THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

‘Why didn’t we know?’ is no excuse. Non-Indigenous Australians must listen to the difficult historical truths told by First Nations people

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Professor Eleanor Bourke (left), chair of Yoo Rrook Justice Commission, the first formal truth-telling process into injustices experienced by First Peoples in Victoria, at the smoking ceremony at its launch. Diego Fedele/AAP

Big things are being asked of history in 2023. Later this year, we will vote in the referendum to enshrine an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative body – the Voice to Parliament – in the Australian constitution.

The Voice was introduced through the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which outlines reforms to advance treaty and truth, in that order. And it calls for “truth telling about our history”.

Truth-telling has been key to restoring trust and repairing relationships in post-conflict settings around the world. Historical truth-telling is increasingly seen as an important part of restorative justice in settler-colonial contexts.

The UN recognises the “right to truth”. It’s important to restore dignity to victims of human rights violations – and to ensure such violations never happen again. But there’s also a collective right to understand historical oppression.

The Uluru Statement, too, sees truth-telling as essential for achieving justice for Australia’s First Nations people.

A successful “Yes” referendum outcome has the potential to make history. The Voice will structure a more effective relationship between Aboriginal nations or peoples and government. It will better represent Indigenous interests and rights in Australia’s policy development and service delivery.

However modest this reform, the Voice is outstanding business for the nation.

But the Uluru statement’s call for “truth-telling about our history” will prove more difficult.

Linda Burney campaigns for a ‘Yes’ vote for the Voice to Parliament. Murray McCloskey/AAP

Barriers to ‘truth hearing’

“Why didn’t we know?” non-Indigenous Australians still lament when confronted with accounts of past violence and injustice against Indigenous Australians, despite decades of curriculum reform.

Our current research reflects on the barriers to “truth hearing”. The barriers are not just structural. Negative attitudes need to be overcome, too. Researchers have noted the levels of “disaffection, disinterest and denial of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history”. They’ve also lamented the piecemeal nature of current educational approaches.

Anna Clark’s research on attitudes in schools towards learning Australia history – particularly Indigenous history – shows that students experience Australian history as both repetitive and incomplete, “taught to death but not in-depth”.

Bain Attwood has convincingly argued that early settler denial of the violence of Indigenous dispossession was followed by a century of historical denial. History as a discipline, he argues, needs to reckon with the truth about its own role in supporting settler colonialism.

Read more: First Nations people have made a plea for 'truth-telling'. By reckoning with its past, Australia can finally help improve our future

50+ years of Aboriginal history

For more than 50 years, historians have produced an enormous body of work that’s brought Aboriginal perspectives and experiences into most areas of Australian history – including gender, class, race, deep history and global histories.

Until the late 1970s, academic interest in Aboriginal worlds was led by mostly white anthropologists and their gaze was set to the traditional north. But historians were then challenged to address the "silence" of their profession when it came to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They needed to write them into history.

This meant "restoring" the Aboriginal worlds omitted in the Australian history texts of the 20th century. This called for new ways of doing research: oral history, re-evaluating the archive, drawing on a wider range of sources than the official and written text.

Today, some historians work with scientists and traditional knowledge holders to tell stories over much longer time periods. For example, Australian National University's Centre for Deep History is exploring Australia's deep past, with the aim of expanding history's time, scale and scope.

And the Global Encounters and First Nations Peoples Monash project, led by Lynette Russell, applies interdisciplinary approaches to consider a range of encounters by First Nations peoples over the past millennium, challenging the view that the Australian history "began" with British colonisation.

On the other side of the sandstone gates, an incredible flourishing of historically informed Aboriginal creative works has taken centre stage in Australian cultural life. This includes biographies, memoirs, literature, painting, documentary and performance: often with large audiences and readerships. They are all forms of truth-telling.

In Black Words, White Page (2004), Adam Shoemaker details the extent of Aboriginal writing focused on Australian history from 1929 to 1988: writers like Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert and Charles Perkins.

This body of work – and much more since – conveys an Aboriginal interpretation of past events, through oral history and veneration of leaders and heroes, drawing together the past and future.

Some early examples include Wiradjuri man Robert (Bobby) Merritt's The Cake Man (1975), set on a rural mission, which explores causes of despair, particularly for Aboriginal men. It was performed by the then newly formed Black Theatre in Redfern in the same year it was published.

Indigenous autobiographies, like Ruby Langford Ginibi's Don't Take Your Love to Town (1988), just reissued in UQP's First Nations Classics series, and Rita Huggins' biography Auntie Rita (1994) are realist accounts of Aboriginal lives, devoid of moralism or victimology.

Many more have followed, including Tara June Winch's novel The Yield (2019), winner of the 2020 Stella prize for literature. Through Wiradjuri language, she gathers the history of invasion and loss – and survival in the present.

Indigenous artists are exploring ways to represent the past in the present: overlaid, but still present and continuous. Jonathon Jones' 2020 artwork to commemorate the reopening of the Sydney Hyde Park Barracks, built originally in 1817 to house convicts, is one example.

Jones explained the installation's interchangeable use of the broad arrow and maraong manaóuwi (emu footprint) as a matter of perspective: one observer will see the emu print, another the broad arrow.

Each marker, within its own sphere of significance, served similar purposes. The emu print is known to be engraved into the sandstone ledges of the Sydney basin and marked a people and their place. The broad arrow inscribed institutional place and direction. Jones wants to show how the landscape can be written over – but never lost – to those who hold its memory.

Jonathan Jones' artwork is part of an incredible flourishing of historically informed Aboriginal creative works.

The Eyes of the Land and the Sea, by artists Alison Page and Nik Lachajczak, commemorates the 250th anniversary of the 1770 encounter between Aboriginal Australians and Lt James Cook's crew of the *HMB Endeavour* at Kamay Botany Bay National Park. This work, too, represents the duality of interpretation and meaning. The monumental bronze sculpture takes the form of the rib bones of a whale – and simultaneously, the hull of the *HMB Endeavour*.

This body of work by dedicated educators, researchers, artists and families has been highly contested.

Read more: The Black Lives Matter movement has provoked a cultural reckoning about how Black stories are told

Truth-telling, healing and restorative justice

Many non-Indigenous Australians are interested in – but anxious about – truth-telling, our early research findings suggest. They don't know how to get involved and are unsure about their role. Indigenous respondents are deeply committed to truth-telling. But they have anxieties about the process, too.

Only 6% of non-Indigenous respondents to Reconciliation Australia's most recent Reconciliation Barometer report had participated in a truth-telling activity (processes that seek to engage with a fuller account of Australian history and its ongoing legacy for First Nations peoples) in the previous 12 months. However, 43% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents had participated in truth-telling.

Truth-telling is seen as an important part of healing, but there is uncertainty about its potential to deliver a more just future for First Nations peoples. And it's acknowledged that truth-telling might emphasise divisions and differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. There are also concerns about trauma and issues of cultural safety.

Many non-Indigenous Australians are interested in (but anxious about) truth-telling. Bianca De Marchi/AAP

But during the regional dialogues that led to the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the demand for truth-telling was unanimous from the Indigenous community representatives. Constitutional reform should only proceed if it "tells the truth of history", they agreed. This was a key guiding principle that emerged from the process.

Why does truth-telling remain a central demand? The final report of the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples described its multiple dimensions.

Truth-telling is a foundational requirement for healing and reconciliation. It's also a form of restorative justice – and a process for Indigenous people to share their culture and history with the broader community. It builds wider understanding of the intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous Australians. And it creates awareness of the relationship between past injustices and contemporary issues.

"Truth-telling cannot be just a massacre narrative in which First Nations peoples are yet again dispossessed of agency and identity," argue educators Alison Bedford and Vince Wall. Indigenous agency and the long struggle for Indigenous rights need to be recognised.

And there is an ongoing need to deconstruct Australia's national foundational myths. A focus on military engagements overseas has obscured the violent dispossession of First Nations Australians at home. As Ann Curthoys argued more than two decades ago, white Australians positioned themselves as heroic strugglers to cement their moral claim to the land. This myth overlooked their role in dispossessing First Nations people.

Read more: The Voice: what is it, where did it come from, and what can it achieve?

Makarrata Commission

The Uluru Statement called for a Makarrata Commission to be established to oversee "agreement-making" and "truth-telling" processes between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

As part of its commitment to the full implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the current federal government committed $5.8 million in funding in 2022 to start the work of establishing the Commission.

Yet few details have been provided so far about the form truth-telling mechanisms might adopt. And there's been little acknowledgement that the desire to "tell the truth" about the past runs counter to the contemporary study of history, which sees history as a complex and ongoing process – rather than a set of fixed "facts" or "truths".

The Uluru Statement called for a Makarrata Commission to oversee agreement-making and trut-telling between governments and First Nations peoples. Lukas Coch/AAP

Worimi historian John Maynard describes Aboriginal history research as generative: the work reinforces and sustains Aboriginal worlds – and it reflects a yearning for truth by Aboriginal people that was denied.

The impact of colonisation not only targeted the fracturing of Aboriginal people but, as Maynard says, "a state of forgetting and detachment from our past". Wiradjuri historian Lawrence Bamblett develops a similar theme. "Our stories are our survival," he says, in his account of Aboriginal approaches to history.

Consider the dedicated labour to return Ancestral Remains to their country. Consider the the work of Aboriginal people to restore the graves of their family and community on the old missions. And the work to document sites, such as Tulladunna cotton chipping Aboriginal camp, on the plains country of north west New South Wales.

Some of this dedicated labour to care for the past is made possible by the recognition of Aboriginal land rights. Aboriginal communities are documenting their history in order to communicate across generations – and to create belonging, sustain community futures and know themselves.

These processes of documenting and remembering Aboriginal stories of the past are less concerned with the state, and settler hostility. They are unburdened by categorising time. The "old people" or "1788" appear irrelevant in the enthusiasm for living social and cultural history.

That history is not confined to the "fixed in time" histories called upon in Native Title litigation, or the debates among historians and their detractors over method and evidence. Nor is it confined to the moral weight of such accounts in the national story.

Read more: Ancestral Remains of First Nations people were once stolen for trophies. Now they will have a national resting place

History and political questions

When discussing Aboriginal history, there is an unbreakable link between the history being studied and the present.

Presentism – the concern that the past is interpreted through the lens of the present – and the concept of the "activist historian" can both impact on the way Aboriginal history is perceived or judged. Disdain for "presentism" has leaked into contemporary discussions recently.

A widely criticised column by the president of the American Historical Association – James Sweet, a historian of Africa and the African diaspora – is a recent example.

He argued that the increasing tendency to interpret the past through the lens of the present, plummeting enrolments in undergraduate history courses and a greater focus on the 20th and 21st centuries all put history at risk of being mobilised "to justify rather than inform contemporary political positions".

These are not new debates. They have taken place within and outside the academy across the world, including in Australia.

But the realities of the histories of colonisation, slavery and imperialism mean they continue to have an impact in the present. Reparations and apologies happen because of the work of historians and others. They are real-world, present impacts of the work being undertaken.

It's the role of historians to understand the past on its own terms – *and* to produce work relevant to contemporary political questions.

Applied (or public) history produces this work. In this work, particularly historical work that sits outside the academy, we do often find "truth telling". For example, in the important work done for the Bringing them Home Commission, the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Royal Commission and Native Title claims in courts.

But somehow, these efforts at truth-telling – and other historical research conducted since colonisation – seem not to have impacted on the overall "history" of Australia.

Then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull receives the Bringing Them Home Report at Parliament House in 2017. Mick Tsikas/AAP

Forgetting and resistance

As the referendum vote edges closer, Australians are being asked to make provisions for the First Peoples to have a role in the political process – and the decisions that impact them.

The challenge to address the "Great Australian Silence" – to include First Peoples in the stories of the nation, where they were otherwise omitted – has been largely addressed by the significant body of historical work added over the last 50 or more years. That work, and the correction it has delivered, has generated discomfort and hostility.

Yet Australians' appreciation – and even awareness – of the history of its First Nations people remains deeply unsatisfactory.

There is now little justification for the laments *Why weren't we told?* or *How come we didn't know?*. Our undergraduate students continue to ask these questions, though.

Australia has a difficult relationship – a kind of historical amnesia; a forgetting and resistance – to hearing those First Nations stories. That resistance is much deeper than simply being *told*.

The current focus on truth-telling will once again draw our attention to dealing with difficult history. This time, different questions need to be asked.

Not *why didn't I know*? But *how can I find out*?

Heidi Norman and Anne Maree Payne will be presenting their research at the upcoming 50th Milestones Anniversary of the Australian Historical Association. Heidi will deliver the keynote address, The End of Aboriginal History?

Correction: this article originally stated incorrectly that educators Alison Bedford and Vince Wall are Indigenous. The article has been amended.