

Starting where we are

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This article explores our relationship with the history of where we live and why it matters. The development of a study group approach to this area of life is described and the relevance to us as citizens and practitioners is considered.

Te Waimatamate: still or intermittent waters



It would have fitted into a matchbox: what I learned about the history of the place where I grew up, a rural town set on the plains at the foot of the Hunters Hills. The hills were named after Ngai Tahu chief, Te Huruhuru, who with a group of 40 or 50 people established a village of 25 dwellings of totara bark there on the west bank of the Waimate River (Anderson, 1990). Not that I knew that as a child. Instead, at primary school we learned about the arrival in Te Waimate in 1854 of Michael Studholme who had come from Christchurch to select land for a sheep run, the last part of his six week journey overland on bullock carts. We visited his cob hut. I recall we learned generically about ‘the Maoris’, all in the past tense and with no mention that I recall of names or what happened in our locality. Our teachers taught us a couple of Maori action songs and Maori stick games, which I enjoyed. Some classmates had Maori ancestry but this didn’t register with me then and was never discussed. I was surrounded by Maori language names I didn’t know the meaning of: Waihaorunga, Waihao Downs, Ikawai, Waitaki, Hakataramea, Makikihi.

Recently I discovered they were river locations, also *a fishing place, a valley of scented speargrass, the murmur of the sea*. I grew up in a time and place where cultural background was not discussed and the history of where we lived seemed old fashioned and irrelevant. No family stories of our own ancestors were told. This was the 1960s, we were on the edge of a modern time and it seemed we were only looking forward.

Out on a Sunday drive, sometimes to visit relatives on a farm, with Mum in the front and us kids in the back seat of the Vauxhall, Dad, who was a stock and station agent, would raise his forefinger off the steering wheel as a friendly greeting to the drivers of oncoming vehicles. They would respond in kind. He mostly seemed to know their names, and would say them out loud with recognition, affection. That's Cyril Sew Hoy. John Hay. Field Dyer. At this time, in this place, and despite the confining social prescriptions of the time, I grew up with really no doubt that this was my home and that I fundamentally belonged.

Merri Merri very stony creek and Birrarung river of mists



Many decades on, I live in Melbourne near the Merri Creek which runs into the Yarra River or Birrarung as it was known before colonisation. I have lived in this place longer than anywhere else. As a migrant I set about to learn my new country, bit by bit, year by year, in order to find my feet here. With my work interests in social diversity and intercultural learning, there has been a lot to take in. Here in this city now, transforming apace, to a soundtrack of grinding traffic and relentless construction, 1800 people make Melbourne their new home every week. There are 5 million of us in Melbourne now, almost half born overseas or with a parent who was (Soutphommasane, 2015). What do we know of the history of this place we live in, or care to know?

Actually, we do know some of the answers to these questions. While the majority of people in Victoria say they know a lot about the history of Australia, only a third have a fairly high knowledge of the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. (Reconciliation Australia, 2016). In Victoria, people want to see that change: 4 out of 5 people see it as important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history become a compulsory part of the school curriculum.

However, unfamiliarity with our history isn't changing very fast. Joanne Cruickshank (2017), Senior Professor of History at Deakin University comments: "For 10 years I have taught history students about the history of colonisation. Every year I think I will get a group of students who will have had a more thorough grounding in the basic facts of colonial history and the relationship between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people. There has been virtually no shift in the knowledge levels of people coming into university over 10 years."

There are some very distinctive things to grasp about Australia's history. The historian Mark McKenna reminds us that between 1788 and the First World War twenty two million British emigrants left their homes to settle in North America, Australia, New Zealand and southern Africa (McKenna, 2018, p. 33). By 1914, the powers of Europe held roughly 85% of the earth as colonies, protectorates, dominions and commonwealths (Soutphommasane, 2015).

Australia was unique in being colonised without a treaty, conquered without negotiation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples, the land taken without compensation (McKenna, 2018). In the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017) contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders remind the Australian people that the sovereignty of their peoples was never ceded or extinguished, and that it co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

Our violent history and its consequences is recounted in a visceral and confronting way by Wiradjuri man and journalist Stan Grant (2016, p. 1, pp. 25-26). His childhood was spent with his family moving from town to town, taking up farm labouring and timber milling work, one ramshackle house to another, he and his siblings in one school after another, always needing to move on for fear that the children would be taken by police or welfare officers. He writes of his people, "the Australian dream abandoned us to rot on government missions, tore apart families, condemned us to poverty. There was no place for us in this modern country and everything we have won has come from dissent, it has been torn from the reluctant grasp of a nation that for much of its history hoped that we would disappear. We know this history, my people. This

is a living thing. We touch it and we wear it. It is written in the scars on the bodies of men like my father. It is carried deep within us, mental wounds that cannot heal. It is so close we can touch it" (Grant, 2016, p.26). I have heard it said many times by Aboriginal people, '*history is not in the past, it's all around us*'.



The **Northcote Koori Mural**, located in St Georges Road, Thornbury in Melbourne, was designed by former Northcote High School art teacher Megan Evans in collaboration with members of the Thornbury-based Aborigines Advancement League. Evans worked with Aboriginal artist and elder Lin Onus researching and designing the mural in collaboration with members of the Victorian Aboriginal Community, and it was painted between 1983 and 1985, by trainee artists including Les Griggs, a Gunditjmara man (1962–93), Ray Thomas, Millie Yarran, Ian Johnson and Elaine Trott and many other volunteers.

There are many reasons why knowing more about our history matters today. The life chances and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (in health, employment, housing and education) are profoundly affected by these events. Closing the gap between the life chances and wellbeing of non-Indigenous Australians and Indigenous Australians is on track on some criteria: child mortality; early childhood education; and year 12 attainment. Others are not on track: school attendance; reading and numeracy; employment; and life expectancy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). If the history that shapes these systemic inequities is unknown and unexamined, they simply become taken for granted, part of the everyday *way things are*.

Our history continues to affect the strength of our social fabric. This is a concern for many Australians. Perhaps it is a concern for you, the reader. Senator Patrick Dodson (2016), member of the Yawuru people, known as 'the father of Reconciliation', notes "countless people, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous, have dedicated their life's work to the reconciliation movement." This includes a decade

of work by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation established by the government in 1991, and almost two more decades of work by Reconciliation Australia, established in 2000. Perhaps you were involved in the displays of shared commitment and solidarity such as the Walk for Reconciliation. Many of us witnessed and experienced the profound resonance of the Apology to the Stolen Generations. Perhaps some of you work or participate in one of the hundreds of businesses, organisations and sporting groups, which fulfil commitments each year, as part of their Reconciliation Action Plan.

The work of strengthening our social fabric involves getting to know the truth of our history. Dr June Oscar, AO, a Bunuba leader and now Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, has reminded us: “Until the entirety of Australia’s history is acknowledged, and trauma is understood, we deny the truth of this nation and lock ourselves in fleeting moments of reconciliation. In doing this we stall the progress of a necessary reconciling journey. I believe the time is now to begin this journey and never let it end. Australia is ready to reconcile” (Oscar, 2016).

There is plenty of work yet to be done to address our history and its legacy, whether or not it is characterised as reconciliation. Reconciliation Australia (2016) identifies five dimensions of reconciliation: race relations, equality and equity, unity, institutional integrity and historical acceptance. Matters of self determination and self-management, individual and institutional racism, and the issues of sovereignty and compensation are highlighted by Ranzijn, McConnochie and Nolan (2009, p. 89). Our capacity to progress this work as a nation needs the widespread engagement of members of the Australian community.

Noel Pearson, lawyer, activist and chairman of the Cape York Partnership highlights one reason such wide engagement is needed: a defining feature of Indigenous Australia is “our extreme minority.” He writes that in 2014 there were 600,000 Maori in New Zealand and 600,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia. Where Maori comprised 15% of the New Zealand people, Indigenous people comprised only 3% of Australians. From his point of view, non-Indigenous Australians overestimate the ability of Indigenous people to get government to work for them. He writes, “the scale and moral emergency of the indigenous predicament far exceeds the power of indigenous participation in the country’s democratic process. We have to solve this democratic problem. It is the problem of the 3% mouse and the 97% elephant.” This, he says, drawing a phrase from the anthropologist

W.E.H. Stanner, is the “torment of powerlessness” (Noel Pearson, 2014, pp. 38-40).

This is poignantly substantiated by, Cobble Cobble woman, Megan Davis, a pro-vice-chancellor, professor of law, and a member of the Referendum Council. She refers to all the work which has gone into the epic journey of Indigenous constitutional recognition, “with no homecoming in sight.” In 2017, Indigenous Australian elders gave unified expression to the Uluru Statement from the Heart, only to see it rejected by the Turnbull government and sent off to another joint parliamentary committee. The recognition project has had many iterations, including five state-sanctioned, taxpayer funded mechanisms in seven years. “We are exhausted. We would like to come home. The Uluru Statement from the Heart is the way home” (Davis, 2017, p. 14).

A group work approach

In 2017, I discovered a number of recently published and well-written books about the history of Melbourne and Victoria. I had begun reading, but I knew what I faced was going to be confronting and I didn’t want to ‘go it alone’. I was affected, too, by an earlier reading of academic and author Sara Maddison’s (2011) book *Beyond White Guilt*, which highlighted the need to find new ways of thinking and talking about our past and about how we might live together in the present and the future. She had suggested this is not work non-Indigenous Australians can expect the government to do for us. Nor is it work Indigenous Australians can do for us. She quoted Aboriginal historian and activist, now co-chair of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, Jackie Huggins, a member of the Bidjara and Birri Gubba Juru people, who in 1998 challenged the constant demands placed on Aboriginal people to be educators, suggesting, “surely it is time for non-Aboriginal people to begin their journey of discovery by themselves.”

I invited other non-Indigenous people to join me in a study group about the history of where we live, approaching people I thought would be interested; some I knew well, and others I had only just met. The flier read:

Starting Where We Are: 2017 Study Group

We all live here in this city, in this state and on this country.

And what are we coming to know so far of the history of this place?

And what, too, of the impacts on ourselves and others as Australians?

You are invited to consider this and come to know more in the company of a small study group of interested citizens/residents.

The flier proposed an initial meeting to get to know each other and learn of our mutual interest in this area, and further meetings to watch and discuss a video and to reflect on and discuss some reading. I suggested Episode 3 of the *First Australians* DVD directed by Arrernte woman, film and television director, producer and screenwriter, Rachel Perkins (2008); *1835: the founding of Melbourne and the conquest of Australia* by historian James Boyce (2013); and *Convincing Ground: Learning to fall in love with your country* by writer Bruce Pascoe (2007), of Bunurong and Cornish heritage. I offered to host and facilitate these sessions, over an agreed period (say 4- 6 months) at a suggested location and at times we would agree together. As an introduction, I also gave a brief profile of my interest and professional context.

It was clear early on that this initiative was relevant to people. Most of the people I approached said yes straight away. One of my neighbors, Sue, heard about it and asked if she could join us, which she did. Some were interested but couldn't join us because of other commitments. Once we got going we didn't accept newcomers, although others did approach us with some enthusiasm.

The sociometry of the group is relevant to its success: I felt a positive link with every one of the nine people in the group. Most didn't know each other, although two had met through psychodrama events and two others, I discovered, were close friends. For the first year because of scheduling challenges, I hosted the group as two subgroups, which worked well as everyone had lots they wanted to discuss. If you were to create such a group, who would you invite?

I started this study group as a citizen. While I provided some facilitation early on, I have been a participant and peer, rather than a professional leader offering a learning group for others. I think the group members would agree that together we developed a purposeful, accepting and generative group culture. At the end of our first year we met to reflect on our learning and eight of us decided we wanted to continue. We are now completing our second year.

In mid-July 2018, six of us have a hot soup lunch together after our morning meeting in Vig's sunny dining room. This year we have gone beyond Melbourne and Victoria following our common interests in culture and history. We've read a collection put together and introduced by Robert Manne of essays by the respected anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner (2009), *The Dreaming and Other Essays*. We've read the Quarterly Essay by historian Mark McKenna (2018), *Moment of Truth: History and Australia's Future*. There is excitement at this meeting because there has been so much learning from reading *Djambati Mala: Why Warriors Lie*

Down and Die by Richard Trudgen. There are always many other books being read by members of the group, so we don't know until we meet where we will head next. There's agreement that our next book will return us to Victoria, the place we live: *The good country: the Djadja Wurrung, the settlers and the protectors* by historian Bain Attwood (2017). And we decide to read Stan Grant's (2016) Quarterly Essay, *The Australian dream: blood, history and becoming* as well. In October as we meet again we decide our next read will be *Fighting hard: the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League* by Richard Broom (2015).

And what have we been discovering? First of all, we discovered each other – where we were from, how long we'd been in Melbourne. Born in Wales, England, New Zealand, Sydney, Tasmania, country Victoria and Melbourne. Terry's family has been in Australia 6 generations since their ancestor arrived as a convict on the First Fleet. Jenny emigrated from England 7 years ago. There were stories of discovering ancestry, discovering distressing family history and leaving some family secrets yet unexplored. Our conversation spanned connections with the land, places, places of historical significance, books being read, events coming up. There was intense interest in the history of where we live and in the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous peoples, in learning about Aboriginal culture and different ways of knowing.

Our work together has stimulated many things. Some of us have gone on road trips to visit the areas we are reading about. Some have dived into reading Indigenous fiction, Indigenous memoir, books about the origins and impacts of racism. Others have taken strength and encouragement for their work in reconciliation, social research, group facilitation. Our awareness of and participation in events such as yarning circles and public presentations with Aboriginal elders, writers and leaders has increased. Our learning has stimulated interest in more learning.

Terry comments, "this has been a very positive and sustaining experience for me. It has provided a safe place to discuss and learn from and with likeminded souls on our journey of reconciliation." Vig says, "I would not have persevered with some of the books if it had not been for the group. Some of the books were very detailed and dense. I was aware that the quality of the discussion and what we would get out of it depended on most people having read the book. This helped me persevere. Also being part of the continuing group reminds me of my responsibility as an Australian to understand our history and its impact today." Jenny, who has lived in Australia only seven years, comments: "I struggled with the first books we read: the complexity of it all, the names

(so many!) of those involved in colonisation and settlement, the attempts by some to bring about peaceful bargaining, the violence, the greed by others. I do appreciate now that the struggle to understand is necessary and difficult. I think I will need to keep doubling back: re-reading books in the light of fresh understanding from other books, encounters, discussions." Someone else comments, "it's hideous looking around the world, at the scale of things, there's so much shame involved. Homing in on the history of where we live, it's on a scale that is able to be looked at."

What are we discovering of the history of where we live? The books we have read are well written: each of them is an enriching experience in itself. As we have read them, we have been taking in the history, group-by-group, event-by-event, character-by-character. It is impossible to summarise without overgeneralising, oversimplifying, losing texture and nuance. Writing of it here is distressing – there's so much relentless devastation, it's hard to tell it.

A history of where we live

We discovered that the country of the Kulin nations was the most populated region in Australia, home to 36 clans, each with a language and territory of their own (Perkins, Nowra & Cole, 2008). Boyce (2013) describes a beautiful and bountiful place, like a temperate Kakadu, with a rich biodiversity of animals, plants, fish and birds. It was an immense, thinly wooded expanse of swamps and open grasslands formed by firestick farming. The rivers were clear. That muddy brown river we know here today has been made that way by farming.

It was shocking to discover how quickly and dramatically this changed. In 1835, sheep barons from Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) looking for more pasture established an illegal squatter camp on the banks of the Yarra River in the area which is now Melbourne. It had been British government policy to concentrate and restrict settlement since 1788. However, within a year this policy was abandoned, allowing settlers to go where they pleased (Boyce, 2013). In just eight years 12,000 Europeans arrived with 100,000 cattle and 1½ million sheep (Pascoe, 2007, p. 25). "By the end of the 1840s squatters had seized nearly 20 million hectares of the most productive and best-watered Aboriginal homelands, comprising most of the grasslands in what are now Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and southern Queensland." It was "one of the fastest land grabs in the history of empires" (Boyce, 2013, p. XIII).

This invasion was lawless and lucrative. The squatters were well-connected businessmen who made a lot of money fast through securing and later selling land. The colonization was "a grand property

speculation financed on borrowed money” (Boyce, 2016, p. 53). High interest rates generated impatience with anyone who got in their way.

In 1835, Aboriginal people were familiar with the British already and initially intense cross-cultural engagement took place. It was common at that time for Aboriginal people to live with the newcomers. However soon they were pushed out of their lands, the kangaroos and emus they hunted were driven off, their staple food murnong, yam daisy, was damaged by overgrazing and access to waterways for fish, eels and birdlife was denied.

It was shocking to discover that the newcomers imposed their own exclusive control over fertile country and good water supplies. The effects were devastating. By 1840, most Aboriginal people were hungry and malnourished with little capacity to resist disease or armed pursuit. They had no option but to beg for food or kill stock. The population of Aboriginal people in Victoria fell by at least 80%, the majority dying from disease, with at least 1000 directly killed (Boyce, 2013, p. 176). Indiscriminate killing to terrorise or punish those Aboriginal people who threatened sheep or shepherds was carried out with impunity.

We saw in plain view the ruthless exercise of the invaders’ sense of superiority. Pascoe observes “the nature of the planned dispossession precluded any partnership or cultural acknowledgement of the Indigenous because the occupation of their lands was predicated on their unworthiness to hold it” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 11).

There was deception and cover up. Evidence of well-established Aboriginal occupation such as stone buildings and complex fish traps was destroyed. A true picture of what was happening was not given to government authorities, and the numbers of Aboriginal people murdered were minimized or covered up altogether to avoid prosecution.

Bain Atwood (2017) describes a scene in which senior Djadja Wurrung men initially welcomed the intruding pastoralists. They were willing to share their country with small parties of these newcomers so long as they respected the land, particularly the sacred sites. They offered gifts to the strangers expecting they would be reciprocated. Relationships broke down quickly as stock destroyed the sources of food and the newcomers fail to understand the kinship rules of sharing and reciprocity. They asked the pastoralists to leave. When they didn’t, the Djadja Wurrung took or killed their stock and robbed their homesteads or outstations of flour and other food, for which they were shot. (Attwood, 2017, pp. 14-16)

We have been learning too about the Aboriginal Protectors, appointed in response to the influence in Britain of evangelical philanthropists who

had shifted their attention to the colonies following the successful abolition of the slave trade. They attempted to confine Aboriginal people on reserves, convert them to Christianity and extinguish their culture.

It is an extraordinary achievement that Aboriginal people somehow survived this invasion and the layer upon layer of oppression which followed. We learned of Aboriginal efforts to take their destiny into their own hands. For example in 1862, in the face of institutional indifference, a group established a thriving farming reserve of their own at Coranderrk. They repeatedly petitioned the Aboriginal Protection Board and the government to be able to manage themselves, but their achievements were undermined and their requests refused. In 1886, the Half Castes Act decreed that only 'full bloods' would remain on the reserves, that anyone with white ancestry and under 34 was considered not to be Aboriginal, and was to be exiled from the missions and reserves into white communities that didn't want them. As the reserves were eventually closed, people were removed off their traditional lands and forcibly moved to Lake Tyers in Gippsland. In Rachel Perkins' film (Perkins, Nowra & Cole, 2008) she confronts us with the experience of an Aboriginal woman who must write to the authorities seeking permission to visit her child, a child no longer allowed to live with her.

We have been learning of the determined efforts of Aboriginal leaders to have their people – being both farmers and Aboriginal – “be of this astonishing and devastating new world and not be consumed by it” (Broome, 2015, p. 3). We are learning of the birth of Aboriginal activism in New South Wales and Victoria, and of the move of Aboriginal people back to Melbourne which began in the 1920s. “This movement to urban spaces helped Aboriginal people to build links with sympathetic white Victorians who assisted their cause, but more importantly, it enabled them to foster links with each other. The 1940s saw a move to pan-Aboriginal actions, both in politics and cultural expressions, which solidified Aboriginal identity, without which the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League could not have existed” (Broome, 2015. p. 12). The history of the League is where we are currently focused.

Being in this study group has been a meaningful learning experience for me. It has provided me, and others, with companionship as we have kept facing into our collective history as citizens of Melbourne and Victoria. While I had previously read about Australia's history from a national perspective, what has been revealed to me of the people and places where I live has been mostly new to me, and is vivid and relatable. There is still plenty to learn. We have decided to continue into our third year.

Implications for psychodrama practitioners

Doing this study together has opened up a number of perspectives for me as a practitioner of the psychodrama method. I have reaffirmed the view that this study group's work is sociodramatic. I am reminded of the limitations of sociodramatic enactments without adequate historical knowledge being available in a group. And my assumptions about our ability to role reverse across periods of time have been challenged. I expand on this below:

1. Our work as a study group is sociodramatic

The psychodrama method has a broad focus. It concerns itself with the life interests, concerns and abilities of individual people and the repair and rejuvenation of their relationship dynamics. It also has within its ambit: interpersonal effectiveness (role training); the development of collaborative groups (sociometry); new perceptions of organisations and groups; and new solutions to group and intergroup conflicts (sociodrama) (Psychodrama Australia, 2013).

J L Moreno developed sociodrama during and after the Second World War, to improve the delicate fabric of co-existence between various groups in postwar society (Kellermann, 2007). Sociodrama is an experiential method for social exploration and intergroup conflict resolution. It focuses on our functioning in groups, including families, organisations, sub-cultures, cultures, nations, and even our global social structure, shining a light on values, collective ideologies and intergroup relations.

Sociodrama helps us enter into the view of life and feelings of people different from ourselves, including people from quite different cultures and roles in society. It broadens and deepens our experience; brings a greater appreciation of the values and attitudes of others and greater understanding of the structure of groups and subcultures. It assists our role development: enlarging our role repertoire; developing flexibility; and building our capacity to plan and execute interventions to improve the everyday working of groups. In addition, it can foster a personal sense of our own contribution to the evolution of our culture. (Clayton, 1989, pp. 165-166) It gives means and possibility to Moreno's vision that we become active rather than passive members of society.

Within this context, I am beginning to appreciate our study group's work together as sociodramatic. While some of the outcomes outlined above could well be created by other means, such as the public broadcasting of ABC, SBS, NITV, for example, our study group is involved in a face-to-face group process. While we may not have been

involved in enactments on a stage, as yet, we are definitely in the territory of the sociodramatic.

As with all aspects of the psychodrama method, sociodrama involves a warm-up, an enactment and a sharing phase. One perspective is that our study group is involved in an extended and necessary warm-up phase. This notion sits well with me. There's a humility in it and a reality, given the limits in our knowledge of history. The action phase may involve a sociodramatic enactment on a stage at some time in the future. I trust the action phase will be action in the world; that we will be better informed, more focused in our engagement as actors in our own social, professional and political settings.

2. The importance of historical knowledge in sociodramatic explorations

Kellermann (2007) comments that knowledge of history, and anthropology too, is needed for sociodramatic work.

I have been involved in some satisfying sociodramatic explorations about history in which key participants have known the historical details. One was a brief portrayal of an Aboriginal elder from Van Dieman's Land surrounded by dying countrymen and women looking back at their country as they were removed to Flinders Island in 1830.

Another was an enactment of more recent historical events: the New Zealand Police raids on the community in the Eureka mountain range near Ruatoki in 2007. Two participants wove their considerable knowledge of events into the exploration. In both cases, well-informed participants contributed to a vivid, absorbing and memorable dramatic exploration.

When we don't know enough of the history or cultural landscape, a sociodramatic enactment is quite a stretch. We can use our imaginations, our creativity, our capacity to play and role-play. But we risk ending up in an echo chamber filled with our own assumptions and unexamined biases, and simply reinforcing them.

3. Recognising the limits of empathy and imagination without historical knowledge

Every one of us has a distinct approach to our ancestors, informed by our family, cultural background and spiritual or religious tradition. For some, our ancestors are a profound presence, an active ongoing relationship, a source of intercession, a source of pride, identity and strength. For others our ancestors are a bit sketchy or unknown to us. Perhaps some of us have even rejected our ancestors.

The late historian, Inga Clendinnen (2006), suggests caution when imagining our ancestors and figures from history. This is relevant to us as members of society and as practitioners.

We value imagination as psychodramatists. When a protagonist is well warmed up to a high level of spontaneity they are able to access originality, vitality, creativity and imagination. This is something of a mysterious process in which new insights can come.

In contrast, Clendinnen (2006) reminds us that the work of the historian is a lonely, slow business, always problematic, and “its inhabitants can be relied on to affront our expectations.” She cautions us against relying only on our imaginations or simply applying empathy. “We cannot post ourselves back in time. People really did think differently then - or at least we must proceed on that assumption” (pp. 20-21).

Clendinnen questions how much culture people with British ancestry really share with British people of 200 years ago and wonders if we are seduced into an illusion of understanding simply because we speak the same language. She says, two hundred years ago people were more familiar with death, pain and violence. The cocoon of physical security in which we currently live may be our greatest barrier to understanding how it was for people of other times and how it is for other people in other places now. For Clendinnen, this massive change in circumstance alone “renders the hope of empathy a fiction” (Clendinnen, 2006, p. 16). Rather, we can learn about history, making fresh discoveries, as historians do.

The challenges of facing our history

It is important for any society to know its history. George Santayana’s oft-quoted line, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” is probably well accepted by many. Less well known, is a quote from Marcus Tullius *Cicero* (63 BC), which a member of the study group told me about: “to be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child”.

Facing the injustices and atrocities of our colonial history can be confronting. Little wonder such events within nations are often followed by a period of denial (Appiah, 2018, pp. 128-9). This phenomena was dubbed by anthropologist, W.E.H. Stanner, in his 1968 Boyer Lectures as “the great Australian silence.” He spoke of inattention on such a scale it couldn’t possibly be explained by absentmindedness. “It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as simple forgetting of other possible views, turned into habit, and over

time into something like a cult of forgetfulness, practised on a national scale. We have been able for so long to disremember the Aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so" (Stanner, 1968; 2010, p. 189). Today in Australia the silence is being well and truly broken. Mark McKenna (2018) notes the effects of new historical knowledge: "the centre of gravity has slowly shifted towards a more complex, yet ultimately richer and more honest history that continues to unsettle us." He adds, "if recent Australian art, film and literature is any barometer, the country remains haunted by the violence and dispossession at the nation's foundation" (p. 28).

Historians focus, amongst other things, on moral choices. Inga Clendinnen (2006) suggests they have a special responsibility to examine the actions of men and women to discover the choices they faced, the choices they made, and how we are to understand them.

Agreed, it is futile to ring our hands over past brutalities and the injustices, but we can seek to analyse them with sufficient delicacy to understand how it was that some individuals chose to commit brutal acts, and then others, in similar circumstances, did not; to examine how our fathers or any humans could entertain so narrowed a notion of humanity, so restricted a view of situation and choice, that they could inflict lethal injury so readily. We would then be better able to count the cost of our present comfort, and not take it as a gift of nature or (worse) as our natural due. We might even choose to try to alleviate those acts' most damaging legacies. (p. 53-54).

By examining past situations we may be better able to identify the real choices we face now. "We have to know the world as it is if we are to change any part of it and to map the span for human agency so we do not acquiesce in what we could change" (p. 66).

Perhaps another reason history is so confronting for non-Indigenous Australians is because our identity is at stake. Whether we are noticing it or not, we may be telling ourselves, and possibly others, well-honed stories about our forebears and our family or cultural in-group. For the creation of in-groups (and out-groups) is quite tied up with our sense of identity (Appiah, 2018, pp. 29-30). Because we are usually well disposed to our own in-group, we are more likely to make generous assumptions about them. In-groups invoke feelings of trust, worth, self-esteem and security. In contrast, people outside our group - out-groups - invoke feelings of anxiety, distrust, unfamiliarity and hostility (Kandola, 2009). It's possible we may be overinvested in these identifications. If that's true it would help us make sense of Mark McKenna's (2018) observation that in Australia there is a "refusal to relinquish the triumphalist and monovocal view of our past" which, he argues, seals us off from

“understanding history as anything other than a crude choice between shame and pride” (p. 60).

You might notice a concern with shame or pride yourself, as I did, as you research your own family history or the history of where you grew up. Who were your ancestors and what part did they play, if any, in Australia’s or New Zealand’s history? On reading about Edward Gibbon Wakefield’s New Zealand Company, which planned to buy cheap land and make a fortune reselling it, I was rather worried about whether the English Member of Parliament who championed their private venture (and the settlement of Adelaide) and argued against the Treaty of Waitangi was related to me. I have not found a link to him in my family tree. I noticed my own fear of somehow feeling personally implicated by the actions of my ancestors and the relief to discover they were less prominent, run-of-the-mill colonisers.

When non-Indigenous Australians, particularly white Australians, face our history, we face the exercise on a grand scale of the notion of racial superiority, which Tim Soutphommasane (2015) notes, has provided the ideological basis for European dominion over the rest of the world for nearly 500 years. “Europeans had the power to determine the standing of non-Europeans and they did so by dividing the world between ‘men’ and ‘natives’. Native peoples were conquered or subjugated, their cultures extinguished, otherwise occupied lands were ‘discovered’.” (pp. 16-17).

Facing our history opens a door into racism: not only the racism of our predecessors, but what we have inherited. It’s widely recognised today, in research such as Harvard University’s implicit association test (Kandola, 2009), that we all possess and act on unconscious biases on the basis of race, gender and other factors. Over the past decade a great deal of diversity education in Australian and global corporate organisations has focussed on participants learning to recognise the operation of unconscious bias, the factors which contribute to it, and strategies for reducing and eliminating it.

North American diversity educator Robin DiAngelo’s (2018) book *White Fragility* alerts us to how deeply these embedded notions of racial superiority are. She says white people have been socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority that we are unaware of or can never admit to ourselves. White people have become established as the ‘norm’ and people of colour as outside of it, ‘different’. This is so deep-seated that white people do not think of themselves as having a race. No attention is drawn to our race. In fact each of us comes to think of ourselves as an individual, outside or innocent of race – just a human being (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 2). DiAngelo sees this as a refusal to see or relate

to our collective identity. She suggests we are all connected to the racism of our history and must be willing to trace the effects of history into the present (p. 94).

She writes of the psychological advantages of whiteness: “As I move through my day, racism just isn’t my problem. While I am aware that race is being used unfairly against people of colour, I haven’t been taught to see this problem as any responsibility of mine; as long as I personally haven’t done anything I am aware of, racism is a nonissue” (p. 55). Diangelo says we have to let go of the simplistic idea that racism is limited to individual, intentional acts committed by unkind people. This good/bad binary obscures the structural nature of racism and makes it hard for us to see or understand. We are taught to think of racism only as discrete acts committed by individual people, rather than as a complex, interconnected, far reaching system that functions independently from the intentions or self-images of individual actors. “If I see racism this way I will not build my skills in thinking critically about racism or use my position to challenge racial inequality” (DiAngelo, p. 73).

These challenges in facing our history highlight the increasing reflexivity needed as we keep developing as citizens. If those of us who comprise the ‘97% elephant’, mentioned by Noel Pearson, can take in and own the history of where we live, we will be better equipped as citizens and practitioners to take shared and active responsibility for what is created next.

I’m sitting on a smooth, black, sculpted bench in Atherton Garden’s, Fitzroy, feeling the heat of the sun stored there. I can hear the grasses, planted nearby, moving in the wind. This monument marks a place where Aboriginal people from all over Victoria who had been forcibly removed from their families came to find, and reconnect, with family. To my left, nine bronze spears planted in the earth are pointing skyward. And at their base a large bark coolamon, filled with twigs, perhaps ready for a smoking ceremony. After sitting a while I feel drawn to place something in the coolamon. A twig, a leaf, fuel for a fire.

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