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**THE ANNUAL HISTORY LECTURE  
HISTORY COUNCIL OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

*Intertwining Histories:  
Heritage and Diversity*

By Dr Ien Ang

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First of all, I wish to thank the History Council of NSW for inviting me to present this year's annual history council lecture. I feel honoured and, to tell you the truth, somewhat daunted. After all – and I wish to state this at the outset – I am not an historian, nor do I wish to claim to be one. I do not teach history, nor do I practise historical scholarship. My field is cultural studies, a field whose main focus is contemporary, not historical. In my work, I have been predominantly interested in analysing and understanding the cultural condition of the present, not that of the past. So what could I contribute to the promotion of history in NSW, as is the History Council's mission?

There is of course a lot to say, from the perspective of the cultural present, about history. History pervades the present, not so much as an academic subject or as a professional enterprise, but more profoundly, as the train of past events which have shaped the social relations and memories we live with today. Indeed, history is obviously not just the business of the professional historian. Whether we are aware of it or not, it is deeply implicated in our public and private lives. History is an intimate part and parcel of contemporary culture and society, notwithstanding the historical amnesia and wilful forgetting of the past that is often said to be so characteristic of our postmodern times. And as society becomes ever more heterogeneous and more global and therefore more complex and interdependent, so does the role of history. This is

especially clear in the difficulties we currently experience in defining our *heritage*, that is, in the way we collectively construct a meaningful relationship between past and present, between history and our contemporary condition. This is what I wish to speak about tonight.

Heritage is more than simply the things we preserve from the past, whether these be old buildings, historic sites or valued material objects. It is also more than just the stories about the past which we wish to document and conserve for posterity. While this is the popular definition of heritage, the significance of what we consider our heritage is much more profound than what we can find in local history museums, oral histories and the like, as important and valuable as these are. It is also much more than the business of the so-called heritage industry, which generally thrives on a rather superficial and sentimental exploitation of nostalgia. The meaning of heritage is profoundly symbolic: how and what we value in the past says something about how we see ourselves as a community today and how we project ourselves into the future. Here, I wish to hold on to this broader, more ethical and visionary conception of heritage – one that can help us to come to terms with the complex legacies of this nation’s brief but increasingly contested history.

Recently, journalist Nicolas Rothwell wrote in *The Weekend Australian* that twenty-first Australia is in desperate need of a new national narrative, one that can bring together groups with very different, even competing interests, experiences and aspirations. “The nation”, he writes, “is seeking a way to preserve its sense of community while transforming its economy; to defend its distinctness while becoming internationally competitive; to balance the needs of rival generations, regions and communities.”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to say that the creation of such a new national narrative will be a matter of successful storytelling, of a public dreaming which can *integrate* the nation in a time of bitter social antagonisms in a rapidly changing world. After the tragedy of the Tampa crisis I should add that this new story would have to be widely shared by the population in all its diversity; it should have an inclusive, universalising impulse which will enable citizens of all walks of life – and not just the so-called ‘mainstream’ – to have a sense of ownership of the nation, a sense of belonging in it. Herein lies the contemporary significance of how we define our national heritage, but also its difficulty. How can we recognise diversity as integral and intrinsic to the nation’s history, and not just as an afterthought? How can we develop a more diverse, shared, as well as open and living sense of heritage, something that all groups

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Rothwell, ‘Looking for a dream team’, *The Weekend Australian*, August 25-26, 2001, p. 24.

and communities contribute to, including those whose stories and voices are generally marginalised from the canonical national narrative? Heritage is not just what must be 'preserved' and 'saved'; it is also what can be 'built' and 'created' out of a critical and creative engagement with the myriad intertwining histories that have made up the nation. This is how I, as a student of contemporary culture and as a concerned citizen, relate to history.

I do have some worries about history too, which I want to share with you. Not being an historian, I have never felt that the importance of history can be embraced unconditionally. It is almost a motherhood statement to say that we should value our heritage. Or that without history, we would have no identity. In other words, that history is necessary. I agree, but not without reservations. History can also be a prison-house. It can act as an inhibiting force, from which we have to liberate ourselves. There can be *too much* history; the historical baggage we inherit may be too heavy, putting undue pressure on us and robbing us from the freedom to engage with our present societies in new and creative ways, to commit ourselves to contemporary *change*. For example, underlying the perpetuation of many intractable world conflicts today – we can think of Northern Ireland, Palestine, or the Balkans – is the working of an historical imagination which is fixated on the continued reproduction of old hatreds, past antagonisms and divisions. In such cases, righteous acting 'in the name of history' has devastating effects. History can kill.

In a different way history can also be a prison-house when a culture chooses to revel in its glorious past as a way of not confronting its less than glorious present. It is often said that old societies with glorious pasts – think France, think China – are less capable of adapting to the challenges of the future than younger, less ancient societies, which are less bogged down by the weight of tradition. Chairman Mao knew this, of course, and made the bold but disastrous decision that, therefore, old China should be completely overturned and replaced by a wholly new China. The lesson here is that while history can kill, the killing of history can also kill. Nevertheless, I do believe that we sometimes have to be prepared to leave parts of history behind in order to create a new, better future. The question is *how*.

One could argue of course that all this doesn't apply to Australia because Australia – post-1788 Australia – is a relatively new society, one perhaps with *too little* sense of history rather than too much. But we all know that 'history' has become a major site of struggle and contestation in Australia today. After many decades of living in the self-image of 'the lucky

country’ – imagining itself as a ‘young, white, happy and wholesome’ nation<sup>2</sup>– history has come to haunt Australia with a vengeance. Much has been said about the profound cultural and political changes that have transformed Australia in the past quarter of the last century: the rise of Aboriginal assertiveness, multiculturalism, a general pluralisation of social values and lifestyles as the nation globalises. In this shifting landscape the definition of what constitutes Australian history – and how Australians should relate to it – has become fraught with strife, tension and anxiety.

In this more untidy, more fractious Australia an old historical narrative *had* to be left behind – the history of Australia as a homogeneous, white, ‘Angloceltic’ outpost of Europe, racially cleansed inside and shying away from relations to the world outside, especially with its closest neighbours. I wasn’t living in this country in that time so I don’t know what it felt like to live in this older Australia. But until the mid-1960s I lived nearby, in Indonesia, and I do remember that my friend and I, young teenage girls both of us, were trying hard to get the signals of Australian radio to listen to the Beatles – who were banned from Indonesian radio at that time. From an Indonesian perspective, Australia was a very big, very white, and very inaccessible land then (and as many asylum seekers are finding out, it still is to a large extent). I remember asking my father why we couldn’t go to Australia when he announced that he was going to take the family to the other side of the world, Europe. “We can’t”, he said, “they wouldn’t let us in – after all we are not white.” So much for that history. He couldn’t have guessed that I would be a resident of this country some 30 years later! Australia *has* changed, even though a remnant of the past – that of the White Australia policy – still lingers.

This brings me to my second note of caution about history. Yes, of course history is important, but even more important is the question *which* history. I am speaking here as a migrant. For migrants, those who move from one country to another, ‘history’ is always a complicated thing, and their relationship to it even more so! Let me explain.

The most powerful and influential history in any country is the monumental kind of national history, the official story of national heroes and founding legends which are supposed to instil pride, patriotism and a sense of unity in the population at large. It is this history which generally becomes inscribed in the national identity and is inculcated in the hearts and minds of ordinary

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<sup>2</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia*. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1980.

citizens, especially the young. Those who migrate from one country to another, however, often find themselves displaced and alienated from such self-centred narrations of the national history.

Let me give you an example from my own experience. In my country of birth, Indonesia, where I lived until I was twelve, I was always taught at school that 1945 was the year Indonesia liberated itself from the shackles of Dutch colonialism and became an independent nation. I still remember the annual national celebrations I participated in as a young schoolgirl to commemorate National Independence Day, 17 August 1945. My family migrated to the Netherlands in the 1960s – the country of the ex-coloniser, a different nation with, of course, a very different national history. What a shock it was for me when my new, Dutch history textbook taught me that 1949, not 1945 was the year that Indonesia became independent. How could this be? Who was right and who was wrong? It was a confusing experience.

Today, I know that the disparity in the two versions of history is political and motivated entirely, if subconsciously, by national self-interest. The Indonesian nationalists, under the leadership of President Megawati's father, Sukarno, *declared* independence in 1945, but the Dutch only reluctantly *recognised* it in 1949, after four years of bloody war in which the Europeans attempted tenaciously to keep their prized colony. This example of postcolonial difference of perspective made it clear to me, from a very young age, that truth is always partial. What we get represented as 'our' history is never simple fact; it is always steeped in selective memory and interpretation, driven by ideology and by an all too common desire to put a positive spin on one's own past. The same course of events can be historicised in very different, even contrasting ways. We never look back to the past without a particular lens; fact and interpretation are always inevitably merged. This also means, of course, that what we choose to commemorate as 'our heritage' is never innocent, never neutral or objective.

International migration made me acutely and viscerally aware of the inescapability of subjective perspective, and it has made me permanently suspicious of nationalist histories which present a self-absorbed, totally self-glorifying or self-justifying picture of the nation's past.

For example, in the 25 years I was living in the Netherlands, a major annual commemorative event I became familiar with was the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, the official day to commemorate the victims of Nazi Germany. The Netherlands were occupied by the Germans during World War 2, a very traumatic and formative historical experience. Towards the end of the war the Allied Forces fought liberation battles in several Dutch cities, with many casualties.

Winter 1944 is still remembered as the 'winter of hunger', when large parts of Holland were cut off from food supplies for months by the Nazis to put the Allies under pressure. Most dramatically, a huge number of Dutch Jews were taken away to concentration camps during the four years of occupation, never to return. (Anne Frank was of course one of them.) To this day the 4<sup>th</sup> of May is a compulsory day of mourning, 'lest we forget', and despite massive turns of events in the postwar period, including - decades later - the establishment of the European Union, German-hating is still a very popular, instinctive posture amongst large sections of the Dutch today.

I was first introduced to this history as a new migrant schoolkid in the 1960s: it was an integral part of my socialisation into the unknown Dutch culture and society into which I suddenly found myself dropped. I payed my respects, but it took me years to understand what it was all about. The European experience of the second world war was abstract history for my parents, they knew even less about it than I did. So it wasn't something we could talk about at home: it wasn't part of our heritage. It was on days such as the 4<sup>th</sup> of May that I felt most as an outsider to the Dutch nation.

At the same time I knew that the same war, which after all is called a *world* war, unfolded in different ways elsewhere. In Indonesia, which was then still called the Dutch East Indies, the invading Japanese overthrew Dutch colonial rule and put thousands of Dutch colonials, who had until then lived a privileged life, into camps. This history erupted into Dutch public debate in the early 1980s, when a writer published a novel based on his experiences in such a Japanese camp, where his mother and he were interned when he was a three year old.<sup>3</sup> His message was that this was a forgotten part in the history of Dutch wartime suffering, occurring far away in the tropical colonies but no less real. The book unlocked a public outpouring of bitter memories from many, many Dutch ex-colonials who were in the Japanese camps too. Some of them are still full of hatred of the Japanese, and still demand an official apology from Japan.

I do not wish to diminish any of the pain and suffering these people have experienced, nor do I wish to excuse Japan for its continuing reluctance to recognise the cruelties they imparted on others across Asia during the war. That nation has its own responsibility to come to terms with its past, as Germany has. From the perspective of my own Indonesian past, however, I couldn't help finding it rather ironic that in all this sharing of memories of pain and injustice,

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<sup>3</sup> Jeroen Brouwers, *Bezonken Rood*.

virtually no interest was shown among the Dutch in recognising the suffering experienced by the Indonesian 'natives', either at the hands of the Japanese or, more significantly, at the hands of the Dutch themselves, who after all colonised Indonesia for more than 300 years!

Just like Australia, the Netherlands is having great difficulty in acknowledging the darker side of its national history. Dutch complicity with the Nazis – more Jews were taken away from the Netherlands, percentage wise, than from any other European country – is a topic of debate limited to a small group of critical historians. The violent Dutch attempt to recolonise Indonesia after the defeat of the Japanese – which resulted in the bloody war between 1945 and 1949 I referred to earlier – is still hardly speakable. The insistence of some that the Netherlands should own up to its less than noble colonial history generally falls on deaf ears. Instead, too many Dutch ex-colonials still prefer to remember their colonial past as a paradise lost, a romantic 'tempo doeloe' of tropical colonial privilege – an experience which has been converted into a touristic attraction these days, witness the unique colonial 'rijsttafel' banquet one can order in Dutch-Indonesian restaurants in Amsterdam today – which, by the way, is highly recommended!.

As a migrant who came in from the old colony, I have found this whole scenario bemusing and strangely unsettling. It made me feel peripheral to the unfolding of the national scene, observing it from the outside, even though the very fact that we, as a family, had ended up in the Netherlands was intimately bound up with the history of Dutch colonialism. But my version of the story – or that of my parents, who grew up under the authority of the colonial regime – seemed somehow irrelevant in the introspective history of the Dutch nation. Our part in it, though so tangible, remained invisible from the public stage, except perhaps in our very presence as postcolonial migrants. It is only in the last decade or so – after I have left and migrated once again, this time to Australia – that the Netherlands has started to embrace a more complex multicultural identity and heritage.

You may have noticed some parallels by now, but also some crucial differences. Australia, too, has a complicated (though very different) colonial past which has long been suppressed in the present. But precisely because it is, unlike the Netherlands, still a relatively new nation, a settler society whose recent history of invasion and colonisation is still a part of living memory, there is a sense of urgency and exigency in the way national history is being fought over in Australia today. It is far from settled. Needless to say this is the result mainly of the powerful resurgence of Indigenous politics in Australia, which has gained exponential momentum in the 1990s. The Aboriginal boycott of the Bicentenary celebrations in 1988, the Mabo and Wik decisions, and the *Bringing Them Home* report, which put the unresolved issue of the 'stolen generation' on the national agenda, have severely dented the nation's

self-confidence and historical self-conception as an essentially good, white nation. White Australia had to realise that the nation would have no viable cultural future if there was no 'reconciliation' between white and black, even though not all, including the Prime Minister, were prepared to face up to the seriousness of the challenge. But even though the contested process of reconciliation is still far from finished business, one thing is irrevocable: Indigenous politics has fundamentally *transformed* the ground of Australian history. Aboriginality has now become an undeniable core to any conception of Australian national history – an unerasable component of Australian heritage.

This is key to what Melbourne cultural historian Chris Healy has called Australia's "mundane heritage crisis".<sup>4</sup> One sign of the crisis is the difficulty many, if not most white Australians have in admitting to a national heritage which has deep roots in colonial racism. Symptomatic is the white revolt of Pauline Hanson and her One Nation party, who stridently refuses to acknowledge that black heritage. Hanson's refusal, in my view, is more than just racial intolerance. If it were just that, we could simply dismiss it as a case of individual bigotry. No, there is much more at stake. It is a clear expression of her profound fear that the Australia as she knew it is being lost forever. What she feels she has lost is a sense of rootedness which she has derived from a national historical memory which had systematically erased the fundamental dependence of white Australian heritage on the exclusion of Aboriginality.

The influx of migrants from many different parts of the world with whom she doesn't feel cultural affinity only exacerbates this sense of loss and threat. Hence the strident call for assimilation, and the fierce hostility against migrants and refugees which, sadly, reached such fever pitch in the past few weeks. But here, too, an ability to be more frank and honest about the nation's historical origins might provide some counterpoint. After all, as Aborigines often remind us, the European arrivals in 1788 were also 'boat people'! The fact that many white Australians – and not just Hanson – find such a comparison too unpalatable to contemplate is precisely what is meant by the heritage crisis.

Healy describes Australia's heritage crisis as a "significant instability in the taken for grantedness which heritage can offer".<sup>5</sup> He calls this crisis 'mundane', I think, because it affects the very ordinary, everyday ways in which people imagine and relate to the nation – as exemplified by the ferocious divisiveness of much talk back radio rant about Aboriginal affairs, refugees, 'ethnic ghettos', and so on. But if the monumental history of white Australia no longer works as a glue for the nation as a whole, which history is to replace it? And how can Australians – all Australians – today develop a new way of relating to the past, a past which is

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<sup>4</sup> Chris Healy, "'Race Portraits" and Vernacular Possibilities: Heritage and Culture', in: Tony Bennett & David Carter (eds.), *Culture in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 278-298.

<sup>5</sup> Healy, op. cit, p. 279.



now being so fundamentally rewritten? In other words, how can we resolve this heritage crisis?

Some, such as the Prime Minister, insist on a return to the old historical chauvinism in the face of what he calls a 'black armband view of our past'. In John Howard's words: "I believe that the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement and that we have achieved much more as a nation of which we can be proud than of which we can be ashamed."<sup>6</sup> If anything, however, such a reactionary nationalist response, which in its generalising sweep doesn't allow for any complex and differentiated sense of the past, is part of the problem rather than the solution! For one thing, who does he mean by 'we' here? Surely he doesn't include Indigenous Australians: asking them to feel proud of this nation's history would be absurd, if not downright cynical. And I don't think he is thinking of multicultural Australia either. The point I want to make here is not that there is no place for national pride – though different Australians may be proud of different aspects of Australian achievement – but that a new conception of Australian heritage can no longer be based on a monolithic, monocultural, and monoperspectival national history. It is simply no longer believable, nor does it provide an integrative narrative that can serve to bridge the bitterly antagonistic voices that have emerged from the community, "to balance the needs of rival generations, regions and communities", as Rothwell put it.

The challenge, I believe, is to recognise that the national historical record consists of divergent, unequal but intertwining histories. These intersecting strands of history can never be smoothed into a single national narrative but they nevertheless produce a common symbolic field of interrelated experiences, stories, and memories – which we can call our collective heritage. After all, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have a very long history of co-existence, a history of ugly conflict and violence but also, often against the odds, of cooperation and cross-cultural exchange. If we are to address the heritage crisis I referred to above, perhaps we need to acknowledge *both* as an integral part of the national heritage. There is room for both pride and shame, celebration and remorse, triumph and tragedy. Perhaps this is what 'reconciliation' is all about: it is about a cross-cultural conversation which could lead to the building of a new, intercultural common ground, where 'heritage' is created and made, rather than simply preserved, through the sharing of different perspectives on the past. Some might, for whatever reason (and I can think of many, including the fact that racism may still be too prevalent to make genuine dialogue possible), not wish to join the conversation. So be it. They may come to the party later.

Let me now to return to the point of view of the migrant. For one of the things that I find most unnerving is the way in which this national conversation – reconciliation – has so far excluded the voices of migrants who do not belong to the white mainstream. It is remarkable, for

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<sup>6</sup> John Howard, Sir Robert Menzies Lecture, 18 November 1996.

example, how quickly talk about relations between Indigenous and non-indigenous generally reduces to that between 'black' and 'white' – the latter referring implicitly and explicitly, and exclusively, to 'Anglo-Celtic' Australians. However, there are huge numbers of non-indigenous Australians who are not by any means 'white'. Indeed, many of them can testify to their own experiences of exclusion from 'white' Australia, past and present. I am reminded here of my father's comment, in the mid-1960s, that Australia was out of bounds for us because of the White Australia policy.

The problem is that the history of what is generally called 'multicultural Australia' is still treated as just a mere add-on to the 'real' Australia: it is not recognised as an integral part of Australian heritage, and it is certainly not seen as having a transformative impact on how we conceive of Australian history – the way Aboriginality has.

Migrants – especially those of cultural backgrounds other than Anglosaxon – have a different position than Aborigines in relation to the national history because they do not have the moral capital that the latter have by virtue of their status as the indigenous people of the land. Indeed, non-white migrants have their own moral obligation to work through their relationship to Indigenous Australia, perhaps by bypassing the transcendent piety of white Australia's 'black armband' version of history. The divorce of multiculturalism from the reconciliation debate has to be undone. More generally, the contribution of non-white migrants to Australian history and culture must no longer be cordoned-off as a particularist world of 'ethnic history' or 'migrant heritage', as if it is irrelevant, even antithetical to the nation as a whole.

Recently I heard a young man of Turkish background tell the story that when he went to school in Penrith in Western Sydney, a classmate abused him and held him responsible for his grandfather's ordeal in Gallipoli! This experience must have caused him an acute sense of alienation; this is how many, many young people of migrant backgrounds are made to feel outsiders to the national culture on a daily basis, often despite their fluent English and their social integration. More importantly here, what this anecdote also signals is that a thoroughly international dimension is integral to the Australian national experience. Turkey is a real country, with its own history, including the episode of Gallipoli, and Turkish migrants inevitably translate elements of their own inherited versions of world history into their Australian lives. This is the case for all migrant groups, wherever they come from, despite the still recurrent demand that they sever their pasts and leave their old histories behind once they're here. But this is a demand as ungenerous as it is unrealistic. (After all, didn't we just establish that it is unreasonable to expect white Australia to simply dismiss its old history in the wake of the Aboriginal resurgence?)

Perhaps the Turkish boy from Penrith has ancestors who could tell him what the Great War was like from the Turkish point of view. No doubt they suffered too. Given the founding importance of Gallipoli in Australian national mythology, listening to Turkish stories today, to their

perspective of the past, might in fact help us to soften inherited mutual distrust, to negotiate differences within the community, and to gain a more complex understanding of human coexistence, of the world as an interdependent, interconnected place. And as Australia is becoming increasingly culturally diverse, it is about time that we recognise that world history is not separate from Australian history, but intrinsic to it.

Migrants' particular histories intertwine with those of others in the nation – white, black, or anyone else – contributing to the continuing unfolding of a national web of narratives which is not only fundamentally diverse, but also fundamentally porous and cosmopolitan, connecting with the narratives that circulate in many other places and countries in the world. Nor is this a recent phenomenon – groups such as Chinese, Pacific Islanders, Germans, Italians, Lebanese and Afghans have made their mark on the Australian cultural landscape for more than hundred years. Their histories are not only relevant to their own descendants, but to the whole nation, and beyond. We need to recognise that without their longstanding (though often ignored) presence, Australia would have been a different country. In this sense, recognition of the intrinsic diversity of the national heritage may not only help bridge some of the ugly divisions *within* Australia today, it will also help bring the Australian imagination in closer connection with the world at large – something which is desperately needed in the increasingly intertwined, globalised world of the twenty-first century. As the eminent historian Graeme Davison has remarked, “Active and ethical citizenship depends... upon the imaginative capacity to look at the world through the eyes of others.”<sup>7</sup> While Davison is speaking about the importance of understanding the people of the past, we can add that the sharing of different pasts, different histories is perhaps one of the crucial requirements for global citizenship today.

What will happen then if we take the complex and evolving diversity of intertwining histories as a *starting point* for the making of Australian heritage? Will it resolve the heritage crisis? I don't think so. Prevailing divisions and dominant structures will not be easily overcome. Monumental nationalist histories are a very powerful and persistent force. But we shouldn't be discouraged by this. We can quote Graeme Davison again, who has pointed out that it is impossible to reduce 'heritage' to a simple formula: “It is, by its very nature, an unstable and contested idea, as must be any idea that attempts to capture the things we count as valuable in our collective life.”<sup>8</sup> If we can live with this instability, and indeed take courage from it, then we

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<sup>7</sup> Graeme Davison, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2000, p.14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

will prevent history from becoming a prison-house; instead, it can be a site of inspiration for the future. We might even in retrospect say that the strictly inward-looking, monocultural history of Australia has turned out to be a very short episode in the life of this nation. Part of growing up and maturing gracefully is becoming sadder but wiser. So it is with nations.