A WHITE WOMAN
STORIES TO DECOLONISE
HERSELF)

CAN ANYONE TELL ME WHAT IS MISSING?

Melissa Kazuki
Can anyone tell me what is missing?

We have been dexterously deluded.
The Projectionist’s Nightmare
This is the projectionist’s nightmare:
A bird finds its way into the cinema,
finds the beam, flies down it,
smashes into a scene depicting a garden,
a sunset, and two people being nice to each other.
Real blood, real intestines, slither down
the likeness of a tree.
‘This is no good,’ screams the audience,
‘This is not what we came to see.’

Brian Patten (b. 1946),
English poet and author
Can anybody tell me what's missing?

What are the ethical foundations of our culture?

The Great Australian Silence

Terra Nullius

Ignorance
Denial
Forgetting
A Spectre

Frankland's Cross Culturals

What was here
What was lost
A social order
Poverty of spirit

Elimination of the Native
Clear the land
Nothing but bush
THE PIONEER

- Land for the Taking
- Tame the Land
- Make it Useful

PASTORAL ARCADIA

ART AS PROPAGANDA

BUILDING THE DOMINANT CULTURE

A NEW NATIONAL HERO

A MYTH

THE POWER OF STORY

LURUJARRI TRAIL

EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED

FOREGROUND FIRST NATIONS KNOWLEDGES

PAPERBARK ROSES

ART AS VOICE

RESILIENCE

FAMILY

CONNECTIONS

HEALING
PIONEERING PROPAGANDA

It is indeed commonly affirmed that the truth well painted will certainly please the imagination; but it is sometimes convenient not to discover the whole truth but that part which is only delightful. We must sometimes show only half an image to the fancy; which if we display in a lively manner, the mind is so dexterously deluded, that it doth not readily perceive that the other half is concealed. Thus, in writing Pastorals, let tranquillity of that life appear full and plain, but hide the meanness of it; represent its simplicity as clear as you please, but cover its misery.

Harrison’s British Classicks: Containing The Adventurer and Guardian, 1785

This is a meander into the grotesque and picturesque, about a pioneer and a painting, unsettled by a poem.
The painting conveniently tells the ‘delightful’ part of the truth, ‘half an image to the fancy ... in a lively manner’.

Almost 100 years later, a poem tells me we have been ‘dexterously deluded’, mostly unaware ‘the other half is concealed’.¹

In this meander, I disrupt the ‘tranquillity’ to reveal the ‘meanness’ and uncover the ‘misery’ in the background of Australian artist Frederick McCubbin’s The Pioneer. Was it, is it, propaganda?

There is an ‘extra panel Fred left out’ in our ‘holy triptych’.²

**A SPECTRE**

One afternoon, a year or so into my research, my eyes came to rest on the spine of a book on my shelf. I had forgotten about it. I don’t recall when or where I bought it, but I can see why the title caught my eye: The Great Forgetting (1996).³

It was a lucky find as I was deep into the task of trying to establish who my creative community of thinkers were, who else was in the space of rebelling in creative ways against the whitewashing of our history, building on W. E. H. Stanner’s lament about the ‘Great Australian Silence’ and the ‘cult of forgetfulness on a national scale’.⁴

I was greatly sobered by Bernard Smith’s assertion that ‘since 1788 Aborigines have been treated in their own country as if they were sub-human’.⁵ He says Australians ‘have tried to forget’ and suggests ‘Australian culture is suffering from a guilt problem’ about

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¹ In these footnotes is the Weaver, the voice who wrangles and wrestles the fibres and threads of my research into a literary twine of scholarship and story, beauty and trauma, hope and possibilities. An example of me pulling threads together is to suggest that this dexterous delusion can also been viewed as the colonial gaze, benign ignorance, the Great Australian Silence (Stanner), a cult of forgetfulness (Stanner) or The Great Forgetting (Page). My friend and mentor, Gunditjmara Senior Man, Richard Frankland (The Songman), calls it social engineering. Geoff Page and Pooaraar, The Great Forgetting (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1996); W. E. H. Stanner, ‘After the Dreaming: Black and White Australians – An Anthropologist’s View’, Boyer Lectures 1968 (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1969).


³ Ibid., 53–4.

⁴ Stanner, ‘After the Dreaming’.

'our continuing colonial crime, the locked cupboard of our history' and its effect on ‘the integrity and authenticity of Australian culture today’. Smith wrote those words almost forty years ago and I am devastated that they are still relevant.

The full collection of Smith’s 1980 Boyer Lectures is called *The Spectre of Truganini*. I treasure this small, thin, black paperback book. He gave voice to my ‘concerned conscience’ as explained in *My Conscience Is a Many Feathered Thing* and has guided me through decoding our attitudes and values through the art of the day. His book is much annotated and highlighted and the pages have escaped their binding. I had to find a second copy in case this one did not last the distance; such is its impact on me.

‘Spectre’ is an uncomfortable word. It chills with the grotesque and ominous, evoking images of graveyards, ghosts and a sense of foreboding. It has the sense of unfinished business, of putting wrongs to right, of vengeance. The title is amplified by the cover’s image, the bust of a woman who haunts our national conscience. Truganini died in 1876 at the end of a brutal war which continues to be ‘the only war that, unaided, Australians have ever won ... it was a complete victory. None of the original Tasmanians survived’. She is an emblem of what was annihilated and desecrated by the colonisers.

When I look at her face, those eyes downcast, ‘the old woman had seen it all, her own story, the very story of her race’, I am swamped with guilt and shame. She had a dying wish. She asked the so-called Protector of the Aborigines, George Augustus Robinson, to bury her behind the mountains. And to not cut her up.

In death, she was denied both.

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6 Ibid., 10.

7 Ibid., 9. Bernard’s Smith comment is now known to be incorrect. Today there is still a substantial population identifying as Aboriginal Tasmanians, of mixed ancestry with European and African-American.

8 Clive Turnbull, *Black War: The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines* (South Melbourne: Sun Books, 1974), 235–6. This quote takes me back to the story of Xavier Rudd and his Spirit Bird in ‘Concerning My Conscience’ (*My Conscience Is a Many Feathered Thing*): ‘Spirit bird / she creaks and groans / she knows she has / seen this all before she has / seen this all before.’ See Xavier Rudd, ‘Spirit Bird’, track 3 on *Spirit Bird* (Woolloomooloo: Universal Music Australia, 2012).
I once heard of an Arrente Elder who sees the smog of unsettled souls hovering across this country. Truganini is one of those souls.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a ‘last minute’ rush to document the physical characteristics of the original Tasmanians before the genocide was complete. This created a macabre market for images, casts and human remains. Truganini’s ‘protector’, George Augustus Robinson, joined the rush. In 1836, he commissioned Australia’s first professional sculptor, Benjamin Law, to make busts of Truganini and her husband, Wouraddy. The sculptures were made in plaster and painted to imitate bronze. At the time, several original copies were successfully sold in the Australian colonies and overseas. Some second-generation copies were later produced from the original casts and at one stage there were up to thirty pairs in circulation. One of these busts graces the cover of Bernard Smith’s Spectre of Truganini (1980). These ‘remnants’ of Truganini continue to circulate, but today she has people to defend and honour her memory and wishes. In 2009, Sotheby’s pulled a pair of the busts from sale. They had been expected to set a record for sculpture in Australia, fetching up to $700,000. Sotheby’s was responding to protests from the Palawa who objected to the commercial sale of images of their ancestors. They are not art, fumed Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre secretary Nala Mansell.¹ For the Palawa, they represent both the racist plan to exterminate all of Tasmania’s First Nations peoples and the myth that it was successful. If you make a sculpture of the dead, the spirit of these people can be captured, warned Tasmanian Aboriginal activist Michael Mansell.²

The bust of Truganini is a symbol of the humiliation visited on First Nations peoples. Its duplication is symbolic of disregard for their spiritual beliefs and wishes, and its almost-sale to the highest bidder is a sign that that intention to extirpate, that genocidal chapter, is memorialised in collectable statuettes.

Truganini is called the Last Tasmanian, the ‘Beauty of Bruny’, although today we know she was not the ‘last’, as there were Palawa living on Bass Straits islands who had escaped the Black War, the genocide of the Tasmanian First Nations peoples.⁹

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⁹ Palawa is a name used by many of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people who continue to live on the Bass Strait islands, in rural and urban Tasmania and elsewhere. Their culture, although severely disrupted by colonisation, persists. Part of this survival is the resurrection of a language, palawa kani. Not all embrace palawa kani but the re-emergence of an Aboriginal language in Tasmania is providing the island’s First Nations peoples with a culturally distinctive, unique voice. Kristyn Harman, ‘Explainer: How Tasmania’s Aboriginal People Reclaimed a Language, Palawa Kani’, The Conversation, 19 July 2018, https://theconversation.com/explainer-how-tasmanias-aboriginal-people-reclaimed-a-language-palawa-kani-99764.
One by one they had all gone, some shot, some brained with musket butts, others rotted with drink and disease ... They had been raped, emasculated, flogged, roasted and starved. They had been badgered from place to place, taken from their country to an unfamiliar island [Flinders] and brought back to die in pestiferous ruins of a gaol [Oyster Cove].

In 1876, Truganini died aged around sixty-four and was buried outside Hobart, not behind the mountains. Within two years her remains were exhumed and later put on display as she feared they would. On the centenary of her death, her remains were finally cremated and scattered as per her wishes. In a grotesque discovery, her skin and hair were located in a collection at the Royal College of Surgeons in England in 2002. They were eventually returned for burial.

Smith posed a question that lingered with me: ‘How shall we redeem it [the authenticity of Australian culture today] from the guilty awareness that these acts of genocide and attempted genocide were being enacted most vigorously at that very time when our own white Australian culture was being conceived and born?’

10 Turnbull, Black War, 235–6.
All this was swilling around in my mind when I sat down to thumb through Page and Pooaraar’s (Bevan Hayward) collection of poetry and drawings. Yet again, I found myself confronted with the ethical foundations of our Australian culture.

**A POEM AND A PAINTING**

Something is missing.

I am so sorry.

An entire People have been edited from our view.

A poem has sent me in search of a painting. I Google it. I laugh to myself when I discover it is fifteen minutes from home.

I climb the escalator in Federation Square’s Ian Potter Centre, part of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), two stairs at a time. I am on my way to the nineteenth-century Australian art section.

The poem has given me instructions to ‘stare now hard between the panels, there in the space between two and three’.12

I do not linger with Von Guérard, nor Charles Conder. Tom Roberts’s shearers catch the edge of my eye, but I hustle past.13 I find it, prevailing over the gallery’s rear wall. I stand before it, breathless.

There is a posse of bored schoolgirls perched on carry-as-you-learn stools in front of the painting. They couldn’t be less interested. They are avoiding the NGV teacher’s enthusiasm, probably itching to check their phones, be anywhere else except being grilled on an Australian masterpiece.

‘Can anyone tell me what is missing?’ asks the NGV teacher.

The girls are smoothing their skirts, picking at their nails. His eyebrows are expectant, his question lingers ...

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But stare hard now between the panels, there in the space from two to three, and have the scene develop slowly.

My hand wants to dart up like a schoolgirl. ‘Yes!’ I want to yell. I can see what is missing in this ‘holy triptych’. Patiently, the educator prompts them with suggestions before a classmate rescues the group and they sigh with relief: ‘Aboriginal people?’

The schoolgirls pick up their stools and file through to the next masterpiece, but I accost the educator before he joins them. Why did he ask what was missing? Had he read the poem? He shakes his head, slightly baffled, and looks pensively at Fred’s work.

‘This was Aboriginal land ... where are they in this painting? It doesn’t seem right that they are not there’, he says. I tell him about the poem ‘The Extra Panel’ by Geoff Page and the panel that Fred left out, which illustrator Pooaraar had painted to accompany the poem. He had not heard of either and I promise to forward it to him.

I wonder if any of the thousands who hover with The Pioneer each year silently ask of Mr McCubbin: ‘Where are the Aboriginal people?’

Where does it fit in the holy triptych, the extra panel Fred left out?

The triptych has its genesis in early Christian art, emerging as a popular format for altar paintings. McCubbin would have been channelling this religiosity when he conceived The Pioneer as a secular altarpiece. The intention was to elevate the pioneer’s status to the point of reverence. Through this reworking of the divine triptych, McCubbin helped to shape our interpretation of history, in a work that, according to one reviewer for the Age, gives ‘pictorial insight into three episodes in the life history of those strong

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14 These passages scattered across the following pages are excerpts from the poem ‘The Extra Panel’ in Page and Pooaraar, The Great Forgetting.

15 Page and Pooaraar, The Great Forgetting, 53.
spirits who opened up this continent. This idea has a beautiful appropriateness for giving an impression of the way in which our pioneers who plunged into the primeval forests seemed engulfed in time as well as in space'.

As with most religious triptychs, The Pioneer reads from left to right and each panel is ‘read’ to link the progress of toil on this land across time, charting the progress of Australian settlement, or occupation.

**Doubt and Melancholy**

*Off to the left on panel one*

*where the new wife waits for the husband’s billy*

The first panel shows brave young pioneers who believe the land needs to be tamed to farm. In the nineteenth century, they were known as ‘Free Selectors’, which referred to the ‘free selection before survey’ of Crown land in some colonies. This allocation of land encouraged closer settlement, focusing on intensive agriculture, such as wheat, rather than extensive agriculture like wool. McCubbin’s pioneer would probably have paid one pound per acre.

*and the horse is off in its hobble chains,*

*the dray a beginning arched by trees?*

The couple are settling into their selection. The horses have been unharnessed from the cart expectant with their world’s possessions. The billy is bubbling on the fire, ready for the evening meal.

*Her face has a late Victorian poignancy.*

*It’s possible she might have known.*
What might she have known? Did she know the mysterious well-worn path they followed into this clearing was made by the light feet of the First Nations peoples over thousands of years? Did she wonder at the curious pile of firewood found waiting in the clearing, collected by women and children for their next fire? Are there scattered bones of limbs and ribs and fingers among the ‘tangle of browns and purples underfoot’, testimony that the land was tamed of its People first?¹⁷

It’s a narrative of sacrifice, offered the Age in 1905, when The Pioneer was unveiled. The writer dwells on the pioneer’s wife, ‘the regretful dream that haunts her face’, speculating the contents of her thoughts. Perhaps she is already missing home comforts and those left behind. Undoubtedly, she is overwhelmed by the task ahead. She is a symbol of the hours of doubt and melancholy every pioneer must face when he or she leaves the beaten tracks of civilisation. The Age reassures its readers that ‘her note of gloom is not sounded too deeply’ as her face ‘shows that she is strong enough to be chastened by the quiet half hour of personal sadness’. All will be well, ‘the onlooker is sure that she will soon be setting about her duties with the blithe wifely spirit of the pioneer woman’.

The first panel is one of depths and untamed vistas, revealing the Australian bush thick, dense, pristine, suggesting isolation and vulnerability. The huge towering gums have heroic status. McCubbin deftly uses the bush in the triptych to chart struggle, perseverance and eventual triumph.

The light has a ‘sad cast’, observes the Melbourne newspaper, a ‘despondent twilight’.¹⁸ Perhaps McCubbin was using the deepening sunset over the landscape to echo the mood of its new inhabitants, or the demise of its first.

Or is it there
Some weeks beyond

the hut that’s up in panel two
washed with sunlight in a clearing,

¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ Ibid.
off the right of the painting’s focus,
husband and wife and child in arms,

Perseverance

In a religious triptych, the second panel is for veneration, and McCubbin follows this tradition with his own version of Madonna and child.

The couple are well settled into their selection with a hut in the distance. The baby on her hip indicates the passage of time and the optimistic light shows ‘the despondency of the twilight has gone. The new life and the child have paramount claim on her energies’. This is a scene full of promise.

The Age writer swells with admiration for the pioneer in this panel, suggesting it will ‘melt the onlooker with a thrill of sympathy for the brave hearts fronting the solitude with so serene a contentment’. The writer rejoices in the ‘hard physical toil’. The pioneer may be tired, but this is a virtuous weariness because he is playing his part in the creation of a nation: ‘The suggestion of languor in the man’s figure is that of a fatigue not unenjoyable’. The scene has moved away from melancholy towards the beginnings of a new nation. This snapshot, the epitome of the spirit of the Australian pioneer, can be relied upon to ferment nationalism, as evidenced by its pride of place on the walls of many country pubs and biscuit tins.

The message in this panel is perseverance. We see the beginnings of ‘civilisation’, with a hut convincing the white family of their claim on another people’s land. The bush is conquered, and ‘with the fallen leaves and bark are now mingled the chips that mark his slow dogged struggle with exuberant

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
Nature. The smoke of his burning off gives a poetical hint of the terrible force of fire that he wields in the struggle’.\(^{21}\)

The heroic status in the towering columns of the gums has been transferred to the pioneer who fells them. The pioneer is ‘smoking the pipe of peace on the trunk of the last giant to crash before the axe that lies beside him’.\(^{22}\) Is this a scene of civilisation or devastation?

\begin{quote}
the rest from sweat as he sits on a log,

rubs his beard

and is talking softly,

his honesty and axe beside him?
\end{quote}

What else, who else has been cut down to build this new nation?\(^{23}\)

\begin{quote}
Panel three is far too late

with its city that hangs as a vista there

brought by light through thinning trees

and boasting its new span of progress.
\end{quote}

**Triumph and Hope**

‘The last panel is the triumphal stanza of the whole colour poem’, sings the *Age*. The warm light glows confidence and hope for the future, gone are the shadows of...
melancholy. Time has passed as shown by the further taming of the bush: ‘The great wonder of the bush has been achieved. The strong arm of the man has swept some acres of these heart-breaking forest giants.’

Marvellous Melbourne glows in the background, a product of the fortitude of the pioneers: ‘In the distance, the spires and bridges of the glorious young city and the stocks of a rich harvest field tell of the joys that another generation is reaping from the toil of the once lusty pioneer now gone to dust.’

The man who kneels at the slewed wooden cross is a false lead only.

He might be the son, come back years later, or the pioneer himself, still mourning the child.

A country youth with reverent fingers clears away the undergrowth from a grave site. This is the end of the legend of ‘the useful toil, the homely joys, and destiny obscure of the pioneer, who does not live, as the rude cross in the third panel indicates, to see the growth or share in the prosperity of the fine city seen in the background of the panel.’

Is it ‘the last resting place of the gallant couple’, or of the baby who did not thrive? This grave may be marked, but what of the unmarked graves throughout the bush, hidden from view. What would the pioneers have done with these burial spots if they found them? The gallant pioneers may not have lived to see the luminous marvellous Melbourne in the third

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
panel, but many First Nations peoples died trying to prevent the decimation of their way of living and being, their social order.

A writer for the Argus in 1904 said that McCubbin was a passionate lover of natural scenery who ‘seldom resists the temptation to people his scenes with figures’ but I wonder, was he ever ‘tempted’ to populate them with First Nations people?27

The Extra Panel

But stare now hard between the panels, there in the space from two and three, and have the scene develop slowly
You choose it from a random handful
although the trees remain the same, sturdy, dense and nineteenth century
the undergrowth idealised slightly.
The extra panel shows a child
(Fred’s brushwork here is less precise)
tangled in the coils of strychnine
just there beneath the central tree that holds the whole thing all together
and two black parents crouched over her

27 Argus, no title, 22 April 1904, 7.
‘This is the one that Fred McCubbin left out’, protests Pooaraar, the artist of the extra panel, ‘the extinction or extermination or eradication of Aboriginal people as the pioneers moved out into the bushland.’

The ‘coils of strychnine’ could just as easily have been arsenic, as both were used to ‘clear’ the land of its First Peoples. Bags of flour were laced with poison and left for the First Peoples to take or ‘steal’. Poisoned damper was left to ‘share’. This extra panel depicts the darker side of our history. It shouts: Where are the First Peoples?

while in the distance is the hut,
its chimney quietly smoking.

Out of sight, out of mind, the new European society closed to them, the First Nations peoples were painted out of the picture.

Then like an emu drumming
came a voice across the plain:

Get 200 pounds of strychnine
dose their flour 'n' sugar again.

A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.

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The combination of Page’s poetry and Pooaraar’s painting helped me realise how seductively easy it is to be captive to and in McCubbin’s triptych. I began to appreciate how The Pioneer and other works from the Heidelberg School trapped us in a fantasy world of a pastoral arcadia. McCubbin’s triptych of melancholy, perseverance and triumph is a much-loved piece of propaganda holding us, anchoring us to our whitewashed history where we imagine virgin land there for the taking – and a race doomed to disappearance. There are no blood splatters in their arcadia, nor are there black survivors.

The triptych and all that it embodies binds us to the dominant narrative, a blinkered colonial lens. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests that in being held captive by the picture, we are trapped in our own frame of reference, which we construct to suit our narrative.

The picture is a model of reality: ‘this is how things are’.\(^{31}\) The Pioneer speaks to terra nullius, an Arcadian optic that only

\(^{31}\) Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 53.
showed the potential of the landscape through a Western worldview, with blind spots for the sensitive cultivation and curation of the land by the First Nations peoples for millennia. In the shadows of the painting is the narrative of social Darwinism – the racist application of survival of the fittest to the human race – that persuaded us that the First Nations peoples were a primitive race, destined to disappear.

I wrestle with these gazes. My education – that is, my primary, secondary and first tertiary education in the 1970s and 1980s – in Australian history was scant and what lurks in the shadows of my brain is undoubtedly whitewashed.

I am teaching myself our history and in this space art scholars are helping me to decode historical imagery to appreciate the attitudes and philosophies that told half-truths about white history.

Earlier I shared a question posed by Bernard Smith: ‘How shall we redeem it [the authenticity of Australian culture today] from the guilty awareness that these acts of genocide and attempted genocide were being enacted most vigorously at the very time when our own white Australian culture was being born?’

My own reframing of the question is: How can I, as a beneficiary and consumer of white Australian culture, celebrate its pioneering achievements with anything other than guilty awareness that acts of genocide and attempted genocide were being enacted most vigorously at the very time The Pioneer was depicted and painted? Were we founded on lies upon lies? Is this redeemable?

In this meander, I explore how white Australian culture became shaped by how European settlers saw, and thus represented, the landscape. Landscape paintings and drawings are part of the broader visual repertoire through which the land was represented by foreign explorers and settlers. What did they see? What were the lenses they were looking through that have forever tinted the gaze with which I wrestle today? Who was The Pioneer and where are all the people who were here first?

32 For more on this see Bruce Pascoe, Dark Emu: Black Seeds Agriculture or Accident? (Broome: Magabala Books, 2014); Bill Gammage, The Biggest Estate on Earth (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012).

33 I discover a myriad of lenses through which this landscape was viewed: ugly, bleak, European, Christian, sublime, grotesque, picturesque and melancholy. Each lens reflects the mindset of the viewer at the time as well as the ongoing influence of these attitudes on contemporary white Australian self-identity.
A CONVERSATION WITH THE SETTLERS

I am here in the bush with a couple of Free Selectors, Fred and Myrtle Settler, now immortalised in McCubbin’s masterpiece, *The Pioneer*. They have very kindly allowed me to visit them in their hut to learn more about their hopes and dreams and to discuss the legend of *The Pioneer*. The time period is in between panels one and two. The baby is on its way.

*What were your first impressions as you left Melbourne and headed out into the unknown with your horses and wagon?*

**Fred:** My ’eart’s in the bush. I been a roo and possum hunter for a while, so I get it. Love its raw beauty wantin’ to be tamed and made good, useful. I’ll put this patch of mine in order. Myrtle, love, you’ll be ’appy ’ere, won’t you?

**Myrtle:** Fred, I wanna be ’appy, but I can’t see no beauty. It’s ugly. It’s a real hard life. The weather’s topsy-turvy, blisterin’ hot or freezin’, can change in an hour. We never know when it gonna rain. The flies can carry you away if the mozzies don’t get ya first. The seeds me mum sent me won’t grow.

**Fred:** We’ll get there. She’s just homesick, she is, with the bairn coming soon ’n all.

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34 Fred was the name of my maternal grandfather and great-grandfather. My son has a ratbag red heeler/cattle dog called Myrtle.


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How are you dealing with your homesickness?

**Myrtle:** We’re working hard to make it a little bit of Cornwall in the arse end of the world. It’s no dungeon anymore. There are those societies now, call ’em selves ‘acclimatisation societies’, bringing home here: daffodils, foxgloves, foxes, rabbits to eat, oak trees, might even put in one of ’em elms one day like they ’ad in Padstow Green.

**Fred:** You’ve never been to Padstow.

**Myrtle:** [Chortles] Too true. Can we ditch the colonial West Country accents? Thank God. I couldn’t have kept that up for this entire exchange.

1770: Captain Cook landed in in Botany Bay, home of the Eora People. He claimed possession of the East Coast of Australia for Britain under the doctrine of *terra nullius*, a Latin expression meaning ‘nobody’s land’. In international law, it means territory that has never been subject to the sovereignty of any state.

According to the international law of Europe in the late eighteenth century, there were only three ways Britain could take possession of another country. If uninhabited, Britain could claim and settle that country and then claim ownership of the land. If inhabited, Britain could seek permission from the indigenous people to use some of their land. This means that Britain could buy land but not steal it. If the land was inhabited, Britain could take over the country by invasion and conquest, meaning war and defeat of the indigenous peoples.

Law dictates that Britain had to respect the rights of indigenous people. Britain did not follow any of these rules in Australia. There were already more than 270 unique nations living on the continent; yet from 1770, the British Government acted as if Australia were uninhabited. Instead of admitting that it was invading First Nations’ lands, Britain acted as though it were settling an empty land. This is what is meant by the myth of *terra nullius*.¹

The pioneers saw dreams and freedom while the First Nations people were losing their freedom and their Dreaming.

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¹ Kevin Butler, Bob Percival, Kate Cameron and Board of Studies NSW, *The Myth of Terra Nullius: Invasion and Resistance – The Early Years* (North Sydney: Board of Studies NSW, 1995).
What is a ‘pioneer’, exactly?

Fred: [In a slow laconic Aussie drawl] I reckon I am the pioneer in the flesh, the selfless settler of the bush, like a lion tamer, carving out patches to grow food for the first born of our new nation. A nation-builder, they call me. The sort of fella the poets and musicians write about, even put in their paintings!

Myrtle: [In that clever, officious voice one might find in the academy] As a definition, the pioneer is a problem as it is grounded in *terra nullius*, pretending the land was nobody’s. The art of this time barely shows the First People, but if they do ‘appear’, it is in the shadows of the bush: dark, savage, threatening. ³⁷ [Looks nervously out into the shadows of the surrounding bush]

Why did you choose to be pioneers?

Fred: There was nobody here, land for the taking. No lords or ladies to tax us, fleece our harvests. We could be our own bosses.

Myrtle: There was a feeling of beginning with a clean slate: people could start afresh and build new lives, no matter who they had been or where they had come from. The hierarchies and class systems from home did not apply here. It was about hard work. [Whispers in a conspiratorial fashion] The loaded gun over there in the corner suggests the land was not ‘there for the taking’.

Fred: Perhaps it is there to shoot that annoying crow that keeps chipping in.

³⁷ John Hirst, *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2009), 174. Hirst’s is one of the definitive studies of the Australian pioneer legend; it is more critical of the pioneer than earlier studies such as James Collier’s *The Pastoral Age in Australasia* (London: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1911).
What was the truth about the pioneer’s life?

**Myrtle:** In the 1880s and ’90s it was hard, harsh and dirty. The colonies were struggling with poverty, drought, depression and strikes. Collier writes of the ‘long and stubborn conflicts with drought and floods, snowstorms and heatwaves, disease in their flocks and herds, death at the hands of the blacks, or from thirst or hunger, or the wasting sickness that came of hope deferred’.  

Those of us defeated of unfulfilled promise fell, ‘leaving [our] bones to bleach under the Western sun’.  

**Fred:** Yeah, I guess it has been a bit romanticised. The Great Depression [of the 1890s] was a bit grim. Having said that, our miserable plight did make the public a bit...
more sympathetic to the harsh life of the all-sacrificing pioneer. We all had a dose of the hard times, city and bush.

**Myrtle:** Humphhh. The Heidelberg School romanticised us, the rural poor. We were elevated into history painting. But it was all bollocks, really.  

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**So why do you think McCubbin’s painting, The Pioneer, has become the Australian masterpiece it is today?**

**Fred:** I reckon he painted us out of our chains. We are settlers now, not convicts. We needed a dose of nationalism, something to be proud of, so why not those who have sacrificed so much to make this country useful?

**Myrtle:** Or perhaps it was how we wanted to see it: images of the proud unfolding of a new nation. McCubbin was curating our history.

**Fred:** [Affectionately] Myrtle ... he made us homegrown heroes. We tackled and tamed a land of mythic proportions, men and women toiling and struggling in the wilderness.

**Myrtle:** [Eye roll] I think Fred has been reading opinions from the day and reviews from the launch of the painting. The newspapers were whipping up nationalism and saw art

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40 Frederick McCubbin, ‘Notes by Frederick McCubbin’, LaTrobe Journal 24 (October 1979), http://latrobejournal.slv.vic.gov.au/latrobejournal/issue/latrobe-24/t1-g-t2.html. The press urged the National Gallery to echo the experience of the people. ‘We cannot ... urge too strongly ... how requisite it is that we should as soon as possible fill our National Gallery with representative works of our artists and our nation, its early historical scenes, and pictures of the true rude life that have and did exist in the early days of the colony.’ See ‘Australian Impressionism: National Themes’, National Gallery of Victoria, accessed 27 March 2019, https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/ausimpress/education/insights_national.html.

41 This pride did not extend to the colony's humble convict origins, and the pioneer legend ignores this chapter ‘by proclaiming the settlement of the land as the chief theme in Australia’s history’. It was easy not to mention the convicts or the First Peoples, whom the pioneers dispossessed. Convicts were initially excluded in the pioneer legend but were later redeemed and given a place in the nation’s history. Hirst, *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History*, 188.

42 A few days after my brief exchange with the NGV teacher, he offered me the chance to research The Pioneer further in the NGV Library. In this space, I could view original catalogues for exhibitions and read the press cuttings over the century since the painting was bought by the NGV. This opportunity gave me an enriched understanding of the young nation after Federation and the national pride that began to build. I could see how McCubbin was not necessarily a witting propagandist; but rather, he was riding the wave of nationalism of the time. Sidney Dickinson, ‘What Should Australian Artists Paint?’, Australasian Critic, 1 October 1890, 22.
as a way of bolstering the cause. The *Bulletin* was aggressively nationalist, touting the slogan ‘Australia for Australians’, calling on painters to meet ‘the artistic needs of the public and depict the real Australia of the outer pastoral regions’.  

Do you think that as more and more children were born and raised in the colonies, and settlers were becoming more prosperous, a sense of national pride was emerging along with a growing awareness of what it meant to be Australian?  

Myrtle: [Appears conflicted] This is where things get complicated for me, when you bring the children into it. We needed to create a future for our families, something for them to be proud of, to build on. I suppose the work ethic of the pioneer was a good example. We *are* the embodiment of courage, bravery, enterprise, sacrifice, perseverance and hard work.

I can feel that crow looking at me. He’s thinking that the people here first are also the embodiment of courage, bravery,

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43 Jane Clark and Bridget Whitelaw, *Golden Summers: Heidelberg and Beyond* (Sydney: International Cultural Corporation of Australia, 1985), 128. Clark and Whitelaw highlight the role the press had in fermenting nationalism through art. This was to be the point of difference for the Heidelberg School: Fred McCubbin, Charles Condor and Arthur Streeton, led by Tom Roberts, rejected these imported qualities of their mentors and teachers, believing outback and pioneering subjects was what distinguished Australia from other nations. They were called the ‘Heidelberg School’ because ‘their work has been done chiefly in this attractive suburb, where, with others of like inclination, they have established a summer congregation for out-of-door painting’. Dickinson, ‘What Should Australian Artists Paint?’

44 As the Australian identity began to consolidate, many in the colonies turned away from holding on to the British way of life. By the 1880s, strong feelings of nationalism had begun to emerge for the centenary in 1888, and in the lead-up to Federation in 1901. This search for identity was reflected in the demand for art.
enterprise, sacrifice, perseverance and hard work. They were families too. What about their children’s future?  

**The Pioneer and other works from the Heidelberg School represent a turning point, don’t they?**

Myrtle: [Seemingly relieved. This is safer territory] Up until the late 1880s, the art we saw in the colonies portrayed the grand vistas of the Australian landscape through a Romantic European lens, softening the land, bathing the country in gentle light and with bright, verdant greens. I’m thinking of painters like Eugene von Guérard.  

As we began to ‘grow up’ and move away from ideas of the motherland, these interpretations began to jar because Australia was not a gentle place that had been tamed and cultivated for centuries (like England), but a raw place of hot, bright light, searing winds, baked earth and a wide dry sky. McCubbin himself once said: ‘How cold and tame the deciduous trees are to us after the beauty and warmth of our native land.’  

With the Heidelberg fellows, we had home-grown artists observing gum trees in micro detail and artfully casting subjects – such as pioneers and shearers – as central actors in history.

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45 What I am trying to get to here is how our principles can be conflicted and compromised when those principles have an adverse effect on ourselves, that ‘not in my back yard’ mentality. I wonder how many mothers felt conflicted on the frontiers at the treatment of First Nations families, I wonder whether they ever tucked their little ones in bed at night, kissed a child’s forehead and then imagined they were black (See ‘Dear George’ in Skin in the Game).

46 Von Guérard, whose moody landscapes I hustled past on my way to see *The Pioneer* that day.

47 McCubbin, ‘Notes by Frederick McCubbin’.
They decided what was to be included and excluded.\footnote{This became the official aesthetic of art into the twentieth century. Ann Galbally, ‘National Life and Landscape: The Heidelberg School as Mythmaker 1880–1905’, in The Cambridge Companion to Australian Art, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 71.} With their aesthetic, we find the actual physical image of the First Nations peoples begins to disappear. They’re not there anymore, whereas in previous colonial work they were often like cardboard figures. They were there as though they are part of the landscape, like gum trees – a part of nature.\footnote{Tom Stannage, Western Australia’s Heritage: The Pioneer Myth (Nedlands: University Extension, University of Western Australia, 1985), 151.}

Fred: I love that we made it onto a biscuit tin, don’t you, Luv?

I am sensing there is a problem with the pioneer legend ...

Myrtle: You have been banging on throughout these pages about the Great Australian Silence, the white blindfold, our whitewashed history, our national amnesia, the Great Forgetting – the pioneer is part of that silence. It painted the First Nations peoples out of the landscape, thereby avoiding confronting the historical injustices committed against them and their lands. It refuses to acknowledge that for the lauded achievements of taming the country, there was an enormous price to pay and

The Pioneer was painted on the grounds of the McCubbin country home on the northern slopes of Mount Macedon. The Macedon Ranges have been home to the Wurundjeri, Dja Dja Wurrung and Taunwurrung communities for at least 26,000 years.

As a plein air purist, McCubbin set up the equipment to paint The Pioneer outside in a field, exposed to the elements. For almost a year, McCubbin worked on the canvases, which are more than two metres high. To be able to reach the top of the painting without a ladder or straining, he dug a trench to accommodate the frames.

The hut in the second panel is McCubbin’s view from the trench where he set up and painted the canvas. It was the home of the keeper of highland bulls. During the painting of The Pioneer, these bulls were constantly getting out and menacing McCubbin, and he would have to drop his brushes and run. They were fearsome, with big horns, stomping and tramping the bush.
there is blood in that soil that was tilled and planted and harvested.\textsuperscript{50}

Are you a hero if your possession and taming of the land includes other human beings? Is taming leaving poisoned flour and damper out for families?\textsuperscript{51} The pioneer is the domain of the white male, even though women were credited for their sacrifice. Now we can see how it was the genesis of the ‘fair go’ and mateship legacy of the Australian male. On show in pubs, wharves, football matches and building sites.

This confected legend, the pioneer as a national hero, was largely fostered by writers, poets and painters who were searching for a glorious past, making a tradition as well as reflecting one.\textsuperscript{52} In 1899 we had the poem ‘How the Land Was Won’ by Henry Lawson and in 1902 the poem ‘Song of the Future’ by Banjo Paterson.\textsuperscript{53} McCubbin follows it up with \textit{The Pioneer} in 1903. They conspired (maybe) to rewrite history through aesthetics, subliminally seeding and nourishing the legend with rhyme and image. Schools carry on their ‘good’ work now; the poems have been stalwarts in anthologies and school magazines, pedalling the fiction.\textsuperscript{54}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{50} Or, in Bruce Elder’s words, ‘Blood on the Wattle’. See his book of the same name for one of the first comprehensive accounts of the massacres of First Nations people around the country. Bruce Elder, \textit{Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians since 1788} (Frenchs Forest: Child & Associates, 1988). Elder’s research has since been superseded by the interactive database produced by the University of Newcastle, which has also been synthesised and published by the Guardian. See Lyndall Ryan, Jennifer Debenham, Mark Brown and William Pascoe, ‘Colonial Frontier Massacres in Eastern Australia 1788–1872’, accessed 16 March 2019, https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php.
\item \textsuperscript{51} There are many accounts of poisoned flour and damper being left out for, or given to, First Nations communities. I found the following account in the National Library of Australia’s database, Trove. The story recounts an anecdote told to the author about a First Nations man accused of killing a ‘Chinaman’, trading from a boat off the coast, for his bêche-de-mer (sea cucumbers). The owner of the trade vessel was so furious, he sent the boat along the coast and at every camp he came to, he gave the men a bag of flour. ‘Now, flour was a great luxury in those days, having the added qualities of not having to be caught, or fished for, or killed, and yet being food, and as it was such plums the older men appropriated it to themselves. Well, the next day there were no old men – the flour was poisoned.’ G. R., ‘Coast Blacks’, Geelong Advertiser, 16 May 1908, https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/148920199?.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 182.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Hirst, \textit{Sense and Nonsense in Australian History}, 188.
\end{itemize}
It is a little ironic: the pioneer legend, which was made by creative writers, is eventually being attacked by one.

**CAN OUR CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY BE REDEEMED?**

How do we live with flawed foundations? Is there a path to cultural redemption?

I cannot pretend to know the answer, but I am confident that one step towards making amends is to challenge the history of the dominant culture, disagree with each other, question and challenge statements and opinions.

Historian C. T. Stannage voiced his concern about the potency of the pioneer legend in his book, *Western Australia’s Heritage: The Pioneer Myth* (1985): ‘The danger for any society is that one view of the past may get enshrined as an orthodox, even an authorised, version, which by its nature is exclusive and partial and which contains and even cuts down potential alternative visions of the nature of our society.’ He says he worries about the use of the word ‘pioneer’, a central symbol of the gentry tradition, and says he was not the first to be concerned. Stannage goes on to share a curious story about Sir Walter Murdoch (1874–1970), a prominent Australian academic and essayist known for his intelligence and wit. I include it as it shows how ingrained the legend is in the Australian psyche.

In 1929, Western Australia was approaching its hundredth anniversary and Walter Murdoch, then Professor of English at University of Western Australia, had the task of reading around 300 odes submitted to celebrate the centenary of their state. Murdoch found himself in a state of ode-shock, fighting the impulse to start his sentences with ‘Hail’. ‘Most of the odes began with “Hail”, or “All Hail”, and some of them threw in an extra “hail”. They hailed everyone. They hailed the country. They hailed the centenary. They hailed our wool, our wheat, our gold, our pearling industry, our wildflowers, the

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55 Stannage, *Western Australia’s Heritage*, 146.

56 Ibid. Walter Murdoch was a founding professor of English and former chancellor of the University of Western Australia. Murdoch University is named in his honour, as is Murdoch, the suburb surrounding its main Perth campus.
men of a century ago and, as he reports, the generations yet unborn’. According to Murdoch, the word ‘pioneer’ was the most used word in the 300 odes:

I do not wish to say a word against them, only I do not see why a special praise is due to them ... Everywhere in our country today, not only in the remote and lonely places in the back blocks, but in the heart of our cities, too, men and women are confronting their fate with a high courage worthy of all honour ... To single out the pioneers for special glorification is to libel humanity.

Murdoch argued there were many to revere and praise in our history. In his last line: “This nonsense about pioneers gets, after a time, on one’s nerves, hence this protest.”

Although an amusing anecdote, the implications of the pioneer legend are very serious. Fundamentally, it is disrespectful to the ongoing presence of a diverse group of First Nations peoples, who have never ceded sovereignty. Stannage is furious about it, stating that it avoids confronting the fact that ‘hundreds’ – thirty-five years on we know it’s more like thousands – of First Nations peoples were killed by the pioneers, shot and wounded, poisoned and raped. The pioneer legend is a method of manipulating people’s ideas about history and justifying invasion. Stannage concludes with a plea: ‘To be properly historical we must drop the use of the word ‘pioneer’ and replace it with the word “land-taker”’.

I wouldn’t go as far as Stannage. In my story ‘Raced Places’ (I’m Not Racist but ...), we learned that Elder Sam Watson was adamant the racially charged road name, Boundary Street, in Brisbane, holds space for a racist history and to remove or amend it is whitewashing the past. The point is that these stories need to be told to every

57 Murdoch, cited in Stannage, Western Australia’s Heritage, 148.
58 Ibid., 149.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 150.
61 Ibid.
generation. The pioneer should remain, but we need to put in the missing panels.  

There is a curious mechanism of remembering (as opposed to ‘mechanisms of forgetfulness’ as Bernard Smith laments in The Spectre of Truganini) proposed by Stannage, embellished by me, which could be a daily reminder if we so choose.  

Hold an Australian two dollar coin in your hand. Run your thumb over the two sides, look down at the head of Queen Elizabeth II. She is the symbol and the story of white Australia, our triumphs and successes, and the ideologies and histories that enabled us to thrive. Turn the coin over to gaze on the face of ‘an Aboriginal’, the quintessential noble savage, the other side of the story: disposessed of land, language, culture, kin, stories; subjected to rape, murder, racism, poverty, inequality, discrimination; and denied a future comparable to his fellow white countrymen. There are always two sides to each coin and these two sets of stories are forever linked. White Australia could not thrive without the attempted genocide of the First Nations peoples.  

I am beyond delightful parts of the truth, half images to the fancy, concealed other halves, and anything that pleases the

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62 One day I hope to encourage the NGV to create a project that asks artists to imagine missing panels for The Pioneer. It is a responsibility of the gallery to start a big conversation about the legend and its legacy.

63 Stannage, Western Australia’s Heritage, 151; Smith, The Spectre of Truganini, 17.

64 The man on the coin is Gwoya Tjungurrayi. The story of how this man and his image was unashamedly commodified and used to promote tourism is told by Jillian E. Barnes in ‘Resisting the Captured Image: How Gwoja Tjungurrayi, “One Pound Jimmy”, escaped the “Stone Age”, in Transgressions: Critical Australian Indigenous Histories, ed. Ingereth Macfarlane and Mark Hannah (Canberra: ANU ePress, 2007).
imagination. My time with Fred and Myrtle Settler and their masterpiece has brought me to another one of those junctures: say, or shut up; enjoy the scenery and keep walking, or take a stand and ask the world, Can anyone tell me what is missing?
He [Pastor Don Brady] remarked how surprised he was that my poetry books were being bought and read by European Australians as well as Aborigines and Torres Strait islanders and he said to me, ‘Kathy, you must be a tribal sister to the paperbark trees because you write so good. You couldn’t do what you do without their help. Your real name must be Oodgeroo, which is our name for the paperbark trees’.  

Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker, 1920–1993), Australian First Nations poet and activist

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65 This quotation is the opening ‘note’ of the anthology Paperbark: A Collection of Black Australian Writings, an excerpt from the tribute to poet and activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal, explaining how she came to adopt her name of Oodgeroo, which means paperbark tree in her language. Paperbark was the first collection to span the diverse range of First Nations literary works, ranging widely across genre and time. It includes transcriptions of oral literature, excerpts of rock opera, prose, poetry, song, drama and polemic, combined with the selected artworks of Jimmy Pike. Jack Davis, ed., Paperbark: A Collection of Black Australian Writings (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1991).
I am in the gallery space of the Koorie Heritage Trust in Federation Square in Melbourne. Ahead of me, dominating the large white wall, is a collection of writhing fleshy roses, cut and crafted from paperbark, connected like a vine, twisting, reaching up, towards, away from me. They call to me across the gallery. I love paperbark. I yearn to touch them, rub the fine, silky layers between my thumb and forefinger, peel the layers away, until I read the description of the work, which sparingly alludes to seventeen sad stories.

I want to know more. I follow a trail through the paperbarks. Allow me to take you back a few years to an adventure in Broome.

**THE LURUJARRI TRAIL**

In the Broome winter sun, I follow the group inland, away from the coastal dunes they call Lurujarri, the namesake of the Trail we are walking. The sand we have roamed has been white, black, red and yellow. I trudge through a damp reed bed, some shoulder height, a wetland once and will be again in the Wet. The reeds are hard, dry, stiff and crabs’ burrows crunch and break under my walking boots. A fetid pong rises with the sun. Abruptly, the reed spread ends and I am on the edge of a silvery forest of paperbarks they call garnboorr. My senses announce the air is cooler and sweeter as I cross over into a new ecosystem. I smile as the camp dogs pounce and chase white butterflies around the shaggy trunks and boughs of the paperbarks, *Melaleucas*. I spy places where brumbies have rolled. I wonder if this is the place where the *rai* waits ... 

It has been around twenty-five years since revered Elder Paddy Roe initiated the Lurujarri Heritage Trail to encourage the members of his Goolarabooloo community to be walking Country again. Walking Country is vital to conserve, renew and stay connected with one’s heritage and traditional skills and to teach the young ones to pass on knowledge for generations to come. The trail had a second purpose: Roe sought to invite non-Aboriginal people to see his Country and enchant us with a relationship to the land we share. His hope was that walking Country together would foster trust and empathy and friendship and honour the past. It worked with me.
Roe’s descendants now lead the trail, teaching and telling stories, step by step, as is the old way, the right way.66 Our guide is Roe’s grandson, senior lawman Richard Hunter. He is wizened, of an indiscriminate age, emotional in his welcome offering, ‘Ask questions ... we are willing to share’. He says he is ‘a salty’, meaning he’s of the saltwater mob, a declaration of origin and connection. He holds the stories for Country, talks for Country and now that is all he has left ... his stories. In later years, I meet river people, cold country people, sunrise people ... all defined by and connected to place. Richard Hunter told these stories along the way and this is my retelling, with some contextual overlays.

The Country we walked through on the trail was not Paddy Roe’s Country to begin with; it was and is Jabirr Jabirr land but colonisation and dispossession had a devastating impact on traditional ways – laws, language and culture – and custodianship.67 In 1865, 4,000 sheep arrived in the region thus disrupting the lives of the First Nations clans on the Dampier Peninsula in Western Australia.68 Within thirty-five years, certain clans had been virtually wiped out.59

66 One of the most important lessons in my decolonising journey is that the land is a moral guidebook, as is the sky, and there is a right way of conducting yourself in the realm of First Nations culture and cosmology. I discuss this in my story ‘Right Way’, in The White Woman.

67 In 2017, a court ruling stated that the Goolarabooloo people had no claim over the area through which the trail runs. Justice North’s ruling came as he considered a complicated patchwork of three applications for a determination of Native Title in the mid-Dampier Peninsula in WA from the Jabirr Jabirr, Bindunbur and Goolarabooloo claim groups. He said under the traditional laws and customs of the Bindunbur and Jabirr Jabirr people, descent – including by adoption – was the only way of acquiring rights and interests in land and water. That descent must go back to time immemorial ... A limited exception to the descent rule is succession, whereby a neighbouring or closely related group may succeed to the local estate of a group that has become extinct. The Goolarabooloo have not acquired rights and interests in land and waters by descent, because their connection to the Goolarabooloo application area goes only as far as the arrival of Mr P. Roe and his wife M. P. in the area in the 1930s. The Goolarabooloo applicants have not succeeded to land and waters in the Goolarabooloo application area because the original inhabitants did not become extinct.’ Wendy Carcetta, ‘Bombshell Ruling Overturns “Traditional Owners”’, National Indigenous Times, 23 November 2017, https://nit.com.au/bombshell-ruling-overturns-traditional-owners/.

68 Named after William Dampier, who commanded the 26-gun warship HMS Roebuck on a mission to explore the coast of New Holland and ‘discovered’ the region in 1699.

As I explore in ‘Ancestral Twine’ in this chapbook, First Nations societies are structured around a sophisticated social order with connection and caring for Country as a central tenet. There are roles for custodianship of Country that are integral to the totemic systems of kinship. The laws and customs dictate that if a tribe is threatened with extinction due to disease or lack of children, Elders must choose someone who is deemed worthy as a new custodian. Paddy Roe’s story explains how this was the case on this Country and how the Elders were sometimes required to scrutinise a person for their qualities rather than their bloodline.  

On the Dampier Peninsula, many young people were stolen, taken away to missions off their Country, until the clans of the Ngumbarl and Djugun people, their lands now overlain with station leases, had not one woman of child-bearing age left. Some Elders and law-keepers stayed on their lands living the traditional way, fulfilling their sacred roles as custodians, despite the problems associated with sharing their Country with non-Aboriginal people.

Elder and ‘chief’ Walmadany and the old law-keepers Narbi and Kardilakan, could see that with their young people off Country in missions in Beagle Bay and Lombardina, there would be nobody to properly care for their lands. In 1931, when Paddy Roe entered their Jabirr Jabirr Country with his woman, Pegalily, ‘on the run’ from stealing her from another, there were only 60–100 elderly clan members left on Country.

Roe was a Njikina man, born on Roebuck Station, near Broome, just before the First World War broke out. He was trained in the skills required for working on cattle and sheep stations and worked as a drover and a repairer of windmills.

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70 Ibid.
Not long after entering Jabirr Jabirr land, Pegalily became pregnant. (This is my favourite part of the story; it has enchanted paperbark trees for me forever more.)

In the paperbarks, perhaps these paperbarks among dogs chasing white butterflies, the rai are waiting. The rai are spirit babies, kept alive by the power of sound, waiting to be born. I recall reading about spirit babies years ago in Bruce Chatwin’s The Songlines (1988). He told of ancestors singing their way across Country leaving behind a ‘trail of “life cells” or “spirit children” along the line of footprints’. He quotes Arkady calling them ‘musical sperm’. Chatwin goes on to explain songlines as a song lying over the ground, ‘an unbroken chain of couplets; a couplet for each ancestor’s footfalls, each formed from the names he “threw out” while walking’. There would be a name to the left and a name to the right. Chatwin was visualising an already pregnant woman strolling about on her daily foraging round. Suddenly, she steps on a couplet, the ‘spirit-child’ jumps up – through her toe nail, up her vagina, or into an open callus on her foot and works its way into her womb, and impregnates the foetus with song.

In 1915, A. O. Neville was appointed Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia and he spent the next twenty-five years implementing his racist vision of breeding out blackness through assimilation. If you have seen the film Rabbit-Proof Fence (2002), Neville is the monster played by Kenneth Branagh. In 1936 the State Parliament of Western Australia passed legislation allowing Neville and any future Chief Protector of Aboriginals to be the deciders on who a ‘half-caste’ could marry. This meant Neville was guardian of all Aboriginal people under the age of twenty-one in WA. He could take them from their families and execute his plans for absorption and assimilation. Miscegenation (intercourse between races) as a means of ‘breeding’ out Aboriginality was central to his plans.

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72 Chatwin, The Songlines, 60.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
The baby’s first kick is the moment of ‘spirit conception’. The Goolarabooloo say that when a baby is born it is given the smell of Country with a ceremonial smoking, using the wood from *gunkara*.\footnote{75}{Told by Richard Hunter on the trail.}

The old lady Narbi knew that the *rai* had been waiting to enter her but now she was too old, so they had come to life through Pegalily. The old people told Pegalily and Paddy that she would have two daughters in their Country (and they did). With their next generation gone, the Elders were afraid they were the end of their line of people, so they welcomed the two runaways under the wing of the Jabirr Jabirr people.\footnote{76}{‘Paddy Roe’s Story’.}

Walmadany and the other Elders took Roe through their law and lore, walking him through their Country many times. He was given full knowledge of names, songs and stories and learned their language. Paddy became Keeper of the Law of the Jabirr Jabirr, Ngumbarl and Djugun peoples. This knowledge, culture and traditions tied Roe to the Jabirr Jabirr Country and he was obliged to see it continued. In time, Roe buried many of these teachers in the Country he made his home. He knew that their culture was loaned to each generation to pass on to the next.

When Roe and Pegalily decided to go back to their own Country to visit, to face the trouble they had caused from running away, the cries of the *rai* spirit followed them, like the sound of the call of an oyster catcher.

We stopped for lunch on the fringe of the paperbark forest. I was resting in a comfy spot in the shade, pondering pregnant paperbarks when I spotted a solitary little fellow, around seven years old, not playing with other Goolarabooloo kids on the trail. I asked him if he would like to read a book with me and he nodded shyly. I had brought along some books for this purpose and plucked Graeme Base’s *The Waterhole* (2003) from the bag, hoping it would encourage him to talk, as I wasn’t sure how well he read.\footnote{77}{Graeme Base, *The Waterhole* (Ringwood: Viking, 2001).} Within seconds he was chatty and bubbly, animated by the dense ingenious fusion of counting, puzzles, art and narrative that is the hallmark of Base’s books. Before long, an older child bounded up to us, demanding to know who I was and what we were doing.
She was the big sister, and she bossily shuffled herself between us, and he allowed her to take over. Over the next week, I saw that this was the pattern as he adoringly allowed her to boss him around.

After lunch we discovered there was more than rai hiding in the paperbarks. The children on the walk were promised a hunt for bush honey, called in language munga. My two new friends excitedly interrogated the paperbarks looking for tiny holes and listening, ear to the trunk, for a hum of activity. A hum detected called for a tomahawk to gently open the branch to reveal a hollowed-out nest of tiny, harmless native bees and their home of wax and honey. The honey has a deep rich flavour ranging from woody to lemony. Once all had had a taste, the wounded branch was put back together, bandaged with paperbark and tied up with a vine – a bush band-aid.

Paperbark has always been a respected resource for First Nations peoples. The fine soft layers of paperbark were also used as bush bandages soaked in a natural antiseptic oil for bodies and as slings and wraps for babies and bedding in their cradles. In cooking, the paperbark would be soaked in water then used to wrap fish or meat before cooking in a ground oven over hot stones. Sheets of paperbark would be used as roofing in huts and as the internal bark tends to stay dry, it could be used for tinder on rainy days.

The two children sought me out for the rest of the trail, asking to call me Mummy, which broke my heart.78 I began to learn of their story, a familiar tragedy of family violence and substance abuse, of incarceration, neglect, of children taken away and broken families. These two were ‘in care’ in a children’s home. I physically ached at night in my swag worrying for these two. I wanted to fix them, save them. This was my white saviour, my white virtue in overdrive. ‘You can’t fix this’, a wise person said to me firmly. He is right, but I can do something, I can tell stories about the attitudes, patterns and

78 Interestingly, years later when I met Stephen Muecke (you will learn about him in Seeping, Oozing, Blooming), I told him about them wanting to call me Mummy and how heart-breaking it was for me. He put it in context, explaining culturally this was not so unusual, as in traditional societies, the village raises the child. It caused me to reflect on my reading of the situation, emotional and maternal (but paternalistic) and how it led me to want to ‘fix’ a situation I knew nothing about.
actions that have led to the predicament these children find themselves in. I can paint the picture of genocide and generational trauma.\textsuperscript{79}

When we parted, the girl asked me to buy her a white dress. Her request conjured uncomfortable images of brown skinned little girls in white mission smocks, lined up in rows outside a school house with severe nuns presiding.

\textsuperscript{79} As I was doing the final review of this story, a clever person directed me to a paper by writer by Jackie Huggins, who is a historian and Aboriginal rights activist of the Bidjara Central Queensland and Birri-Gubba Juru North Queensland peoples. See Jackie Huggins, ‘A Contemporary View of Aboriginal Women’s Relationship to the White Women’s Movement’, in Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought, ed. Norma Grieve and Ailsa Burns (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 70–9.

My reflections after reading the paper are placed here – just after my arrogant claim that I could paint a picture of genocide and generational trauma – for a reason. What can I know about either, even though I have endeavoured to learn so much? All I can do is respectfully acknowledge the cultural loads of the First Nations peoples and bear witness to it, which is ultimately what I am doing. Why the critique and change of position? Huggins troubles the idea of sisterhood between First Nations and non-First Nations women, making me reflect on how I judged the mother of these two children at the time: ‘When the complex factors of race and gender are considered, … white women’s activities have to be seen as a part of the colonisation and oppression of Black women. Certainly, sisterhood was not powerful enough to transcend such racial boundaries’ (72).

My heart and head went straight into assimilation mode without any regard for the woman whose babies (four in total) had been taken from her. Shamefully, I share with you that I imagined her as a bad mother and a drunk, confident that her children would be better off with me. Of course this was not an option, but it was my default position and I believe representative of our past and present where white people still imagine First Nations children as better off in families of the dominant culture. I may despise the actions and attitudes of A. O. Neville, but I would lying if I denied that some of them lurk in me, against my conscious intentions. ‘Instead of alleviating the burdens for Aboriginal women, white women usually add to them’ (78), is Huggins’s assessment.

To be a little fair on myself, I was not as aware then of the cultural loads First Nations peoples carry and I am a better witness today. But it is important to notice how quick I was to judge: ‘Many Aboriginal children have suffered brutally at the hands of white women who have always known what “is best” for these children. White women were and are still a major force in the implementation of government policies of assimilation and cultural genocide … As white women become empowered through the women’s movement, their roles as oppressors of Aboriginal women and children will be multiplied and reinforced rather than dismantled’ (73–4).

Any white female who works with First Nations communities should read Huggins’s paper for a reality check: ‘As with the assimilation process, which never worked anyway, we have no desire to be white so why bother; we have too many other barramundis to fry which concern our whole community and not just half. Our needs are too urgent to be addressed with anything except top priority and we cannot afford to educate and “hang around” for white women to evolve’ (78).
PAPERBARK DRESSES

This gently violent image of Aboriginal girls’ bodies contained and constrained in colonial dresses is explored in the creative practice of artist and Wurundjeri woman Georgia MacGuire. As the only girl with four brothers, she remembers her childhood as girly:

I vividly remember a dusky-pink velvet pinafore I owned as a little girl, which had a red rose embroidered on the front. My mother bought me one ‘good’ dress every year, and it was by far my favourite item of clothing. I think it was the one item of clothing I owned which made me feel like I wasn’t the poor black kid in the street.80

Such memories are bittersweet as the dress was implicitly colonial and she came to realise that ‘my matriarchal lineage towards a love of roses and dresses – even contemporary fashion – is a poignant signifier of our forced assimilation’.81 Her creative practice led her to consider these motifs from her First Nations perspective, asking how the dress has been a contrivance to contain women, especially First Nations women, in their activities.

MacGuire’s understanding of her matrilineage came late to her. Her adored grandmother, Isabel, a member of the Stolen Generations, was subjected to discrimination in the small Victorian country town where she struggled to gain social acceptance: “To justify their affections, they labelled her as anything other than Aboriginal, because Aboriginal people in their eyes were not smart, personable or beautiful.”82

81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
MacGuire began ‘to make plaster body casts of my aunties, cousins and nieces so I could model unique pieces of clothing that would reflect their lives and struggles’. For her exhibition, *Ill-fitted*, in 2014, she dressed these plaster bodies in a series of sculptural dresses made from paperbark. With *Ill-fitted*, MacGuire presents a body of work reflecting on the history of the assimilation of First Nations women and how they were subjected to a Western identity, manipulated by the gaze of the dominant culture. She draws connections between human flesh and the bark of the paperbark tree, a cultural connection to Country. ‘Within the work, paper “flesh” is rearticulated into forms that have been used to restrict female Indigenous identity: for example, the construct of the dress.’ Her collection included a child’s school frock with a Peter-Pan collar, young woman’s knee-length shift and a ‘couture’ gown allowing for the belly of a pregnant cousin.

Making the plaster casts with her family members brought MacGuire closer to her models and their roles. ‘This group experience was reflective of traditional women’s business, and spurred conversations about bodies, sex, childbirth, and image. We talked a lot about how our flesh contained our personal histories, something that was apparent for all of us.’

The making of the dresses was a solitary act, granting her time to reflect on her own and her family’s experiences. As she harvested, cut, stitched and glued the flesh from the tree, contorting it to fit colonial patterns, forcing the body into another’s architecture, MacGuire found she was embodying the oppressive and heartless making


85 Skerlj, ‘Georgia MacGuire’.

86 Ibid.
of black girls into white, assimilating Aboriginal women into Western culture.  

‘With this assimilation comes a history of trauma, removal, rape, murder and racism. These have become important components of the female psyche of my family. Our experiences have ultimately made us who we are.’

The use of paperbark is the artist’s reference to traditional women’s practices, such as craftwork, that were lost when cultural practice was forbidden on missions and families were broken by the policies that created the Stolen Generations. It also references paperbark’s curative and medicinal qualities, a time-honoured bandage to dress and heal wounds, which, in turn, are embedded in the dresses, empowering them as ‘object[s] that can acknowledge and soothe the collective past of Indigenous women’.

87 Other First Nations creatives working in this space are poet Natalie Harkin, who probes the archives that carry the story of generations of women in her family who were stolen, and Yhonnie Scarce who explores the experiences of her great grandmother and grandmother working as indentured labourers on country stations. See Natalie Harkin, ‘In Her Pocket She Carries Her Heart’, Southerly, 18 April 2017, http://southerlyjournal.com.au/2017/04/18/in-her-pocket-she-carries-her-heart/.

88 Skerlj, ‘Georgia MacGuire’.

89 Skerlj, ‘Georgia MacGuire’.
The physical backdrop to MacGuire’s *Ill-fitted* exhibition of her paperbark dresses was a copy of Eugene von Guérard’s painting, *Mr John King’s Station* (1861). At the start of this meander, I announced my ‘quest’ to find out the story around the paperbark roses. This painting is a clue, but I will digress for a little longer as there are so many fascinating things to share with you about the narrative in this piece, as it is not the traditional commissioned homestead portrait. A scholar of von Guérard’s works, Dr Ruth Pullin, explains: “This is a secretive painting, one that requires time and close analysis and one in which von Guérard was able to stretch the parameters of the traditional property portrait to communicate his deeper response to this place and its history.”

The place is John King’s station, Snake Ridge. His was an extensive run situated in Gippsland on the Latrobe and Glengarry Rivers between Traralgon and Rosedale, which stretched as far north as Angus McMillan’s property, Bushy Park. Both men had been involved or complicit in the massacres of the Gunnai/Kurnai people on these lands twenty years before. When this was painted in 1861, both King and McMillan ‘had each become pillars of respectability, King as a parliamentarian and local magistrate and McMillan, among other things, as an honorary protector of Aborigines’.

Pullin says the painting subverts our expectations of a commissioned homestead portrait that by its very nature is designed to celebrate the proprietorial achievements of a European landowner, as there is no homestead. Also, of interest is the question of custodianship of the land, which is signified by the presence of John King and his gardener tending the picket fence that confines, defines and divides worldview and people. King is not in the foreground but relegated to the middle ground; his back is to us and the gardener’s face is obscured by shadow. They are anonymous figures in the composition and narrative, unlike the Gunnai/Kurnai family on centre stage, the original custodians of the land who were, by this stage, dispossessed.

90 Eugene von Guérard, *Mr John King’s Station*, 1861, Fairfax private collection.


92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.
Von Guérard’s depiction of the Gunnai/Kurnai represents aspects of their traditional and current realities, explains Pullin. The young warrior is proud and dignified, sporting cockatoo feathers in his hair and wrapped in the traditional possum skin cloak, with fur against his skin and the decorated skin outwards to denote who he is and his connection to his Country. He carries his weapons: a boomerang, a spear and a club. His female companion, by contrast, is wrapped in a government-issue blanket that Pullin identifies as having the blue trim of those issued by the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines. The child also wears a government-issue blanket, but it is draped over one shoulder in the manner of the cloak worn by her father.\textsuperscript{94}

There is a world of difference between the two groups, each in a different realm, oblivious to one another. Although in the foreground, the Gunnai/Kurnai are shadowed by the setting sun, the Europeans are shown in bright sunlight. It is an unsettling image that indicates how aware and uncomfortable the painter was at the impact of colonisation on the First Nations peoples.

For the clue as to the origins of the paperbark roses, we need to zoom into the image behind MacGuire’s hanging dresses; zoom into the picket fence, John King and his gardener tending a border of roses, the ultimate English flower. Writer Laura Skerlj seems to be the only person who has interviewed MacGuire about her creative practice and she illuminates why the artist chose \textit{Mr John King’s Station} as the backdrop for her dresses:

Through many conversations with artist Georgia MacGuire, it became apparent that the image of a rose constellates the Indigenous women in her family. These connections begin in Powelltown — a quaint timber-milling locale in the Yarra Valley — where all that separated the family home from dense bush land was a six-foot hem of roses. The artist’s grandmother, Isabel, sang ‘The Yellow Rose of Texas’ while cooking: an old folk song musing on a young woman of mixed race (a ‘mulatto’) envisioned as ‘yellow’ amid the darker people of the American south. In

\textsuperscript{94} The introduction of these blankets to First Nations peoples contributed to the spread of illnesses and death of clans. Not only is there the accusation that the blankets may have been deliberately infected with diseases such as small pox, they also replaced the possum skin cloak which had thermal and water-resistant properties. The blanket had no such qualities. They got wet, people got sick and they died.
the artist’s library of books, a pile of rose anthologies inherited from her mother once instructed the growth of some 40 specimens in their garden.95

On my wall hang seventeen fleshy roses, cut and crafted from paperbark, connected like a vine, twisting, reaching up, towards, away from me, made by Georgia MacGuire. The description in the gallery had said they represent seventeen Aboriginal women, murdered. This is all I know.96


96 I have tried several times to contact Georgia MacGuire through her website to learn more about these women, explaining that I purchased her work, with no success. To be honest, I was peeved at first, my ego and or white privilege telling me that I had paid for the piece, so I deserved to know more. Left to my own ignorance, I began to understand there were layers to MacGuire’s silence. First and foremost was her right to keep her stories to herself. I realised that First Nations people were probably sick of talking to good white folk like me, such is the legacy of appropriation and exploitation. Their stories may be deeply personal and private, or perhaps there were layers of protocol I was not privy to. The bottom line is, it is none of my business. Oxfam has a very good and readable brochure on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Protocols. ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Protocols’, Oxfam Australia, accessed 31 March 2019, https://www.oxfam.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2015-74-atsi-cultural-protocols-update_web.pdf.

On another level, I began to consider the maker’s choice to leave interpretation and understanding of the work with the viewer. This silence around her work, this not knowing, galvanised my curiosity, and led me on a journey to find out more. I was guided by the insights of artist Ann Hamilton, who says ‘not knowing is a permissive and rigorous willingness to trust, leaving in suspension, trusting in possibility without result’, regarding as possible all manner of response’. By following her lead, I enjoyed the process and practice of questions more than answers, of waiting, listening, meandering, in an active state. I was thrilled with the small discoveries I made along the way and in many ways, this is my favourite piece of the collection because I just let myself meander, not knowing where I was going. Ann Hamilton, ‘Making Not Knowing’, in Learning Mind: Experience into Art, ed. Mary Jane Jacob and Jacquelynne Baas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 68–9.
There has never been a more exciting time to be alive than today and there has never been a more exciting time to be an Australian.

Malcom Turnbull, 15 September 2015
addressing the media following the leadership spill

The last stragglers take their seats, sipping from mugs. We are a group of perhaps twenty-five individuals seated at tables in the educational ‘U’ formation. Notebooks, pens, water bottles and coffees are shuffled around to suit.
A man who introduces himself as ‘a Greek-looking Aboriginal’ moves around the room, placing a business card in front of each of us. Most begin to read the ‘Koorreen Principles of Life: Our Seven Primary Rules’ to suggest how to ‘strive to be a better contributor to the world’:

**LISTEN** to the Earth, waters and others so that you may learn

**LEARN** from all you hear, see and feel. This will inform you on who you are and who you can be

**RESPECT** all living things and beings to enable them to respect you.

**INTEGRITY.** Conduct yourself and act honestly at all times so that others may learn from you

**HONOUR.** Honour the great spirit, the property of others and your own life path

**COMPASSION.** Have compassion for others so that you learn to be graceful with your spirit

**COURAGE.** Have courage to act in all of the above and to know when you have made mistakes so that you can know when to have humility.

He says he is a proud Gunditjmara man, from southwestern Victoria. They were traditionally river and lake people, eel farmers. Gunditjmara in English means ‘good looking’ he proffers with a wry smirk.

The flip side of the card establishes the ‘safe place rules’ for this cross-cultural workshop, requesting respect, courtesy, listening, an open mind and finally, leaving ‘with good memories and good things in our spirit and heart’.

Our facilitator is Richard Frankland, usually seen in his well-travelled Akubra, but in fact a man of many hats. He is an acclaimed filmmaker, author, musician, songwriter, human rights and strong communities advocate, academic and Senior Man of his mob. As the head of Koorreen Enterprises, he oversees the cultural capacity and cultural strengthening training they deliver to government and non-government organisations. Underpinning all his work are these Koorreen principles.
The Koorreen principles seem to sit well with the group; their curiosity and goodwill are tangible. My eyes drift to the white board prepared with questions and columns. The day-long cultural awareness workshop begins.

**THE GAMMIN GAMMIN PEOPLE PRE-CONTACT**

Frankland announces that we are all to ‘become Aboriginal’ and to their amusement, he includes the First Nations folk in the group. There are a few nervous laughs as the room accepts the role. He calls us the Gammin Gammin tribe. The First Nations folk chortle. Already I feel slightly wrong-footed. What do they know that we do not?

He defines *gammin gammin* as ‘pretend’, but I am slightly suspicious. There is a twinkle in his eye, and I wonder if he is toying with us. Later, I google the name out of curiosity; the translation is indicative of the cheeky humour I value in my Aboriginal friends:

*gammin* can mean fake (he’s gammin, he thinks he’s good, but he’s never played football in his life), pathetic (this didgeridoo from Indonesia is gammin, a garden hose would sound better), or to pretend (just gammin, Mum, I wasn’t really trying to sneak out).97

‘Your people, the Gammin Gammin mob, have been on their lands for around 2,600 generations’, Frankland paints our backstory.

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97 ‘26 Aboriginal words and phrases that all Australians should know’, Welcome to Country, 9 October 2018, https://www.welcometocountry.org/26-aboriginal-words-australians-should-know/.

We are sent back to a time pre-contact, 280 years ago, to the 1730s, fifty years before the First Fleet arrived in 1788.

Frankland asks, what did ‘we’, the Gammin Gammin mob, have as a society 280 years ago? Words start flying towards the whiteboard, and before long I feel a weight to them. I look around the room to see if this heaviness is resting on any others in the room: who else is aware that all we are throwing towards Frankland will be lost to ‘us’ two centuries later? Lost? No, taken, broken, destroyed by the colonisers: us. By putting us in the skins of the First Nations peoples he is humanising what has ostensibly been dehumanised.

He is making me feel untethered, that is, losing my central point of reference, which is being white. The ‘us and them’ and ‘we and they’ is inverted and I am not sure which ‘side’ I am on.

What did ‘we’ have 280 years ago?

Land [wince], waterways, hunting, farming, aquaculture, tools, trade, engineers, economies.

Family [ache], community, belonging, sophisticated kinship structures, roles, rites of passage, hierarchies, languages.

Traditions [flinch], rituals, ceremonies, customs, spirituality, stories, laws, lore, oral knowledge, linguists, painting, drawing, dance, song, celestial calendar.

A political system [sigh], ambassadors, diplomats, the capacity to resolve conflicts, healers, a health system, teachers, an education system, custodians and caretakers.

Autonomy [I slink down into my seat], self-determination, a clear sense of identity.

Freedom, harmony, safety, connection ... [I close my eyes and my head droops].

Wow, says Frankland. Impressive ... more than 2,000 generations of communities. You cannot exist for that long without getting a lot right.

Frankland summarises for the gathering what he has guided us to see: First Nations people, through their deep connection and care of their environments, could satisfy all five elements of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs before invasion and occupation.98 Their curated and cultivated Country, which they knew and understood intimately, fulfilled

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98 Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a theory in psychology comprising a five-tier model of human needs. The crux of the theory is that our most basic needs must be met before we are driven to achieve higher level needs. It is usually depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid. The base need is physiological, rising to safety, then love and belonging, esteem and self-actualisation.
their biological and physiological needs such as food, shelter, warmth. Their knowledge of Country and their traditional roles, responsibilities and kinship structures gave them law and order and stability. Their family groups satisfied their love and belongingness needs, and traditional roles and responsibilities conferred esteem needs through mastery and achievement, respect and status, and rites of passage. Rites, rituals and ceremony played a considerable role in self-actualisation. Aboriginal lore and Law weaves everything together like ancestral twine to provide a spiritual, physical, emotional and social foundation, and a sense of identity and meaning.

What is evident to me now is because First Nations societies were in a different cultural shape to Western ‘civilisation’, these other ways of knowing and being have been devalued and denounced by our so-called civilised society.

This exercise ruptured my perceptions of the First Nations peoples as simple ‘Stone Age’ hunter gatherers, the dominant narrative in Australia. Within me is an unsettling understanding that for millennia pre-contact, the First Nations had a complete social order. And we couldn’t see it.

I had no idea. Shamefully, planted in the smalls of my mind, washed in whiteness, had been assumptions, convictions that white people had had a civilising effect on a primitive people. What does civilise even mean?99

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99 I might get I little heated for a few pages; this is what happens when the truth hits you between the eyes and you make it your task to find out more.
To educate? Their education is transmitted via an extraordinary system of mnemonics in the form of songs, songlines, stories, dance, art, passed on in layers through everyday living, ritual and ceremony. Because it wasn’t written down, the Europeans assumed it didn’t exist.

To enlighten? Most First Nations peoples spoke multiple languages. They could read Country, knew seasonal signs, and cultivated their traditional lands and waterways for food in a sustainable way with zero footprint. They had villages, towns, harvests, gatherings for ceremony and trading. There were dispute resolution processes, diplomats, engineers devising fish traps, and environmentalists overseeing seasonal burns to revitalise the land. Sophisticated kinship systems maintained ‘genetic hygiene’ (such an awful anthropological term) with non-negotiable laws for marriage (this is when First Nations people speak of ‘right skin’ or ‘wrong skin’ or ‘wrong way’ marriage), which were tied into totemic systems incumbent with spiritual and physical responsibilities.

To humanise? Does that mean the First Nations people were not, or are not thought of as human? Of course, today this is not disputed, but colonial powers (and their successors – I am thinking of Rwanda here) have and do deny the humanity of another group to justify invasion and occupation. We have seen what happens when a group in power denies the humanity of another group, equating them with animals (apes and monkeys, as footballer Adam Goodes well knows), cannibals, vermin, insects (cockroaches in Rwanda) or diseases (pox on humanity).

Dehumanising often begins with negating the subject, manufacturing it as an enemy, the other: inferior, dangerous,

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10. I write about Adam Goodes in the story ‘I’m Not Racist! I Love Cryil (Rioli)’, in the chapbook *I’m Not Racist, but ...*
primitive, Stone Age, noble savage, cannibals, sub-human. Framing the situation in this way widens the psychological distance between the First Nations peoples and the invaders, giving licence to take sides, for mistrust, for conflict, to commit acts of genocide. The dehumanised are viewed outside the scope of morality and justice and the rules of humanity do not apply.¹⁰¹

Dehumanisation is a response to irreconcilable intentions in that we intend to harm a group of people, but the actions required are contradictory to our humanity, explains David Smith in his book Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others (2012). According to Smith, the human race possesses a wiring that inhibits us from treating other people as animals. ‘Dehumanisation is a way of subverting those inhibitions.’¹⁰²

For the settlers, it was us or them, victory or defeat. In the settlers’ eyes, the First Nations peoples had to be controlled and subjugated for the colony to thrive. Within this framing, the ‘enemy’ had to be dehumanised to justify slavery, servitude, torture, human trafficking (sealers, whalers and settlers stealing First Nations women), and taking children because they are not black enough.

Bear with me here. I know this is uncomfortable territory, this is you and I confronting Stanner’s Great Australian Silence. It happened. We may as well explore why and how it happened so we can get a better understanding of the generational trauma that First Nations peoples live with and navigate as their everyday reality. I will return to the cultural awareness workshop.

**THE GAMMIN GAMMIN PEOPLE 2018**

We Gammin Gammin people are now fast tracked to 2018 and confronted with the impacts of colonisation on our mob. Colonisation has a chronology: ‘discovery’, invasion,

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conquest, dispossession, exploitation, distribution, appropriation. It is a war for territory and resources, so control is exercised, and power is established at the expense of ‘we’ First Nations peoples, ‘our’ lands and resources.

Our rights are lost. Communities are dispossessed and disempowered and begin to decline and decay. They find themselves unwelcome, wasting on the fringes of the colonising and now dominant culture. The after effects are family dysfunction and violence, poverty, addictions, poor health outcomes and suicide.

Our land has been taken, dug up, mined and plundered for another’s richness. Our waterways have been damaged and poisoned, our hunting grounds overrun with the invaders’ animals and our animals, birds and fish have been killed, disrupted and driven out of their habitats. Ancient fish traps are disregarded (not even seen) and waterways are rerouted and dammed.

Our agriculture, our fields of murnong (yam daisy) cultivated over centuries are devoured and trampled by sheep. Once, ‘we’ obtained everything we needed from land and water. ‘That is no longer the case, and that is why poverty is so damaging. Most of us cannot provide for ourselves from the land to meet our basic needs. This is true poverty.’

Our families are murdered, massacred, starved, poisoned, stolen, moved off our unceded ancestral lands onto missions and reserves. Many languages are forbidden, forgotten, shamefully forfeited, and with this, many millennia of stories, ceremonies, dances and knowledges are lost forever.

Our children have been stolen, we have been made homeless, often living in impoverished conditions, lonely, forgotten. Untethered.

Our cultural safety has been eradicated. Being culturally safe means we can practice our culture without discrimination or ridicule. Cultural safety is when you get to be you, with your culture, your voice; you get to make the decisions about you, your language, your ceremony, and no one puts you down or tries to stop you. For wellbeing, we all need good access to culture and our cultural framework.

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103 Waziyatawin, ‘Zuya Wicasta Naka Icawicayapi (Raising New Warriors)’, in Waziyatawin and Yellow Bird, For Indigenous Minds Only, 142.

104 I cannot recall a time where I have not felt culturally safe. Whiteness feels like a fortress.
Our entire social order has been smashed. ‘You are a decimated people, rendered impotent, angry, hopeless and idle by the loss of your hierarchies and traditional roles and responsibilities. The lack of clear roles means there is constant jostling for position’, continues Frankland. ‘In the words of Patrick Wolfe who writes on the logic of elimination, “invasion is a structure, not an event”’.  

**A SOCIAL ORDER**

To summarise where we are up to so far: when the continent was invaded and colonised, the Europeans could not see or appreciate the sophisticated social and moral order that functioned in First Nations communities. Their societies were demeaned as primitive, doomed for extinction and therefore of no value. The First Nations peoples presented an obstacle to European expansion and development, so their social and moral order was attacked.

What do I mean by social order?

Social order is a theory in sociology that refers to the way that the essential components of society and culture interact to maintain the status quo (that is, to keep the dominant culture dominant). Societal components are our social structures and institutions, social relations, social interactions and behaviour; cultural components are our norms, beliefs, practices and values.

For social order to be present, we must all agree to a shared social contract that states that specific rules and laws must be accepted, and certain standards, values and norms maintained. Social order tends to be hierarchical in nature; some hold more power than others in order to enforce the laws, rules and norms that underpin it. Those who contest or disrupt these agreed values, behaviours and beliefs that maintain social order are framed as deviant or dangerous and are restricted by enforcement of laws, rules, norms and taboos.  

In the Gold Rush days it was the Chinamen (hence

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In 2018, the Australian Senate voted on the motion put forward by One Nation ‘It’s OK to be white’ and the government senators were possibly ‘asleep at the wheel’ when they ‘accidentally’ supported the motion (a procedural error). Prime Minister Scott Morrison described his senators’ support for the motion as ‘regrettable’. The end result was that a white supremacist slogan made its way into Australia’s upper house as an idea worthy of consideration.

The slogan ‘came directly from the White supremacist playbook’, an attempt to wedge political opponents with the question: ‘it’s ok to be white’. If you say, ‘No, I don’t agree’, you can be accused of being against white people. If you agree, they say, ‘Oh OK, then so basically there’s no such thing as white privilege, white people can be treated badly like minorities’. It is OK to be white, but in Australia we also need to ask, when is it OK to be Aboriginal? When’s it going to be OK in Australia to be Muslim?1


the origins of the White Australia policy; see ‘Snowflake Australia’ in I’m Not Racist, but ...), and contemporary examples would be Muslims, or ‘African gangs’.

Sometimes, when someone from the ‘inside’ challenges these norms and values, they can be socially isolated. I have experienced this in certain circles, especially when I am among affluent white friends. As I have come to see the mechanisms and practices of the Great Australian Silence, I have had to decide, sometimes on the spot, whether to challenge it and create a ruckus, or be complicit and let the racially ignorant moment slide by.

There was one time when I was feeling particularly angry after weeks of research around the frontier wars. I was the guest at a friend’s house for drinks, and there was a western district pastoralist there too. He wore the uniform of RM Williams boots, light moleskins and the pale blue button-down shirt. His ample belly was held in check with a belt to match his boots. This fellow is ‘Establishment Melbourne’, a landowner of generations. I knew his property was down near Frankland’s Gunditjmara Country.

He had been talking about his family farm. I asked him who were the traditional owners of his property. He shook his head, seemingly baffled. ‘What do you mean? We are. We have been there for generations.’
‘But who were the First People? I press. He is defiant. There were none. I pause and ask, ‘What are the missions near you? Condah? Framlingham?’ He nods, suspiciously, slowly: yep.

‘Ahh, that’s where they were put then’, I add.107

Even more recently, another fellow gave me ‘his opinion’ that all Aboriginal people should be corralled to live together in a certain place put aside for them all. He saw ‘all of them’ as one homogenous mob, not worthy for cohabitation with the other Australians. For anyone reading this who has not discovered this elsewhere in the chapbooks, there were 270 unique, distinct nations thriving in various cultural shapes in 1788. There is no single, generic ‘Aborigine’, which is why I choose to say First Nations peoples.108 I was already going to challenge his opinion when he added that Aborigines possess about 15 per cent of our intellectual capacity. It was like lighting a fuse at the dining table.109

I share these two anecdotes with you to demonstrate that our social order is governed by whiteness. The dominant culture = whiteness. And I see, overwhelmingly, white people working together to protect their interests. This togetherness keeps whiteness strong and it keeps non-white people out.

I am going to channel French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) to assist us in understanding the mechanics of social order. Durkheim’s work as a researcher and theorist concentrated on how a society can form and function and he was especially interested in what holds a society together. When I look at the components of our society, I see capitalism, whiteness, individualism and neoliberalism, which is a capitalist version of Darwin’s survival of the fittest. All of this goes into the mix to contribute to

107 I am worried this might sound smug and it was a little, but I was trying out new knowledge on him, not really knowing where it could go. I don’t think I was expecting him to deny prior occupation so dogmatically, but not many will admit that their family’s wealth is built on stolen wealth. I had to decide at the time to stop or make a point. (I don’t think I have been back there since.)

108 It makes me so angry to read today’s media use of ‘Aborigine’, particularly in our national broadsheet. I wonder if using First Nations would be seen as a concession or an admission in that space.

109 This point of view is not limited to rich white people. Pauline Hanson’s followers and Advance Australia are two right-wing organisations who advocate for a white Australia.
Now we see a people defined and bounded by negative numbers, sad statistics and foreboding forecasts: the highest suicide rate in the world, a high rate of substance abuse, incarcerated at an inhumane rate, child removals, chronic illnesses, high mortality rate – Close the Gap!

What do non-Aboriginal people say about these current happenings, or of the history? Get over it, wasn’t me or my rellies. Someone had to invade you.

What happened on the 26th of January 1788 was, on balance, for everyone, Aboriginal people included, a good thing because it brought Western civilisation to this country, it brought Australia into the modern world (former prime minister Tony Abbott).¹

I don’t believe genocide has taken place (former prime minister John Howard).²

There was nothing but bush here in 1788 (former prime minister Tony Abbott).³

Living on your remote homelands are lifestyle choices the government cannot afford (former prime minister Tony Abbott).⁴

Australians are sick and tired of seeing people with blonde hair and blue eyes declaring themselves to be Indigenous – check their DNA (Mark Latham).⁵

Move on from the past, pull yourselves up by your bootstraps and work hard, get educated, make money to end your problems. Embrace our material values and ways, accept the loss and ignore the discrimination.

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what Durkheim calls our collective consciousness (sometimes collective conscience or conscious).\textsuperscript{110}

Our collective consciousness is our package of common beliefs, ideas, attitudes and knowledges that we share in a social group or society. It informs our sense of belonging and identity and engenders our bonds and our sense of solidarity. In this framing, I am part of a white collective consciousness, as my identity and sense of belonging is tied into my whiteness and its attendant privileges and opportunities. The manifestation of collective consciousness is culture. Culture plays a vital role in the production of social order.\textsuperscript{111}

Much of Durkheim’s theory came from his observations of traditional and indigenous societies. From observing these social groups, Durkheim could see that religious symbols, discourse (in the form of story, song, dance, sharing knowledge), beliefs and rituals nurture the collective consciousness.\textsuperscript{112} In a homogeneous social group, where members are not distinct by race or class, like a clan, the collective consciousness becomes what Durkheim calls a ‘mechanical solidarity’, or the ‘glue’ of the group. The ‘glue’ is the automatic binding together of people into a collective through their shared values, beliefs and practices.\textsuperscript{113}

When thinking about the glue that binds us all into a collective consciousness and hence a social order, I was reminded of the metaphor of ancestral twine in Xavier Rudd’s ‘Spirit Bird’.\textsuperscript{114} Frankland is showing us the threads and sinews of his people’s ancestral twine, woven over and over, over millennia, to be robust and resilient. This twine, their collective consciousness, tethered his people to their clan, their Country, their nation, their culture.


\textsuperscript{111} Cole, ‘Definition of Social Order in Sociology’.

\textsuperscript{112} Durkheim, \textit{The Division of Labour in Society}.


\textsuperscript{114} This is in the chapbook \textit{My Conscience Is a Many Feathered Thing}. 
Frankland gives us a window into the other way of knowing and living and being on this continent. He is showing us what ‘we’ had and ‘we’ lost. And it is huge.

Colonisation’s mission was to sever this ancestral twine.

**THE CULTURAL AUDIT**

Frankland has demonstrated to us what we had and what we have lost. He wants to know how the Gammin Gammin are feeling? He does a one-word ‘check-in’ around the room.

Angry, furious, sad, confused, desolate, bereft, impotent ...

This is your trauma trail, he tells us. This is what informs your trauma and it gets passed on from generation to generation.

Frankland continues. Although your culture has been smashed, you are still here. Some Elders have been doing some research and they have located people from your mob from all over the country and invited them to attend the inaugural Gammin Gammin gathering. You are going to undertake a cultural audit. He cajoles a member of the group to leave the anonymity of their chair and join him up the front as the moderator.

Our moderator, coached by Frankland, begins to take the Gammin Gammin gathering through the list of what we had pre-contact, comparing it to now.

Do we have land? Language? Family? As we move through the list, our ancestral twine unravels as the scale of the devastation is revealed: fractured families, Stolen Generations, slavery and servitude, generational trauma, profound loss of identity and language and culture, exploitation and appropriation.

Throughout the exercise, Frankland shrewdly adds depth to the experience with his various asides:

‘This first gathering gives you all hope, but you may not all get on with each other. Many of you suffer intergenerational trauma after four generations of Stolen Generations and there have been many suicides in your mob: eleven in eleven months, including two adolescents.’

‘How many coffins have you carried this year? For First Nations people, the average is attending fifteen funerals a year.’
‘Your trauma is a phantom limb, invisible to the dominant culture because people have been engineered to not see it.’

‘For many of you, this is your first time on Country and the onus is on you to “prove” your Aboriginality, even if you look like one.’

‘How are you going to quantify your connection to the land for the Native Title submission?’

‘How are you going to justify what you have lost, justify the cost of retrieval and maintenance and justify, in many cases, your very existence?’

Frankland checks in with us regularly as we unpack the list of loss. He asks us to describe how we are feeling. Words don’t fly now, they are eked out of us: ashamed, sad, confused, devastated.

He shows us two maps of Australia. The first is the AIATSIS map of many colours that clearly illustrates how many First Nations there were in 1788. This is who we were.

A second, more familiar map, replaces the First Nations map. It is the map we were taught in school, the map of our atlases. ‘Then, we became this …’ I seem to remember Frankland said this with a sigh, but perhaps it’s my own sigh I am projecting.

The two maps flicker back and forth showing the

115 The map, developed in conjunction with the Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia, is an attempt to represent the language, tribal or nation groups of the First Nations. It doesn’t claim to be definitive as certain information is contested by the traditional custodians and it is for this reason the borders are purposefully blurred. ‘AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia’, AIATSIS, last reviewed 13 December 2018, https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aiatsis-map-indigenous-australia.

The late Tsali anthropologist Bob Thomas described colonisation as the calculated deprivation of experience. By attempting to deprive First Nations peoples of their experiences, colonisation severs their relationships with their homelands, families, clan systems, medicines, and all aspects of the natural world.1

Colonised First Nations peoples lost the sense of how to live according to traditional laws and values. The intention was to assimilate them. Assimilation is the process of dismantling and erasing First Nations society and culture, and replacing it with the dominant culture through religious, political and economic conversion. This is a form of psychological warfare institutionalised within the colonial state by policies such as those that produced the Stolen Generations.2

two Australias. ‘First Nations peoples are now moving between the two maps, trying to reclaim the original while living in the white world map. Some hide in both maps. Many have no cultural anchoring. We carry massive cultural loads.’ He calls it ‘a poverty of spirit’.

POVERTY OF SPIRIT

It feels like a violation to put these three words together.

I chew it over: a soul bereft, a self wanting, a spark insolvent, a dearth of life force.

Frankland goes on to explain what our poverty of spirit looks like. Our minds are infected with self-hatred and inferiority; we cannot fight back or resist. We end up believing colonisation is for our own good. We lose the ability to see the beauty and wisdom in our culture as they are painted as primitive and inferior ways of knowing. We adopt the colonisers’ superior and progressive ways.

Months after the workshop, I discover Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s interpretation of poverty of spirit. He calls it the ‘cultural bomb’, the greatest weapon unleashed by colonialism.

The effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples’ languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces that would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral righteousness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair, despondency and a collective death-wish.116

Chaw-win-is, who upholds the position of witwaak (warrior) among her Nuu-chah-nulth-aht people, gives us a perspective grounded in their cultural practice: ‘We must also consider the subtler implications of colonialism, for they are what is underneath our attitudes and our actions towards each other and this land. To use a Nuu-chah-nulth metaphor … our people are hoquotisht (our canoe is tipped over) and we are disoriented, we have lost our way.’117

HOW DOES THE DOMINANT CULTURE SEE YOU?

The mood has changed in the room. The weight of history and its consequences descends like a smog of shame.

We move on to the next question on the whiteboard: How does the dominant culture see ‘us’?

Invisible, inferior, uneducated, drunks, drug addicts, petrol sniffers, violent, thieves, bludgers, welfare dependent, victims, ungrateful, a burden, lazy, unemployable, angry, exotic, a problem to be fixed, a product to be sold, a lost cause, real vs. fake, they want their land back.118

Frankland shows us some slides from other workshops like ours. We all say the same things: the same racism, bias, prejudice. We sit in shocked silence.

Frankland brings the Gammin Gammin mob back to attention: Who sees ‘us’ that way?

The government, police, retailers, sport, schools, teachers, the media, the ignorant, Aboriginal people … us.

The smog gets heavier. We can, we do, you do think that way, whether we choose to admit it or not. They are insidious narratives and stereotypes that burrow into our minds like those annoying tunes called earworms.


118  Our response reminds me of a session I did with Anita Heiss on telling good stories about First Nations peoples (see the story ‘the Crow and the Wagtail’ in My Conscience Is a Many Feathered Thing).
Frankland is revealing our cultural lens, the dominant culture’s lens, which traditionally views First Nations peoples and culture negatively.\textsuperscript{119} We have been desensitised to their dehumanisation.

Frankland’s workshop in cultural awareness was a revelation for me. For those who open themselves to the experience, it is deeply confronting and transformational. It has played a major role in my undoing of my own whiteness. It is so powerful because Frankland has created a way to put \textit{us} in his people’s skin and walk about in it for a few hours. It is like when someone tells you a story about a scar on their soul and you search and scan yourself for a similar scar, so you may hear them better, feel them better, understand their pain and anguish.\textsuperscript{120}

Of course, I can find no similar scar on my soul. I cannot walk around in Richard’s skin to understand his scars and trauma, his People’s scars. But I can dig deep in my empathy stores, demonstrate awareness, decline the silence that wants these stories to slide by. I can hope for possibilities that my stories, my curious analogies and reframings, my putting myself in the uncomfortable places, can transport my reader to a place of openness where they can view First Nations people and culture with fresh eyes.

\textsuperscript{119} My mother, a good and kind person, and many of her friends, are very nervous of First Nations people. ‘But they just want to take our land away!’ It is purely irrational. They have never met one, they only know what they intuit from their environments, what they read in the \textit{Herald Sun}, what garbage is dished out by breakfast programs and commercial television in general. They are not the exception. That is the example they set for my generation, and so it continues.

\textsuperscript{120} I borrowed this analogy from Richard Frankland.

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