FIRST AS A TRAGEDY,  
SECOND AS A FARCE ...  

Traumascapes, memory and the curse of indifference

HOW MANY more newspapers can proclaim that ‘history repeats itself’ as if it were a harmless cliché? Newspapers tell us Iraq is becoming the new Vietnam. *What can you do? History repeats itself.* A new wave of violence in Kosovo is turning into an all-out conflict yet again. *What did you expect? That’s how it works.* And so the Chechen women in Grozny pick through the debris of their city, just like the ‘rubble women’ of Berlin did in the aftermath of the Second World War. And in the US, the lingering shock of September 11, the so-called unprecedented terrorist attack on democracy and the free world, bears a striking resemblance to the aftermath of what Walter A. Davis called “the first act of global terrorism”—the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.¹

It’s worth asking why, in this day and age, the fact of history repeating itself is usually noted with resignation—imbued with sadness and self-irony perhaps, but resignation nonetheless. This resignation to the fact that certain kinds of relationships and certain kinds of histories are bound to recur have, I believe, huge political and social implications. In the words of Jay Arthur, both as a nation and an idea, Australia “comes into being by repeated acts of colonisation”.² To this day these repeated acts of colonisation sustain the neo-colonial project of securing “the land emotionally and spiritually for the settler society”.³ Many forms of colonial violence, both overt and barely discernible, are repeated and re-enacted in government policies, media coverage, academic discourses, on the train, in the schoolyard, at the pub; and most potently in our relationship with the land.

For six years I have been trying to chart the legacies of neo-colonial and other kinds of violence by studying the fate and social power of what I’ve termed *traumascapes*—physical places marked by one or a series of tragedies. Focusing on the relationship between trauma and lived experiences of place, I sought to understand how loss and reckoning are inscribed in and transmitted through the land, and how the recurrence of violence shapes life-histories of Australian places.

In Australia, historian Ken Inglis tells us, there are more than four thousand memorials to the First World War spread over the continent.⁴ Why, then, this ever-growing stream of pilgrims to the Turkish countryside? To the extent that the number of people coming to Gallipoli every year simply could not be accommodated at the original site. In 1999, eighty-four years after the event, ANZAC Day dawn services, usually held at the Ari Burnu sacred site where ANZACs first landed in 1915, had to be moved to a larger site three hundred metres north. And this year, in 2004, people kept coming despite the threat of a terrorist attack. Why do we need Gallipoli now more so than ever before?

This is not a rhetorical question. As the site of mediation between the nation’s past and its future, Gallipoli gives us a space for the performance of what the great French sociologist and philosopher Emile Durkheim called ‘piacular rites’.⁵ Piacular rites are rituals in which the living pay their dues to the dead. Importantly, these rites are not just expressions of care and respect for the deceased; they are practical and symbolic steps to reaffirm the strength and solidarity of the community of mourners. It’s
through these rites that the morale of a group or a whole nation can be renewed and collective moral foundations strengthened, particularly at the times of history-making upheavals.

And to speak of the present era as a time of upheavals is, if anything, an understatement. After the Port Arthur massacre, September 11 and, perhaps most significantly, the Bali bombings in October 2002, Australia no longer appears exempt from the constancy and breadth of pain and uncertainty, which have been enveloping the world. These tragedies, in which Australians see themselves as victims, have been paralleled by events on our shores in which we can view ourselves as silent accomplices. Witness the *Tampa* stand-off, the Children Overboard Affair and the sinking of *Siev X*, which led to the death of 353 asylum seekers.

Amid the trauma and loss, traumascapes offer us a degree of consolation that was once provided by religious institutions. No matter how profane the tragedies that occurred on their soil, traumascapes are the closest to sacred sites that we have in contemporary Australia. Those places have come to embody our traumatic histories; it is to them that we turn to mourn, remember and make sense of the pain and loss around us.

Gallipoli is just one example. On 24 April 1998, Prime Minister John Howard opened the $1.6 million Hellfire Pass Memorial on the infamous Burma–Thailand railway, where thousands of Australians perished between 1942 and 1943. A group of former POWs and widows went on a pilgrimage to the site at the time of the memorial’s dedication. A year later, another party of Australian pilgrims visited the Sandakan POW Camp in Borneo. Between 1942 and 1945 Sandakan Camp held more than 2700 Australian and British prisoners, of whom only six survived. From the mid-nineties, the Australian government has spent $750,000 to upgrade the Sandakan Memorial Park, which now includes a memorial to POWs and an interpretative pavilion. Tony Stephens wrote in the *Age*: “having created their own sacred sites at Gallipoli, in France and Belgium, and at Hellfire Pass on the Burma–Thailand railway, Australians are staking out another at Sandakan”.6

MAYBE THIS IS why the story of Mindil Beach terrifies me. Mindil Beach is one of Darwin’s premier tourist sites. A fifteen-minute walk from the city, the spectacular beach is the location of the Diamond Casino and Hotel Complex as well as Darwin’s famous Sunset Markets, which attract over 400,000 visitors every Dry season.

So far so good, except that Mindil Beach is also an Aboriginal burial ground, used well into the 1930s by the Larrakia people (on whose land Darwin was built) and other indigenous peoples from the nearby areas. Both as a beach and a burial ground, it is an integral and sacred part of Darwin’s indigenous history and culture. Like reefs, sandbanks, seabeds and saltwater itself, Australian beaches, Nonie Sharp tells us in *Saltwater People: The Waves of Memory*, form part of the inherited clan-owned Aboriginal territories, especially along the tropical coast and islands of Northern Australia.7 Today, Sharp says, beaches are considered practical and spiritual inheritance for many saltwater Aboriginal peoples.
Yet look at Mindil beach now, dug up by contractors, marched on by thousands of tourist feet, with sewerage pipelines going right through. There must be many places like this across Australia—sites that only become identified as burial grounds through acts of desecration, places that reveal their history only when violated.

Between 1977 and 1980, due to construction works for the new Casino, human remains were uncovered in the sand dunes of Mindil Beach. The bodies were buried with their skulls towards the beach, covered with sheets of corrugated iron.

The Mindil Beach dead were disturbed time and time again. Their ancestry was questioned garishly and at length. Were the dead drowned Indonesian fishermen, or Aborigines, or perhaps vestiges of unmarked and unreported mass graves of the Second World War? So far-reaching was the controversy over the remains that a full Coronial Inquest was called. Aided by David Ritchie’s exhaustive research under the auspices of the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority, the Inquest made its conclusions clear.

The dead were indeed of Aboriginal and mixed descent. The area around Mindil Beach was now recognised as a known and extensively used indigenous burial ground.

As the controversy died down, the remains were re-buried in a traditional ceremony on a memorial island especially created in the area. Just over a decade later, in 1991, the bulldozers were at it again. Historian Lyn Riddett says postcards depicting the first re-burial ceremony were still available in newsstands around the city when Darwin City Council went ahead with the maintenance works at the beach.

Inevitably, more remains were unearthed. Faced with an embarrassing situation, the Council ended up co-operating with the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority to help erect a memorial at the northern end of Mindil Beach. Designed by Larrakia artist Richard Barnes and consisting of Tiwi and Larrakia funeral poles, the memorial would, it was hoped, act as a ceremonial and physical safeguard against the possible future desecration of the site.

Acts of desecration are not undone by memorials. Was the recurring violation of the burial ground, asks Riddett, symptomatic of the transient and fragmented non-Aboriginal social memory in the North? People come and go and the bureaucratic and community memory continuum gets broken down. Or was the history of Mindil Beach as a burial ground—a place notionally sacred to most cultures—simply not important enough to remember?

It matters a great deal that the events I am retelling happened in the 1980s and 1990s, within the reach of most people’s memory. It matters that the repeated disturbance of the Mindil Beach ground wasn’t another colonial transgression that happened back in the dark, colonial times. The responsibility for what happened at Mindil Beach cannot be ascribed to past generations or our misguided colonial forebears.

Is this important? In the US, Europe and the Middle East, as Annie Dillard has written, people “live on dead people’s heads.” Under one suburb in St Louis, she says, archaeologists have recently found thirteen layers of human occupation, one on top of the other.

But at Mindil Beach, the last of the dead were buried in the 1930s, maybe even later. These people whose heads we’ve been walking on are part of the living families and of the existing chains of kinship. They belong to and hold together life-stories of places and events that are resolutely part of this world.

The story of the disturbing of human remains at Mindil Beach does not stop here. Neither does it start in the late 1970s with the contractors descending on the site. The infamous Adelaide Coroner, William Ramsey-Smith, had dug up Mindil Beach in the late nineteenth century during his search for scientifically valuable skeletal remains—the search that took him around Aboriginal grave sites right across South Australia and the Northern Territory. Some of the remains from the Darwin area, sold by Ramsey-Smith to museums and medical schools in Sydney, England and Scotland, were only recently returned to the Larrakia people after years of lobbying.

Today Mindil Beach continues to be desecrated, if in less obvious ways. What else is Darwin’s immensely popular Beer Can Regatta, held annually at the beach, than an officially sanctioned ritual of desecration? In postcolonial Darwin, anthropologist Bill Day writes:
where public expressions of racial superiority are illegal, the festival makes a powerful unspoken statement authorising task-directed white drinking in public places. Aborigines, who are noticeably absent from the Mindil Beach festival, are further displaced by the appropriation of the supposedly empty landscape for the predominantly White festival.

Further, the festival can be seen as making a mockery out of the widespread campaign against Darwin’s Aboriginal drinkers. A 1983 amendment to the Northern Territory Summary Offences Act makes it an offence to consume alcohol in a public place within two kilometres of a licensed outlet, and is regarded as a “transparent attempt to clear the streets of indigenous drinkers while doing nothing to address the underlying problems”. While Aborigines are forced to drink in city parks and vacant lots, Mindil Beach, their burial ground, is used for a white festival, renowned for its culture of officially condoned, excessive alcohol consumption.

Does this story end? Are the Mindil Beach dead left in peace? “Sooner or later, any society that would like to know itself as ‘post-colonial’”, writes historian Ross Gibson, “must confront an inevitable question: how to live with collective memories of theft and murder?” For Australia this confrontation is a long way away, dissolved as it is in the transience of memory and the permanence of disrespect.

“It would be nice”, wrote anthropologist Michael Taussig, “if the dead could be tucked away, far away, so there would be two worlds, one for the living and one for the dead.” But as Taussig knows too well, all we seem to have is one world where the living cohabit with the dead. As a traumascape, Mindil Beach is marked by recurring violence, loss and seething disquiet. It is also literally a common ground between the living and the dead—a place which reveals, if only we cared to look, the complexities, obligations and connections between the living and the dead. These obligations and connections are well beyond what we usually have in mind when talking of ‘honouring the dead’, ‘laying them to rest’ or ‘paying our last respects’.

Yet when it comes to suffering, it’s Us and Them all over again. Could such desecration and forgetting happen to a non-Aboriginal sacred site? Recently, Slavoi Zizek, a Professor of Philosophy and Psychoanalysis at the University of Ljubljana took objection to the often-voiced question raised by September 11, ‘How could it happen HERE?’ The real question, he said, is ‘How could it happen ANYWHERE?’
Similarly, while the Mindil Beach dead are not protected from amnesia, indifference and barely disguised disrespect, we should consider none of our dead to be safe:

The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference.
The opposite of art is not ugliness, it’s indifference.
The opposite of faith is not heresy, it’s indifference.
And the opposite of life is not death, it’s indifference.

Elie Wiesel

12. Ross Gibson, Seven Versions of an Australian Badland, UQP, St Lucia, 2002, p.83.

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