

# Preface

Ben Silverstein and Crystal McKinnon

Some five years ago, when 250 First Peoples' delegates from around Australia met at Uluru to discuss proposals for the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, they acknowledged the importance of recognising the truth about the past. They did so in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, signed by most but not all of those delegates, which calls for a process of 'truth-telling about our history' that would provide the basis for a 'fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia'.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, they were responding to the insistence of participants in the 2016–17 First Nations Regional Dialogues that 'people need to know more about Australian and Aboriginal history'.<sup>2</sup> Though calls for true histories have been heard across a range of forums for decades at least, these dialogues and the Uluru Statement have given them a new impetus. We are now seeing the fruits of these moments in both scholarly research and public institutions.

For many, this means an intent focus on telling the truth about colonial violence, and publicly recording wars, killings and massacres. The Yoorrook Justice Commission, established in Victoria in May 2021, has the broad purview of examining 'all historic and ongoing injustices perpetrated by state and non-state entities against First Peoples [in Victoria] since the start of colonisation', a beginning dated to 1788.<sup>3</sup> And across a series of works, writers and others have represented the imperative of truth-telling as a compelling demand to remember processes of invasion and genocide, of frontier wars and massacres. Rachel Perkins introduces her recent SBS miniseries *The Australian Wars* by asking whether 'we [are] ready to honestly face the

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1 'The Uluru Statement from the Heart', 2017, The Uluru Dialogue, accessed 1 December 2022, [ulurustatement.org/the-statement/view-the-statement/](http://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/view-the-statement/).

2 Davis and Williams, *Everything You Need to Know about the Uluru Statement from the Heart*, 166.

3 Yoorrook Justice Commission, *Yoorrook with Purpose*, 5, 95. See also Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, *Final Report*, 32.

past that made our country what it is, or go on living a lie'. The centrality of what Henry Reynolds terms the 'killing times' and its legal and national implications are entrenched at the heart of these true histories.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the most powerful instances of truth-telling may begin with, but exceed, colonisation and the violence that makes it. The Referendum Council, a body appointed by the Australian Government to work towards constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, here provides one small example: in its final report it included a synthesis it named 'Our Story', which commences with a description of First Law and traces its endurance through the violation of British colonisation. As it emphasises, it is from this First Law that First Peoples' sovereignties are derived.<sup>5</sup> And, as many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people identify, the 'true history of ... colonisation' is ongoing and present. The First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria has argued, for instance, that it is critical that institutional approaches to truth-telling acknowledge that ongoing 'lived experiences of colonisation are no less painful than stories of frontier wars'. For First Peoples, they wrote, 'the links between massacres, exile from Country, stolen generations and deaths in custody today are self-evident and do not fall neatly into separate categories of historic systemic injustice and ongoing systemic injustice'.<sup>6</sup>

Both these aspects of truth-telling – the ongoing history of colonisation and the need to exceed it – recall the message of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, established on Ngunnawal–Ngambri Country 50 years ago, which its founders framed as a response to the government treating Aboriginal people as 'aliens in our own land'.<sup>7</sup> In the immediate context, this was a response to a government declaration of opposition to land rights and renewed commitment to an assimilation policy. But more broadly the embassy insisted – through its very political form as well as through the words of participants – on enacting underlying and enduring Aboriginal sovereignties. These sovereignties are not effects of colonisation; they are embodied relationships between people, Country and First Law. In performing sovereignties, and in providing the scene in which the settler colonial state rejected their political cogency, the Tent Embassy dramatised a fundamental and ongoing antagonism at the heart of Australian history. This conflict, so carefully and effectively made apparent by the embassy, continues to structure relationships in this place. Aileen Moreton-Robinson has urged scholars to think about 'Indigenous sovereignty and its relation to state sovereignty as relations of force'; the terrain of sovereignty in Australia is a terrain of war.<sup>8</sup> This truth has a place in the kinds of historical truth-telling that might lead to the effective social change upon which its proponents insist.<sup>9</sup> It reminds us of the ongoing and fundamentally unresolved problem of conflicting sovereignties whose relationship cannot be neatly resolved.

4 Perkins, 'Episode 1'; Reynolds, *Truth-Telling*, 194. See also, for example, McKenna, *Return to Uluru*; Ashenden, *Telling Tennant's Story*.

5 Joint Select Committee, *Final Report*, 16–21.

6 First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, 'Tyerri Yoo-rrook' (*Seed of Truth*), 17, 32.

7 Foley, 'The Australian Labor Party and the Native Title Act', 122–23.

8 Moreton-Robinson, 'Toward a New Research Agenda', 131.

9 See, for example, Davis, 'Speaking Up', 30.

The articles in this volume each take up the challenge of historical truth-telling in provocative and generative ways. Aunty Doris Paton, Beth Marsden and Jessica Horton trace the memorialisation of Angus McMillan, a Gippsland squatter who led a series of massacres of Aboriginal people in the mid-nineteenth century. Paton, Marsden and Horton describe the installation of memorial cairns in the 1920s and their shifting meaning through the twentieth century, before turning to the Gunai Kurnai-led contestation of their continued presence in 2020. Through examining the disputed terrain of truth and justice in Gippsland in the context of Black Lives Matter, they show us how some ways of memorialising the frontier can act as a colonising practice of securing territorial possession. Against these settler claims that seek to dispossess Indigenous peoples, Gunai Kurnai communities endure and survive, covering colonising memory with sovereign counter-narratives.

In describing campaigns to repatriate Ancestors' stolen remains, Heidi Norman and Anne Maree Payne link movements for return with Aboriginal nation-building over the past 50 years. The rising momentum towards the repatriation of Ancestral Remains from collecting institutions across Europe and North America mirrored the rising power of Aboriginal land rights and self-determination movements; the two, Norman and Payne show, were connected. Repatriation presents Aboriginal people with opportunities to articulate publicly relationships with Ancestors as family rather than as objects of scientific or museological value, embedding contemporary nation-building efforts in the solidity of historical truth-telling. Their call for these relationships with the past to be represented in a National Resting Place is central to this argument. Rob Hudson and Shannon Woodcock return us to Gunai Kurnai Country to show us how one such Keeping Place has worked over the past 50 years to foster cultural resurgence. Presenting a valuable reflection on methods of collaborative research, Hudson and Woodcock's exemplary approach demonstrates the force of a history shaped by the narrative of the Keeping Place, one based in Elders' knowledge, emphasising the value of historical truth-telling for community wellbeing.

We are pleased to include an edited version of the History Council of New South Wales' 2021 Annual History Lecture, a conversation between Laura McBride and Mariko Smith. McBride and Smith are co-curators of the Australian Museum's *Unsettled* exhibition, through which they responded to the 250th anniversary of Cook's *Endeavour* voyage along Australia's east coast by telling true stories that put Cook in his place. Working closely with community through extensive consultation, the exhibition takes seriously the stories and emphases that circulate among First Peoples' communities yet are so often absent or marginal in public spaces. In this conversation, they take us through the process of producing true histories that reflect community memories as well as survival, resistance and healing today.

Through these articles and the accompanying reviews, we hope this volume responds to the demands of the present moment. We thank the Aboriginal History editorial board, especially book reviews editor Annemarie McLaren and copyeditor Geoff

Hunt, and the ANU Press team for all their work throughout 2022. We also thank the many anonymous referees who generously gave their time and expertise to reviewing articles this year. Lastly, we would like to recognise the many contributions of outgoing chair of Aboriginal History Maria Nugent, under whose stewardship the journal and monograph series have thrived. Maria's generosity and astute editorial judgment have been invaluable in our time as editors, and we thank her for her advice and guidance. We welcome the new chair, John Maynard, with whom we look forward to working closely to reimagine the scope and possibilities of *Aboriginal History* over the coming years.

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