

Assessment Task 3 – Experimental History

Hyde Park: The Preservation of Silence, or the Memorialisation of Truth

‘What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale’ – W.E.H. Stanner, Boyer Lecture, 1968.

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Hyde Park, Sydney. June 2020.

‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have always defended their country’ – Yininmadyemi ‘Thou didst let fall’ memorial plaque

I’m in Hyde Park for the first time in over a year, since returning from overseas. The green heart of Sydney is a familiar place and not much has changed. Pathways intersect with the boulevard lined with towering trees, teenagers skateboard around in front of the ANZAC Memorial pool. People lie in patches of sunlight on this warm day, Sydneysiders slowly emerging from months of pandemic isolation.

I’ve come to look. Look more closely than I usually do, pacing through the park headed elsewhere. I’ve seen the giant bullets protruding through the trees near the ANZAC War Memorial many times before, but never before stood at their base and looked up close. I had assumed that the giant bullets were a sculptural piece that was part of the ANZAC Memorial landscape at the south end of the park near Museum Station; another imposing monument to Australia’s national obsession with diggers and battlers. After all, our cities and suburbs are scattered with familiar reminders, men eternalised in bronze. And bullets are a clear representation of war, I thought.

Yininmadyemi is tucked away in Hyde Park, in a leafy enclave near the ANZAC Memorial. It sits upon a piece of land shaped like a boomerang, with small boomerang shapes tessellating into a kaleidoscopic pattern at its base. Four giant metal bullets stand upright, and three lie fallen on the earth (see Appendix 1). These symbolise the survivors and the fallen in war. This war memorial is one of thousands that 'began to proliferate in the Australian landscape and were firmly identified with the nation state after WWI' (Ashton et al 2012, p 4), but not as we know it. Yininmadyemi, the megasized bullets, is specifically dedicated to Indigenous Australians who have served in Australian armed forces, in WWI, WWII and other conflicts since.

Tony Albert, a young Indigenous Australian artist, designed the memorial. His Indigenous grandfather, Eddie Albert, served for Australia in WWII. He willingly fought for the nation at a time in which he was not even counted as a citizen. For this memorial to recognise the sacrifice of Indigenous Australians at war is critical. They have long been forgotten.

Much is still forgotten, swept aside and ignored, from our memorial landscapes. Ashton and Hamilton wrote of memorialisation as a 'mode of expression for legitimating the identities of communities or groups' (Ashton & Hamilton 2001, p 23). But who is responsible for public memorialisation like we see in Hyde Park? Who decides upon the creation of these 'bricks and mortar testimonies of the past and promises of the future' and on what basis (Manderson 2008, p 12)?

Yininmadyemi was opened in 2015, the 100th anniversary of the ANZAC landing at Gallipoli. The opening of this memorial to Indigenous people took place in a year of ANZAC fanfare. Yininmadyemi symbolises a long overdue, more inclusive ANZAC narrative. But it simultaneously fits the mould. It scarcely diverges from the narrative. 'At the local level, Indigenous or migrant voices have to speak in appropriate dialects if they are to be incorporated into local myths and traditions' (Ashton & Hamilton 2001, p 27). Despite more monuments to Indigenous people and ethnic minorities built in Australia in recent years, most are 'politically correct and non-confrontational' (Ashton & Hamilton 2001, p 28).

I look closer. I read the plaque inscribed on the base of one of the bullets. The first line states: 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have always defended their country' (see Appendix 2). It then delves into their service 'in the state colonial forces'.

Hang on a second.

Defended *their* country?

Yes, they defended their land when it was invaded and settled upon without their permission.

They defended their country when it was considered *terra nullius* and the Union Jack was set in the sand.

To me, this line reads like an acknowledgement of frontier warfare. But it is simultaneously brushed over so fast, that it is hard to recognise the subtlety of the language. Many people may not even catch the hint; so limited is general public knowledge of frontier warfare.

Then, I read further down the plaque: 'This memorial on the land of the Gadigal clan pays tribute to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have defended *our* country – the unsung heroes, our brothers and sisters, our mates'. Something doesn't quite add up here.

They start out defending *their* country, a tenuous albeit clear reference to frontier warfare. WWI came and went. Now Aboriginal people are defending *our* country, become *our* mates?

It feels like a play at inclusivity, written by those who hold power and control the narrative. It's more of an attempt to bolster the ANZAC narrative of mateship than it is to acknowledge the truth of *our* history.

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'Remembering means recalling an occurrence honestly and undistortedly so that it becomes part of our very beings. This places high demands on our truthfulness' – former German President Richard von Weizsäcker, May 8 1985

Berlin, Germany. January 2020.

This is probably the tenth time I've walked through the depths of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, usually known as Berlin's Holocaust Memorial or the one with all the concrete

blocks (Appendix 3). I've observed the memorial by myself and with friends and family, engrossed by the monumental memorial in the heart of Berlin. I've gotten lost in twists and turns as shadows move across the top of the concrete blocks on winter days, and summer days.

A thought has crossed my mind many times. Imagine if Australia had a memorial even a fraction of this size commemorating its own genocide? We have multiple Holocaust memorials. We accept that genocide occurred in places like Germany, Rwanda and Cambodia, and that it is the epitome of evil. Yet, accepting crimes on our soil remains a stretch too far. Levi (2007) suggests that Holocaust remembrance has both acted as a form of 'screen memory', to detract from remembering Australia's history, yet at times also as a point of comparison in the backdrop of the History Wars (Levi 2007). 'Holocaust memory can enable a self-critical approach to a nation's history' (Levi 2007, p 127).

Many people often wrongly assume that Germany has always accepted its role as the perpetrators of genocide of the Jews. Germany has come to be viewed as an exemplar for effective remembrance. Yet, Germany suffered a crippling post-war silence, which did not lift substantially in public life until the 1980s (Dirk Moses 2001).

Berlin's now iconic memorial is literally monumental, sitting in the middle of the tourist centre. It is impossible to shy away from. Yet, it is still contested. Its creation was contested, its use is contested, and its size and design are contested. Many saw this monument as emblematic of shame and guilt, 'a football field sized nightmare' (Walser 1998). It isn't perfect. It has been vandalised. But the very fact of its ongoing contestation is an act of public remembrance. Berlin didn't emerge from the rubble of WWII and start building memorials. The city of memorials is the result of decades of reckoning with Germany's own dark, painful history.

Dirk Moses stated 'the genocide issue (in Australia) has become the functional equivalent of the uniqueness of the Holocaust in Germany: the blemish that soils the myth of origin by preventing it from doing the magic work of social integration and healing' (Dirk Moses 2001, p 101). Germany's form of truth-telling, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or 'coming to terms with the past', continually resurfaces and is a feature of everyday life through education and film.

To see anything near this level of truth telling and recognition in Australia, we can't brush over the past. If we are to learn anything from Germany, it's that we can't just get over it and move on, as many continue to suggest.

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'And, as I say, the starting point might be to recognise that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians. It begins, I think, with that act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing' – former Prime Minister of Australia, Paul Keating, 10 December 1992

Hyde Park, Sydney. June 2020.

There's a crowd in Hyde Park. They're on the news. Hyde Park is in the news, not because of Noodle Markets taking place, but because of its monuments.

The statue of Captain James Cook was vandalised one morning before daylight. It's not the first time that someone has taken it into their own hands to correct the inscription stating Cook 'discovered this land in 1770'. But this time, a police force came out the next night to protect the statue from further retaliation. During a global movement fighting for the rights of black and Indigenous people, memorials and monuments are firmly in the picture, hotly contested. This speaks to the ongoing power of men set in stone and placed on pedestals in public life and imagination.

People have been dreaming of toppling Cook's statue for a long time. Tony Albert is one of them. With unpredictably perfect timing, Albert released his latest artwork 'You Wreck Me' in June 2020 (Appendix 4). Albert stars in a video parody of Miley Cyrus' somewhat iconic 'Wrecking Ball' video. But this time, Albert is singing and Albert is the one hanging onto the wrecking ball. It's toppling the head of none other than Cook himself.

Artist Nicholas Galanin, Indigenous to Satkin Alaska, has also been inspired to lay Captain Cook to rest, quite literally. On the 22nd Biennale of Sydney on Cockatoo Island, Galanin has dug a shape into the ground which is designed to fit the statue of Captain Cook from Hyde Park

(Appendix 5). 'Shadow on the land, an excavation and bush burial' makes no mistakes in its purpose.

While it may seem that many people want to knock Cook's head off or bury him, this is far from the case. These ideas are heavily contested, and many, including Prime Minister Scott Morrison, fight to preserve colonial monuments. A \$50 million redevelopment of Botany Bay is set to include a brand new \$3 million statue of Cook (ABC 2018). Back in Hyde Park, the ANZAC Memorial has undergone a mammoth upgrade in the past few years, above ground and underground. It looks more polished than ever. Yet, with all this money injected, Sydney and Canberra War Memorials still make no acknowledgement of frontier wars fought on Australian soil.

Artists like Albert and Galanin are imagining a Hyde Park landscape free of colonial monuments. They create art as a means of public remembrance, leading dialogue and building momentum. Simultaneously, the government is spending millions of dollars on fortifying existing monuments, protecting them with police, and building more colonial monuments. This is contestation. And there is no sign of consensus any time soon.

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'There is never just one way to tell a story, nor just one story to tell, about how a nation came to be, and that is why people argue over which story tells the truth about national origin and identity' – (Levi 2007, p 124)

In Hyde Park, monuments and memorials continue to contradict one another. There are incongruities. A hundred metres from the inscription that Cook 'discovered' Australia is Albert's statement of Aboriginal people defending 'their country'. One is carved in large capital letters; the other is easy to miss, blending into the ANZAC fanfare. The contested memorial landscape of Hyde Park is emblematic of the current state of Australia's reckoning with its founding narrative and identity. There's plenty of space in Hyde Park for monuments that may better represent Australia in ten years, or for the burial ground of colonial statues.

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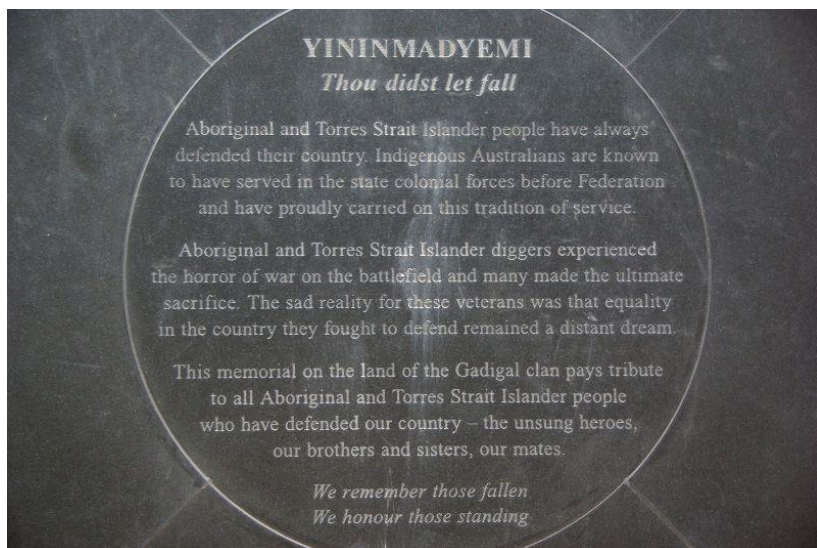
Appendix

Appendix 1



Yininmadyemi thou didst let fall, Tony Albert, 2015, City of Sydney

Appendix 2



Yininmadyemi, inscription

Appendix 3



Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin, dw.de

Appendix 4



'You Wreck Me', Tony Albert, 2020, makingart.work

Appendix 5



'Shadow of the land, an excavation and bush burial', Nicholas Galanin, Biennale of Sydney, 2020.