

Introduction: Unfinished Business

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IN THE INTRODUCTION TO A RECENT BOOK ON HISTORICAL MEMORY AND JUSTICE, Australian scholars Klaus Neumann and Janna Thompson write: ‘It was once assumed that historical wrongs could be addressed and then forgotten. Few would make that assumption now’ (5). The lesson of the reconciliation and justice commissions which, over the past two decades, have tackled problems of historical responsibility for violence—from Argentina to South Africa and from Spain to East Timor—is that committees of investigation, apologies and compensation funds do not close the ledger book of history. They may have very important and valuable outcomes, helping victims to recover from terrible past injuries, and enabling former enemies to live together. They may therefore be worth campaigning for with great energy. But they do not make the past go away. Some problems almost inevitably remain unresolved, and the tasks of remembrance, reconciliation and redress go on. This ongoing and global process of addressing the past is well illustrated by two recent events from opposite sides of the world.

In September 2015, thousands of Kenyans gathered in Nairobi’s Uhuru Park to witness the unveiling of a bronze statue. This sculpture of a woman handing a pail of food to an independence fighter is a monument to tens of thousands of Mau Mau fighters, their supporters and other Kenyan civilians, who were tortured, killed or detained by the British colonial authorities during the fierce

independence struggles of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The monument, a joint project between former colonised and former coloniser, was funded by the British government. It is part of the settlement arising from a 2013 court victory by 5,228 Kenyan victims of the violent suppression of the independence movement. The settlement also included a statement of 'profound regret' from the British government, who committed £19.9 million (around US\$30 million) to a fund for the victims.

But this is not the end of the story. Kenyan investigations suggested that as many as 90,000 people, rounded up on suspicion of being Mau Mau supporters, were killed, tortured or maimed by the colonial authorities and their local agents, and that some 120,000 people were detained, sometimes in terrible conditions (BBC; Elkins; Anderson). One of the detainees was the grandfather of US President Barak Obama. Many people remain uncompensated, and a further court case brought by over 40,000 victims is expected to be heard later this year.

Meanwhile in Seoul during the first months of 2016, groups of South Korean students were maintaining a non-stop vigil around a small statue of a seated woman, which had been erected near the Japanese Embassy in 2011. In December 2015, the Foreign Ministers of Japan and South Korea publicly announced that their two governments had reached an agreement to settle their long-running conflicts over the issue of the so-called 'comfort women', women recruited (often by coercive methods) into Japanese wartime military brothels where they experienced great physical and psychological suffering. The statue in Seoul, representing a young woman victim of this abuse, was erected as a protest against the Japanese government's refusal to confront this past and compensate the victims.

The 2015 agreement, which included a Japanese promise to pay into a fund to support surviving former 'comfort women', was hailed by some as an important step towards reconciliation. But the rather vague statements made by the two foreign ministers in December 2015 left huge questions unanswered. It was unclear whether the Japanese government was even acknowledging the fact that 'comfort women' had been forcibly recruited, and subsequent statements by Foreign Ministry officials only served to further deepen the doubt (Morris-Suzuki). Rumours soon began to circulate that a precondition for the payments from the Japanese government was the removal of the 'comfort woman' statue outside the Japanese embassy: hence the presence of the young protestors, who mounted a non-stop 'guard' to prevent the disappearance of the statue (Kirk; Straits Times). What had started out looking like an act of reconciliation was by now starting to look—to some at least—more like an offer of hush-money, a payment for the creation of amnesia.

These stories highlight the profound dilemmas confronted in this special issue: conflicts over the memories and tangible scars left by wars, invasions and colonialism are a worldwide problem. Raising the spectre of international comparisons in the context of this history of violence may risk unleashing an ugly game of competitive self-justification: 'look, they are worse than us; we are not as bad as them'. But that is not, and must never be, the point. The point is that the wars and colonial violence of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have left legacies of that injustice and violence which live on in many parts of the world. The task for those who try to address those legacies in diverse places is to learn from one another about ways to nurture redress and healing.

From these reflections, I think that we can draw out some ideas which are integral to the process that I have elsewhere called 'reconciliation as method'. Rather than seeing reconciliation as something that has a defined end point—a point at which the two sides can be said to have 'put the past behind them'—it may be better to see it as an ongoing and open-ended process. Ernesto Verdeja, in his work *Unchopping a Tree: Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Political Violence*, describes reconciliation as 'a complex, multileveled process that is best understood as disjunctured and uneven, with multiple moral claims often in competition with one another' (3). Reconciliation, from this point of view, is not a project that ends in harmony, with all protagonists sharing a similar understanding of the past. Rather, it is a more complicated, and often painful, ongoing process of relating to the past in dialogue with others. Verdeja also goes on to suggest that reconciliation is achieved when 'previous, conflict-era identities no longer operate as the primary cleavages ... and thus citizens acquire new identities that cut across earlier fault lines' (3).

These are important insights, though I differ a little from Verdeja in wanting to avoid defining any end-point for reconciliation. Since historical knowledge is always being refined and redefined and identities are always being reshaped, it may make more sense to suggest that reconciliation is an unending process, but one whose meaning changes over time. Its success is never absolute, but is made visible in the continuing growth of new identities across fault lines, and in the creative rediscoveries of the past that such new identities generate. The essays in this special issue probe deep into the meaning of that continuing and often painful process of rediscovery in the contexts of Australia and of other countries of our region. Emerging from a collaborative project which brings together scholars of history, politics, literature and film, these essays reflect on the complex ways in which memories and identities continue to be renegotiated, and injustices continue to be repaired, even after formal acts of reconciliation have been completed.

In her essay 'Warning Signals: Indigenous Remembrance and Futurity in Post-apology Australia', Therese Davis looks back with a critical perspective at the history of the 2008 national apology to the 'stolen generations'. Her argument is not simply that subsequent policies have failed to address the problems of dispossession and injustice which the apology left unresolved, but rather that the apology itself was framed in a way that sought to 'put the past behind us' at a time when the pain and grief of past dispossession continues to be experienced on a daily basis in Aboriginal communities. In the second part of her essay, Davis turns to some ways in which indigenous people are using artistic performance to enact memory and connect past to present. Her powerful analysis of Dalisa Pigram's dance work *Gudirr Gudirr* suggests the ability of such artistic performances to 'offer an image of Indigenous futurity as a horizon of possibility'.

Catriona Elder's 'Unfinished Business in (Post)Reconciliation Australia' takes up closely related themes of the silences and aporias left by public landmarks of reconciliation such as the Mabo judgement and the 2008 apology. Starting from the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991, she carefully explores the multiple ways in which the Australian rhetoric of reconciliation has taken shape and changed over time. Elder's essay particularly highlights the fact that a single reconciliation act (such as the 2008 apology or the current 'recognition' process) can be given multiple meanings and enacted in multiple ways. This multiplicity offers some hope of future resistance to the repeated efforts of governments, mainstream media and other sections of Australian society to constrain the reconciliation process within the safe bounds of the liberal/national imaginary.

Olivia Khoo shifts the focus from questions of the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians to Australia's (mis)treatment of asylum seekers. Her essay reminds us of the fact that, even as efforts are made by some to right the wrongs of the past, new wrongs continue to be perpetrated, for which future as well present generations will have to take historical responsibility. As Khoo trenchantly observes, 'Australia's "post-apology" period does not mean that an apology has been given and that the nation has moved on; rather, it refers to the fact that the nation-state is unapologetically "over" giving apologies, and regards itself as no longer having to apologise for wrongs done or continuing to be done to refugees or those seeking asylum in Australia'. Rather than the apologies of the past having generated a repentant sense of 'never again', they have instead engendered a post-ethical smugness in which some Australian politicians hold up Australian-style human rights abuses as a model for Europe and elsewhere. Against the backdrop of this globalised competitive inhumanity, Khoo offers a carefully crafted reflection on the artworks produced

by incarcerated asylum seekers, whose wonderful 'coffee paintings' reach out beyond the barbed wire to challenge our complacency.

Reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and the treatment of asylum seekers are both major issues of political debate in Australia, but Sue Kossew's essay takes the reader onto rather less familiar ground by looking at the intertwined problems of historical reconciliation raised by Christine Piper's novel *After Darkness*. The novel brings together two dark stories from wartime history: the human biological warfare experiments performed on Chinese and other prisoners of war by the Japanese Army's Unit 731, and Australia's wartime internment of Japanese and other 'enemy' civilians, including those who had spent all their lives in Australia. The novel offers a window for exploring the deep psychological scars of fear and guilt that historical wrongs leave in individual lives. As Kossew suggests, fiction can be a way not only of bringing to life forgotten past events, but also of showing how the echoes of those events continue to be played out in the present.

All the paradoxes and problems embodied in events like the ambiguous statements of the Japanese and South Korean foreign ministers in December 2015, or in the unveiling of the Mau Mau monument, are carefully teased out in Paul Muldoon's essay 'After Apology: The Remains of the Past'. Taking former West German Chancellor Willi Brandt's famous *Kniefall* before the monument to the Warsaw Ghetto as a focus, Muldoon questions the very notion of 'after apology'. To the extent that an apology is a promise to the future, there is no 'after'. Reading it, I am reminded of R. C. Hutchinson's unusual and disturbing 1969 novel *Johanna at Daybreak*, which poses the question, 'what happens when contrition and apology do not yield forgiveness?' The logic of Muldoon's essay suggests a paradox: that the true test of the power of an apology may be the ability of perpetrators and victims to live together in a state where an act of apology has been made but has *not yet* been met with recognition and forgiveness.

The final two essays in this special issue explore the way in which quests for reconciliation and healing are put into practice in forms less familiar than the established patterns of official apologies and monument building. Beatrice Trefalt examines the ongoing process of the repatriation of the bones of Japanese soldiers who died in various parts of Asia and the Pacific during the Second World War; while Bridget Vincent's essay "'Sorry, above All, that I can Make Nothing Right'" reflects on expressions of apology and remorse in the poetry of Judith Wright. Vincent's essay (like the essays by Therese Davis and Sue Kossew) highlights the way in which the imagery and imagination of artistic works can reach into areas of the traumatic past which are inaccessible to more formal written histories. Judith Wright's poetry similarly brings a lost past into the

present, in this case by using poetic imagery to recapture the unassuaged traumas of colonialism and massacre. The performative act of bone collection, discussed by Beatrice Trefalt, also brings the past into the present, but in a very different way. The repatriation of the remains of Japanese soldiers is not an act of reconciliation between perpetrator and victim, but rather between present and past generations: an effort by the living to come to terms with the haunting absence of their ancestral dead. But Trefalt suggests that this digging up and bringing home of the past, far from creating closure, in fact opens up new questions: ‘the collecting of bones, rather than finishing “unfinished business”, reveals the ways in which the practice highlights old tensions, and creates new ones’. In this sense, her paper is a reminder of the theme that runs throughout this special issue.

Reconciliation has often been envisaged as ‘putting the past behind us’—but to put the past behind us is surely a mark, not of the success of reconciliation, but of its failure. If a reconciliation process produces a situation where the history that it addressed is no longer contested and debated, something has gone seriously wrong. Reconciliation as method opens up new grounds for discussion. The discussions that follow any particular act of reconciliation—whether that be an apology, the building of a monument, the return of remains or the artistic re-enactment of a traumatic past—may be just as painful as the discussions that preceded it. But the sign that reconciliation is underway is that they are not the same discussions as before: they do not just go over the same ground again and again. New questions arise; new conversations begin. That is how history, time and memory move forward.

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