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# Forgetting Aborigines

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### Forgetting Aborigines

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kidnapped, exchanged, handed over, let-in, exploited, mistreated, punished, over-worked, underpaid, under-nourished, uneducated, neglected, abused and, ultimately, utterly powerless to do anything about it. This is patently so for those handful of children actually killed by their employers or who died in the course of their employment, as well as for the two and three year olds absorbed into this labour force.

Some industries offered less harsh environments for child workers. It was preferable to be a domestic servant or a farm hand than to be employed, as a significant number of Aboriginal children were, in the pearling and beche-de-mer industries. Not only was this work dangerous but once at sea children were unable to engage in some of the resistance strategies used by Aboriginal workers on the mainland. They were utterly subjected to their employer's whims, and it was a brutal world. As Robinson shows, Aboriginal children's conscription as labourers involved their removal from their families, and this was often to be permanent. The exception was those children who, with their families, were 'let-in' by settlers to work on pastoral stations.

Robinson's book makes an important contribution to this neglected history. It builds on the significant contributions of histories by Noel Loos, Dawn May, Henry Reynolds and others who have documented the important economic dimension of Aboriginal workers on the Queensland frontier. Robinson also draws on the work of Raymond Evans, taking a similar definition of slavery drawn from Orlando Patterson, which emphasises the utter powerlessness of the slave and the domination of the master. Most disturbing in this historical account of Aboriginal child workers, is that despite some legislation that set a minimum age or wage, there was a lack of any effective regulation of their labour until the mid-twentieth century.

In Robinson's catalogue of settler abuse a couple of things stood out for me. It is clear that Aboriginal child labour was attractive to settlers because of its cheapness and the fact that unlike adults, children were considered more pliable. But equally important was the desire by settlers to separate Aboriginal children from parents, long before this was to be part of an official policy. The absorption of children as labourers operated on the colonial principle that this would 'civilise' them, and would help eradicate Aboriginality and create a condition of abject dependence on white society.

Were all the experiences of all Aboriginal child workers bad? Did no-one in the colonial administration or among Queensland settlers care? Aboriginal child slavery or situations analogous to slavery were, as Robinson demonstrates, critiqued at the time. Indeed, much of the evidence in her book uses the statements of government officers like the Aboriginal Protectors Walter Roth and Arthur Meston, or draws upon settler evidence given to government enquiries about such exploitation. Yet, even with the introduction of some protection legislation in 1897, the 'problem' was not fixed. Missions and reserves merely became depots of cheap labour for the thriving pastoral and maritime industries. Furthermore, there was a widespread culture of tolerance and social acceptability around the practices surrounding Aboriginal child workers, and this was matched by government ambivalence. This suggests that there was something far more insidious than silence on the frontiers.

I used to think my Nana's story was rather bleak, particularly in terms of her emotional deprivation. Robinson does compare the situation of non-Aboriginal children who were state wards with Aboriginal child workers, and finds a much greater culture of care and protection for white children. This completes the picture of slavery she builds. Whereas my Nana had a future, Aboriginal children had a purpose.

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***Forgetting Aborigines.***

By Chris Healy. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008. Pp. 250. A\$39.95 paper.

An exploration of the processes of memory that shape how we forget and remember is a key concern of *Forgetting Aborigines*. The book begins with the remembrance of a thing seemingly past, a ubiquitous mid-twentieth century children's game, *Corroboree*, in which players move along a route defined by positions like 'Lost Churinga Back to 71' and 'Bushfire Back to Mia-Mia'. Healy's account of this game demonstrates how history's material culture lives in the processual configurations of memory work. This demonstration moves readers along a route of remembering and forgetting that includes stops at popular television shows, high and low art markets, heritage legislation, museum practices and bush tours.

At the centre of *Forgetting Aborigines* is an argument about 'Aboriginality' as an object of critical reflection. Healy carefully outlines what he means by 'Aboriginality' and the analytical space he intends the term to cover. 'Aboriginality' is an intercultural space between Indigenous and settler worlds, something like 'overlapping elements in a Venn diagram and the colonial encounter itself' (7). 'Aboriginality' is not meant to fill what Marcia Langton famously described as the gap between 'cultural and textual construction of things "Aboriginal"' and the actual life circumstances of Indigenous people (5). Instead of detailing how the actual lives of Indigenous people are affected by memory work, Healy seeks to read the cultural 'contact zone' that is neither first contact nor fatal impact between Indigenous and settler. Yet *Forgetting Aborigines* does sometimes enter the zone where representation either substantially impacts on social life, or becomes inextricably interwoven with it. At the conclusion of the chapter 'Old and New Aboriginal Art', for instance, Healy refers to an argument of Ian Anderson, a scholar of Indigenous health, that 'culture can and does produce effects beyond mere representation and abstract ideas' (98).

An examination of these effects is not the point of this book. Instead, readers are offered sensitive readings of culture-as-text. In 'Aborigines on Television', for instance, Healy sidesteps a comprehensive treatment of the representation of Aboriginality on Australian television. Rather, the focus is on one television show broadcast during Healy's childhood, *Alcheringa*, because, he claims, it exemplifies 'the central tension between "archaic Aboriginal being" and "pure white modernity"' (37). Whether they are of *Alcheringa* or Warlpiri television, Healy's readings of televisual texts do not concern themselves with the problem of production, reception, and circulation, or with any specific theoretical account of narrative and narration. Instead, he gives readers a sense of the broader logic of plot and representation in order to make a case about an enduring structure of difference and differentiation that lies at the functional heart of 'Aboriginality' as memory work. Likewise, in 'Old and New Aboriginal Art', Healy examines a specific narrative about the emergence of Aboriginal Art as signifying a general structure of remembering and forgetting. The narrative structure of the story about the emergence of Papunya art assigns to the realm of forgetfulness

the formative nature of bad Aboriginal art—that the practice of carving and painting tourist objects honed the artistic skills of Indigenous artists who would become the leading figures of the New Aboriginal Art movement. Subsequent chapters on the spectre of heritage, museum collecting and display, and bush tours continue this broad argumentative logic. Each chapter focuses on a selected example of the general logic of Aboriginality, and offers an inductive case study approach to cultural analysis.

Although it is situated in the broad discipline of cultural studies, *Forgetting Aborigines* also belongs in the burgeoning field of memory studies. With its own specialised journals and conferences, memory studies is as unwieldy a field of inquiry as the study of Aboriginality, according to Healy. In his hands, memory studies seeks to unpack the intercalated process by which ways of remembering and forgetting create memory as a narrative about 'the recent past'. The 'recent past' serves a dual temporal framing within the book. The objects of analysis are taken from the recent past and much of the memory work that interests Healy takes place in the recent past. It seems—though this argument is never explicitly made—that this loose periodisation reflects the commitment to memory studies as, at least in part, about the way in which time is temporalised through processes such as belatedness, anachronism, and continuity and breakage.

The insights of *Forgetting Aborigines* emerge from this intersection between cultural studies of Aboriginality and memory studies in (post)colonial societies. Within this space *Forgetting Aborigines* is a lively, insightful text deserving of a wide readership.

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***Ochre and Rust: Artefacts and Encounters on Australian Frontiers.***

By Philip Jones. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2007. Pp. 448. A\$49.95 cloth.

On the first page of Graham Connah's *'Of the Hut I Builded': The Archaeology of Australia's History* (1988), historians were told to leave the interpretation of objects to archaeologists. Historians, opined Connah, 'have enough to do puzzling over documents in the various archives without worrying about a heap of bricks in the middle of a