

## Stories about Citizenship: Aboriginal People's Historical Remembrance in Australia

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In a critical discussion of a lengthy oral 'history' told to him by Walter Newton, an Australian Aboriginal man from western New South Wales, the anthropologist Jeremy Beckett observed that: 'Colonised people have not only to endure their situation but to make sense of it'.<sup>1)</sup> Like Walter Newton, Aboriginal people across Australia have long sought to make sense of their experiences of, as well as the material facts, structures and consequences of colonisation and dispossession, through telling historical stories. Such accounts are often told orally, and they can take varied forms.<sup>2)</sup> Some historical interpretations require long, wide-ranging and complex narratives, and are the products of deep contemplation and consideration over a sustained period. Stories in this mode might be shared over more than one session with a trusted interlocutor, who later does the work of translating them for broader audiences. An example of this type is the accounts of Australia's history, which featured Captain Cook as a leading figure, that Hobbles Danaiyarri shared with anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose in the early 1980s and about which she published a series of commentaries. To emphasise the quality of its sustained and lengthy rumination on historical themes, Rose described Danaiyarri's stories as "sagas".<sup>3)</sup> His account and her reflections rewrote conventional versions of Australia's history by focusing on the moral impasse resulting from the colonial encounter — an impasse which continues to structure relations between Indigenous people and the Australian state. More than this, their powerful collaboration underlined the politics and power of historical remembrance. Walter Newton's narrative, which inspired Beckett's insights into the nature and uses of history by Aboriginal people, also belongs to this type of story. It is epic in length and global in scope, described by Beckett as a "history of the world—or Australia".

Just as commonly, though, Aboriginal interpretations of Australia's colonial history are expressed succinctly. They are conveyed in highly condensed — and thus memorable and easily reproducible — terms. Many Aboriginal representations of aspects of Australia's history of race relations are notable for their brevity. Whole eras or events might be rendered in little more than a sentence. An example of this type of history, also much discussed by historians and anthropologists, comes from south-east Australia. It is the claim that Queen Victoria personally gave crown land reserves to Aboriginal people for their exclusive use and as compensation for

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<sup>1)</sup> Jeremy Beckett, "Walter Newton's History of the World—or Australia," *American Ethnologist* 20, no. 4 (1993), 675.

<sup>2)</sup> Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan, eds., *Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2001).

<sup>3)</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, "The Saga of Captain Cook: Remembrance and Morality", in *Telling Stories*, 61–79.

their dispossession, and it is typically rendered as: “The Queen gave us the land”.<sup>4)</sup> Historical narratives like this are “epigrammatic” and “emblematic” rather than epic. Less the work of a philosophically-minded and skilled orator, such highly condensed and meme-like histories as this are collectively owned. While they might be told as a first-person narrative, they belong to no one in particular. Rather, they are collective memories of shared experiences and histories, which acquire their force through repetition, circulation and accrual. Indeed, their power derives from their proliferation and ubiquity. Like Pierre Nora’s “lieux de memoire”, these richly symbolic stories provide “a maximum of meaning in the fewest signs”.<sup>5)</sup> Their sparseness suits their political uses. As Elizabeth Elbourne reminds us: “Effective political narrative demand[s] a starkness that [does] not always reflect reality”.<sup>6)</sup> Their abbreviated character relies on recycling familiar images, archetypes and stereotypes, and clichés. The raw materials of these highly condensed histories are words, names, things, people, and events from popular culture that are already thoroughly seeped with symbolism and associations — but the narratives woven from them typically are designed to confound accepted meanings.

These historical remembrances, rendered in symbolically rich stories, are a form of history making. History making is a broad term referring not only to diverse forms and modes of narrative, interpretation and analysis but also to how the meanings of the past are constantly made and remade to serve particular cultural and political purposes. This latter meaning alludes to what Paul A. Cohen called “history as myth”, which he described as an “impressing of the past into the service of a particular reading of the present”.<sup>7)</sup> By “myth”, Cohen does not mean “falsehood”.<sup>8)</sup> Rather, he uses the term “history as myth” to distinguish this mode of history-making from historians’ history (which he calls “history as event”). While “history as myth” will draw upon some of the same materials, events, and interpretations as historians’ history, it tends, Cohen argues, to be less concerned with reconstructing the past with verisimilitude. It is, rather, directed towards extracting as much meaning and political mileage as possible to serve immediate desires, causes and goals. Cohen’s concept of “history as myth” is also useful for interpreting and analysing Aboriginal people’s historical narratives, because they have a complex relation to historical reality — both connected to and disconnected from

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<sup>4)</sup> For a recent discussion, see Maria Nugent, “The Politics of Memory and the Memory of Politics: Australian Aboriginal Interpretations of Queen Victoria, 1881–2011,” in *Mistress of Everything: Queen Victoria in Indigenous Worlds*, eds., Sarah Carter and Maria Nugent (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 100–123.

<sup>5)</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* no. 26, Special issue: Memory and Counter-memory (Spring 1989), 19.

<sup>6)</sup> Elizabeth Elbourne, “Indigenous peoples and Imperial Networks in the early nineteenth century: The Politics of Knowledge,” in *Rediscovering the British World*, eds., Philip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), 67.

<sup>7)</sup> Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), xii.

<sup>8)</sup> *Ibid.*, 211–213.

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Over the last few decades, and particularly with the emergence of oral history followed by the expanding field of memory studies, there has been increasing interest in analysing the ways in which historical remembrance (broadly conceived) contributes to structuring relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in contemporary Australia.<sup>9)</sup> As historian Mark McKenna explains it, “the way in which we create and remember history plays a crucial role in determining our local and national identities and our political agendas. By constituting history, we set the framework within which the politics takes place — our historical imagination reflects what we believe to be possible today”.<sup>10)</sup> Such an approach situates memory work as a critical aspect of the colonial encounter and race relations — of the transcultural spaces and contexts which literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt famously described as the “contact zone”.<sup>11)</sup> More than twenty years ago, Indigenous academic Marcia Langton observed of Australia’s version of the “contact zone” that:

The most dense relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors. They relate to stories told by former colonists [and] the constant stereotyping, iconising and mythologizing of Aboriginal people by white people who have never had any substantial first-hand contact with Aboriginal people.<sup>12)</sup>

Telling historical stories was and is part of the ways in which Aboriginal people and settlers constituted themselves and their relations to each other. Their history making is always dialogical, even if only indirectly. While much focus has been given to understanding settler traditions of telling stories about Aborigines, it is worth underlining that Aboriginal people’s own efforts to remember and represent — or to refuse to forget — historical entanglements and relations with colonists forms a critical part of memory work in Australia’s contact zone, and increasingly so. As anthropologist Gillian Cowlishaw has noted “cultural productions can be conceived as a kind of political work. Aboriginal people have to labour hard to produce an alternative account of themselves and the world”.<sup>13)</sup> Focusing on this creative and cultural labour represents what Felicity Collins has recently described as “a shift in focus from

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<sup>9)</sup> For a recent example, see Chris Healy, *Forgetting Aborigines* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008).

<sup>10)</sup> Mark McKenna, *Looking for Blackfellas’ Point: An Australian History of Place* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005), 221.

<sup>11)</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 5–7.

<sup>12)</sup> Marcia Langton, “Well, I heard it on the Radio and Saw it on the Television”: *An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and about Aboriginal People and Things* (Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993), 33.

<sup>13)</sup> Gillian Cowlishaw, *Blackfellas, Whitefellas and the Hidden Injuries of Race* (Melbourne: Blackwell, 2004), 85–86.

settler [visions and] revisions of the national story to Indigenous dialogue with the national archive”<sup>14)</sup>

One way to make the history and politics of Aboriginal historical remembrance more visible is to examine a range of historical stories that have been told by Aboriginal people as a response to colonisation, including accounts and interpretations that have been passed down and endure into the present. Historian Tim Rowse has suggested that Aboriginal people’s historical storytelling can be organised into “genres”, in which “each genre conveys a distinct way for Indigenous people to make sense of major features of the colonial encounter”<sup>15)</sup> In previous work, I have examined genres of Aboriginal historical remembrances and narratives (some long, some short) that are centred on a particular historical person, namely Captain Cook and Queen Victoria (as mentioned above).<sup>16)</sup> These particular genres are focused around powerful actors in Britain’s imperial history whose actions and existence also had effects for the colonial history of Australia. Each was responsible in different ways for contributing to British possession of territory and the concomitant Aboriginal dispossession of territory. Not surprisingly, then, within Aboriginal people’s traditions of history making, these two historical figures feature strongly in interpretations that grapple with traumatic and violent pasts as well as contesting colonial accounts of claiming territory. These are, moreover, historical stories that are mobilised by Aboriginal people in political struggles to have their rights to land restored.

Given the settler-colonial history of Australia, in which Aboriginal people were violently dispossessed of their country, stories about land are an understandably prominent theme within Aboriginal history-making and interpretative traditions. Equally prominent, though, is memory work that engages with issues of citizenship, equal rights and a politics of recognition.<sup>17)</sup> As a number of historians have documented, the history of Aboriginal politics in Australia has been a struggle not only for the recognition of rights in land, but also for citizenship rights, broadly conceived.<sup>18)</sup>

In what follows, I present a discussion of two widely circulating collective memories that speak to the history of the denial of citizenship rights to Aboriginal people and the belated recognition of their equality and inclusion in the Australian national community. The first

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<sup>14)</sup> Felicity Collins, “After Dispossession: Blackfella Films and the Politics of Radical Hope,” in *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Politics*, eds., Yannis Tzioumakis and Claire Molloy (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 231.

<sup>15)</sup> Tim Rowse, *After Mabo: Interpreting Indigenous Traditions* (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1993), 13.

<sup>16)</sup> Maria Nugent, *Captain Cook Was Here* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Carter and Nugent, *Mistress of Everything*, 2016.

<sup>17)</sup> Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and “the Politics of Recognition”*: An Essay (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); Dipesh Chakrabarty, “History of the Politics of Recognition,” in *Manifestos for History*, eds., Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan and Alun Munslow (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 77–87.

<sup>18)</sup> Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003).

remembrance discussed relates to Aboriginal soldiers during the two world wars and their contradictory status and treatment as patriots and non-citizens.<sup>19)</sup> The second story considered centres on a national plebiscite held in 1967, which is widely regarded as marking a major historical shift in Australia's race relations. This story remembers that historical turning point through a story about misrecognition replaced by recognition, and in doing so it refuses to forget what came before that watershed moment.

These genres of historical storytelling by Aboriginal people, which highlight themes of exclusion, discrimination and misrecognition based on race, provide rich sources not only for gaining insights into Aboriginal people's past experiences. They are also necessary for analysing processes and patterns of contemporary remembering and forgetting in Australia, because they speak to the "underside" or "shadow side" of Australian national narratives and identities and in doing so threaten to undo celebratory stories of nation building, inclusivity and racial harmony.

### **War service and equality: "Refused a drink" stories**

The history of the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women in Australia's military is only now beginning to be told in a comprehensive way.<sup>20)</sup> Early research was undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s to document the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers; this is now being pursued on a broader scale.<sup>21)</sup> Of late, Indigenous military service has become the focus of an increasing amount of public commemoration, including innovative museum exhibitions, large government-funded research projects that involve extensive oral history recording, and prominently sited art installations.<sup>22)</sup> A motivation of

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<sup>19)</sup> See: Jessica Norton, "'Willing to Fight to a Man': The First World War and Aboriginal Activism in the Western District of Victoria," *Aboriginal History* 39 (2015): 203–222.

<sup>20)</sup> See, for instance, Noah Riseman, *Defending Whose Country? Indigenous Soldiers in the Pacific War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012); Noah Riseman, *In Defence of Country: Life Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Servicemen and Women* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2015); Noah Riseman and Richard Trembath, *Defending Country: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Military Service since 1945* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2016); Allison Cadzow, Kristyn Harman and Noah Riseman (eds), "Aboriginal War Service," Special section, *Aboriginal History* 39 (2015).

<sup>21)</sup> Robert A. Hall, *The Black Diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989); Robert A. Hall, *Fighters from the Fringe: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders Recall the Second World War* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1995); Doreen Kartinyeri, *Ngarrindjeri Anzacs* (Adelaide: Aboriginal Family History Project, South Australian Museum and Raukkan Council, 1996); *Too Dark for the Light Horse: An Exhibition of Photographs and Documents Depicting Aboriginal Involvement in the Australian Army* (Albury Regional Museum, 11 August–27 September 1988), compiled by David Huggonson.

<sup>22)</sup> For details about a current four-year, government-funded research project, see: <http://ourmobserved.anu.edu.au> (accessed January 10, 2017). For details of a monument to Aboriginal war service titled

the current public memory work is to ensure that what has hitherto been a “hidden” or “little-known” history becomes more visible and widely acknowledged — and to contribute to properly recognising the contribution of “black” (or “minority”) soldiers to Australia’s military history and to include them within the national mythology of the “digger” or ANZAC.

For some time, Aboriginal people’s memory work around the experience and meaning of overseas military service has focused not on inclusion but rather on exclusion. A recurring and telling story, which can be found recounted across a range of media, such as in newspaper reports, political literature, published memoirs, oral histories and televisual treatments, involves an Aboriginal soldier being refused entry into a hotel (or public bar) to enjoy a drink with his white comrades. This is a repeated scene that speaks to equality assumed and experienced — and then withheld. Like all “history as myth” in Cohen’s schema, the story has some basis in actual events and experience. A number of reports can be found in newspapers of incidents in which the formal and informal prohibitions on the right of Aboriginal men to drink in twentieth-century Australia is portrayed as being out of step with the liberties earned by — and due to — those who had served their country in war.<sup>23)</sup> For instance, in 1925, a letter to the editor of metropolitan newspaper argued that: “Surely aboriginal ex-soldiers should be allowed the same rights to the hotel bars and liquor, as Europeans exercise. . . . The law here gives the police officers almost unlimited power over the unfortunate “aboriginal”.<sup>24)</sup> The letter was sent from Point Pearce, a place from which came a number of Aboriginal men had fought in the First World War. Yet, under the assimilationist agenda that came to dominate government policy in the interwar period, Aboriginal people at Point Pearce, as elsewhere, experienced restrictions on their lives and freedoms, including the right to drink.<sup>25)</sup>

The sentiments expressed by the writer in 1925 found parallels in, and were no doubt influenced by, the political rhetoric of Aboriginal leaders and activists more generally, particularly those who were leading the new political organisations that were emerging in the 1920s and 1930s. Some of the impetus for organising politically in this period was fuelled by the dashed hopes of a better future experienced by Aboriginal men who had served in the First World War. They had enlisted to fight as loyal patriots; they were, however, disappointed by their social treatment upon return. As Aborigines, they found themselves excluded from the compensations and assistance programs that were extended to white soldiers. This included

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*Yininmadyemi Thou Didst Let Fall* installed near the War Memorial in Sydney’s Hyde Park in 2014, see: <http://www.cityartsydney.com.au/artwork/yininmadyemi-thou-didst-let-fall/> (accessed January 10, 2017). For details of a current exhibition on Indigenous war service at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, see: <https://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/country-nation-0/> (accessed January 10, 2017).

<sup>23)</sup> For a more detailed discussion of incidents involving Aboriginal soldiers and alcohol during the First World War, see: Philippa Scarlett, “Aboriginal service in the First World War: Identity, Recognition and the Problem of Mateship,” *Aboriginal History* 39 (2015): 170–172.

<sup>24)</sup> “Aborigines and Liquor,” *The Register* (Adelaide, South Australia, 16 July 1925), 12.

<sup>25)</sup> Anna Haebich and Steve Kinnane, “Indigenous Australia,” in *Cambridge History of Australia*, Vol. II, eds., Alison Bashford and Stuart MacIntyre (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 332–345.

provisions such as settlement schemes, which made land for farming available to returned servicemen. Aboriginal people did not enjoy the benefits of such schemes and, adding insult to injury, some of the land included in the soldier settlement scheme was excised from Aboriginal reserves.<sup>26)</sup> At the same time, the interwar period witnessed increasing legislative restrictions on Aboriginal people in almost all aspects of their lives. Little changed during the Second World War with reports of experiences similar to those of soldiers who served in the previous war.<sup>27)</sup>

During the Second World War, and immediately afterwards, newspapers occasionally reported on court cases involving Aboriginal soldiers. For instance, a metropolitan newspaper in 1943 gave an account of Gunner Alexander Bell, aged 23, and described as an “aborigine”. He had been court martialled for going absent without leave from his barracks in Sydney. In his own defence, Bell was reported as saying that he had left without permission because he “did not receive the same treatment as his white coppers [i.e. friends]”. He complained that when “he went into hotels with his white comrades the staff would not serve him”, but believed that he should receive the same treatment as any man wearing the king’s uniform. He was reported as saying: “It is not the drink I worry about, it is the principle”.<sup>28)</sup>

Bell’s experience was not isolated. A year earlier another paper had published an account from a returned serviceman who described himself as a “half-caste aboriginal”. He explained that on his return to Australia, he had gone into a hotel and asked for a drink, but had been refused. Drawing out the moral of the story, he asked rhetorically:

If I am not good enough to be served a drink, then why was I accepted for overseas service with the AIF? Am I not entitled to the same privileges as the coppers with whom I faced the same dangers? At any rate, my mates think I am entitled to a drink. Yet those who have never been too willing to serve their country are ever-eager in seeking to prevent my own kind from even a mild indulgence of this character . . . Here I am doing the right thing by my country; and there are some people—a few I suppose I should say—who can’t do the right thing by us.<sup>29)</sup>

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<sup>26)</sup> Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics, 1770–1972* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 123–124.

<sup>27)</sup> Estimates of the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who served vary, but the current consensus according to Noah Riseman is that “at least 1,000 and 5,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander personnel [served] in the First and Second World Wars respectively”, despite prohibitions on their enlistment. Noah Riseman, “Introduction: Diversifying the Black Diggers’ History,” *Aboriginal History* 39 (2015), 137.

<sup>28)</sup> “Aboriginal gunner went AWL ‘Difficult to Settle down,’” *The Argus* (Melbourne, 7 January 1943), 4.

<sup>29)</sup> “Serves his country; Yet Refused a Drink,” *Smith’s Weekly* (5 September 1942). The writer’s name or details was not published and it is possible that it was a piece of political rhetoric penned by a journalist working for the paper. Nevertheless, it is interesting not only because it echoes the sentiments of the writer from Point Pearce twenty years earlier, but because it also conforms to the political language that had been increasingly mobilised by Aboriginal activists in the interwar years.

As rhetoric, the letter to the newspaper works both to uphold the cherished values of the ANZAC legend (the mateship and equal treatment given to him by his “cobbers”), while also calling into question the authority — indeed manhood — of those who did not enlist but who assumed positions of dominance over Aboriginal people at home.<sup>30)</sup>

The shadow history of the mistreatment of returned Aboriginal soldiers, who had demonstrated loyalty to the nation by risking their lives but were treated as second-class citizens upon their return, haunts Australia’s celebration of war as forging national identity and character.<sup>31)</sup> It is a reminder that Australian nationalism has always been racially exclusive. It is this very contradiction — and the pain, confusion and humiliation it caused — that is encapsulated in the often-repeated remembrance, or anecdote, about Aboriginal soldiers being denied the right to drink alcohol on the same terms as, or indeed in company with, their non-Aboriginal comrades. As a particularly evocative example of exclusion, and one that engages with some of the most cherished spaces in Australian cultural life (hotels) and with celebrated modes of sociality (mateship), it has come to be *the* emblematic remembrance and representation of the history and meaning of Aboriginal military service. Within remembrances about war service overseas and the situation faced by Aboriginal soldiers upon their return home, it was the right to drink that would increasingly come to symbolise the “hidden injuries” of race.<sup>32)</sup>

Within these accounts, the space of the public bar of an Australian hotel — a space that in Australian popular culture is celebrated as thoroughly egalitarian and intimately associated with the Australian ideal of “mateship” — is re-presented as a site of racial exclusion, petty-mindedness and bigotry.<sup>33)</sup> The public bar in an Australian hotel becomes in the space of the story a synecdoche for the Australian nation, a site and community in which Aboriginal people are not welcome and in which they are not accorded the same rights as other Australians. This image of Australian bars and drinking cultures as inherently exclusionary, rather than open and egalitarian, has become increasingly common in popular representations of twentieth-century Australian race relations, especially in contemporary feature films. Baz Luhrmann’s blockbuster *Australia*, for instance, which drew on extensive oral histories with Indigenous Australians, opened with an over-the-top bar room brawl in a hotel called The Territory, when the Drover’s Aboriginal “mate” and brother by marriage was refused

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<sup>30)</sup> For a discussion on the contradictions of “mateship”, see: Scarlett, “Aboriginal Service in the First World War.”

<sup>31)</sup> Ann Curthoys, “National Narratives, War Commemoration and Racial Exclusion in a Settler Society: The Australian Case,” in *Commemorating War: The Politics of Memory*, eds. Timothy Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 132–137.

<sup>32)</sup> Cowlishaw, *Blackfellas, Whitefellas and the Hidden Injuries of Race*.

<sup>33)</sup> For some recent scholarship on hotels and mateship, see: Diane Kirkby, Tanja Luckins and Chris McConville, *The Australian Pub* (Sydney: NewSouth Books, 2010); Nick Dyrenfurth, *Mateship: A Very Australian History* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2015).

entry. The local hotel as a site of racism is a recurring image in contemporary films made by Indigenous filmmakers and directors too. *The Sapphires*, another recent Australian film that enjoyed international acclaim, and which told the story of a group of Aboriginal girl singers styled on The Supremes who sang to Australian and American troops in Vietnam, included a scene in which their presence in a hotel in a country town in Victoria while participating in a talent quest caused disquiet among its mainly white patrons. Similarly, a recent television documentary about Eddie Mabo shows that the hurt experienced when he and his family were denied entry to a hotel as motivating his political activism. As these various examples indicate, the experience of exclusion from so-called “public bars” of Australian hotels has become a prominent site — a “lieu de memoire” or “site of memory” — for representing and remembering histories of racial inequality in twentieth-century Australia.

The “refused a beer” anecdote is part of this broader memory work. Through its repeated utterance and circulation via various media and platforms, audiences are reminded of the history (which is still within living memory) of the unequal treatment of Aboriginal soldiers particularly, and Aboriginal people generally. The anecdote gains its force as a story with a moral by mobilising a series of stereotypical and cherished aspects of settler Australian identity and values, such as leisure as a reward for hard work, socialising by drinking, and the valorisation of “mateship” that includes an apparently easy-going egalitarianism. But it shows these to be falsely inclusive when it comes to the treatment of Aboriginal people.

### **Citizenship and the 1967 referendum: “Flora and fauna” stories**

If the “refused a drink” genre of historical representations works to recall the injustices of racial exclusion that characterised mid-twentieth-century Australian society, then another genre of stories, which I am calling “flora and fauna” stories, remembers instead the belated formal acceptance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders into the national community of citizens. The story comes in many versions, depending on the narrator, but its basic structure is that prior to the 1967 national referendum, when Australians voted overwhelmingly in favour of changes to the Australian Constitution to remove or amend discriminatory clauses, Aboriginal people had been grouped with the flora and the fauna. (“Flora and fauna” in the Australian vernacular refers to indigenous plants and animals as distinct from introduced species.) For instance, it is not uncommon to hear statements, especially during commemorations of the Referendum, such as: “I am no longer a plant nor animal . . . Before [1967] we came under the umbrella of the flora and fauna”, or “. . . you look back to the era of what you were born into, a time when you were considered to be not a human being, but a part of the flora and fauna”, or “. . . but it did mean a lot being counted as a citizen instead of part of the flora and fauna”. Some iterations of the story make reference to a purported piece of legislation that allegedly covered both Aboriginal people and flora and fauna. The Wiradjuri woman and former state, now federal, politician Linda Burney, for instance, has said that: “This is not ancient history.

. . . It still staggers me that for the first 10 years of my life, I existed under the *Flora and Fauna Act of NSW*.<sup>34)</sup> Born in 1957, Burney suggests that before the 1967 Referendum, which is widely if erroneously believed to have transferred responsibility for Aboriginal affairs from state governments to the federal government, Aboriginal people in New South Wales (NSW) had been governed by legislation protecting Australia's natural heritage.<sup>35)</sup>

Like all “history as myth”, Burney’s statement is both false and faithful. There was no actual *Flora and Fauna Act of NSW*, as some historians have been quick to point out. In NSW, as in other Australian states, Aboriginal people were governed by legislation that covered them alone as a distinct group. In NSW, the legislation was the *Aborigines Protection Act* (1909), which was later replaced with the *Aborigines Welfare Act* (1939). Different legislation covered indigenous plants and animals, such as the *Fauna Protection Act* (1948) in NSW, which was designed to ‘administer faunal protection’.<sup>36)</sup> While legislatively and administratively separate, these statutes and the departments responsible for implementing them had overlapping discourses, using as they did the language, concepts and practices of protection, isolation and a reserve system. In this sense, the claim that Aboriginal people in NSW came under a putative *Flora and Fauna Act* is not so fanciful. Nevertheless, it was not actually the case.

While particular details within versions of the flora and fauna story are specious (and can be easily shown to be so), that does not detract from, but rather adds to, the ways in which it works as a faithful representation of Aboriginal people’s experiences and interpretation of their treatment as colonised people. Regardless of the variations in different renditions of the story, its core element — that Aboriginal people were once treated as though they were flora and fauna — remains constant. This central idea taps into a long tradition in colonial Australia of perceiving and representing Aboriginal people as being closer to nature than to humanity, or as actually part of the natural world than of culture or “civilisation”. Such ideas were the currency of evolutionary thought and racial science that were hugely influential in shaping the colonial encounter in nineteenth-century Australia.<sup>37)</sup> Colonial imagery of Aboriginal people drew on and recycled stereotypes of Aboriginal people as less than human. In this way, the abbreviated, enigmatic story about Aboriginal people once being classified as — and counted with — the flora and fauna draws on an especially deep vein of clichéd ideas in Australian popular culture about Aboriginal people. But its power resides not simply in the ways in which

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<sup>34)</sup> Cited in Jonathan Pearlman and Joel Gibson, “When I was Fauna: Citizen’s Rallying Cry”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 May 2007.

<sup>35)</sup> Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, “Representation Matters: The 1967 Referendum and Citizenship,” in *Citizenship and Indigenous Australians*, eds., Nicolas Peterson and Will Sanders (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 118.

<sup>36)</sup> R. B. Walker, “Fauna and Flora Protection in New South Wales, 1866–1948,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 15, iss. 28 (1991), 17.

<sup>37)</sup> For a discussion of the heritage of these ideas, see: Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880–1939* (Melbourne University Press, 1997).

it succinctly highlights discredited heritages and bad representations — what Chris Healy refers to as “rubbish pictures”.<sup>38)</sup> Rather, its sting is in the ways in which it reveals that settler Australia was long based upon a fundamental misrecognition and thus a lie. It does this by always referring to a moment — or watershed event — in which that longstanding and cruel misrecognition was replaced with proper, if long deferred, recognition of Aboriginal people as fully human and as equal citizens. That turning point was the 1967 referendum.

Within the flora and fauna genre of stories, the 1967 Referendum is consistently cast as a momentous event that ushered in a definitive break with the past. This is not unique to Aboriginal people’s remembrance. It mirrors the meaning of the 1967 referendum in Australian cultural memory more broadly, in which it is “now seen as an event that marked a major turning point in Aboriginal-European relations in Australia”.<sup>39)</sup> Generically, the flora and fauna story has a simple before and after structure, as the examples cited above make clear. What distinguishes the pre-1967 past from the post-1967 present and future is a radical alteration in the ways in which Aboriginal people were seen, categorised, treated and counted by settler Australians and their institutions. That transition from misrecognition to recognition is represented in the story as a shift from “nature” to “culture”, in which Aboriginal people are at last properly seen by their fellow Australians as “humans” and as “citizens”. As one person put it when reflecting on the experience of the 1967 Referendum: “. . . it did mean a lot being counted as a citizen instead of part of the flora and fauna”. Since some historians have pointed out that the 1967 Referendum did not actually grant Aboriginal people citizenship, it is worth asking why the 1967 Referendum is rendered in this way within this widely popular collective memory of it? Why is it, moreover, interpreted primarily as being a politics of recognition — that is, about changes in the ways in which Aboriginal people were “recognised” by the dominant society?

Part of the answer lies in the political campaign for constitutional change, which came to dominate the struggle for Aboriginal rights during the 1950s and 1960s. While it was ostensibly about voting on a proposal to alter two clauses in the Australian Constitution that were considered discriminatory against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the campaigners did not focus unduly upon the details of constitution-making and arcane debates about legalities. As Attwood and Markus note, “many of the principal proponents of the referendum . . . recognised that, in and of itself, approval of the plebiscite would mean little”. What most campaigners believed was that “the referendum was ultimately a matter of representation”.<sup>40)</sup> Ultimately, the campaign for the referendum and for the vote in favour of the proposed changes emphasised the symbolic and political gains that would accrue from removing anachronistic discriminations from the nation’s founding document. Among the

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<sup>38)</sup> Healy, *Forgetting Aborigines*, 2008, 4.

<sup>39)</sup> Attwood and Markus, “Representation Matters,” 118.

<sup>40)</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

political strategies used was “talking up” the significance of amending the couple of clauses that were slated for change.<sup>41)</sup> One of the two clauses to be voted on related to the ways in which population figures were reckoned, which included the provision that in reckoning those numbers “aboriginal natives should not be counted”.<sup>42)</sup> The clause’s original purpose appeared to have related to the apportionment of parliamentary seats, but within the campaign for constitutional change it was represented as meaning that Aboriginal people did not count, that is, did not matter. In this way, it was recast as a matter of citizenship, inclusion and equality.

Newspaper coverage emphasised that the vote for change would mean that Aboriginal people would at last be treated as people. In the days before the plebiscite, interviews with Aboriginal activists were published in metropolitan newspapers. One carried the heading: “I want to be a human being”, and quoted its subject as saying: “For most Aborigines [the referendum] is basically and most importantly a matter of seeing white Australians finally, after 179 years, affirming at last they believe we are human beings”.<sup>43)</sup> This is the political narrative surrounding the Referendum that is now preserved within the “flora and fauna” genre of stories. Not only does it work to remember the Referendum as a watershed event, but it also preserves something of the politics that contributed to its symbolic achievements.

## Conclusion

A marked feature of contemporary public culture in Australia over the last decade or so has been the growing prominence of Indigenous people’s accounts, performances and representations of Australia’s colonial history. Whether on film, television, stage, or in visual art, fiction and non-fiction, Indigenous interpretations of Australia’s colonial history are altering conventional understandings and Indigenous writers, filmmakers, and artists are among the most influential interpreters of history in Australia today. While unprecedented in terms of its scope and visibility, this creative work does have a history. It emerges out of earlier and longer traditions of interpreting colonial history and experience through telling incisive and piercing historical stories. Although it is not always obvious, contemporary historical treatments produced by Indigenous people often pay tribute to those earlier ways of remembering the past by incorporating stories, like the “flora and fauna” story or the “refused a drink” story, within new narratives and treatments. This memory work speaks to settler denial and forgetting, even as it recycles many of the same symbols and images that have shaped settler narratives and imaginings.

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<sup>41)</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>42)</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>43)</sup> Chika Dixon, “I want to be a Human Being,” *Sun-Herald* (21 May 1967), cited in Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The 1967 Referendum, or, When Aborigines Didn't Get the Vote* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1997), 50.

Post-colonial studies, as well as memory studies, encourages some new questions to be asked of this material. Attention has shifted to the ways in which colonised people have struggled for self-representation, including their insistence upon the truth and validity of their own historical interpretations.<sup>44)</sup> Importantly, there is an insistence not to conceive of Indigenous people's historical interpretations as comprising a distinct and discrete tradition in their own right. Rather, the intellectual and discursive work of making sense of experience, and of constituting subjects, identities and relations, is always dialogical — and not in any straightforward way.

Over the last few decades, the telling of Indigenous history has revolutionised the writing of history in Australia. As Mark McKenna recently put it: “The gradual surfacing of the very history that had allegedly been ‘vanquished’ would come to represent the most significant shift in historical consciousness in twentieth-century Australia”.<sup>45)</sup> This revision of Australia's history, from a story in which Aboriginal people had been excised to now being among the most influential authors of Australia's national narratives, is one of the most significant achievements in Australian political and cultural life. And yet there is still much work to do to even further revise and calibrate our understandings of and perspectives on Australia's past — and the present. Paying attention to Aboriginal people's historical remembrances, particularly to the stories and claims that are circulating widely in the public sphere — and which continue to have some mileage as an explanation of what things were like and how they might be different — is a critical part of the process. In their history making, Aboriginal people insist that other sides to and versions of Australia's history must be acknowledged. This rich store of history-making provides the materials for assembling new takes on Australia's history — ones that do not merely aim to incorporate Aboriginal people's perspectives, but rather seek to rewrite it according to the values and standpoints enshrined within their sustained interpretations and critiques. This is what commends the archive of Aboriginal history making as a source not only for new understandings about what constitutes history, but also for how histories of Australia can now be written.

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<sup>44)</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>45)</sup> Mark McKenna, “The History Anxiety,” in *Cambridge History of Australia*, vol. 2, eds., Alison Bashford and Stuart MacIntyre (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 566.