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Passing on the Past: contemplating historical inheritance in settler-colonial society

I've got all the histories of my great grandparents, my grandparents on both sides, and my mum's. I've got all the welfare stories from the welfare days when she was a Stolen Generation—taken away. I've got all her history, plus her oral history that she told me about.

*Trevor from Derby*¹

Is there anything you have inherited from the past, or is there anything you would like to pass on? It's a question I asked 100 people from around Australia as part of a recent project into historical consciousness. I asked because there has been increasing interest in the processes of historical connection in recent years: for example, how do people make meaning from the past? And why is that sense of historical subjectivity so important for our sense of self?² Critically, the histories we are bequeathed and leave behind are inseparable from this process of day-to-day history making. Historical relics (complete and fragmentary, material and non-material) handed down to us, and passed on in turn, are central to the narratives and subjectivities we compose about ourselves.³ And yet, despite increasing research into historical consciousness in recent years,⁴ there is still much to be understood about its hereditary function. For example,

¹ Participant names have been changed

² Carlos Kölbl and Lisa Konrad, 'Historical Consciousness in Germany: Concept, Implementation, Assessment,' in *New Directions in Assessing Historical Thinking*, ed. Kadriye Ercikan and Peter Seixas (New York: Routledge, 2015), 17–28; Peter Seixas, *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Maria Grever, Ben Pelzer, and Terry Haydn, 'High School Students' Views on History,' *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 43, no. 2 (2011): 207–229; Jörn Rüsen, 'Preface,' in *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness*, ed. Jürgen Straub (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), vii–xii.

³ Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews,' *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 1 (2004): 65–93; Lynn Abrams, 'Memory as Both Source and Subject of Study: The Transformations of Oral History,' in *Writing the History of Memory*, ed. Stefan Berger and Bill Nivens (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 89–109.

⁴ For example: Peter Seixas (ed.), *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Anna Clark and Carla Peck (eds.), *Contemplating Historical Consciousness: Notes from the Field* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019); Sirkka Ahonen, 'Historical Consciousness: A Viable Paradigm for History Education?' *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 37, no. 6 (2005): 697–707; Carlos Kölbl and Lisa Konrad, 'Historical Consciousness in Germany: Concept, Implementation, Assessment', in *New Directions in Assessing Historical Thinking*, edited by Kadriye Ercikan and Peter Seixas, 17–28 (New York: Routledge, 2015); Jörn Rüsen, 'Forming Historical Consciousness: Towards a Humanistic History Didactics', *Antitesis* 5, no. 10

what does historical inheritance look like? How does it influence our individual and collective historical consciousnesses? And what happens to our historical consciousness when that history is unknown?

In response, the *Private Lives/Public History* project was designed to explore (1) the ways people connect to the past, and why; (2) how people negotiate public and official historical discourses with their own, personal engagements with the past; and (3), as this chapter explores, how people see themselves in the process of historical inheritance. The research confirmed inheritance is significant in forming and mediating historical consciousness: participants described a rich material culture they had received that included artefacts as well as deep connections to place and the built environment. It also revealed historical inheritance operates in many ways: as well as those material connections to the past, participants described in detail the stories, values and cultural identities they had inherited and sought to pass on. Critically, some also described the influence of silence, gaps and omissions in their historical inheritance that inflected their historical consciousness.

It's that particular contusion of historical consciousness, prominent in one group of research participants—Indigenous Australians from Derby in north-western Australia—that I want to focus on in this paper. They comprised only eight of the one hundred participants I spoke with around the country, but the forms of historical consciousness they described raise important questions about using material cultural analysis to 'do history' in settler-colonial societies, and indeed whether the term 'historical consciousness' might also need more work to accommodate such erasure.

The *Private Lives/Public History* project

My community research into historical consciousness has been influenced by several larger, national studies. Twenty years ago, historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen published the findings from a survey of around 1400 Americans that was motivated by a curious paradox: politicians and the media denounced what they saw as a widespread historical illiteracy among the general public; meanwhile, an explosion of historical production and consumption—what

(2012): 519–537; Jürgen Straub (ed.), *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2005.

the authors termed ‘popular history making’—was equally apparent.⁵ Based on that pioneering work in the US, similarly large-scale projects were completed in Australia and Canada using quantitative and qualitative surveys.⁶ Such research overturned assumptions that it was historians who practiced history and were the arbiters of historical knowledge. It revealed a widespread community disconnection from official national narratives, which participants described as being too prescribed and unrelated to their own lives; while also noting an explosion in the popular contemplation of history.⁷

Although participants in those studies struggled to connect with official historical narratives, such as the history they learnt at school, personal and intimate histories of their families and communities often generated strong historical connections. Most kept objects to pass on to their own children or grandchildren. (In the *Canadians and Their Pasts* study, for example, researchers found that 75% of respondents had an heirloom they wished to pass on to the next generation.)⁸ They looked at family photographs, participated in family reunions, compiled genealogies, visited museums, heritage trails and historical societies; they talked about the past with their friends and families; and they avidly consumed history—in the form of historical fiction, documentaries and popular history books.⁹ So much of this history-making reflects what seems to be a widespread urge to develop a sense of historical ‘composure’ in individual and community identities. This term, drawn from oral history, describes the way history helps our sense of subjectivity.¹⁰ Meanwhile, using sociologist Erik Erikson’s term of ‘generativity’, historian Anna Green also senses the importance of the passing on family stories not simply for developing our own historical sensibilities, but to the development and care of

⁵ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Margaret Conrad, Jocelyn Létourneau, and David Northrup, ‘Canadians and Their Pasts: An Exploration in Historical Consciousness,’ *The Public Historian* 31, no. 1 (2009): 15–34, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2009.31.1.15>; Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); Diane Ravitch and Chester E Jnr Finn, *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?: A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

⁶ Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton, *History at the Crossroads: Australians and the Past* (Ultimo, NSW: Halstead Press, 2010), 54; Conrad, Létourneau, and Northrup, ‘Canadians and Their Pasts: An Exploration in Historical Consciousness.’

⁷ Ashton and Hamilton, *History at the Crossroads*, 10, 54; Conrad, Létourneau, and Northrup, ‘Canadians and Their Pasts: An Exploration in Historical Consciousness,’ 30–31.

⁸ Margaret Conrad et al., *Canadians and Their Pasts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 30.

⁹ Paul & Paula Hamilton Ashton, ‘At Home with the Past: Background and Initial Findings from the National Survey,’ *Australian Cultural History* 22 (2003): 3; Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 20; Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, ‘How Americans Use and Think about the Past,’ in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 273.

¹⁰ Summerfield, ‘Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews,’ 69.

the next generation.¹¹ In other words, historical consciousness works across generations as well as within them.

What's revealing is the *materiality* of much of that activity. Connections to the past are frequently made through material culture—by looking at photos, compiling scrapbooks, visiting museums, walking heritage trails, and passing on personal relics. In turn, the significance of objects and places in the process of historical consciousness demonstrates the need for a material cultural analysis to understand it.

Notably, these national studies (in Australia, Canada and the US) also emphasised the particularity of Indigenous historical connections and engagement in settler-colonial societies.¹² They acknowledged the political potency of Indigenous family and community history-making as a response to historical silence and silencing. And they suggested that Indigenous connections to the past importantly complicate and enrich understandings of historical consciousness.¹³

My own research did not reproduce those broad, statistically representative surveys. Instead, I attempted to map historical consciousness on the ground, as it were. Five communities were chosen to conduct this qualitative study using a purposive sampling method as a way to generate a breadth of socio-economic, cultural and geographic background among participants:¹⁴ I visited the communities of Marrickville (a municipality in inner Sydney), Chatswood (a community in Sydney's affluent north shore), Brimbank (a multicultural and working class community in outer western Melbourne), Rockhampton (a large rural town in Central Queensland), and Derby (a remote town with a large Indigenous population in far North-western Australia).

Both individuals and focus groups were interviewed for the project and were approached through community organisations such as seniors' centres and sporting clubs, as well as university classes, migrant resource centres and youth groups. Using this method enabled me to focus on particular regions and demographics and assess the historical consciousness of urban and rural Australians, for example, or migrants, older Australians, or

¹¹ A. Green, 'Intergenerational Family Stories: Private, Parochial, Pathological?,' *Journal of Family History*, October 22, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0363199013506987>.

¹² Ashton and Hamilton, *History at the Crossroads*; Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*; Conrad et al., *Canadians and Their Pasts*.

¹³ See, for example, Maria Nugent, 'Aboriginal Family History: Some Reflections,' *Australian Cultural History* 22 (2003): 143–153; Fabri Blacklock, 'Telling It Our Way: Koori History in NSW,' *Australian Cultural History* 22 (2003): 155–160.

¹⁴ Tim Phillips and Philip Smith, 'What Is "Australian"? Knowledge and Attitudes Among a Gallery of Contemporary Australians,' *Australian Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 2 (2000): 206–7.

Indigenous people—as this paper explores in relation to historical inheritance and material culture. Over the course of a year I listened to about twenty-five community conversations as a way of tracking the ways people think about history in the context of the places they live, the people they talk to and the communities they share.¹⁵

Inheritance

Like those larger studies, the *Private Lives/Public History* project confirmed the importance of material culture to the concept of historical consciousness. When I asked if they had inherited something special from the past, participants frequently mentioned the special things they had been given and wanted to pass on. At the Rockhampton Historical Society, Fran had kept:

Um, Dad's hat, from the '60s. You know, every countryman wore a hat to town. You come to town once a week, you wore a hat. So I've kept Dad's hat. My mother's embroidery, my grandmother's embroidery, and my aunt's embroidery. They're just a few, there's lots of others, but just those sorts of things.

Fran's friend Marie from the History Society had kept the 'doily holder bought at Jenolan Caves on my mother's honeymoon in 1931'. Meanwhile her daughter was 'anxious to keep my grandfather's watch'. Selena, a Greek Australian university student from Melbourne was collecting Greek recipes from her family: 'I'm basically getting all the recipes from my mum, and what she's gotten from her mum and her mum', she said. 'I'm actually making this now ... and I know my sisters want to do the same thing.'

Place was also significant in many participants' sense of historical inheritance and connectedness, confirming Dolores Hayden's observation about the 'power of place' in relation to historical consciousness.¹⁶ For example, a place from her parents' history particularly resonated with Debra, a member of a Chatswood synagogue: 'I think the place that I felt really connected to in the past was the concentration camp that my parents were in', she explained. 'I went there with my children when I first went back to Czechoslovakia in the early 'nineties, after the fall of communism. And we went out there on a very cold winter's day and had a private tour by a Jewish guy, and it was unbelievable.' Even more mundane places can convey powerful historical connections, as Julia from Rockhampton explained, echoing historian David

¹⁵ The project was published in 2016 as: Anna Clark, *Private Lives, Public History* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2016).

¹⁶ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995).

Glassberg's insistence that 'Our sense of place and history are inextricably intertwined.'¹⁷ Most weeks Julia took the short drive out of town to the place where her parents were buried at the local cemetery. 'I like to sit there, actually, and just reflect', she said. 'It's so beautiful there, looking to the mountains, and I really feel connected there.'

Such comments reveal the intersection of inheritance, material culture and historical consciousness. They also demonstrate the 'agency' of that material, as historians such as Karen Harvey and Beverly Lemire have observed.¹⁸ For some participants, their historical inheritance in the form of recipes—portable, knowledge-based, translatable—is evidence of an enduring migrant heritage; others, such as Fran's father's hat, hints at gender, class and land-ownership in mid-twentieth century rural Australia; meanwhile, place also offers a physical and tangible connection to the past for many Australians. Material culture not only acts as a tangible link to the past but can reanimate it in the present. When Willa from Chatswood described the sense of loss following her mother's death she noted how her mother had been an archive of her own life story: 'You know, she had recipes, she had everything. She was like a walking encyclopaedia of *our* life and the way *we*, our family, did things.' Willa describes how her mother had been a living archive of their family history: it's a powerful articulation of how intimate material culture not only remembers or invokes our sense of the past, but also enacts it. Taken together, these participants articulate a form of embodied historical connectedness and even enduring love—through materiality itself.

Aboriginal historical inheritance in Derby

For the eight Aboriginal participants in Derby, however, that comfortable historical connectedness visible other interviews was often missing. After all, what sort of historical inheritance is even possible when families have been forcibly separated from each other and from country? Hannah, an Aboriginal teacher, explicitly framed her response in those terms when asked how connected she felt to her family history:

See, my parents ... were in Moola Bulla, which is like a station that kept all the kids, and they were meant to be taught trades—like my dad was taught mechanics and my

¹⁷ David Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 125.

¹⁸ Karen Harvey, 'Historians, Material Culture and Materiality,' in *History and Material Culture*, ed. Karen Harvey (Milton Park; New York: Routledge, 2018), 6.; Beverly Lemire, 'Draping the Body and Dressing the Home: The Material Culture of Textiles and Clothes in the Atlantic World, c. 1500-1800,' in *History and Material Culture*, ed. Karen Harvey (Milton Park; New York: Routledge, 2018), 101–2.

mother was a domestic [servant]. But, you know, they used to recall going hungry and things like that, and having to sleep under the house, because they didn't have any proper shelter. They were just taken there on trucks and left to their own devices. You know, and the government took them away from loving families to a situation like that.

Derby is a small, remote town that fringes the far north-west of the Australian continent and the eastern reaches of the Indian ocean. It was created to service pastoral stations on a vast and violent frontier in the late nineteenth century. Today, Derby is also an administrative centre for local Aboriginal groups who were dispossessed by that expanding frontier, and who 'came in' off their own country seeking protection, or were forced into church mission stations and government institutions.¹⁹

Remnants of Derby's history as a pastoral and frontier town are still visible around the town and surrounding bush. The old Derby Gaol continues to stand on the main street with some interpretive signage for tourists: it's nothing more than a concrete slab with iron bars and a tin roof, and only closed in 1975 after decades of mostly Aboriginal incarceration. (Today locals walk or drive past daily on their way to the shops.) Close to the town, the ruins of the Derby leprosarium are also a powerful reminder of Aboriginal people's forced removal and detention. In other words, this is a form of material culture that might be better registered as a 'traumascape', than one offering composure.²⁰

The challenges of that history were not lost on my participants, who noted the challenges and pain of 'doing history' in Derby. Trevor, whose quote opens this chapter, proudly explains how he knows his story—'I've got all the histories of my great grandparents, my grandparents on both sides, and my mum's. I've got all the welfare stories from the welfare days when she was a Stolen Generation'—but it's one predicated on loss and separation. Others, such as Karla, described an Aboriginal skepticism to historical research itself: 'If you go back to it, the white Australia had theirs [history] written down, you know? Where, you go to black Australia, it's all pictures, it's oral. And who's going to say what's the truth?' These participants recognise the complicity of historical practice in their own oppression. Such fraught histories confirm the urgent need to reach for new historical methods and genres. If the discipline has itself been implicated in the colonial project, writing over the histories of the 'history-poor', as Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us, then the material turn

¹⁹ Mary Anne Jebb, *Blood, Sweat and Welfare: A History of White Bosses and Aboriginal Pastoral Workers* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2002).

²⁰ Tumarkin, 'Secret Life of Wounded Spaces: Traumascales in the Contemporary Australia,' 22.

offers a decolonising moment in Indigenous historiography in Australia.²¹ African Studies Scholars, such Mamadou Diouf and Achille Mbembe similarly describe the challenge of Western academic disciplines of knowledge to both decolonise and recognise alternative epistemologies.²²

It's a moment that asks difficult but important historical questions. Archeological and environmental history methodologies have re-populated the Australian landscape, demonstrating the country was peopled and *historied* well before Europeans arrived with explorers' journals, government dispatches and police reports—as well as building the archival repositories to house it all.²³ Such research uses material cultures of place, family and contact to retrieve Aboriginal life from 'pre-history'. And it recognises environmental, oral and embodied archives of Indigenous societies as vital historical sources. Consequently, the idea of a history that extends beyond contact into deep-time has become increasingly accepted in Australian historiography.²⁴

And it's a moment that has been experienced in Derby, some Aboriginal participants revealed, as they seek to reconnect with country they were removed from generations ago. Jenny, an Aboriginal elder, has been making increasingly powerful connections to her family history through place: 'We're just starting to find out where our connection is—our traditional people. Our land is up the Gibb River Road', she said. While 'we were all born and stayed in Derby', she explained, 'we've just started learning and asking questions about our grandfather country. We know where it is now.'

When that search for historical inheritance and connection moved beyond the material to something more nebulous, the interviews also reveal limitations in ascribing Indigenous Australian historical culture to western historical discourse, including terms such as 'material culture'. For example, while the term 'country' suggests a material culture of place, its meaning for Indigenous people is also inseparable from 'language', 'culture', 'identity', 'spirituality' and 'knowledge'—forms of historical inheritance that many of Derby's Aboriginal respondents are reaching for, yet are decidedly non-material.

²¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Politics and Possibility of Historical Knowledge: Continuing the Conversation,' *Postcolonial Studies* 14, no. 2 (2011): 243–250. Sara Pennell, 'Mundane Materiality, or, Should Small Things Still Be Forgotten? Material Culture, Micro Histories and the Problem of Scale,' in *History and Material Culture*, ed. Karen Harvey (Milton Park; New York: Routledge, 2018), 222.

²² Mamadou Diouf, 'Africa in the World', *Africa Today* 63, no. 2 (2016): 58-65; Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (San Diego: University of California Press, 2001).

²³ Mulvaney, 'The Australian Aborigines 1606–1929'; Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel: Historians and Their Craft*; Griffiths, *Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia*.

²⁴ McGrath and Jebb, *Long History, Deep Time*.

Such methodological concerns raise important questions about the capacity of material culture to incorporate Indigenous histories and historical practices following the post-colonial turn outlined by Chakrabarty and others.²⁵ As First Nations Canadian historian Michael Marker argues, Indigenous epistemologies are needed to account for Indigenous conceptions of place (including the more-than-human world), history (incorporating time as non-linear and multifarious) and historical consciousness (such as Indigenous spirituality).²⁶

Forgetting

The challenge of using a material cultural analysis in that Derby fieldwork is not simply an issue of translation, however. When Linda described ‘family’ as ‘something big that we talk about at home’ she was partly referencing the importance of family connectedness and the centrality of its stories in an Indigenous oral historical tradition. Yet comments by Janie in the same focus group simultaneously highlight the impacts of dispossession and forced removal brought by colonization on Aboriginal families in Derby:

It’s very hard to find out information, because nothing is kept on Aboriginal children, or Aboriginal people. So if you’ve got a grandparent who was stolen or taken away, it’s very hard to find all the connections. And all you get are little bits and pieces from the departments, and stuff that’s kept at Battye library [the State Library of Western Australia].

For Janie, the experience of the stolen generations had created distinct *disconnections* from the past, where whole family stories and important kinship information had simply been lost. Furthermore, compounding the physical removal of Indigenous children, any remnant historical records were located in Perth, almost two and a half thousand kilometres away. This community has an interrupted material inheritance. In my interviews with Aboriginal participants in Derby, their descriptions of historical silence and absence, experienced mostly through the prism of cultural dislocation, dispossession and forced child removal, characterised

²⁵ Chakrabarty, Dipesh, ‘Empire, Ethics, and the Calling of History: Knowledge in the Postcolony,’ in *Unsettling History: Archiving and Narrating in Historiography* (Frankfurt, New York: Campus Verlag, 2010), 63–88. See also: Ghosh, Durba, ‘Another Set of Imperial Turns?’, *American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (2012): 772–93; Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule,’ *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 1 (1989): 134–161; Shahid Amin, *Alternative histories: a view from India* (Calcutta: CSSSC, 2002).

²⁶ Michael Marker, ‘The “Realness” of Place in the Spiral of Time: Reflections on Indigenous Historical Consciousness from the Coast Salish Territory,’ in *Contemplating Historical Consciousness: Notes from the Field*, ed. Anna Clark and Carla Peck (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018).

our conversations about connecting to the past. In other words, *silence* itself was a feature of their historical consciousness.

What does it mean when the idea of inheritance itself is marked by absence? Bain Attwood has recently described Australian history's foundation on silence in a powerful exposition of historical denial.²⁷ These interviews reveal that silencing isn't simply historiographical, but personal. After all, as Paul Connerton and Susanne Karstedt remind us that all remembering is hinged on forgetting.²⁸ It's an area of memory studies that has generated increasing research, with several important interventions into the phenomenon of historical forgetting in recent years,²⁹ in particular the agency required to forget. As historian Anna Haebich insists, 'Forgetting and ignorance are never benign conditions: they do things.'³⁰ That sense of loss was particularly pronounced among Indigenous Derby participants, whose families had been victims of government policies of forced child removal throughout the twentieth century in Australia. These Stolen Generations represented a colossal intergenerational rupturing of not only families, but family *histories* and *narratives*, which some participants explored in their interviews.³¹

Jenny described how her father was taken away and brought up by missionaries: 'He had a, I don't know if I should say, but a white, European way of growing us up, you know?', she described. 'So I focus my kids in schooling, education, things like that, which is important. But I also feel that we lost some of our cultural stuff.' Her comments demonstrate how 'wounds in the tissue of memory', as Louisa Passerini evocatively describes mnemonic pain and rupture,

²⁷ Bain Attwood, 'Denial in a Settler Society: The Australian Case,' *History Workshop Journal* 84, no. 1 (2017): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbx029>.

²⁸ Paul Connerton, 'Seven Types of Forgetting,' *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 59–71; Susanne Karstedt, 'The Life Course of Collective Memories: Persistency and Change in West Germany between 1950 and 1970,' *Polish Sociological Review* 1, no. 165 (2009): 27–38.

²⁹ Paul Ricoeur, Kathleen Blamey, and David Pellauer, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Ian Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (London: Vintage, 1995); Laura Hein and Mark Seldon, eds., *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany and the United States* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000); Chris Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Lorenzo Veracini, 'Historylessness: Australia as a Settler Colonial Collective,' *Postcolonial Studies* 10, no. March 2015 (2007): 271–285, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790701488155>; Patrick Wolfe, 'Islam, Europe and Indian Nationalism: Towards a Postcolonial Transnationalism', in Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (Eds), 'in *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*, ed. Ann & Lake Curthoys Marilyn (Canberra: ANU E-Press, 2005), 233–265.

³⁰ Anna Haebich, 'Forgetting Indigenous Histories: Cases from the History of Australia's Stolen Generations,' *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 4 (2011): 1035.

³¹ For information on the historical policies and effects of forced separation in Australia, see Australia and Meredith Wilkie, eds., *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Parliamentary Paper, no. 128 of 1997 (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

inevitably come at a cost.³² The effects of *historical discontinuity* that participants described, however much we might understand its motivations and context, was frequently perceived as a form of ‘loss’ in these conversations, along with the loss of family, country and culture.³³

At the same time, such comments also prompt questions about the capacity of material cultural analysis in retrieving subaltern histories of the dislocated and dispossessed. If these attachments to the past rely on ‘family connections’ and asking ‘people [about] stories from their young days’, as Alison explains, can we use material culture to do the historical restoration work required? Because, for Aboriginal participants from Derby, those ellipses were as influential in shaping their historical consciousness as remembrance itself: their identities and their relationships to the past had actually been *formed* by the experience of silence. Narrative omissions were key to the way they sketched out and understood their family histories and historical consciousness.

Conclusion

While historical inheritance among the broader Australian community revealed in this research focused on the transposition of significant love objects and ties to place across generations, Indigenous participants frequently talked about passing on legacies that could be best described as non-material. Partly that connection requires a cultural explanation, where analysing the ‘agency of objects’ might be extended to encompass Indigenous epistemologies (in which the material and spiritual worlds constantly overlap). In the Derby context, that non-materiality of Aboriginal historical inheritance is also a desperate legacy of colonisation, where keepsakes are a luxury and dislocation is the norm.

Such local historical context in turn reveals the critical importance of what we might call a historical *unconsciousness* (the histories we don’t know) in forming historical subjectivities. Research increasingly confirms the importance of history to our sense of self—and this project is no different—but the experiences of Aboriginal participants from Derby point to the need for analysis and contemplation of that relationship between historical occlusion and inclusion. After all, silence is paradoxically also deep and proximate, as Allison reveals:

³² Luisa Passerini, ‘Introduction,’ in *Memory and Totalitarianism*, ed. Luisa Passerini (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009).

³³ See Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Living with Shame from the Victorians to the Present Day* (London: Viking, 2013), xii., who writes: ‘Family secrets interrupt truth, deforming identity. To restore to the family tree the bastard or the suicide pruned out by a judgemental ancestors is thus to know oneself better.’

It's really close, isn't it, that colonial history?

Alison: Yeah, to think about it, [it's just] a great grandmother away.

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