently narrate conflicting and often contradictory responses to past trauma.⁶

Further, the communal “solidarity of remembered victimhood” (see Buruma 4) and the demotic sentimentalising of suffering in the manner of Maddison above— “[by] sharing the pain of others, we learn to understand their feelings, and get in touch with our own” (Buruma 7)—turns trauma into a romanticist aesthetic which manifests in the public sphere as a “heritage of suffering” (Hamilton 2003:95). Further again, the relation between broader ideological currents that pre-configure the psychological is pertinent not only to those (strategically) fomenting a community of anguish based on historical trauma, but also to many of those glibly adopting the mantle of the supportive activist. Paula Hamilton argues the confessional profession of ignorance—“Why weren’t we told”—in light of the many and varied accounts of Aboriginal history over the last two decades, “obscures the transformation of a national consciousness which has already taken place to allow their articulation” (Hamilton 2003:92). Oddly enough, whilst on the one hand those confessing a hitherto ignorance appear to be embracing a believed-in historicity of the emergent explanatory narratives, on the crucial issue of memory and its articulation they negate history altogether. As Hamilton (2003:92) points out, “[t]he idea of “forgetting” encourages an empiricist explanation—as if memories were waiting under a rock to be found rather than constituted at a time of different questions.”

Public utterances of ignorance in the manner of confession, and the crude Freudianism permeating the assumption that this in itself is healing, demonstrate adherence to popularly rendered western cultural forms, not an understanding of classical Aboriginal cultures. Writing of 1990’s reconciliation discourse, Haydie Gooder and Jane Jacobs (2000:238-39) note the “persistent assumption ... that encountering

⁶ See Bain Attwood (2001) for a discussion on how and why narratives concerning Aboriginal children separated from their families—the “stolen generations”—have changed over time.

“truth” and apologizing will function palliatively, and that from these two interlinked processes will emerge a healed nation” (see also Lloyd:218). That we assume a universal response to trauma that needs supporting by western psychoanalytical practices and/or psychological counselling services was demonstrated in another context when a colleague sought to interview Balinese in the aftermath of the 12 October 2002 nightclub strip bombing in which 202 people were killed, 88 of whom were Australians. Her human research ethics clearance required her to present the Balinese interviewees with an information sheet advising them that the interview would raise sensitive issues that could precipitate emotional trauma, possibly necessitating professional counselling. The Balinese thought this assumption absurd (pers. comm. 15 June 2010).

Changed circumstances necessitate different strategy and choices: culturally, psychologically and politically. Exigencies determine what is remembered and how, what is forgotten and how, and what functions the remembered and the forgotten serve. As Mark McKenna (2003:132) notes, “Different politics demand different memories.” The practices of amnesia and recall are situational and fluid. This is as true for Aborigines as it is for others, including the broader Australian population. Theories that guilt or an unutterable shame are the catalyst for the “cult of forgetfulness” and the “Great Australian Silence” are compelling. The suppression of guilt (Freud) and the redemptive value of confession tap into powerful western discourses. These provide a ready explanatory apparatus that resonates as commonsense. They also facilitate the strategic adoption of a heritage of suffering. In order to better exploit settler guilt in the interests of leveraging attention to claimed rights and compensation for losses and historical trauma where restitution is impractical or impossible, “[w]e no longer create our own lives, we repeat the injuries of former times” (see Bruckner 141). That this strategy ultimately and quickly comes to the end of useful service is not the concern of this paper.⁷ The theories

⁷ On this point see Buruma 1999; Lloyd 2000; Sicher 2000; Steele 2006; Sowell 2006; Michaels 2006.

of guilt and shame, however, provide an unsatisfactory explanation for the concern identified by Stanner.

It is not difficult to demonstrate that at the demotic level in the era which Stanner proposed was characterised by a “cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale” there was very little forgetfulness (in respect to Indigenous presence) practiced, and that which was—whether by settler or indigene—might well have had its own therapeutic value. To wit in another context Aborigines suppress the names of the dead and erase from memory historical departures from erstwhile norms. It is hard not to conclude that a geopolitical middleclass (urban, educated) has captured this issue and retrospectively shaped it in light of their own concerns, sensibilities and pretensions. That relations betwixt black and white between 1939 and 1955 in the regions where that relationship was manifestly present was often fraught, sometimes violent, abusive and mostly gauche is not in doubt. Nevertheless, the trajectory of that relationship has not been adequately explained, with the propensity to read it in binary, racist or oppressive terms only. Finding guilt and shame responsible for apparent silences in the past and ignorance in the present diligently obscures how localised and specific any silence was. Given the underlying pop Freudianism it is tempting to join in and propose that guilt and shame better explains the unease of current discussants, not the generation before them, who at least in regional Australia were, however awkwardly and inappropriately, engaged in the ongoing process of negotiating the relationship between Aborigine and settler. The refrain “why weren’t we told” captures something of the obscurantist’s intent to avoid interrogating their own former aversions and to displace complicity. It aids the imposition of hegemonic models: western conception of a unified self formed cumulatively and coherently from his / her past; repressed trauma; therapeutic confession; the role of memory; guilt, shame and absolution. The noise generated by this ostensibly corrective hyperactivity stigmatises the previous generation and not only renders the protagonists deaf to the many and varied sounds of Aboriginal-settler relations between 1939 and 1955, the suppressive qualities of the clamour generates silences of its own.

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