

What we were told: Responses to 65,000 years of Aboriginal history

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Introduction

In July 2017, a new date was published from archaeological excavations in western Arnhem Land that pushed the opening chapters of Australian history back to 65,000 years ago.¹ It is the latest development in a time revolution that has gripped the nation over the past half century.² Stimulated by this new research, the authors of this article, together with geochronologist Bert Roberts, held a forum in Wollongong to explore the ways in which the Australian public have made sense of the deep Aboriginal history of Australia. A distillation of this discussion was published in *The Conversation* in November 2017 with the title, ‘When Did Australia’s Human History Begin?’³

The short, 1,500-word essay – written by a historian, an Indigenous studies scholar and a geochronologist – was explicitly interdisciplinary, as, we argued, all attempts to write history on the scale of tens of millennia must be. We sought to move beyond a view of ancient Australia as a traditional and timeless foundation story to explore the ways in which scientists and humanists are engaging with the deep past as a transformative human history. We also stressed the immense variety of societies that have called this continent home, and the particularities of their cultural and ecological histories. We argued that the past 65,000 years cannot be divorced from the turbulent events of the last two centuries, and, equally, that the past 230 years of Australian history should be understood in the context of tens of millennia of human experience on this continent.

1 Clarkson et al. 2017.

2 Griffiths 2018.

3 Griffiths et al. 2017.

The essay was shared widely by the ABC, *Australian Geographic* and a number of science news outlets; within a few days it had reached over 50,000 readers and attracted over 1,000 comments on various platforms. It has since been republished as a podcast. Many of the comments dredged up an ugly racist undercurrent in Australian society. Despite an initial desire not to engage – to heed the online mantra ‘Don’t read the comments!’ – we quickly realised that, taken together, these responses delivered a rare insight into public thinking about Aboriginal history and deep time. *The Conversation* and other online forums provide an opportunity to ‘take the pulse’ of the public and examine their often deeply held beliefs. Despite the range of views expressed, we were quickly able to identify several recurring themes amidst the hundreds of comments. In this article, we attempt to explore and trace the origins of some of these dominant and enduring myths about Indigenous Australia.

The title of this article is inspired by Henry Reynolds’s memoir, *Why Weren’t We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth about Our History*. Reynolds’s title was an exasperated cry about the silences in Australia surrounding the histories of invasion and dispossession. It was both a personal plea, as he reflected on the ‘great gaps’ in his own Tasmanian education, as well as a passionate appeal to the conscience of all Australians, as Australians.⁴ As he wrote in the opening passage:

Why were we never told? Why didn’t we know? I have been asked these questions by many people, over many years, in all parts of Australia – after political meetings, after public forums, lectures, book readings, interviews. It hasn’t mattered where I spoke, what size the audience, what the occasion or actual topic dealt with. Why didn’t we know? Why were we never told?⁵

In 2010, historian Mitchell Rolls wondered whether the questions Reynolds posed were ‘more obfuscatory than revelatory’, suggesting that his overwhelming desire to ‘face up to our history’ had obscured an earlier generation of history-making. Rolls aligned this argument with a broader critique of anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner’s words about ‘silence’ in settler–Aboriginal relations.⁶ Reflecting on the scale of public interest in ‘Aboriginal themes’ in the mid-twentieth century, as expressed in a raft of novels, children’s books and anthropological texts, the activism of Aboriginal leaders such as William Cooper, and popular culture magazines like *Walkabout* (1934–72), Rolls joined Tom Griffiths in suggesting that Stanner’s ‘silence’ might better be described as ‘white noise’: in Griffiths’s words, ‘an obscuring and overlaying din of history-making’.⁷ The often unconscious or half-conscious nature of denial certainly

4 Atkinson 2009: 351–68; Attwood and Griffiths 2009: 4–9.

5 Reynolds 1999: 1.

6 Rolls 2010: 11, 16. For a reflection on the presentist uses of Stanner’s ideas, see Hinkson 2010.

7 Griffiths 1996: 4–5.

changes the tenor of Reynolds's plea. In response to 'Why weren't we told?', Bain Attwood and Stephen Foster pose the more confronting questions: 'Why didn't we ask?', 'Why didn't we listen?' and 'Why weren't we able to hear?'⁸

This article pushes these important questions further. Instead of exploring absences in national understanding or drawing attention to the structures that hid earlier generations of scholarship, we examine some of the ideas that came to fill the 'great gaps' in knowledge that Reynolds described and that have endured despite the past four decades of research in Aboriginal history. Rather than probing 'The Great Australian Silence', we are interested in the public apprehension of Aboriginal Australia that Stanner described in 1968 as 'our folklore about the Aborigines': that which 'mixes truth, half-truth and untruth into hard little concretions of faith that defy dissolution by better knowledge'.⁹ The 'we' in our title is Reynolds's 'we': it speaks to and for a national audience.¹⁰

The readers who engaged with our online essay asserted their views with striking certainty. The comments privileged sources the authors claimed to have encountered or 'discovered'. They were a chorus of voices repeating what they were familiar with, what they had been told. Drawing on this rich dataset, we seek to begin to unpack this 'folklore', to explore the origins of specific ideas and to ask why certain themes have proven so resilient. Rather than asking 'why weren't we told', this article digs down into 'what we *were* told'.

The presence of the deep past: Tracking social narratives

The inspiration for our analysis comes in part from Liz Conor's recent book *Skin Deep: Settler Impressions of Aboriginal Women*, in which Conor eloquently illustrates, dissects and debunks a series of recurring tropes and leitmotifs about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (particularly women). She traces persistent stories of infanticide and cannibalism over the course of a century and more, interrogating 'the unrigorous standards of past knowledge production' and reflecting on the rigidity of these ideas in the face of contrary evidence.¹¹ In showing how such myths linger and why, she reminds us of the ongoing need to challenge entrenched ideas and reflect on their origins. In a similar vein, Ian McNiven and Lynette Russell's book *Appropriated Pasts* identifies various tenuous but constant colonialist and racialised themes in the intellectual history of Aboriginal archaeology.¹²

8 Attwood and Foster 2003: 3, as quoted in Rolls 2010: 19.

9 Stanner 1968: 30.

10 Attwood and Griffiths 2009: 40–45.

11 Conor 2016: 238.

12 McNiven and Russell 2005.

There is a rich literature on the range of social narratives various ‘publics’ have constructed about the past. In the 1990s, American historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen collected quantitative and qualitative data from 1,400 Americans to find out what people knew about the past, what was important to them. The survey, published in *The Presence of the Past*, was a significant shift in social research, as it moved the focus away from studies of historical illiteracy towards what they termed ‘popular history making’.¹³ In Australia, Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton, and Anna Clark have conducted similar large-scale interview projects that seek to understand how Australians relate to their past.¹⁴ This is complemented by the more quantitative efforts of scholars like Murray Goot and Tim Rowse, who studied public attitudes towards Indigenous history in *Divided Nation?*,¹⁵ and Frank Bongiorno and Darren Pennay’s 2018 analysis of data from the Social Research Centre, which asked just over 3,000 Australians to reflect on significant historical events in their lifetimes.¹⁶

A growing number of studies use social media as a ‘mine’ for data – to help understand audiences, for example, or to track the emergent issues and controversies of a discipline.¹⁷ Of the ‘big data’ approaches, Chiara Bonacchi and colleagues’ recent work sets the standard for popular understandings of heritage. Their ‘systematic study of public perceptions’, based on 1.4 million posts, comments and replies, examined the ways in which ideas and materials from the ancient world were mobilised in contemporary debates surrounding Brexit.¹⁸ Other studies approach user comments at a more intimate level, exploring these forums as sites of remembrance and even analysing how comments shape readers’ perceptions of an article.¹⁹ Anna Clark employs such a qualitative approach in her book *Private Lives, Public History*, a sustained reflection on the historical engagement of so-called ‘ordinary’ Australian citizens.²⁰ Drawing upon a carefully curated ‘oral historiography’ from 100 Australians from across the country, as well as anonymous comments on internet blogs and ‘letters to the editor’, Clark explores how Australians *make sense* of their past as a site of connection, contestation and commemoration. In this article, we use the same approach to draw on the more than 1,000 ‘responses’ to our online essay to examine how Australians make sense of Aboriginal history and deep time. The simplicity of our online essay – its broad question and overview structure – has allowed us to use the comments as a gauge of wider public engagement.

13 Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998.

14 Ashton and Hamilton 2010; Clark 2016.

15 Goot and Rowse 2007.

16 Bongiorno and Pennay 2018.

17 Marwick 2013; Newman 2017.

18 Bonacchi, Altaweel and Krzyzanska 2018.

19 Yadlin-Segal 2017; Jahng 2018.

20 Clark 2016.

The responses we analyse were published in the comments section of *The Conversation* and on the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter. *The Conversation* has an audience of over 5 million monthly users, 85 per cent of whom have an undergraduate degree or higher. Many articles inspire vigorous debate with over 20 per cent of the readers commenting on at least one article.²¹ Although some of the responses to our paper were later moderated and removed, we as the authors were able to see all comments. The republication of the online essay – in particular its appearance on the ABC website under the headline ‘A Story of Rupture and Resilience’ – exposed our words to a much wider audience, stimulating a range of responses that we tracked online using Twitter and Facebook. For our analysis, the names of the commenters have been removed, and, in light of the considerable repetition, we have chosen the most representative comments. Some of the authors identified themselves as either Indigenous or non-Indigenous. Where the commenter did not offer an identifier, we have assumed that they were non-Indigenous. We have also slightly edited comments to remove repeated words and to correct spelling mistakes. Nothing has been altered that might change the commenters’ intended meaning.

We have synthesised the comments into five main themes:

1. The ‘other’ first Australians: ‘Pygmy people were here first’
2. Wilderness and fire: ‘Whitefella Dreamings of a terra nullius’
3. The march of progress: ‘Not moved beyond a bark lean-to’
4. A harmonious existence: ‘A society that had no need to change’
5. A hunger for history: ‘Tell me some stories of ice age Australia!’

We deliberately avoided using the contentious term ‘prehistory’ in our online essay, as it carries unhelpful baggage and creates a divide between history and prehistory that both privileges documents and precludes writing a synthetic integrated history. As scholars and teachers, we strive to work in an anti-colonial, anti-racist manner to create a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Australia’s past and cross-cultural relations. Married to this has been our ongoing commitment to true interdisciplinarity, working across HASS and STEM fields.²² But our broad interpretation of History was not always greeted with enthusiasm by readers. As one commenter responded:

21 *The Conversation*, ‘Our audience’, theconversation.com/au/audience (accessed 9 April 2018).

22 Over the past decade much has been made of the differences and connections between the Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine (STEM) as discrete research areas. Significant work is now taking place to bring these two areas together through collaboration and a better understanding of what can be achieved in the cross-disciplinary space. Anti-racist work that has been important includes Kowal 2015 and Land 2015.

History begins when people started to write things down. Before that it's prehistory. Surely [the authors] are aware of that universal usage. Are they just incorrect? Or postmodern? Or do they feel there is some kind of stigma attached to the term prehistory?

Another commenter appreciated what we were trying to achieve by blurring these lines:

I think the article inherently raises the contemporary understanding of a break between history and prehistory which is a reasonable undertaking. Categories of knowledge aren't static; understanding changes. The belief that history, dependent on the written record, surpasses the study of 'prehistory' because the latter is so much more obviously subject to interpretative inquiry, obscures the interpretive nature of history itself.

If Australians are to engage with the deep past as a transformative human history, they need to overcome certain myths about Aboriginal history and people's lives in ancient Australia. In the following sections, we interrogate the origins of five recurring themes and reflect on why certain ideas persist in the face of contrary evidence.

The 'other' first Australians: 'Pygmy people were here first'

A significant number of the responses to our essay referred to 'rumours of an earlier race [that was] displaced by the Aboriginals'. Some commenters referred to this race as the 'Australian Pygmy Tribe'; others argued that Aboriginal Tasmanians were the first people to arrive in Australia and that they had been killed off on the mainland and driven to the far south of the continent. It is relatively easy to trace the origins of these nuggets of misinformation back to nineteenth-century thinkers.²³ Indeed, as one of the responses noted, it 'is interesting to see how much comment reflects controversies of the last two hundred years'.

Contemplating the origins of Indigenous Australians has a long history. In 1870, English biologist Thomas Henry Huxley speculated that there was a close relationship with the people of South Asia, as they share the 'chief characteristics' of the 'so-called hill-tribes who inhabit the interior of the Dekhan, in Hindostan'.²⁴ These ideas profoundly influenced the American physical anthropologist Joseph Birdsell, who developed a model of migration in the 1930s that became known as the 'trihybrid' theory.²⁵ Birdsell suggested that there were three distinct waves of

23 For more detailed analysis see McNiven and Russell 2005; Prentis 1995.

24 Huxley 1870: 406.

25 Birdsell 1967; McNiven and Russell 2005: 90–91; Prentis 1995: 79–91.

migration into Australia, with an early group of ‘Oceanic negritos’ coming from Southeast Asia, followed by the arrival of people from Japan, and a later group from India. Based primarily on appearances – or ‘variations’ – Birdsell argued that modern Aboriginal peoples were an amalgam of these three waves. He attributed the origins of the Tasmanians, in particular, to the first and second waves of migration. There is no skeletal or material evidence to support the ‘trihybrid’ model and, since the discoveries of ancient *Homo sapiens* burials at Lake Mungo in 1968, physical anthropologists have found a wealth of evidence that contradicts it.²⁶

In 1999, however, the ‘trihybrid’ model was revived by geneticists Alan Redd and Mark Stoneking in an article in *The American Journal of Human Genetics*.²⁷ Redd and Stoneking paired evidence of a maternal genetic connection between Australia and India with apparent changes in the archaeological record about 4,000 years ago to suggest a recent wave of migration from India to Australia, much as Birdsell had proposed. More recent genetic studies have discredited Redd and Stoneking’s hypothesis.²⁸ Although there was trade with the outside world in the past few millennia,²⁹ which brought, importantly, the dingo to Australian shores, there are no signs of the kinds of sweeping gene flow from India to Australia that Redd and Stoneking describe. The evidence currently suggests that Australia was peopled once, and only once, by a single group of *Homo sapiens* who voyaged to this continent at least 65,000 years ago.³⁰ Nevertheless, Birdsell’s hypothesis continues to have traction, and Redd and Stoneking’s article was one of the few pieces of academic research that was invoked in the responses to our essay, with one commenter writing a detailed post about the ‘Dravidian DNA in the modern Aboriginal genome’.

The other main cause for the resuscitation of the ‘trihybrid’ model was a 2002 article in *Quadrant* by Keith Windschuttle and Tim Gillin titled ‘The Extinction of the Australian Pygmies’. The authors revisited the Birdsell hypothesis and mounted an attack on the scholars who had thoroughly debunked it. They argued that ‘Aboriginal activists and their white supporters’ had suppressed information about ‘the Australian pygmies’ because it posed an inconvenient truth to their political movement.³¹ ‘In reality,’ Michael Westaway and Peter Hiscock responded in 2005, ‘archaeologists have abandoned Birdsell’s 70-year-old model because it is no longer sustained by the abundant archaeological evidence.’³²

26 See, for example, Pardoe et al. 1991; Westaway and Hiscock 2005.

27 Redd and Stoneking 1999: 808–28.

28 Bergström et al. 2016: 809–813; Nagle et al. 2017: 43041.

29 Paterson 2011.

30 Clarkson et al. 2017: 306–10; Griffiths 2018: 279–80.

31 Windschuttle and Gillin 2002: 7.

32 Westaway and Hiscock 2005: 142.

So why do ideas of an earlier race – or a later usurping race – continue to persist in the popular arena? As McNiven and Russell have argued, the stubborn resilience of the trihybrid model, particularly its most recent iterations, appears to be tied to colonialism and anxiety around native title.³³ In short, in arguing for multiple waves of migration by different ‘racial groups’, which then usurped the previous groups, these theories reduce the magnitude of the dispossession wrought by Europeans. We all become ‘invaders’; there are no ‘first peoples’, only second- and third-wave Australians.

Shoshanna Grounds and Anne Ross reached similar conclusions in their analysis of how the ‘trihybrid’ model was mobilised in the 1997 One Nation Party booklet, *Pauline Hanson: The Truth*.³⁴ A more recent example can be found in Senator David Leyonhjelm’s attempts to stave off constitutional recognition in 2015. When asked about recognising the ‘first Australians’ in a constitutional preamble, Leyonhjelm sought to create doubt over whether Indigenous Australians really had been ‘first’. ‘There may have been people in Australia prior to the Aborigines,’ he said. ‘If there is any doubt at all, why would you put history in the Constitution?’³⁵ The trihybrid origin debates were similarly invoked by commenters on our online essay to delegitimise contemporary Aboriginal peoples’ claims. The conspiratorial tone of Windschuttle and Gillin’s article also featured in the discussions about ancient Australia.³⁶ As one person commented on our article:

When Mr and Mrs Mungo were discovered, another skeleton was also located, and, yet, kept quiet!! Why?? ... these discoveries have been located at Mungo but due to Political Correctness have been ‘hushed up’ ... [if the] Truth would come out ... we all could grow with this knowledge.

The belief in conspiracies, particularly ‘science-based’ conspiracies, appears to be a consequence of limited scientific literacy often coupled with a sense of social dislocation. Access to communities of like-minded people has grown with the internet, and in particular social media, creating hubs of mutually reinforced misinformation.³⁷

Australia’s deep antiquity and the colonisation of the continent by Aboriginal peoples remain poorly understood, as does the evolving and uncertain nature of scientific knowledge. The inherent racism of the colonial project, and the assumed

33 McNiven and Russell 2005: 90–99, 124.

34 Grounds and Ross 2010.

35 Louise Yaxley, ‘Senator David Leyonhjelm questions if Aboriginals were first occupants of Australia; says it would be “bizarre” to put into constitution’, ABC News, www.abc.net.au/news/2015-06-25/david-leyonhjelm-raises-doubts-over-aboriginal-occupants/6572704 (accessed 12 March 2018).

36 Jordan and Bosco 2018.

37 Bessi et al. 2015.

superiority of Western culture was writ large across many of the essays' comments. As a tool for understanding the state of race relations and the possibilities for some form of reconciliation, many of the responses suggest that we have a long way to go.

Wilderness and fire: 'Whitefella Dreamings of a *terra nullius*'

Our online essay did not refer to Aboriginal burning practices – it did not even include the words 'wilderness' or 'fire'. Yet these terms appeared in over 100 responses to our essay. Surprisingly, considering the racist undertones of other comments, very few commenters questioned that Aboriginal people had used fire to manage and manipulate their landscape; this was largely accepted as a basic fact of Aboriginal history. Instead, the respondents were interested in exploring how the insights of 'fire-stick farming' might be useful in contemporary initiatives to protect and manage the Australian environment. They were asking how, not if, Aboriginal fire had shaped the environment. Did fire have a part to play in the extinction of the megafauna? Is the absence of traditional burning regimes the cause of recent 'widespread, high intensity wildfires'?

Although Aboriginal mastery of fire was clear to many settlers and explorers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that ecologists, geographers and archaeologists realised the role it had played in creating and maintaining certain vegetation patterns.³⁸ In 1968, drawing upon the emerging evidence of Aboriginal antiquity, as well as the insights of contemporary burning regimes, archaeologist Rhys Jones and palaeontologist Duncan Merrilees independently suggested that Aboriginal burning had played a profound role in shaping Australia's flora and fauna over millennia.³⁹ The spark of insight captured by Jones's phrase 'fire-stick farming' has been stoked and tended by many scholars over the intervening decades, including Sylvia Hallam's pioneering regional study in south-western Australia, *Fire and Hearth*, Stephen Pyne's 'fire history of Australia', *Burning Bush*, and Bill Gammage's recent continental history, *The Biggest Estate on Earth*.⁴⁰ The responses to our essay suggested that this rich history of scholarship has succeeded in entering the public sphere. Almost all of the comments accepted that Aboriginal burning regimes had transformed the Australian environment to some degree. Aboriginal history is inextricably tied to fire history in the minds of these respondents, even where fire is not mentioned in the story under discussion.

38 Griffiths 2018.

39 Jones 1968; Merrilees 1968.

40 Jones 1969; Hallam 1975; Pyne 1991; Gammage 2011.

Many commenters used our essay to challenge the philosophies and policies of contemporary conservation bodies. They criticised the popular usage of phrases such as ‘wilderness’ and ‘pristine forests’ for implying that parts of the Australian landscape had been unoccupied or uncultivated. As one respondent exclaimed: ‘National Parks are whitefella Dreamings of a *terra nullius*’. Several comments reflected on the tensions within the environmentalist movement that accompanied the recognition of Aboriginal land management strategies. As one commenter argued:

the idea that simply reserving areas we think are natural, and leaving them un-managed, will result in bio-diverse climax ecosystems is naive at best, and could even be viewed as racist in terms of its ignorance of 65,000 years of Aboriginal land management.

But others were more cautious in their remarks, highlighting, for example, the alliance between the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Country Needs People campaign as evidence of a recent ‘rapprochement between conservationists and Aboriginal peoples’.⁴¹ Many comments addressed attempts to reintroduce Aboriginal burning practices across Australia, with some wondering if these contemporary regimes were ‘doing more harm than good’.⁴² After an ardent discussion about contemporary bushfire policy, one commenter reflected on the gradual ‘evolution’ they were observing in the debate: ‘even environmentalists’ were beginning to see the Australian landscape as a ‘created’ environment. We could track a similar ‘evolution’ in public understanding in the comments on our essay.

While the majority of commenters accepted the concept of ‘fire-stick farming’, they largely referred to it as singular practice with uniform effects. There was little appreciation of the variety of ways in which burning has shaped the landscape and there was no discussion about how burning regimes have changed over millennia. This is perhaps a reflection of the limitations of the most cited source in the comments, Bill Gammage’s *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, which both telescopes the long history of Aboriginal burning into the year 1788 and homogenises the practices of hundreds of different Aboriginal nations into a single, universal system. The implications of Aboriginal burning were dramatic, but also varied and complex.⁴³ Nevertheless, the influence of Gammage’s work is undeniable, and the relative nuance in this debate is a tribute to his public outreach. A recurring refrain in the responses was: ‘Have you read Bill Gammage?’

41 For more on the idea of ‘green-black’ alliances, see Vincent and Neale 2016.

42 Lehman 2001: 308–19; Young and Ross 1994: 184–97; Bird et al. 2005: 443–64; Neale 2018.

43 There are many critiques of Gammage’s thesis. See, for example, Karskens 2018; Hiscock 2014.

The march of progress: ‘Not moved beyond a bark lean-to’

Another theme that emerges in the comments is the very particular idea of ‘progress’: a linear understanding of ‘intellectual advancement and modernisation’ that can be measured by Western concepts such as agriculture, architecture and industry. As one commenter reflected: ‘The older the Aboriginal race is discovered to be the more cogently poignant it becomes that their civilization has not moved beyond a bark lean-to.’ The comments almost unanimously placed value judgements on different types of subsistence strategies and social organisation, with one respondent lamenting that it would be ‘rather sad if the peoples of the world were still hunter gatherers’.

Many commenters railed against this dismissal of Aboriginal culture as ‘stagnating’ at the ‘bark lean-to’, with dozens of people referencing and repeating arguments from Bruce Pascoe’s recent book *Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?*. Pascoe, an Aboriginal writer, scholar and storyteller, has made a passionate case for Indigenous societies to be viewed through the lens of ‘agriculture’. In his attempt to contest the negative racial attitudes that remain prevalent in Australian society, and to restore ‘Aboriginal pride in the past’, he has sought to ‘re-classify’ the first Australians as farmers and horticulturalists. He draws together the immense ethnographic evidence of Aboriginal land management, burning, tilling, irrigating, harvesting, baking and construction to argue ‘that Aboriginals did build houses, did cultivate and irrigate crops, did sew clothes and were not hapless wanderers across the soil, mere hunter-gatherers’.⁴⁴

But Pascoe, like the commenters who invoke his research, is equally captivated by the enduring myth of progress – articulated as the move from foragers to farmers – and *Dark Emu* explicitly privileges the language of ‘agriculture’ above all else. Such an assumption demands interrogation. What is ‘mere’ about a hunter-gatherer way of life? What does the language of ‘progress’ do to our understanding of change and dynamism? Is it necessary to turn to Eurocentric language and ideas to acknowledge the richness and complexity of Indigenous economies? Is it meaningful to define ‘agriculture’ as a stable category that transcends space and time?

In Australian archaeology many of these questions have been teased out in the debates over ‘intensification’: a theoretical mechanism employed and expanded by Harry Lourandos to explain the variety of social and economic changes in Australia over recent millennia.⁴⁵ When Lourandos began working on Aboriginal sites in

⁴⁴ Pascoe 2014: 156.

⁴⁵ Lourandos 1983. British archaeologist Barbara Bender originally outlined the concept of ‘intensification’ in her 1978 article, ‘Gatherer-hunter to farmer: A social perspective’.

western Victoria, he found his assumptions about Aboriginal society challenged by the presence of vast eel traps and holding ponds in the landscape and ethnohistoric descriptions of large-scale gatherings to process foods at sites with clusters of huts made of wood, stone and clay. As he marvelled in 1987, ‘The people of southwestern Victoria and their neighbours were more numerous, more sedentary and far more ingenious than we ever imagined’.⁴⁶ But Lourandos was hesitant to use the label ‘agriculturalist’ to explain the phenomena he was observing. Indeed, by drawing on the language of ‘intensification’, he hoped to move beyond labels, which create arbitrary boundaries, to explore the ‘grey areas’ in between. In his own work, he acknowledged that the term ‘hunter-gatherer’ was a colonial artefact, but he also worked with it and sought to enlarge our understanding of the societies it represents. He titled his book-length history of Aboriginal Australia *Continent of Hunter-Gatherers*.⁴⁷ ‘The main question was no longer “Why or why not agriculture?”’ he argued in 1981, ‘but “Why change?”’⁴⁸

Perhaps the reason such Western parallels continue, and why Pascoe’s arguments have such traction, is because of the sheer scale of the ‘gaps’ in public knowledge about Aboriginal societies prior to the arrival of Europeans. When there is such historical illiteracy, there is little room for nuance. We see an example of this in the debates in the comments over Indigenous architecture. When commenters argued that Aboriginal societies ‘lived in stone houses, thatched houses up north, or spinifex domes’, their responses were greeted with outright denial. As one person erroneously asserted: ‘Letters from the first settlers make no mention of these “stone houses”’. Even the people who stepped in to defend the complexity of Indigenous societies conformed to the old metrics of progress. As one commenter wrote, ‘Many First Nations’ Peoples were as smart as or were smarter than the average white person.’

We are wary of using Western terms to argue for the significance of Indigenous heritage for it risks repeating antiquated colonial assumptions about evolutionary hierarchies, whereby every society is on a ladder climbing towards the ultimate destination of agriculture and industry. It is important to remember that there is no inherent value to a farming or a foraging way of life. Communities have shifted between these categories and moved back and forth as suited their needs. Neither signifies greater sophistication and both are amorphous categories better understood on a spectrum of economic activity. The boundaries between them are blurred. Indeed, there is growing body of literature that emphasises the losses as well as the gains in the transition to agriculture.⁴⁹

46 Lourandos 1987: 307.

47 Lourandos 2010: 75–77; Lourandos 1997.

48 Lourandos 1981: 536.

49 For a recent popular distillation see, for example, Harari 2014: 87–180.

A harmonious existence: 'A society that had no need to change'

In our online essay, one of the authors (Russell) published the results of a small-scale survey of 35 Indigenous friends and colleagues of varying ages, genders and backgrounds who were asked for their thoughts on Australia's deep history. Many of the responses were statements of cultural affirmation ('we have always been here'), while others viewed the long Aboriginal history on this continent through the lens of continuity, taking pride in being members of 'the oldest living population in the world' and 'the world's oldest continuing culture'. Terms like 'the oldest living culture' have long been regarded by Russell as deeply problematic.⁵⁰ Embedded within these concepts is the sense of Aboriginal culture as both unchanging and stagnant. The notion of the 'oldest living culture' also conveys an unchecked nostalgia, indeed romantic ideal, for a harmonious society with no outside pressure to change. As an expression of identity, it remains a powerful statement. But when others uncritically repeat such statements as historical fact, they risk suggesting that Aboriginal culture has been frozen in time. It is easy to hear echoes of the language of past cultural evolutionists, who believed, in Robert Pulleine's infamous words, that Aboriginal people were 'an unchanging people, living in an unchanging environment'.⁵¹

The deep antiquity of Australia posed a challenge for some of the Aboriginal respondents to our essay, as they fundamentally rejected the notion of putting a date to their ancestors' presence on this continent; rather, they asserted, they have been here forever. We accept such an ontology. It is a way of seeing and interacting with the past that need not be contested. There is another way of looking at it, which a number of the respondents to Russell's survey advocated: that 65,000 years is forever. Others suggested that on arriving here some 65,000 years ago, their ancestors became Aboriginal, and therefore Aboriginal people have always been here.

Many non-Indigenous commenters felt uneasy about such expressions of cultural identity. As one person wrote:

Describing something as 'always being here' is giving ownership and power to the person who says it – but unjustifiably, as it's a verbal history. I came here when I was 7 but I have 'always been here' for as long as I remember.

Here we see a lack of understanding of Aboriginal ways of knowing and a dismissal of the historicity of oral traditions and oral history. In contrast, dates emerging from archaeological sites were privileged as sources of historical evidence; indeed, they were celebrated with the mentality that 'older is better'. As one Aboriginal commenter wrote:

⁵⁰ Russell 2001.

⁵¹ Pulleine 1928: 310.

Will we eventually see a figure of 100,000 years? Perhaps ... And that is a good thing, for whatever the precise findings of science, the fact remains that the Indigenous people of Australia are Aborigines i.e. native to this land, and their life and culture is a deeply embedded part of the land, having evolved over an incredibly long period of time.

Other comments suggested that the date 65,000 years is simply a matter of ‘science ... catching up with Aboriginal historical fact’. Arguably, the deep anxiety that the term ‘always been here’ generates will remain, as Ian McNiven has observed, as long as Australia remains unreconciled and sovereignty issues unacknowledged.⁵²

The subset of the comments we have classified as ‘A harmonious existence’ also argued for an Australian exceptionalism. They contended that Australia is ‘unique’ in that Aboriginal peoples had ‘evolved to live in relative harmony with each other and their environment’. One commenter suggested that ‘No other group of humanity has existed in relative harmony with each other and their land for as long’. Another invoked archaeologist Josephine Flood’s work to describe Aboriginal peoples as being the ‘aristocrats of the stone age’: a people who were ‘perfectly adapted’ to their environment, ‘without the threat of war and invasion’ and who had ‘achieved a society that had no need to change until Europeans arrived’. The ‘noble savage’ of the eighteenth century is not far from these musings.⁵³ The notion of living in harmony and balance with each other and the land also resonates with the ‘new age’ movement found in popular texts such as Robert Lawlor’s academically decried *Voices of the First Day: Awakening in the Aboriginal Dreamtime*.⁵⁴

There is a fine line separating such visions of harmony and the statements about a continuous culture. Taken together, they suggest a failure to understand that over the course of 65,000 or more years the cultures (plural) did change. As Russell has observed, at first contact there were hundreds of different cultural groups and over 200 language groups, and it was the attempts to erase this diversity of Indigenous cultures that has led to depictions of an ‘essentialised, spatially homogenous Aboriginal culture’.⁵⁵ This spatial homogeneity is all too easily read as chronological stasis. As well as cultural transformations, these societies endured great environmental and climatic changes. While people have lived in Australia, volcanoes have erupted, dunefields have formed, glaciers have melted and sea levels have risen about 125 metres, transforming Lake Carpentaria into a gulf and the Bassian Plain into a strait. It is naive to suggest that Aboriginal cultures would remain stagnant across tens of millennia. When we examine the public’s perception on this topic, it becomes clear that there remain significant gaps in understanding

52 McNiven 2011: 41.

53 McGregor 1997.

54 Lawlor 1991. Although this book sits firmly in what we would call the ‘new age’ genre, remarkably, it has been cited by over 260 academic writers.

55 Russell 2001: 3.

and a steadfast desire to see an idealised past, expressed by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous commenters. This response, however, was not universal. As one Aboriginal respondent wrote:

We've watched Tasmania become an island ... The sea levels [rose and a] great flood [took] much of our old areas of living ... And created new ones ... The evidence is everywhere ... We have cultural ways of keeping track of many of this planet's fluctuating systems.

Here we see an Aboriginal man taking pride in the transformative history of his people – a story of rupture and resilience.

A hunger for history: 'Tell me some stories of ice age Australia!'

In 2009, Henry Reynolds looked back over his career and suggested that Australian society had entered 'a new era' in regards to Indigenous affairs:

The numerous reports about the attitudes of secondary school students and their lack of interest, if not disdain, for Aboriginal history points in the same direction. In books, articles and speeches I was mainly addressing an audience who felt, with both reason and concern, that they had not been told the true story of Australian history. It would seem that many young people would rather choose not to know. The inescapable conclusion is that my histories have themselves become part of history, addressing concerns that are now losing both relevance and resonance. In moments of pessimism, I wonder if my work was for one season only and perhaps the weather has changed?⁵⁶

While it may seem that we emerge from analysing these comments with a similar sense of pessimism, our experience has been different to Reynolds's. Although there is much misinformation and ignorance about Aboriginal history and deep time, there is also an undeniable hunger for history. Far from 'choosing not to know', many readers were eager to know *more*. Indeed, several comments ended by explicitly asking for more information: 'Can you point me to a published survey?'

The five sources most readily invoked were (in order of highest to lowest): Wikipedia, Bruce Pascoe, Bill Gammage, Henry Reynolds and Josephine Flood. Putting Wikipedia to one side, these authors are similar in that their major works are book-length, continental studies addressed to a wider *Australian* audience. Their commitment to public outreach is clear in their prose, with the books either acting as an 'explainer' (Flood) or prosecuting an argument about *national* understanding (Pascoe, Gammage, Reynolds). There were several comments that referred to the

56 Reynolds 2009: 383.

profound role that Reynolds in particular had played in opening their eyes to Aboriginal history. As one commenter wrote: 'It was only after Reynolds published his work that I realized that the innocent playgrounds of my youth in the bush in fact had been killing fields for Aboriginal people'. Many lamented how much has been lost through the ravages of dispossession and expressed frustration at the challenges of interpreting the deep past:

The true history of our continent will remain forever unknown to us, prior to European settlement we have only fragments of knowledge hinting at what might have been. It is almost like trying to read a book where you are only allowed to look at every twentieth page.

Here we see awareness that there will always be gaps in knowledge about Indigenous Australia, and that writing history at the scale of millennia is full of uncertainty. But this was accompanied by a desire to fill those gaps. As one commenter exclaimed: 'tell me some stories of ice age Australia!' Other commenters craved new ways of accessing the deep past. As one exchange in the comments put it:

The story needs a good director from Netflix perhaps.
Dude, that would be the ultimate, a doco series on Netflix.

The gradual awakening about Aboriginal history, in large parts fostered in the pages of this journal, is still underway.⁵⁷ Many Australians are still coming to terms with the violence of dispossession. The question on their lips remains, 'Why weren't we told?' But the emerging understanding of the deep past is inspiring different questions and opening another avenue for Australians to engage with Aboriginal history: an excitement about the technoscience that allows us to see events, trends and people in ancient Australia. Jeffrey Toobin has described public enthusiasm about forensic techniques in America as the 'CSI effect'; there is a similar sense of wonderment at the 'cool science' that enables history-making at the scale of tens of millennia.⁵⁸

Throughout the comments, alongside the strains of racism, there is clear admiration for the ingenuity of the societies that have inhabited this continent over tens of millennia and the ways in which they made – and continue to make – this land their own. Many of the comment writers felt a sense of national pride by engaging with this history, especially when comparing it with the more recent history of the so-called 'Old World' of Europe. One non-Indigenous commenter expressed a longing to have a personal link with this history: 'I am envious of the ancient connection First Nations people have to this land'. The 'young' nation, a footnote to empire, has become a continent with an ancient heritage.⁵⁹

57 Attwood 2012.

58 Toobin 2007: 31; Kohlenberger 2015: 69.

59 Attwood 1996; Byrne 1998; Griffiths 2018.

In 2009, Reynolds reflected that ‘the weather had changed’ and that his longstanding concerns about Aboriginal history were ‘losing both relevance and resonance’ in the wake of ‘the seemingly contradictory, co-eval developments of the Prime Ministerial apology and the continuing intervention in the Northern Territory’. Perhaps now, in post-Uluru Statement Australia, the weather is changing again.⁶⁰

Conclusion

The comments we analysed in this article were captured, rather than collected or curated. They provide a limited but revealing insight into public thinking about Aboriginal history and deep time. The clear discomfort many commenters expressed can be related, we argue, to perceptions of legitimacy and the gulf of understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This supports Ian McNiven’s conclusion:

as long as Australian society struggles to comprehend and acknowledge Aboriginal Native Title rights, archaeology will continue to be manipulated by those seeking to undermine Aboriginal authenticity and legitimacy of connections to land and heritage.⁶¹

The enduring challenge, it seems, is how to disseminate knowledge about this continent’s deep history and dispel public misconceptions about ancient Australia. In 1999, Richard Mackay and Grace Karskens argued for the importance of ‘storytelling’ in communicating archaeological finds.⁶² Archaeologist Stephen Nichols also highlights the role of television and the school education system in shaping social narratives about the past. Together with Jonathan Prangnell and Michael Haslam, Nichols urges his peers in archaeology to adopt an ‘expanded vision of a socially active and politically engaged public archaeology’.⁶³ One example of this is the highly successful, award-winning ABC series *First Footprints* (2013), which visualised and described in documentary form the archaeology of Indigenous Australia.⁶⁴ Many archaeologists and Indigenous communities collaborated in the four-part series, which married dramatic narratives with photo-realist digital animation to bring the deep past to life. It is as close as scholars have come to the ‘Netflix series on ancient Australia’ called for in the comments. However, even in a diversified and increasingly digital media landscape, our study suggests that books continue to play a powerful role in shaping public debate. We are far from alone

60 For commentary on this shift, see, for example, McKenna 2018.

61 McNiven 2011: 41.

62 Mackay and Karskens 1999: 110.

63 Nichols et al. 2005: 79; Nichols 2006.

64 Dean 2013.

in observing 'the staying power of the old-fashioned codex'. As Robert Darnton's work on the history of communication demonstrates, new media generally do not displace the old, but rather 'enlarge and enrich the information landscape'.⁶⁵

As we noted in our original article, telling the epic story of Australia's past cannot be managed by one discipline alone. To expand the public's understanding, historians and archaeologists need to adopt an interdisciplinary approach that, crucially, involves Indigenous voices. Only then can the deep history of this continent be told with the nuance, subtlety and magnitude it deserves, and perhaps it might shift some of the more entrenched and erroneous views about the past.

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65 Darnton 2009: xiv.

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