

Indigenous Insurgency Against the Speaking for Others

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We produce cultural criticism in the context of white supremacy. At times, even the most progressive and well-meaning white folks, who are friends and allies, may not understand why a black writer has to say something in a certain way, or why we may not want to explain what has been said as though the first people we must always be addressing are privileged white readers.¹

The writing of history is assumed to have validity through the act of writing, whereas for Indigenous peoples, history is worn in the body and in the connection between memory and practice. The debates that currently consume most historians as to who has the right to speak and for whom, as well as to the accuracy of historical writing often leaves me at a loss. As Indigenous people we are dragged and seduced into engaging in the debate as if to justify the very act of declaring and articulating our history. Non-Aboriginal historians such as Henry Reynolds, Ann McGrath and Bain Attwood have been referred to as experts in the field of Indigenous history writing but most often the confirmation of authority resides with those in the non-Aboriginal community and some Aboriginal people.²

Apart from a few exceptions our history is filtered through white minds, language and worldviews. We are required to fit the pattern of historical recollection as understood by the dominant culture. To put it quite simply non-Aboriginal historians believe they are engaged in an act of translation to communicate to the broader population (of white people) whereas we are translating in order for those individuals to

comprehend our historical reality and methods of recording. Mudrooroo Narogin is often regarded among dominant culture analysts as a black interpreter for Indigenous Australians and he speaks of being 'educated in the conqueror's way', which brings us into contact with 'others in the same predicament'.³ Yes, it does and has for me but the ability to communicate with others in similar circumstances does not alter my understanding of my identity nor does it invalidate my identity.

However, some white writers consider that we are somehow less Aboriginal by the act of writing theory, presenting our history, or critiquing dominant history. This ignites in me a simmering anger. For somehow, if we become multi-lingual and multi-skilled in the ways of the dominant culture our identity as Indigenous people no longer holds. This of course was required of us from first contact due to the inability of Europeans (British) to learn the complexities of Indigenous forms of communication. Non-Aboriginal writers who produce works about us are assumed to have attained some particular skill through their ability to interpret and translate history; this is then extended into an assumption of being able to produce Indigenous history. It becomes in effect a confirmation of their status as a white historian because they are able to write about 'others'.

The idea that to be able to be heard requires of us to speak in the 'master or mistresses voice' in order to be understood is too simplistic. Even though we may be perfectly able to articulate our history cogently and ably it is still deemed necessary to have white mentors, patrons or interpreters. At literary awards in New South Wales an Aboriginal author who produces his works in partnership with a non-Aboriginal writer was given two major awards. One of the most annoying, but expected responses was the paternalism with which both the author and the book were treated. The media were keen to find non-Aboriginal 'experts', who were asked to comment on the awards and the air was filled with praise and the word 'reconciliation' was constantly linked to both authors and their book. You see even their accomplishment required all people not to forget that it was a great achievement to succeed in the white man's (and woman's) world.

When we write Aboriginal history we also fall into the trap of trying to justify our history. The conflicts that Indigenous people have are put down to our inability to cope with non-Aboriginal society and culture. These conflicts, however, are often over the white understandings and recordings of our history. One only has to look at the dispute over whose land we now stand upon when exchanging knowledge in Sydney. Is it Gadigal, Eora or Dharug? The boundaries are false: they are connections required in order to prove our Aboriginal connections to this land so that non-Aboriginal people are able to confirm for themselves the existence of set borders around the lands of the Indigenous ancestors of this region. We fight while their words and their constructions are writ upon the land.

Who are they? No longer can we see it as between black and white. Waves and waves of immigrants have stepped onto our lands. We have ancestry that includes the different waves of immigrants, Maccassan, Afghan, Japanese, Irish, English, European, Indian, Pacific Islander and many more. The subaltern serves multiple roles: that of master while also being the second lieutenant to the dominant culture. Immigrant relationships, in the minds of the Indigenous, are based on the sense of that immigrant being yet another coloniser of the land. When put under the microscope that is the tragedy behind the events in Fiji in 2000, a conflict which was waged around the issue of Indigenous people's rights vs. non-Indigenous citizenship rights. This is a situation where the subaltern is not Indigenous, where the Indigenous can also be subaltern (the leader of the conflict) and where the majority are in conflict over the rights of first nation and the rights of the settler groups. Where does history and the writing of history stand in relation to formulating new groupings, different understandings and a vision of the future?

Consideration should be given to Dipesh Chakrabarty's position in relation to the history of Indigenous peoples and to the applicability of subaltern theory in the Australian context. He speaks of the role of the subaltern as writing or speaking on behalf of those who are unable to, and the subaltern thus writes the identity of those who are subject to the subaltern. There is the question of writing history and

writing identity, and writing identity into history. We have the classic situation here in Australia where we have numerous writers writing our identity, and I say 'our' in this situation as meaning Indigenous Australians. We have historians who are writing the identity of different cultural groups even though they might not be members of those cultural groups and that's quite common, particularly in relation to migration. I read a number of books about two years ago, which were written about Asian Australians and from those only two were actually by people who are Asian Australians. For me this represents the continuing practice of colonisation, some would call it assimilation but I think it's a process of historians' writing in the identity of others within their histories. It occurs most often in relation to Indigenous Australians. There is a sense that through the writing in of identity colonialist acts are covert but continue to be reproduced. In contrast to much of that writing I actually don't see us as a conquered people, I see us as a people who are invaded and have had to form innovative and often what I would call self-destructive ways of resisting. I'm not talking here about things such as alcohol and drug abuse, but I mean self-destructive in the way that we've had to self-destruct publicly sometimes in order to be able to retreat and reconfirm our identity.

The main way in which we have been able to write our history is to go into the area of autobiography. Aboriginal autobiography is an area for many Indigenous people to write our history. Of course much of what has been written about oral history having the 'conflict of memory contained within' is an assumption, the assumption being that oral history is more conflicted by memory than archival materials and others who write the history. When I'm teaching students one of the debates we engage in is the validity of oral history, particularly in relation to Aboriginal autobiography. The evidence they resort to for devaluing the authenticity of oral history is Heather Goodall's comment in *Invasion to Embassy* that Aboriginal people in some areas of New South Wales thought that Queen Victoria gave the reserve lands to their families. Although she does explain that it is derived from the attempt by New South Wales Commissioners of Crown Lands in the 1850s to construe the setting aside of reserves for use by

Aboriginal people as coming from the Queen as a ‘benefactor’ and owner of all ‘Crown Land’. Heather does point out that such ‘readings severely underestimate the factual knowledge held by Aboriginal people in the period, and the symbolic power of their account’.⁴ Aboriginal people understood the power relationship to Queen Victoria. It was one of the Queen as a senior woman with acknowledged authority in relation to all of Australia and the land. Yet, many non-Aboriginal people would say, ‘well Aboriginal people obviously did not understand the situation’.

I was reminded of this view when Dipesh was talking about our understanding of the relationship between capitalism and government. He declared that there is some confusion about the role of capital, private property and Western political structures by some groups. And that the documentation (archives) of those structures carries with it the opportunity to assess the history of that relationship. We did and do understand the relationship between western concepts of property, ownership, authority and government. It’s really quite clear to me that we understood that relationship—which is why I’m so much of a Republican. I think that in terms of their (the students’) doubts about the validity of oral history, the response is to say, how valid then are government records? Students are really quite confident about the accuracy of government records, when they are released after fifty or thirty years. I ask them the question: how accurate do you think the Hansard records of parliamentary debates are? I then explain to them that Hansard is actually changed. Someone might get up in the house and make a statement with general references and then that is given back to the Member of Parliament who confirms the accuracy of the record. Students are quite stunned by that, because they have this belief that the documentation that’s contained in the archives somehow represents truth. And that truth can be investigated and analysed, because you base your analysis on the truth that is there. Yet they feel able to question the accuracy of Aboriginal people in autobiography and oral history. In one case a student referred to a quote from Jackie Huggins’ biography, *Auntie Rita*, as an example of a work where there is an element of doubt because it relies on memory and experience and that outweighs *truth*.⁵

I think that goes back to the writing of history on behalf of others. Many historians, and I'm not saying all, who write on Aboriginal history use it to reinforce an unspoken or unacknowledged position of power in terms of control over truth. It is as if those historians are more able to accurately delve into it and find truth, whereas we as Indigenous people are much more suspect in our writing of history.

Questions and doubts about truth and our ability to be able to voice our history came out in the debate about the Stolen Generations. The *Bringing Them Home* report was questioned.⁶ During the public hearings the statements made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who had been removed were said by some to be flawed, because of the reliance on people's memories. There was and is a continuing debate about the accuracy of the statements and whether they constitute historical truth. The statements are put up against government records, which happened during the Northern Territory case. Debates such as that between Windschuttle, Reynolds and others convey to the general population a questioning of the truthfulness of both Indigenous reporting of their experiences of the past and inherited historical knowledge.⁷ In that debate over the accuracy of the number of Aboriginal people who have been massacred in Australia we have people trying to undermine the evidence of the past, while others are trying to support the validity of the Aboriginal experience. It is ultimately not about the numbers of Indigenous people who were massacred, but about the practice of state endorsed murder in order to oppress a people. And this is where I think that even those historians who are attempting to write much more representatively of Aboriginal history are still caught up in the exercise of the colonialist power structure of who has the ability to disengage and seek truth. I think that is quite problematic.

The release of the *Bringing Them Home* report saw a number of people producing books about the Stolen Generations. I was quite disturbed by this wave of historical writing on Indigenous Australians. It was a case of not allowing the authority of that history to still reside with people who had the lived experience of it. Memory may be flawed, for example, in the court case in the Northern Territory, where one of the

witnesses was interrogated about the actual date and the experience of her removal. The government's legal representative was reported as claiming it could not have happened like that. The person's memory was deemed inconsistent, because the records and memories of others held more conviction. What was ignored here was that it was the experience which was the historical import. Not the actual detail of the removal, what day, where and how and so on.

The assumption then was that in the case of legal understandings of history and utilising history, our legal system is founded on that colonial structure and so the right to own the history is expected to reside with the dominant culture. It also is then influenced by that nineteenth century approach to history and race. There is the added problem of educating the legal profession and the judiciary. That has been undertaken with varying degrees of success. However, the overriding difficulty is the approach of government either state or federal which continually reinforces the colonial structure of the state. Thus even if the judge wants to rule differently there are other barriers to that, this is apparent in mandatory sentencing or in this instance cases in relation to the Stolen Generation. This is a situation where the plaintiff may exhibit flawed memory in finite detail, but the truth of the lived experience is argued against on the grounds that it does not stand up in the court. High profile Aboriginal people came out in support of the plaintiffs, as did the majority of Aboriginal people across communities, and so did non-Aboriginal people who wanted to effect a socio-cultural change in the dominant culture. The colonial-born structure mediated against this change. I think that this is an example where the subaltern speaks, in unison with those who are supposed to be unable to speak against the dominant culture and have support from a broad section of the population but are confined by structural determinations that aim to ensure inequitable outcomes.

When I was an apprenticed historian it was considered to norm to read E. P. Thompson and E. Carr. But I was dissatisfied with them, not only in the language of those books, but also in the actual practice of writing history. I could not apply their approaches because it kept contradicting what was supposed to be the practice. I think that is very much the case

in the current practice of certain historians. As a student I was taught by historians, who fundamentally believed that there would be a truth that one could uncover, without resorting to lived experience or inherited history. Luckily I also had the opportunity to learn from a few with different understandings of historical research practice. Still others believed oral history was something that you just did when you wanted to feel a sense of community. That was why it was uncomfortable learning experience for me because you cannot disconnect from the past or from people's experiences of it, and when you do you fail as an historian.

I agree that historians such as Reynolds have changed the way many people understand the relationship between Aboriginal Australia and non-Aboriginal Australia. The difficulty remaining for me is that these historians provide opportunities for people to connect with the past, but the dominant voice is not Aboriginal. The majority of the Australian population believe that one opens the book and there is history, you close the book and that is where it ends. The difficulty for historians is that they have to not only rethink their practice but also their role in contemporary society. Historians are in a bit of an upheaval at the moment and this is a good thing. Indigenous people have had to deal with that upheaval and with constantly having our past being portrayed in ways that bear very little connection to what the lived experience is or what we know of our past. Alternatively, sometimes it bears a substantial resemblance to our experience and understanding of the past, usually when the Indigenous voice is at the forefront of the writing.

I just wanted to give you some sense of that. Many historians seek to have access to records that are archived from the various protection boards that have been in place in Australia. Those historians demand this access on the basis that they should have the right to investigate and to record this past because of the social responsibilities historians have in disseminating the past. I know that more and more historians are getting access to these records, which concerns me. I know I will be criticised for this, because it is about people having the ability to be able to seek information and knowledge and create new knowledge. But the whole sense of this being

available because one is seeking to create a shared history is not acceptable. Because what is contained in those records is not something that was shared. It was something that was imposed upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders by the invading society. These acts and records document what was practiced in an effort to define our identity in a way that was about our genocide. I think we have the right to privacy on that. We have sufficient data available to actually give the broad historical view of people who are being colonised. We have the right to stand up in our history and in our present and say this is no longer acceptable. I think some of the historians who have been writing about us have to turn around and start actually working with us. It is also not acceptable that some of those people have turned around and used those connections with us to advance careers or to create markets for their own writing. Indigenous people should now have the authority about access to the writing of history; learning from others about we can best go about that (whether they are Indigenous Australians or not) and be understood as the dominant voice in the writing of Indigenous history.

I will accept criticism on this position in relation to the role and rights of the historian, but I don't care to be honest with you. We have our right to write our own history, and when we chose to write that history to decide how we share with others. This is not about declaring all Indigenous writers will be free of dominant culture values or practices in the writing of history, but we do need to be acknowledged as the main recipients of our history of the past, as well as having the lived experience of colonisation in practice. I think there are Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who are doing that and in a way that we find appropriate. I am tired of reading about us by people who are concerned about creating a new picture of Australia's past, yet are unable to make the connection with those of us who have experienced it.

Notes

- 1 bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, South End Press, Boston, 1990.
- 2 Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told*, Viking Press, Melbourne, 1999; Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering In Our Hearts*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998; Ann

- McGrath, *Contested Ground*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995; Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999.
- 3 Mudrooroo, *Us Mob*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1995.
 - 4 Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996.
 - 5 Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins, *Auntie Rita*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1994.
 - 6 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1997.
 - 7 Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 1994; Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told*; Reynolds, *This Whispering In Our Hearts*.