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Archival poetics: Writing history from the fragments

Abstract:

This paper examines ‘archival poetics’ in contemporary history and fiction writing, with a focus on Mark McKenna’s *An eye for eternity: The life of Manning Clark*, Megan Marshall’s *Margaret Fuller: A new American life* and Kim Scott’s *Benang, from the heart*. It investigates the ways in which the authors of these works move away from the forensic imaginary embodied in a certain kind of historiography’s approach to the archive, to create a more personal, powerful and situated kind of history writing. It argues that these works suggest that history is less about the sublime chaos of the past – which cannot be narrated without duplicity, damage or violence – than how we engage the past, which is, on reflection, an entirely different thing.

Biographical note:

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Historians, by and large, like to deal with certainties rather than uncertainties. To outsiders, their concerns may appear narrowly epistemic – too wholly consumed with what they know, or do not know, with what they can or cannot say, even acknowledging at times that saying ‘we do not know’ may be the ‘essence of good history’ (McKenna 2005: 109). In traditional formulations of history the past is understood as something that is finished, over and gone. The present is seldom apprehended as a continuation of the past, but as separated from the past in a way that is said to be ‘objective’. The idea that history is something produced in the present is often eschewed in favour of an idea of history as something to be read off a cache of dusty documents in the archives of a government institution, or found buried in a ruined attic or damp basement – that is, places where discoveries can be made, fresh documents can be unearthed – where eyes stare, cold dust stains the fingers, and the remains of the past are forensically enquired into (for example, Evans 1997, see also Farge 2013, Steedman 2002 and Darnton 2014).

Rightly or wrongly, a fondness for gothic terminology has led some cultural critics to suggest that history of this sort constitutes itself through a kind of necrological imagining (Schlunke 2004). Take, for example, Roland Barthes famous analysis of Jules Michelet – ‘eater of history’ (1992: 17) – who ‘wandered’ the ‘lonely galleries of the Archives for twenty years’ listening to the ‘distant sufferings of so many souls’ – ‘a dismal harmony, a colossal symphony, whose countless dissonances reached my ear’. Michelet’s aim, often repeated in his ‘Preface to the history of France’, was not merely to bear witness to the dead, but to ‘restore their life to them’; to make the dead live again ([1869] 2013: Location 3275-527). In a much analysed passage, it is the historian’s breath that gives the dead life, ‘as I breathed their dust, I saw them rise up. They rose from the sepulchre’. Barthes famously argued that Michelet’s method represents an act of assimilation or ingestion through which Michelet literally ‘devours the dead’ in a kind of ‘primitive communion’ (1992: 83), through which a new meaning is granted to the dead that is greater than anything their lives originally possessed. Michelet, writes Barthes, ‘was drawing from them a raw, blind, chaotic, incomplete, absurd life, and restoring to them a clear life, a full life’ (83). Benedict Anderson, building on Barthes’ analysis, argues that Michelet could therefore say what the dead ‘really’ meant and ‘really’ thought because the dead not only could not speak but also ‘did not understand’. From then on, writes Anderson, ‘the silence of the dead was no longer an obstacle to the exhumation of their deepest desires’ (1998: 198). For Anderson, these older historical methodologies were complicit with the ideologies of State and Empire.

More recently, historians have begun to argue that Michelet’s narrative methods were more epistemologically complex – and, indeed, politically radical – than these often-quoted passages from Barthes and Anderson would lead us to expect (for sympathetic analyses of Michelet and other nineteenth century historians, see Clive 1989 and Gay 1988). Indeed, the repudiation of nineteenth century empiricism that is such a familiar feature of the post-structuralist critique of history is as much a function of post-structuralism’s fundamental suspicion of narrative – especially the forms of realism

(for example, Barthes 1970) – as it is a reaction to the perceived sense of tyranny or authoritarian ideology inherent in the western historical tradition. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Michelet’s metaphor of history as the ‘Magistrate’, who decides upon the fate of the dead, not infrequently reappears in the work of self-described ‘scientific’ historians, such as Inga Clendinnen, for example, who deploys a not too dissimilar image of the historian as the (self-appointed) ‘clerk of record’ whose function is to bear ‘witness’. Michelet called his method ‘Resurrection’. In a more or less disenchanted age, Clendinnen calls her method ‘Re-Presentation’. As she writes of her own archival research,

had I inserted one false detail, one imputation of motive or sensation not justifiable out of the record (including its exclusions, deformations and silences) I would have falsified an actual human and therefore moral relationship ... between myself and the people I had chosen to ‘re-present’ and between myself and my potential readers, who look to me for History (Clendinnen 1996).

Pursuing history of this sort is perhaps ‘an odd way of being in the world’, as historian Carolyn Steedman somewhat wryly put it (2002: xi). But it is a ‘way of being in the world’ that has given rise to its own form of writing – some of it beautiful writing – that ‘celebrates the constraints’ that it has imposed upon itself. These constraints are ones that historians claim ‘are made by the documents themselves’. As Steedman argues, it is the documents – and the archive more generally – that are said to constrain what may be said and what cannot. It is the documents in the archive that grant liberties, or else ‘forbid’ the saying of certain things (Steedman 2002: xi).

In recent times, this ‘way of being in the world’ – or way of being in the archive specifically – has been disrupted not only by the vulgar, or, at least, ‘vernacular’ (Attwood 2005a), encroachments of novelists and family genealogists, but also by scholars outside the discipline of history who have similarly taken an ‘archival turn’, conducting archival research not only in a material sense, but also in a theoretical sense – spurred on, perhaps, by Jacques Derrida’s declaration that the archive is always inscribed as a desire to locate and possess a point of origin. Accordingly, ‘there is no political power without control of the archive, or without memory’ (Derrida 1996: 4). The fascination with, and suspicion of, the archive that informs contemporary cultural theory is also anchored in the works of Michel Foucault in which he argues that the archive is not so much what can be said – or even the limits of the sayable – but is rather the means or system through which things are established (1982, 1994). In other words, the archive is no longer considered to be just another physical or institutional space, but has become a site for, and symbol of, a much wider debate over contested epistemologies, ethics and politics. Recently, cultural theory has expended much effort in drawing attention to the dangers inherent in the historian’s epistemic method – specifically, the danger that historians may have learnt to ask only those questions that the archive can answer.

This is far from being a narrowly theoretical problem. It is also a practical and material one, especially when considering groups and entire peoples who have not –

like Europeans – written their histories into documents. Historians too, have begun the task of asking such questions (for example, Burton 2005, Paisley 2004, Haebich 2014), and in areas such as Aboriginal history have, since the 1970s, been bringing the evidence of anthropology, archeology, linguistics, oral history and other scholarly traditions into their analyses (for a summary of shifting methodologies in Aboriginal history, see Attwood 2005, 2005a, 2001, and for a criticism of Attwood’s approach from a writer’s perspective, see Birch 2004: 137-58). However, as Antoinette Burton has argued, the problem is not just the absence of evidence but the means and manner of the archive’s construction (2005: 1-24). In a recent essay, Anna Haebich articulates this problem with specific reference to the archive of the Western Australian Department of Indigenous Affairs. Haebich writes,

What the archive speaks about is the governance of subject Aboriginal populations through rulings, judgments, instructions, economies and calculations and their sickness, deaths, punishments, removals, institutionalisation and dire living conditions. The general lack of humanity is distressing for any reader but for Aboriginal people reading about their families it can be devastating (2014: 24).

The problem is not just the acts of violence described in the archive, but the fact that the archive’s violence is ongoing. The archive’s violence is that which constantly re-inscribes Aboriginal people as the brutalised objects (and not the subjects) of history. Haebich argues that archives must not be considered as static repositories, as immutable artefacts of the past, but that archives need to be understood as dynamic and changing institutions, influenced not only by internal reorganisations, but also through shifts in use, and contact with external systems of knowledge, including Aboriginal knowledge and culture. Haebich argues that this is especially apparent in the use that successive Aboriginal writers have made of the DIA archives, including writers Jack Davies, Doris Pilkington, Kim Scott and Stephen Kinnane, who have sought to imaginatively negotiate and dramatically rework the documents contained in the archive, specifically in works of memoir, drama and fiction. As Fiona Paisley argues, archives are not ‘dusty places, out of the way of the world’ but ‘remarkably contemporary places’. They ‘contain within them decisions that not only have impacted upon individual lives, but also have sought to govern the futures of whole peoples.’ For this reason, what is most evident in any encounter with an archive is the ‘inseparability of ourselves from history’ (Paisley 2004: 122).

In other words, the work of these writers and historians draws attention to the fact that any engagement with the archive is an engagement that necessarily extends well beyond the epistemic. There is therefore a pressing need to think more philosophically about the idea of the historian or writer’s relationship to the histories they tell. In making an argument for an expanded, more thoughtful encounter, the philosopher of history Herman Paul (2014) draws on a vocabulary found in the works of Mark Day (2008, 2008a), who coined the term ‘relations to the past’ specifically to draw attention to the variety of elements that make up a given society’s perception of the past that go well beyond the merely epistemic. Neither Day nor Paul overlook or disregard epistemic or knowledge-based relations, but rather aim to tease out the

further relations that are ‘built upon, underlie, or are otherwise entangled with historiographical epistemology’ (Day 2008a: 418). Day argues that these include moral, political and aesthetic relations, as well as what he calls ‘material relations’, a term used to refer to the ways in which any given historian is also a product of the past that he or she aspires to write. Paul, in building on Day’s analysis, suggests a range of other relations, including economic and religious ones (2014: 4). I would like to draw attention to the significance of affective and emotional relations, which, as Sarah Pinto has argued, are ‘centred upon the workings of emotion within historical representation, and particularly on the historical and political work these emotions have the potential to perform’ (2010: 193).

The striking aspect of Day and Paul’s work lies not only in their mutual acknowledgement of the great variety of a society’s ‘relations to the past’, but also the fact of their entanglement. Significantly, Paul points out that the variety of relations ‘should not be seen as *contradicting* a type of philosophy of history focused on epistemological matters, but as *enriching*’ it (2014: 4, original emphasis, see also Paul 2011). He further argues that this does not mean that all these relations to the past will sit ‘harmoniously’ together – they are just as likely to be in ‘tension’ with one another. Hence, the vocabulary of ‘relations to the past’ is presented not only as a means of specifying these ‘tensions’ and ‘harmonies’, but also as a way of reminding historians that a given society’s understanding of the past should not be reduced to the purely epistemic. In this sense, the idea of ‘relations to the past’ raises the possibility that a given society’s understanding of the past may actually be impoverished – or indeed deformed – if it is confined to narrowly epistemic questions.

In Australia, a recent example of such deformation is found in Keith Windschuttle’s *The fabrication of Aboriginal history* (2002), a revisionist account of European settlement that seeks to overturn widely accepted historical studies of violence against Aboriginal people on the colonial frontier. In addition to the book’s dubious historical claims (see, for example, Manne 2003), which are a product of its methods of ‘crazed’ or inconsistent ‘documentary positivism’ (Moses 2003: 353), attention also needs to be paid to the way in which the work seeks to detach any kind of emotion – that is, any sense of human empathy – from its ruthless counting of the dead. Charged with a lack of compassion that falls into the terrain of the unethical, Windschuttle famously replied in a television interview that ‘You can’t really be serious about feeling sympathy for someone who died 200 years ago’ (cited in McIntyre and Clark 2003: 167).

The works discussed in the second half of this essay – including Mark McKenna’s *An eye for eternity: The life of Manning Clark* (2011), Megan Marshall’s *Margaret Fuller: A new American life* (2013), and Kim Scott’s *Benang, from the heart* (1999) – all foreground a concern with the archive, with a particular focus on an ethics of engagement. These works move away from the would-be forensic approach embodied in a certain kind of historiography’s approach to the ‘bones’ of the past, acknowledging that certain ‘bones’ were not preserved, while many others were deliberately arranged for future discovery – either condition requiring a more

imaginatively engaged historical encounter, necessarily resulting in a more personal, situated, kind of history writing. These histories are also preeminently literary works, in the sense of being deliberately ambiguous, and open to a range of interpretations. The texts all contain elements of reflectivity through which the author's concerns and acts of choice are foregrounded by aesthetics means, which, in turn, makes these choices available for analysis.

By interrogating these works, this essay attempts to understand what is new or different in the way in which the texts are representing – and make sense of – their pasts. These books foreground a new awareness that archive is not innocent. It has designs on the future, just as the future has designs on the past, for which it makes use of the archive. These works suggest that perhaps history is less about the sublime chaos of the past – which cannot be narrated without duplicity, damage or violence – than how we engage the past, which is, on reflection, an entirely different thing.

Mark McKenna's *An eye for eternity: The life of Manning Clark*

History is – or, perhaps, ought to be – a struggle with uncertainty. But if historians struggle with their sources, too often little trace of this struggle is to be found on the surface of their elaborately ordered texts. Historians may labour for long hours in the archives. They may give interviews or write books and essays about their subjective relationships to these struggles (Burton 2005, Steedman 2002, Farge 2013), but few actually dare to frame, let alone foreground, the sheer chanciness of this struggle in the context of the official narration of their histories. Mark McKenna's biography of Manning Clark is a remarkable piece of writing for precisely this reason. The second chapter entitled 'Manning Clark, MS7550' describes McKenna's encounter with the Clark collection in the National Library of Australia, an archive containing 200 boxes of Clark's personal and professional papers. 'Stretching eight metres in length and climbing some four metres high, they almost touch the ceiling', writes McKenna. Even in its incomplete state, lacking the papers that are held at Manning Clark House, McKenna suggests that the collection is double the size of most of Clark's contemporaries, and ranks among the largest personal archives in Australia. 'My recurring dream', writes McKenna, 'has been one of being buried under an avalanche of cardboard boxes, each with the label "Manning Clark, MS7550"' (2011: 29).

This authorial aside enacts a slightly comic undercutting of the historian's professional persona, engaged in what Lord Acton once called 'the heroic study of records' ([1895] 1906: 7). (Of course, in contesting this persona, McKenna also establishes and reaffirms it, albeit in way that builds a bridge of empathy and understanding with his intended reader.) But it is not just the large quantities of documents that disturb the author. Rather, it is the way the archive reveals the older historian at work 'sculpting the documentary monument of his own life'. The archive is 'extraordinary', writes McKenna, because it is 'scattered throughout with notes to the biographer'. McKenna argues that Clark was 'doctoring his papers' heavily since the 1970s, possibly since the publication of the first volume of his six volume history

of Australia, when Clark began to see himself ‘as a future subject’ (2011: 28). Hence, McKenna tells us, ‘When a correspondent’s name is unclear, [Clark] writes the name in capital letters.’ He assigns categories, draws signs and arrows pointing the reader back to summaries of who the correspondent is, and the strength or meaning of the correspondent’s relationship to him. ‘[Clark] leaves finding aids’, writes McKenna, ‘(“for notes of this speech see small blue-covered notebook “The Trip to the Gulf”’) and makes sure that the biographer does not miss crucial information (“see also SMH 18/12/76”)’ (32). ‘Far from resisting the biographer’, writes McKenna, ‘Clark courts the biographer at every turn’ (29). He delights in ‘sowing doubt and ambiguity and in layering the lines of his life with mystery’. He poses riddles, paints his virtues in glowing terms then suggests the ‘whole edifice of invention is a charade’ (34). Nor was Clark’s wife Dymphna immune to leaving material traces of her own version of events in ways that constantly prompt the biographer to shift his view of the couple’s famously fraught relationship. The result, writes McKenna, ‘is a richly layered archive, an individual past constantly being written and fought over’ (35).

McKenna’s portrait of Manning Clark cannot be said to harbour anything akin to what cultural theorists call naive empiricism. Rather, it retains a deep commitment to, and acknowledgement of, the perspectival nature of experience. The chameleon-like subject of the biography is constructed through the fabric of the work, weaved together from a myriad of often conflicting recollections gathered from colleagues and contemporaries. McKenna also takes care to acknowledge the depth of his own material relation to the history he tells, an acknowledgement made through carefully crafted digressions, including the ghostly memory of the author as a student brushing by Manning Clark in a university corridor, but only recognising him ambiguously and in retrospect (23). ‘In history the writer should always be visible,’ writes McKenna elsewhere (2005: 108).¹

Openness to ambiguity and uncertainty is very much a characteristic of McKenna’s work. His writing constantly underscores the essential fragility of our relations to the past. And in this, he is far from being alone. One of the recurring motifs in Australian history writing is the figure of loss. Australian history is deeply inscribed as a story of loss, of lost lives, lost utopias, or lost opportunities. There can occasionally be a radical edge to this narrative of loss, as it collides with the story of nation building. But if one had to choose among the literary tropes for a description of McKenna’s oeuvre, it would not be tragedy so much as elegy. His work captures the elegy’s mood of grave reflection, and the author is not, one suspects, entirely immune from sensing a certain kind of romance in the historian’s task.

Megan Marshall’s *Margaret Fuller: A new American life*

There are surprisingly few histories that wrestle with the uncertainties of the archival paper chase in the manner of McKenna’s work. Megan Marshall’s life of Margaret Fuller is one in a small handful of other examples, opening with a sustained contemplation of a diary found in the Fuller archive. Indeed, the paperback edition of

Marshall's work is prefaced by a photographic reproduction of a page taken from this diary – the last diary that survived the shipwreck that swept away Fuller, her young Italian husband, and their two-year-old son, and was found packed in a chest that floated safely to the shore. The hurried, antique script is almost indecipherable to the casual reader, though Marshall assures her audience that the hand is not baffling or mysterious, but 'familiar' and merely 'looping'. The diary as a material artefact of the past is constantly represented as covered with the signs of age and history. 'The green pasteboard cover had pulled away from its backing; the pages were warped at the edges in even ripples' (Marshall 2013: xv), and strikingly it was placed before the author 'in a protective foam cradle on the library desk' (xv).

The image of the polystyrene-like cradle sits uncannily in the text. It is an image that does not mark off the present from the past so much as it represents the eruption of the past in the present. Nor is it the only unromantic object in this scene. 'I opened the cover [of the diary] and read what appeared to be a message directed to me,' writes Marshall (xv). The message is in the form of a note inscribed on an index card and gives rise to an extended meditation on the artefacts of the past, in which Marshall senses not only Fuller's hand at work in the archives, but the hands of many others. 'The words, written on a white index card, had not been penned in Margaret Fuller's flowing longhand', writes Marshall, 'but rather pencilled in a primly vertical script formed in a decade closer to mine' (xv). Has it been penned by a descendant, Marshall speculates, a librarian or an archivist?

Marshall takes care to indicate the heavily sedimented layers of the Fuller archive at several points in the early chapters of the work. Somebody, for example, had labelled a piece of writing by a six-year-old Fuller, 'First letter'. 'All of her survivors understand that there are, or will be, biographers, historians, students of literature who care to know' (1). Although Marshall senses that there are many hands at work in the archive, thickening the documents with layers of interpretation, her biography, unlike McKenna's, is haunted by an idea that is not so much about the fragility as the essential recoverability of the past; an idea that the past clings as vestiges beneath the layers of interpretation. '[F]irst it is the father who treasures his daughter's message of concern,' writes Marshall, 'this lurching unpunctuated parade of runes, from the moment he unfolds the page' (1). In a way that is crucially different to McKenna, the archive is seen to consist of layers of judgment from which Marshall seeks to release what she understands to be the 'real' meaning of Fuller's life and reputation. Hence, she starts her book with the very first judgment, signposted on the librarian's index card inserted into the waterlogged diary. 'Two brief lines carried a judgment on the volume, and on Margaret herself,' writes Marshall, "'Nothing personal, public events merely'" (xv).

This judgment acts as the rhetorical pivot that introduces Marshall's central argument. 'How extraordinary it was to find a woman's private journal filled with such accounts', the writer responds. They are, after all, 'accounts' of the public events that had held the whole of Europe in thrall, including the campaigns of Garibaldi and the Roman Revolution of 1849. 'Would any reader fault a man – especially an

internationally known writer and activist, as Margaret Fuller was – for keeping a journal confined to public events through a springtime of revolution?’ (xvi). Marshall’s response to her anonymous interlocutor in the archive frames a central moment of contingency in which Marshall’s own subjective investment in women’s history meets a point of resistance in the documents as they have been stored in the archive. From this pivot, Marshall’s biography begins.

In contrast to McKenna, who understands his task as one of challenging the elaborate puzzle his chimerical protagonist had constructed for him – ‘the detective work lies in dismantling the archival monument Clark has left behind and finding different tracks’ (2011: 29-30) – it is not unfair to say that Marshall, like other more classical ‘archival detectives’ (Keen 2003), participates in an essentially romantic belief that the past inheres somewhere in the ‘dust’ of the documents. Hovering there, like the ghosts of Michelet. Indeed, the trope of the literary romance is strongly foregrounded in Marshall’s work. ‘I have brought out lights and deepened shadows,’ writes Marshall, with the verve of a writer confident that she is writing into a tradition that is part myth and part history, but none the less ‘real’ for that (2013: xx). Marshall finds support in the work of Fuller’s contemporary, the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, who wrote, ‘When a writer calls his work a Romance, he wishes to claim a certain latitude’. Marshall makes it clear that her history is a ‘factual narrative’. But she also claims ‘We propose some liberating measures’, this time quoting Fuller, the subject of her biography as if speaking directly to the author across an ocean of time (xx).

McKenna’s ‘geologies of fable’

McKenna and Marshall both create a dialogue with the archive, and between the present and the past, mediated through the subjectivity of the writer. But McKenna seems more clearly conscious of the archive’s limitations, and therefore experiences the need to look elsewhere in search of his history. The archive, for McKenna, is a source of both truth and deceit, and he argues that history must therefore remain open not only to the gaps and silences, but also to other forms of knowledge, including what he calls the ‘geologies of fable’, that is, the oral histories that he has gathered from ‘out there’.

McKenna became powerfully acquainted with this ‘geology of fable’ in writing *Looking for Blackfellas Point*, his history of Aboriginal dispossession on the far south coast of Australia. He writes:

It was not history I could document or prove, but the survival and power of these stories was undeniable. Over time, I came to see how many of the stories of Aboriginal death had become rural myths for the whole history of dispossession, a grasping for what had occurred on the frontier. I also realised that the reasons why the stories survived and were constantly retold mattered as much as whether they were true. Instead of dismissing this ‘geology of fable’ because it could not be substantiated, it enriched the history I was writing (McKenna 2006: 108).

McKenna is adamant that the task of the historian is not to resolve or judge, to moralise or proselytise, but rather to foreground the inconsistencies:

The impulse to resolve dissonances, to smooth out the cracks, to seek order where there is none, is one the historian constantly has to fight. Literary history leaves a space, a window through which readers have the capacity to wonder, imagine and discover the past (109).

It is the element of the literary that distinguishes McKenna's histories. His elegies regularly cross the divide between the past and the present, opening a space between what was, and what ought to have been. This is a space of ambiguity and unease. It is a space in which, as Hayden White, following de Certeau, once argued 'something has to be done' (White 2005: 338). In other words, the lines between what was, what is, and what ought to have been, that constantly traverse the pages of McKenna's work, also define the space of ethics. 'And it is this very incompleteness and ambiguity that gives history its life, power and mystery,' writes McKenna (2006: 109).

But there are – perhaps – limits to this approach. What does a writer or a historian do, for example, when dealing with archives of extreme violence, such as those located at the Western Australian Department of Indigenous Affairs?

Kim Scott's *Benang, from the heart*

Foucault's 'The lives of infamous men' describes a certain kind of archive that defies enunciation. In this essay, Foucault tells the story of his many encounters with the records of obscurely lived lives – mad, bad, or merely unwanted lives whose only recognition came from their violent encounters with power. The only register of their existence reduced to 'ashes in the few sentences that struck them down' (Foucault 1979: 76-92). The problem, Foucault argues, is that the absence of information about a life effectively derealises it, and the essay becomes a meditation on how to represent these lives in a way that preserves their affective force.

This idea of an archive that defies enunciation seems to be an apt introduction to Kim Scott's *Benang, from the heart*, a novel in which Scott tells the story of Harley, a young Aboriginal man, who must come to terms with the violence of a large personal archive that contains the relics of his now crippled grandfather's eugenic project. The early pages of the novel recount Harley's first encounter with this archive, specifically with the documents that chart his grandfather's attempt to erase indigenous identity through the progressive dilution of blood and skin colour, in which Harley has been marked out to be the 'first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line' (Scott 1999: 11). Scott writes:

I found myself hovering over sets of documents, things filed in plastic envelopes in rumbling drawers and snapping files. Certificates of birth, death, marriage; newspaper clippings, police reports; letters (personal; from this or that historical society); parish

records; cemetery listings; books, photographs ... (25)

The passage describes the logic of categorisation and division on which the power and apparent perpetuity of colonial discourse is based. Scott writes:

Captions to the photographs; full-blood, half-caste (first cross), quadroon, octoroon. There was a page of various fractions, possible permutations growing more and more convoluted. Of course, in the language of such mathematics it is simple; from the whole to the partial and back again. This much was clear; I was a fraction of what I might have been.

A caption beneath my father's photograph:

Octoroon grandson (mother quarter caste [No. 2], father Scottish). Freckles on the face are the only trace of colour apparent (26).

Scott's novel eloquently foregrounds the problem that the archive – in this case, the archives of the Western Australian Department of Indigenous Affairs, where Scott conducted his research into his own family's history – only speaks with the subjectivity of the European. It is not the gaps and silences of the archive that are the difficulty, but rather the violence with which the archive speaks, and the way in which the archive burns each of the individuals it encounters. Hence, any attempt to tell a story about Scott's family is in a sense doomed, not only because of the traumatic nature of events, not only because of the brutality of the participants, but also because of the way that the archive frames this trauma.

Scott responds to the logic of the colonial archive with a different kind of 'meaning-making'. This 'meaning-making' is not only in the form of the counter-histories – gathered from 'out there' – that Harley discovers as he accompanies his uncles around his ancestral lands. Rather, Scott's novel deploys a deliberately incommensurable logic that is embedded in the different form of representation that he uses. It is the 'meaning-making' of a different kind of language and poetry that cannot be neutralised, categorised or assimilated. He achieves this through the invention of a narrative form that defies not only history, but also the form and 'meaning-making' of the European novel as well. These strategies can at times be bewildering for the reader, quite deliberately so. The text constantly refuses history's more 'distant', more 'rational' picture, just as it refuses the traditional novel's more 'organic' and 'meaningful' one – producing a kind of anti-novel that challenges all the linear conventions of realism, including time, plot, character and chronology. Scott's novel never allows the reader to push back the past, to evade it, or to experience it as separate. He does not give 'meaning' to the violence of the past, because this is impossible. He does, however, give the reader clues as to how they might approach it. Scott writes not about the 'chronology' or 'context' of events, for example, but about the processes of repression and finding out – of recounting, representing and being unable to recount or represent. In this way, the novel presents us with a very different kind of 'relations to the past'. It is only by appropriating colonial records into a fictional world that the author is able to make us feel the affective force of the lives

that the archive otherwise burns.

Historical novels are neither history nor fiction. Of necessity, therefore, they constantly aggravate and question the relations between the two. This is especially the case in reading a novel like *Benang*, which needs to be understood not only as a ‘historical novel’, but also as an exemplary form of a kind of writing that has recently come to be known as ‘witness literature’ – that is, stories written by the survivors of the century’s great traumas and their children. To bear ‘witness’ or give ‘testimony’ is strongly associated with ideas of truth, in the sense that the giving of testimony is an engagement in an act of solidarity – it stakes a claim for what John Frow (2001), in an essay on the *Stolen Generations*, called ‘discursive justice’. Paradoxically, to give witness in a fictional work such as *Benang* is to call upon your reader to listen to what you have to say and not dismiss it as a fiction. It disturbs, and questions everything.

Conclusion

Other writers have featured the archive as image, motif or theme in their fictional works. In *Possession* (1990), AS Byatt famously conjured up an elaborately faked archive that described the works of two fictitious Victorian poets. In *The English patient* (1993), Michael Ondaatje’s eponymous character carried around a heavily annotated copy of the histories of Herodotus, while his *Collected works of Billy the Kid* (1996) comprised a cache of poems allegedly written by the novel’s protagonist. More recently, Peter Carey produced yet another set of fabulous documentary fakes in his *True history of the Kelly gang* (2005), a novel that purports to be a package of documents drawn from an archive from the Melbourne Public Library – which, of course, doesn’t exist. The histories that are the focus of this essay seem to do something that is quite different to these earlier and better-known postmodern fakes. They are not ‘Faking it’ in a sense that had interested me in an essay written some years ago (Nelson 2007). Their characteristic gesture is not irony, but sincerity. The relationship they construct with their archival sources is a living and affective one. They are less concerned with being in the past, than the idea of engaging with it.

Endnotes

1. In contrast to certain critics of Edward Gibbon, for example, one of whom famously condemned the historian for the way in which the ‘personal pronoun’ is of ‘perpetual and disgusting occurrence’ throughout the author’s work (Anon 1820).

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