

**LOCATING
SUBURBIA**

MEMORY - PLACE - CREATIVITY

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PAULA HAMILTON & PAUL ASHTON

Locating Suburbia
Memory, Place, Creativity

Edited by

Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton



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INTRODUCTION

THE POLITICS AND PASSIONS OF THE SUBURBAN OASIS

Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton

Murder in the suburbs isn't murder technically at all really is it? It's a justifiable reaction to aesthetic deprivation and golf.¹

Suburbia has been satirised and mocked by the best of them from George Orwell's 1939 caricature in *Coming up for Air* to Dame Edna Everidge from the 1960s and TV's Kath and Kim in twentieth-first century Australia. For many of the generation growing up in the twentieth century, suburbia is, on the one hand, the remembered nightmare from which the human chrysalis escaped to experience adulthood and its pleasures *elsewhere* – the stifling, conformist sameness which nonetheless hid evil deeds like murder. Others hold dear the wistful nostalgic memories about growing up in a domesticated cosy world of backyard games so effectively mobilised by conservative Prime Minister John Howard during the 1990s in relation to Earlwood, a suburb of Sydney.²

It is certainly the case that for the older generation who lived through depression and war in the twentieth century, the suburbs represented safety and peace – 'a roof over our heads'; 'a place to call our own'. Like the soldier who came back from Changi POW camp, kissed the ground at Narrabeen, a suburb in Sydney, and said: 'this'll do me'!, the expanding suburbs after the 1950s were the retreat for many men after

time abroad in global conflict; a place to replenish the spirit and build again – individual lives, families, homes, garages, sheds, gardens, lawns. Suburbs have also been long hated,³ and more recently loved,⁴ by writers and intellectuals. They have also been perceived with an uneasy ambiguity, as ‘being neither town nor country, but an unwilling combination of both, and either neat and shining, or cheap and nasty, according to the incomes of its inhabitants’.⁵ This was the ‘half world between city and country in which most Australians lived’ that architect Robin Boyd decried in his elitist work on Australia domestic architecture.⁶ Recently, however, there has been a strong and growing interest in delineating the complexities of the suburban experience rather than simply denouncing or defending it.

Over the last twenty to thirty years, suburbia has had a make-over. How it is remembered and what place it has had in our lives has also being reconfigured. Many now accept that the nostalgia relates only to a childhood dream of the white Anglo-Saxon part of the population that obscured a great deal more than it revealed. Certainly the historian Andrew May argued in 2009 that ‘the reliance of the twin fictions of the novelist’s pen and of baby-boomer nostalgia for our predominant images of post-war suburban history precludes the prospect of developing more sophisticated historical narratives’.⁷ Even before the impact of the massive post-war migration, the suburbs were more culturally and socially diverse than we have previously understood. Class and religious divisions, if not always race and ethnicity, have a long history within suburban communities.⁸ Nowadays, the articulation of that nostalgic memory in public forums is strongly contested, as suburban places are made and remade over time.

In March 2013, for example, Peter Roberts wrote a column for the *Sydney Morning Herald* which had the heading: ‘What happened to the suburb I used to know? His particular suburb was Greenacre near Lakemba in Sydney and his article juxtaposed a suburban past and present. He remembers a suburb where he grew up during the late 1950s and early 1960s as a place of peace, sparsely populated, filled with boys sports and games:

Lakemba? Sure that’s where we went to the Sunday matinee at the Odeon every week and watched such pearls as the Three Stooges, Jerry Lewis and Ben-Hur.

Roberts does not mention that Lakemba is now the site of a mosque and one of the biggest Muslim communities in Australia. But most of the *Herald* readers will have this in mind. In his (Anglo-Saxon) memory, there was no violence as there is now, which he blames on the ‘enclave of Little Lebanon’. Greenacre and Lakemba now, he says, have been ‘turned into a minefield, or a battlefield, or a refuge

of drug dealers, criminals, drive-by shooters and terror'. His elegaic tone is one of sadness and loss:

That was my home – the place where I once simply couldn't imagine living anywhere else – transformed to the place where I could never imagine living again.

There were several responses to this letter which seemed to strike a Sydney nerve and gave readers a sense of how the media mediates our collective memories. At least two letters accused Roberts of cloaking racism in nostalgia. Omar Sakr replied in the same edition of the *Herald* with an awareness about the public prominence of such views and how they need to be interrogated. Sakr is particularly critical of the assumption that all of the problems are the result of another ethnic group, as though murder and rape were not part of any other suburban culture. This view, he says, absolves one group for taking responsibility for the problems of the community as a whole. For him, growing up in this area probably twenty or thirty years later, the most important element was the camaraderie of his diverse delinquent friends.

One letter, though, was from someone who had lived for eighteen months in Lakemba until recently and also spent time there on a regular basis now. Con Vaitsas, now of Ashbury, claimed that Roberts' vision was 'way out of whack with reality' and very outdated. He argued that Greenacre and Lakemba were no longer predominantly the home of the Lebanese but a mixture of very different nationalities living peacefully side by side: 'my neighbours were Filipinos and Colombians on either side and Africans opposite us', he wrote. So his perception was one of a successful multicultural community.

Such an exchange does little to recognise the complexity of current suburban life but it does juxtapose the memories from different generations and cultures against one another as alternative experiences of belonging to particular suburban localities.

What is Suburbia?

Suburbs are geographically defined areas on a map, spatially located in our memories and also an idea: they colonise our imaginations as both inside and outside the pale. But beyond the government defined boundaries, how are they delineated? Are they anything beyond the city central? Inner city areas such as Surry Hills or Balmain are certainly not brought to mind by this term. Spatially the suburbs are seen as 'out there' away from the inner city which somehow don't meet the criteria for single story occupation on a block of land which we think of as characteristically suburban. But where does the inner city begin and end now? Redfern, Waterloo, Alexandria, Drummoyne,

St Leonard's? 'As a state of mind and a way of living', Humphrey McQueen has observed,

Suburbia is not confined to certain geographic areas but can thrive where there are no suburbs... It is pointless to lay down a criterion for suburbia that includes duplexes, but excludes a row of terraces. Where it survives outside its natural habitat, suburbia still aspires to the ways of living that are most completely realised by nuclear families on garden blocks with detached houses.⁹

The identity of suburbia, so far as it can be ascribed one, is shifting and insecure; a borderline and liminal space.¹⁰ Dominant stereotypes have listed it as 'on the margins' beyond edges of cultural sophistication and tradition' and the areas that make up 'sprawl'.¹¹ But in the twenty-first century this static view has to be modified somewhat. And it is evident from this collection that suburban dwellers themselves have redefined being cosmopolitan as house prices in the inner suburbs skyrocket and push people further afield.¹²

The study of suburbs is often viewed as separate from the city or the urban as a whole. But in fact not only are suburbs obviously integral; they are now part of the networked city, reinforcing much older electricity grids, transport and water services with contemporary communications networks, especially the internet and mobile telephony which has facilitated greater interaction between suburbs and across the urban generally. Suburbs are always relational in this sense and though we tend to throw a light on the local or the small concerns within the suburb as case studies, this collection does not argue for their isolation from the wider urban landscape, for we know that local knowledge too, has the power to change lives.

This collection was set up as a collaborative project by members of the Research Strength in Creative Practices and Cultural Economy at the University of Technology, Sydney, is in the first instance a testament to that range and complexity of twenty-first century responses to city suburbs, predominantly in Sydney, though with a nod to other suburban contexts on the most-populated eastern seaboard of Australia, such as Melbourne and Brisbane. Secondly, the collection showcases the lively engagement and interdisciplinary nature of the intellectual culture in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Technology, Sydney, from the more traditional scholarly approaches of Humanities scholars to the range of cultural forms which make up Creative Practice in the academy, especially in this

case, Creative Writing and Media Arts.¹³ We had many seminars and discussions which took place in 2011 and 2012 about the ideas for the collection. We began by viewing it from the perspective of lived experience, always believing it possible that new technologies can create different spaces for collaborative scholarship within the traditional frame of a book.

And so it proved. We found that the tension between representing how a world was experienced while keeping that detached critical eye on its form and nature could work very well through a range of artistic and scholarly practice that spoke to each other. Karen Till, writing about her own engagement with memory studies as an artist, argues that more traditional scholars have a lot to gain by heeding the work of artists 'who also acknowledge the ways that people experience memory as multi-sensual, spatial ways of understanding their worlds'.¹⁴

Three distinct themes emerged in relation to the central concept of re-imagining the suburban which people researched and made for this publication. As our title indicates these became remembered suburbs anchored either by our own personal past or those of others, suburbs as places that were made and remade across time and suburbs not only as the subject for various creative representations but also increasingly where creativity as an identified practice or industry takes place.¹⁵

Some of our essays take as their subject particular suburbs such as Bondi, Manly and Campbelltown. Others range across time and the space of the urban and suburban. Others focus on those inner city in-betweens, subject of urban renewal and consolidation, such as Marrickville, Pyrmont and Balmain. Some utilise the concept of the even more local through a focus on the park, shops, the backyard or the suburban house. And still others explore what took place in the homes of these areas there that came to be identified with suburban life.

Referring to the suburbs of England, Roger Silverstone previously commented in his 1997 book *Visions of Suburbia* that 'An understanding of how suburbia was produced and continues to be both produced and reproduced is an essential precondition for an understanding of the twentieth century, an understanding above all of our emerging character and contradictions of our everyday lives'.¹⁶ Whether his argument for the centrality of suburbia to historical understanding still holds for the twenty-first century remains to be seen given the many different shapes it now takes in our imaginations.

MEMORY



05

CONNECTING TO THE PAST

Anna Clark

CONNECTING TO THE PAST

MEMORY AND HISTORY IN AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITIES

Anna Clark

Shortly before my grandmother Dymphna died she called me into her room. She was tired and wincing with pain. 'I want to show you The Box', she said. But she looked so sick that I suggested we leave it until after she had rested. I had seen its contents maybe 10 years earlier, when I was 11 or 12. I didn't really know anything about this box, except that it was old, it came from Sweden and had been passed down the female line in our family.

As the oldest female grandchild, Dymphna told me that I was to inherit the box. But we hadn't talked about it again till that night shortly before her death. I'm still kicking myself for suggesting we wait, because she died before we could look at the box together.

Inside it is a little scrap of paper, written in Swedish:

This box was presented in 1826 it was given by sculptor Santesson to his half-sister Bothilda Österberg to be cared for and bequeathed to the eldest daughter in the female line. (If it should go astray, whoever is in possession of it is requested to return it.) It was left to Sofi Sjölin, born Österberg, eldest daughter of Bothilda Österberg on her death in 1845.

On Sofi Sjölin's death this box was left to Ida Brandtman, born Sjölin, in 1890. She was at that time the eldest daughter.

So I'm left with this precious piece of family history – yet I don't really comprehend its meaning, and I'm gripped with a desire to know more. There are endless compartments in the box that are made up of drawers and lids and secret places. Some are empty, others contain relics of forgotten family stories: a lock of hair, a Scandinavian brooch, traditional Swedish beads, photos of children and grandchildren and mothers and fathers, as well as private letters.

Within the box there is also a genealogy, written in Swedish, that explains the births, marriages and deaths of its owners. It left Sweden and sailed all over the world for over a century: to South Africa, the Congo, Belgium and then Australia. It finally sat on the chest of drawers in the corridor of my grandmother's suburban house in Canberra for thirty years, yet another relic of her large, extended family. Now I have the box, and can see where she added me on to the list soon before she died: 'Axel Clark, married Alison Macintyre 1968. Children: Tom, Solomon, Anna born 1978, married...' (where she left a convenient blank).

When I inherited this box I was left with a sense of a longing for understanding that I couldn't properly make sense of. I scoured family records and went on trip to Sweden in search for more answers. I know I'm not alone here – so many of us have profound desires to

connect to the past, particularly as we get older and have children, or lose someone important to us.

The experience of that unexpectedly powerful urge to uncover those family stories in turn made me want to explore the very nature of historical consciousness, in particular that question of historical connection, and what it means in our communities to *be* historically connected. On the one hand, we have this intense historical engagement, this burning desire to find out more: any visit to a local library or public archive shows ordinary people consumed with interest in their family and local histories. ‘Where do I come from?’, they ask. ‘What is my story?’ On the other, there’s a powerful public anxiety that we don’t know enough about the past, that our national futures are being jeopardized by a grave historical ignorance that begins in school and extends into our lives as citizens. So let’s look at this paradox of historical consciousness as it plays out in the suburbs of our everyday life.

There’s a pervasive concern about the state of historical knowledge that reverberates around the world. After a German study in 2000 revealed worrying levels of knowledge among adolescents about National Socialism there was significant debate over the effectiveness of fifty years of history teaching since Nazism. Stunned outrage also followed in the UK when some students answered in a 2001 survey that they thought Hitler was Britain’s Prime Minister in World War II. That same year, only 39 per cent of respondents ‘passed’ a Canadian history quiz, which threw commentators there into a similar frenzy.¹

Australia is no exception. In 1997, for example, a national survey showed that only 18 per cent of those interviewed knew Edmund Barton was Australia’s first prime minister. And in a 2006 report on the state of civics and citizenship noted that only 23 per cent of year 10 students knew Australia Day commemorated the arrival of the British in 1788.² Headlines proclaiming the latest ‘disappointing’ survey result or ‘dangerous’ level of national knowledge now read like clichés – and it’s sadly ironic that anxiety about Australian history seems inversely proportionate to engagement with it. But as the Canadian history educationist Alan Sears has argued, so long as that discourse of ‘crisis’ dominates public debates about the past, a more reflective discussion about historical connection continues to be overshadowed.³ While anxious debates about the state of Australian history reveal the political potency of national collective memory, questions about the nature of history and historical consciousness remain largely un-examined in public debate.

As a way into some of those questions I interviewed 100 people (individually and in groups) from five very different communities around the country about their attitudes to history as part of a larger study on historical consciousness in Australia: I visited community groups in the suburbs of Marrickville and Chatswood in Sydney's inner-west and north shore, and St Albans in outer western Melbourne, as well as the country towns of Rockhampton in Central Queensland and Derby in the Kimberley. At a time when national historical debate is still dominated by the 'history wars',⁴ this qualitative research investigates the historical connection (and disconnection) of 'ordinary people'. Their quotidian discourses of Australian history provide us with a unique picture of national memory and history day-to-day.

This scholarly desire to get in touch with the ordinary has been particularly influenced by Judith Brett and Anthony Moran's excellent long-term qualitative study, *Ordinary People's Politics*, which traced the political beliefs and engagement of several Australians over many years.⁵ Like them, I am interested in how ordinary people engage with national concerns – in this case the nation's history. The sense of 'the suburban' is also critical here: this is not simply the geographical space of Australian suburbs, but a sense of everyday life that such imagery powerfully represents.⁶

In this way, the research wants to populate discussions about national history with the voices of ordinary people from around the country. It asks how people think historically out there in 'lawn-mower land', as the former New South Wales Premier Nathan Rees notoriously quipped.⁷ That belt of 'mainstream Australia', courted as 'battlers' by the conservative Howard Government, and 'working families' by his Labor successors – what connects *them* to history?

In saying that, I also use the term 'ordinary' advisedly. The idea of the ordinary Australian, inhabiting that suburban mainstream, has become a potent emblem of political debate in Australia. But I persist with this image, because that is how many people see, and describe, themselves.⁸ And I want their voices and opinions to contribute to the public historical discourse and debate. The participants in the study are neither professional historians, politicians nor public commentators, but they do have opinions about Australian history that warrant acknowledgement and examination.

In this sense, I hope to produce what historians Jean Burgess, Helen Klæbe and Kelly McWilliam have called 'participatory public history' – those 'ordinary' or 'vernacular' historical conversations.⁹ While there's an apparent dearth of factual historical knowledge, does that mean ordinary people simply don't think or care about the nation's

past? Using these interviews, I want to probe that suburban anomaly of historical consciousness: despite the tenor of anxious debate over the national ‘story’, local and personal historical engagement seems more popular than ever.

Heritage groups, genealogical societies and community history organisations are actively engaging communities around the country and are avid producers and consumers of history. The Federation of Australian Historical Societies represents about 1000 groups, including nearly 100,000 members, and there are around 3000 local and community museums. As Martha Sear, a curator at the National Museum of Australia, noted playfully: ‘Australians love history-making’.¹⁰ International research confirms we’re not alone.¹¹

The growing digitisation of archives and reach of the internet has enabled unprecedented access for people to research and write family histories and personal memoirs. Meanwhile, the consumption of popular histories – through film and television, fiction, and even heritage tourism – demonstrates a widespread historical engagement.¹² The question is, why do people connect to these histories, while national knowledge remains apparently alienating?

Two influential studies that have been done over the last ten or fifteen years begin shed light on this popular interest in the past. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen’s influential study *The Presence of the Past*, noted a wealth of ‘popular history making’ in the United States in addition to more established academic and official historical productions. Based on that American study, Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton’s *Australians and the Past* project interviewed 500 Australians about their relationships with the past. A further Canadian project has since been completed using similar methodologies.¹³ Such research noted a widespread popular contemplation of history that Ashton and Hamilton neatly termed ‘past-mindedness’. It also confirmed ordinary people’s distinct lack of engagement with more formal national narratives, which they considered to be much more prescribed and remote – disconnected from their everyday lives.¹⁴

While participants in such studies often found it difficult to engage directly with the national history they learnt at school, for example, their own stories and experiences generated very strong connections with the past. Respondents kept objects to pass on to their own children or grandchildren, 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.¹⁵ And the distinction between that

tactile, familiar inheritance we get from more local, personal histories and the official, often alienating narratives of History – with a capital ‘H’ – has been widely noted in memory studies and public history.¹⁶ Likewise, many of the people I have spoken with for this research are strongly connected to the past – through their family, their local history or their cultural background as refugees, Indigenous Australians and so on. Many had objects they wanted to pass on to the next generation, or objects that had been passed on to them. They also spoke about family reunions and conversations about family history.

This interview with a group from the men’s shed in the Sydney suburb of Chatswood is a typical example:

Do any of you have any objects that you want to pass on to the next generation?

Neville: Now I’m trying to find things to create the family history. I’ve got step-children, and I gave my great-grandfather’s silver pocket-watch to one of my step-sons when he was married. And now I’m passing on the family bible, what I’m calling the family bible, to my son.

And has that interest in passing things on come about as you’ve gotten older?

Peter: As you see that end date, you think, ‘maybe I’d like just something left behind’!

For two Indigenous participants, it wasn’t things that needed passing on, but language, culture and place. Jenny, an elder from Derby, was in the process of organising a return to country for her extended family group to their traditional lands in the Kimberley: ‘I realise now with my grandchildren I’ve got a lot of work to do with teaching them what I know’, she said. Her sister Violet chimed in: ‘So we’re trying to take our kids up there’.

Older Australians aren’t the only ones forging connections between generations. Some university students from the western Melbourne suburb St Albans were similarly interested in questions of inheritance:

Kyleen: I have a pendent that my mother received from Ireland when she was a baby. And because it was so expensive to send things over, my aunt sewed it into the gown of one of her baby outfits. She’s passed it onto me, and I’ve passed it onto my daughter now.

Sylvie: That’s nice.

Sasha: When I got married, my Oma gave me her wedding ring. That’s pretty special.

And yet, while history figures in these young people's lives, they don't particularly connect with Australian history as a national narrative:

Do any of you feel connected to Australia's past?

All: No

Sylvie: Personally, no.

Why is that?

Sasha: I think, I don't know, for me, like, we never even really learnt much Australian history in school. I can't even remember learning about explorers, I mean, let alone Indigenous Australia, or anything.

A group of youth workers in St Albans also expressed an explicit disinterest in an official national history:

Do any of you feel at all connected to Australia's past?

Andrew: I don't feel particularly connected. Because I see myself as an Aussie and stuff, but like, my family tree and stuff just cut into Australia's history, if you get what I mean. So we weren't there from the beginning and we don't really have any Australian descendents [sic] or anything like that. So I don't feel particularly connected, but it's interesting. It's not really a part of me so much.

Matthew: The thing is, we all pretty much know the Australian history. The Hume and Hovell monument is over there [pointing], we know about the goldrush and all that stuff. But all that stuff happened however long ago, and all that stuff changes so quickly, it's just not us. We're us for us, not for what they were.

These young Australians feel as if they have been exposed to an official national history, but that narrative doesn't properly speak to their own experiences – 'it's just not us', as Matthew said. This history is taught in school – sometimes sporadically, sometimes repetitiously. It is emphasised in public historical celebrations and anniversaries and is bolstered by significant political funding and support. Despite that concerted effort, however, it continues to languish in everyday life, as those repeated surveys confirm.

Jarred, another young participant from Rockhampton, answered with similar reluctance when asked how connected he felt to Australian history: 'Um, I guess I have to be. I don't feel it, but I have to be because I was born and raised here. So I am part of it, whether I like it or not. I haven't got a choice, so yeah'.

When participants *did* connect to that Australian story it was generally through the prism of their own experience. As Don from Marrickville explained: ‘Well, I suppose I connect with it [Australian history] from my own local community, because I’m involved on the street, both creatively and socially with my community, and many of those people go back a long time. So I have that kind of connection.’ Vicki’s engagement with Australian history also emphasised personal links:

Do you feel particularly connected to Australian history?

Vicki: Definitely, definitely.

Why is that?

Vicki: Well, everyone’s bragging about convicts these days, but because I did have ancestors coming out on the First Fleet, and probably being 9th generation Australian, I probably feel very Australian. So there’s a very strong feeling of, um, I just want to know everything I can about Australian history.

The historian Michael Kammen has rightly argued that ‘family and pastness are clearly not the same as history and should not be conflated with it’.¹⁷ And this study doesn’t pretend its participants’ perspectives equate to the sort of historical thinking we might expect from practising historians or graduates. Treasuring granny’s embroidery (or inheriting her box!) does not make us historians, *per se*. But it does reveal how historical connections are fostered, and that historians, education departments and governments intent on raising levels of historical knowledge ignore the nature of this relationship at their peril.

Indeed, the centrality of that personal element in connecting to history was even articulated by participants themselves. Manisha, a thirty-year-old Sri Lankan Australian student in St Albans explained why that intimate relationship to the past spoke more than any official narrative: ‘I think it’s different, because you’re connected to that history or that part of history, rather than history as a whole, you know what I mean? That’s my personal view anyway.’

As Wai, a community radio worker from Derby in Western Australia, explained: ‘History was taught in school, but I don’t think you connect with it as much’, she said. ‘When you can make a personal connection to history I think it means more to you than just reading about how Captain Cook discovered Australia.’ Laurel from Marrickville in Sydney also emphasised that need for an explicit connection with the past:

I think if you realise you have a connection with a certain place or area, you then develop an interest in that area. I’ve got this interest in the St Peters area [in inner Sydney]... So

I think, if you've really got a connection, or something that you're researching about that area, you want to go and find out more.

Ultimately, that national narrative, so often presented in school curricula and national celebrations with conventional periodisations and themes, didn't figure at the forefront of participants' historical engagement. Instead, any national historical recognition only occurs when they can situate themselves and their own family stories within or alongside the national narrative. Their connection with the Australian story is framed by personal experience, rather than the overt presence of an innate, official and abstract national history.

Take Malcolm, a member of a bush regeneration group in Sydney's Chatswood. For him, travelling around Australia generated his interest in its history because he was able to experience it *in person*: 'Wherever you go in Australia, there's always a small museum or there's something to remind you of the history of the area', he said. 'Even in the smallest town, usually there's a museum of some kind.'

For two recent migrants to Sydney, those ties to the past were even sensory. Quyen thought about her history in Vietnam while walking through the Sydney suburb of Marrickville during Chinese New Year celebrations, with the smells of traditional Vietnamese festive cooking and fireworks wafting over the street: 'I love it', she said. 'I feel it inside me. I don't know how to explain it, but I feel it inside.' For Moushuni, the sight of a sugar cane farm in northern Australia brought back vivid memories of growing up in Bangladesh. Again, it's that sense of intimacy and familiarity tugging at our senses.

Despite such strong ties to the past, adherence to national history remains elusive. That's not because participants don't believe in the importance of Australian history. As the students in St Albans explained:

Do you think Australian history important to know?

Manisha: Oh I think it is important.

Silvie: Oh, definitely.

Selena: Very important.

Manisha: I think it's only now that I'm starting to realise that, yeah, I do need to know more about Australia, especially learning world history. And yeah, it is a small part of it – the history isn't as large as other histories, really – but it is important, because that's where we live and after our studies, that's where we're going to be working – you know, in Australian communities. So we need to know where all these and things like that came from.

These participants aren't ignorant. Overwhelmingly, they understand the significance of knowing Australian history, but they are motivated by deep and personal ties to the past above any sense of national duty. 'We all make histories endlessly', Australian historian Greg Dening once mused. 'It is our human condition to make histories.'¹⁸ That constant presence of the past as an effect of our humanity also captivated Paul Ricouer, who wrote about our 'historicity' – the 'fundamental and radical fact that we make history, that we are immersed in history, that we are historical beings'.¹⁹ So many of my participants confirm this, as they described the strong interest in their family and community histories across generations.

Historical consciousness includes not only humanity's interest in the past, but also its capacity for critical historicism, as Jörn Rüsen has articulated: it is both innate – in that we recollect – and learnt – through the disciplinary skills of history.²⁰ And as Sam Wineburg has tirelessly advocated, those skills of historical thinking demand critical faculties: an ability to interrogate historical sources (even our grandparents), to negotiate different perspectives and to reconcile historical values with contemporary judgements.²¹

So I'm wary of the potential for this project to conflate 'nostalgia' and 'enthusiasm' for the past with actual historical knowledge. As Michael Kammen warns, having 'feelings about the past' is not enough to qualify as a 'history maker'.²² But I also strongly believe these intimate historical connections should not be dismissed as unhistorical – because they are *deeply* rooted in history. What's more, this ordinary, historical engagement reveals a lot about what connects people to the past in this both metaphorical and lived suburbia of everyday Australian life.

In other words, we don't need to 'overcome' personal connections in order to facilitate historical thinking. Indeed, as Rüsen suggests, that very connectedness is a critical component of our historical consciousness. Similarly, what I see in these interviews isn't a romantic nostalgia at the expense of historical complexity, but an insight into this paradox of historical consciousness. We devour the past, but when it comes to engaging with national history, our connections clearly start to fray a little. Political and public pressure to engage with the 'Australian story' does not resonate with an otherwise historically-minded community.

While academics and politicians endlessly squirm over the meaning and purpose of the Australian story (and I must plead guilty here, too), ordinary people around the country actively engage with the nation's past. But they do so in distinctly personal ways. It's a pity so much

of that public discussion and debate doesn't seem to understand the reality of historical connection or contemplate the need to foster historical knowledge which acknowledges that reality.

As Janie, an Indigenous teacher from Derby explained: 'When you start losing the old ones, your history disappears'. She meant it literally, of course, for so much Indigenous history is custodial. But you can also use her comments as a metaphor for history more broadly. When we lose those connections from the story, those people and places connected to us, we lose the power of the story itself.

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Chapter 5: Connecting to the Past

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