Reading is increasingly becoming a minority activity, something done by the eccentric few - the rest of us rely on electronic media. But despite or perhaps because of this, it is becoming increasingly crucial.

There is clearly something inadequate, if not wrong about a world as full of misery, injustice and plain hopelessness as ours. The electronic media, however, leave us more or less as spectators, watching the play of images, like Plato's prisoners in the cave. Even when the purposes of these images is interrogation, in a documentary, for instance, or in a film like *In the Name of the Father*, the focus is still on perception. There is not much sense of obligation to others, or even that the other exists and compels our respect and attention - a centripetal compulsion is one of the marks of consumer society, as Baudrillard remarks. Yet today the excluded other/others may well be the central problem returning to haunt western society in general and Australian society in particular.

There is little hope of understanding who and what we are as individuals or as social beings if our only models of self and society are of asymmetrical power relations, of inclusion and exclusion on the one hand and of rule of bodies by force, what some call "law and order" - on the other.1 Nor can we build a proper society by relying on pre-determined patterns of behaviour: conformity tends to produce what Foucault calls "docile bodies" and Garfunkel "cultural dopes", rather than citizens. We need people who can still think and feel for themselves, critically aware not only of the social and cultural forces which shape them but also of the possibilities of difference, and ready to cherish those possibilities. Creativity arises not from commonsense but from its interrogation.

All this, is in defence of the importance of reading, but is also a prelude to a discussion of four books, very different in style and concern from the usual run of Australian writing, each dealing in its own way with the question of the other, in this case Aboriginal Australians. These books matter politically - in the largest sense of that ambiguous word - not merely aesthetically. A society which has lost its identity, as ours is in danger of doing, surrendering instead to the so-called "rationality" of economics, is like someone who has lost his/her shadow, in danger of madness or death. However, reading about the shadow side of our history and culture, the experiences of Aboriginal Australians, is a way of recovering this identity, creating a set of shared meanings and values, an objective world we know and relate to together and a shared social world which is wider, more in tune with actuality and therefore more capable of expansion than the one we non-Aboriginal Australians have lived in hitherto, enclosed within the Orientalising fantasies of western colonialism.2

This is not an easy project, of course, even as far as reading is concerned. So it is worth reflecting at first on some of the difficulties involved. Culturally Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians inhabit two very different worlds, relating to one another either in terms of stereotypes or of bureaucratic definition and organization. Consider, for example, the long-running debate about the definition of "Aboriginality" - usually conducted in terms which are not only hollow, the result of ideological determination rather than personal interaction, but also the product of the history in which we have situated ourselves as winners, justifying this by evolutionary logic, the "survival of the fittest". For Aboriginal people, however, this "victory" means dispossession, poverty, illness and humiliation and often death; it means becoming strangers in their own land. Yet this experience is not included in the story of Australian identity. Aboriginal Australians have been written out of history until very recently, rendered invisible, and their definition amended accordingly.

This is the situation these four books set out to remed Susan Maushart's *Sort of A Place Like Home* which has ready won several awards, is about the Moore River Native Settlement seen through Aboriginal
eyes. Rosemary van den Berg's *No Options No Choice!* deals with the same subject but at the individual level, telling the story of Rosemary's father, taken at the age of six to the settlement from his Aboriginal mother in the North West, who spent more than twenty years, from 1920 to 1944, at the settlement. *Aboriginal Australia*, edited by Colin Bourke, Eleanor Bourke and Bill Edwards, non-Aboriginal people who have nevertheless had a long association with Aboriginals, is rather different, a collection of essays designed for the Open Learning Project to introduce non-Aboriginal readers to Aboriginal history and culture and to the problems involved in deconstructing our notions of Aboriginality. These books, then, are part of what one of the writers in *Aboriginal Australia* calls a "new invasion":

> Challenging the dominant "white" view of Australia's past [Aborigines] have begun presenting their own versions of what has happened in Australia in the last two hundred years and introduced a new perspective, based on The Dreaming, of Australia's much longer history.

For that reason the non-Aboriginal reader is at a certain disadvantage. It is not easy to find yourself the villain in a story in which hitherto you figured heroically, building up a new and decent society in which every one has the right to a "fair go" - hence, of course, the angry reaction of many Australians, West Australians particularly, to the High Court's Mabo decision which in effect wrote Aboriginal people back into the history of settlement and undermined the moral justification on which we relied. Nor should we take this anger lightly - any challenge to the ways in which we represent ourselves threatens incoherence.

But that, as we have said, is why these texts matter because they attempt, each in its own way, to rework and renew that representation and to make it more inclusive. By and large colonial cultures live by exclusion, by what Abdul JanMahomed has called the "Manichean allegory" of colonisation in which white figures to black as good to evil, civilised to savage, superior to inferior, and so on.3 Aboriginal Australians have figured, if at all, as incidental to the on-going history of "civilization", "development" and "progress", turned into objects of anthropological study or for the delectation of tourists, Orientalised, to use Said's term, figures at best from a prehistory we believe we have superseded and at worst from an evolutionary cautionary tale, figures of the "degradation" we left behind on our way up the evolutionary ladder: "nearest of all to the money or orang-outang and therefore incapable of enjoying the same state of intellectual existence as ourselves", as one settler wrote; "the very zero of civilization"4, to quote another.

This matter of representation is the central concern of the essays in *Aboriginal Australia*. As it remarks, in the history of contact between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, favourable representations have been rare. Dampier set the tone in the seventeenth century with his picture of them as "the miserablest race on earth", a picture which supported the conviction that their land existed to be colonised and that they needed to be "civilised" by us. Similarly, the alternative notion of the Noble Savage, representing them as "childlike", "simple", "primitive" etc., justified our speaking for them, excluding them from power and subordinating them to our purposes and values. In this way, as Colin Bourke points out in *Aboriginal Australia*, Aboriginal people have been held as hostages to images of our creation. Images, of course, are usually forms of alienation from one self and reality, and it is this attempted separation of Aboriginal people from their history and culture on the one hand and on the other the cult of forgetfulness on our part which, writing them out of our history, inserts them into the fantasies by which we justify ourselves. Challenging the abstractions and generality of images and stereotypes, *Sort of a Place Like Home* presents the specific story of a named and known group of people, the "alumni of Moore River", Aboriginal people who as children spent years of their lives as inmates of the largest and most notorious of Aboriginal settlement camps in Western Australia.

Even more significantly perhaps, their story is largely told by the people themselves in their own voices - it is based on a series of interviews with them, and their views are set in telling contrast to the official records and newspaper accounts. As Maushart remarks, "history speaks through as many voices as historians have ears to hear", and she is obviously concerned to attune our ears to the voices of those who were the victims of the social experiment at Moore River. Her book also reminds us of the links between representation and power: "Archival sources, the voice of authority, speak in more official accents" and are thus necessarily complicit with positions of authority. For that reason, "they are often more telling in what they omit than in what they reveal". Her concern, however, is with these omissions, with the voices which have been silenced by official accounts and discourse. The pain, confusion and loss so often expressed here finds no place in the official view that what was being done at Moore River was an exercise in "civilisation"
and was "all for the good" of the Aboriginal people involved. But it is these voices which Maushart and her team set against the official record, appealing from its impersonal matter-of-fact to the "oral record, richly textured and bright with detail".

Listening to the people who actually lived there, the picture is very different from the official version: children living crowded into dormitories, locked in at night with only a bucket for sanitation, permanently hungry, separated from their parents, badly taught by poorly trained teachers, educated sufficiently only to work as domestic servants and farm hands, forbidden to speak their own language. This is not a picture of people being civilised but of an attempt to create second-class whites, people displaced not only from their own country - they came from all over the state - but also from their culture. According to many of these survivors, there was a deliberate attempt to make them feel ashamed of their own culture and to destroy their language.

At the same time, because it is based on personal reminiscences and because Aboriginal people seem to be extraordinarily resilient, we also hear about good times, of fun the children had together, swimming in the river or hunting and looking for food in the bush, visiting the old people down at the camp, and so on. That is important too, a necessary correction to the "victim history" which turns Aboriginal people into objects of pity, not the strong, courageous, adaptable and lifeloving people that they are. This is not history as matter-of-fact, of statistics, then. Nor is it the imperial history of progress but its underside, the story of those who bore its brunt. That is what makes it so powerful, pointing us to the gap between the real and the ideal in which these Aboriginal people were caught. Officials like A.O. Neville, "Protector" of Aborigines may have thought they were doing them a kindness by initiating them into our ways. But the story told here represents that "normative surplus" of meaning and experience which, Habermas argues, points beyond our agreed meanings and sense of identity, to become a "thorn in the flesh" of the reality by which we live.

Generally, history writes out the personal and the specific: the intentions of the government and of Government officials like Neville may have been benevolent. Given the dominant view that the life of tribal Aboriginal people was "nasty, brutish and short," then it was kindness to rescue them from it and try to induct them into "civilised:" European ways. But ideology is a form of censorship, sifting out some perceptions and emphasizing others. In this case what was censored was the fact that Aboriginals were human beings like us with feelings like ours and profoundly attached to culture and traditions which stretched over thousands of years.

It is therefore a painful story. One woman still remembers how afraid her parents were of losing her (her father was an Irishman and her mother Aboriginal, so as a half-caste she was due to be rescued:

\[
\text{When I was born I was carried around in a suitcase. That's the only way they could hide me.
They had a little hole in the suitcase so that I wouldn't get smothered, and they carried me round till they couldn't carry me any more in the suitcase.}\]

Found there with her parents by a policeman, she was taken away at gunpoint. Many others still remember their parents' grief. Another woman, for instance, recalls how she felt when they took her away - she was only "about five or six":

\[
\text{Oh I felt awful. I cried all night. Tell you the truth, I cried and cried. I wanted to go back to my mother an I couldn't go back. All he said was you got to go to this place where you have to go to school, that's all, he didn't tell me where I was going. My mother, well, she stood there as they, as I got into the car and went and she just cried and cried. I can see her crying, you know. I can see her standing there crying and I just couldn't do nothing, just standing there. Nothing she could do, nothing at all. She just stood and watched me go away.}\]

Whatever else rationality may be, it is what obtains when persuasion is substituted for force.5 In the face of evidence of this kind, it is difficult to argue for the rationality of such policies based on force, on the isolation of human feeling.

\*Sort of a Place Like Home\* is thus much more than a series of oral histories. Building up from them a picture of the trauma of being taken there of life as it was actually lived at the settlement, it also attempts some kind of explanation. On the one side it shows Aboriginal people as victims of power and of racist
ideology, of the Manichean Allegory of colonisation. So colour seems to have obsessed people like Neville. As one Aboriginal remembers it:

_They draft us out in different colours, and if you're whiter than the other kids, your half-caste, quarter-caste or quadroon or whatever it is, they draft us out like that and I was drafted out to be sent to Moore River Native Settlement there, and when I got there every Aboriginal looked like me, same colour._

In fact, of course, Neville was consciously engaged in a programme of eugenics, breeding out "black blood": "Half-castes" were only allowed to marry "half-castes, quarter-castes" and so on until "black blood" was eliminated, as if they were cattle or sheep. Many Aboriginals sensed this: "Get a big truck to pick us up like a load of cattle (laughter) or, you know, sheep or anything else". But they were helpless, mostly children taken from their parents, far from home in a strange place amongst strangers. So, whatever they felt and thought - which they did shrewdly and powerfully - they had no say. "We never ask questions", Vincent Lambadgee recalls. It was safer that way because they were in effect prisoners, "where the settlement, the Government took you and shoved you in there, and forgot about you."

Australia, then also has its Gulags. Reading this book and _No Options No Choice_, one has the impression that, as with successive Russian governments, "out of sight out of mind" was the official policy - Moore River was the Aboriginal Siberia. But unlike most oral historians, Maushart and her colleagues, probe the reasons behind the policies whose effects they record. The last section of the book reproduces a number of articles in Perth newspapers which detailed abuses at the settlement and the appalling conditions there, making it clear that the Western Australian public had ready and repeated access to accurate, detailed and timely information about what was going on. There was, for instance, open debate about the incident in 1944 in which the Assistant Superintendent shot an Aboriginal youth in the foot, and the case against him was dismissed on the grounds that "It was more or less bad luck" that he hit the youth.

What emerges, then, is the force of ideology. As far as Aboriginals were concerned, most whites had their minds made up; Aboriginal people were inferior, "primitives" who needed to be "civilised" and who were in any case dying out, doomed by the logic of evolution of which we were the growing point. Yet it also appears that, with a few exceptions, the superintendents, teachers and others who ran the settlement were not monsters but ordinary people doing a job under difficult conditions. The problem lay with the job, though it is true that most of them shared the premises on which that job was based. These premises were articulated by a Police Court Magistrate and former Protector of Aborigines in the North West who told the 1934 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Affairs that, while "we all regard (Aboriginals) as human beings... humanity is not all on a level plane" - or, as Orwell put it, that all people are equal but some more equal than others.

If, as Anthony Appriah says, "race" functions as a metonym for muddled thinking about the relations between genetics and intention, meaning, culture and history, in this case the muddle was also convenient economically. At least some Aboriginal people were removed to Moore River - Ken Colbung suggests, "to get them off the land that the white people wanted." As Deleuze and Guattari observe, "there is no 'race' but inferior race'. Colonization produces the colonized, and produces them as inferior, subordinate to the colonizers' purposes. Notions of "white" superiority thus provided the justification for the destruction of Aboriginal resistance and the attempted destruction of their culture; it was official policy at Moore River. As we have noted already, children were forbidden to use their own language and taught to be ashamed of their heritage - easy enough when they were separated from their parents and their people. They were also educated for subordination, to work as servants, and since it was assumed that they could not look after their own affairs, the Protector "looked after" what money they earned.

Seen from an Aboriginal point of view, not much had changed, therefore, from 1835 when the editor of the newspaper, _The Colonist_, pointed to the usefulness of the "pervasive doctrine of Aboriginal worthlessness", though administrators like Neville would have argued that their motives were very different, that they were concerned for the good of Aboriginal people, to "uplift" them to the level of white society. Yet there was no suggestion that Aboriginal people were, or ever would be, fit for anything more than menial work. The premises identified by _The Colonist_ remained, though expressed less violently:
Sordid interest is at the root of all this anti-Aboriginal feeling. Because the [Aborigines]... interfere, in some of the frontier stations with the easy and lucrative grazing of cattle and sheep, they are felt by the sensitive pockets of the graziers to be a nuisance; and the best plea these 'gentlemen' can set up for their rights to abate the nuisance by the summary process of stabbing, burning and "poisoning", is, that the offenders are below the level of the white man's species.

True, as Maushart shows, there were those white people in the 1920's, 30's, 40's and 50's, the time of the Moore River Settlement, as there were in the 1830's who opposed these policies. But they seem to have had little influence. Like the Aborigines, though rather differently, of course, their voices were silenced - and we are all the poorer for it today. Yet it is also one of the signs of hope today that similar voices are beginning to be heard again. Bill Day's Bunji, which we will discuss later, is one of these signs, telling about a white person, Day himself, who, with a few likeminded friends, stood beside the Larrakia people of Darwin to regain part of their tribal lands. If racism depends upon the division between white and black, those on both sides who defy this division, crossing the frontier into a common humanity, strike at its very roots.

So to return to Sort of Like Home, Moore River was two different places. Seen through Aboriginal eyes what seemed to Neville and many like him a benign and "civilising" operation appears as little more than slavery - the favourite song, we are told, was "Misery Farm"

See, it is all about these animals that didn't do this and didn't do that - you know, hens won't lay, we can't make hay, we work all day and get no pay. Think whoever wrote that song must of stopped at the settlement!

Jack Davis' play, No Sugar, set in Northam and later at Moore River, also gives us a glimpse of this kind of resistance, underground but effective in preserving the people's dignity. Manshart's account is one of the first histories to acknowledge this resistance. For her, the contrast between bush and compound was central to life at the settlement, and she identifies this as a struggle between competing cultures, the institutional culture of "the official (European) culture of the compound versus the outlaw (Aboriginal) culture of the bush".

This is important, not just because it sets the record straight but also because it challenges the comforting and comfortable view that Aboriginal people put up no resistance to our invasion and conquest of the country. Moreover, as Maushart suggests, settlement officials seem to have felt strangely threatened by this underground resistance:

The official culture at Moore River regarded Aboriginality as a kind of communicable disease, spread by contact. The settlement was designed to function as an isolation ward, cordoning off the infected from the wider community.

In some cases of course, this succeeded, if only temporarily. Some were ashamed of their Aboriginality and looked down on traditional people and their ways. But for many, especially for children from whom everything else had been taken away, having "to just find our own way out, most of us, in the world without love", their Aboriginality was all they had.

It was not destroyed, Manshart realises, reflecting on the stories, but went underground. The physical centre of this subversive culture was the camp where families lived:

But its spiritual centre was the bush, where Aboriginality could be freely expressed and nurtured. Despite the barriers erected between compound and camp, aspects of traditional Aboriginal culture survived in the form of cherished special events - from weekend camping expeditions to moonlit corroborees. Equally important were the everyday pleasures of being Aboriginal: savouring short snatches of freedom from rules and bells, seizing opportunities to learn by doing, luxuriating in the unconditional acceptance of family, of friends.

One is reminded here of Chairman Mao's advice in the Little Red Book that when the enemy is in positions of power it is suicidal to attempt a headlong attack. What one must do is to "take to the mountains", retreat to some place where it is possible to preserve one's own peculiar power for the future. Alternatively, there is the story of two giants fighting one another. One is weaker than the other and on the brink of defeat. Yet he
manages to keep going and finally to defeat his antagonist because he listens to a tiny dwarf who sits in his
ear, urging him on and reminding him of his strength. Aboriginal peoples have lived for thousands of years
by their stories, and it seems that they have also survived the last two hundred years thanks to them.

This brings us to Rosemary Van den Berg's account of her father's story. Born to a tribal woman and
an unknown white father, he was taken at the age of six to Moore River, a thousand miles or more from
his country, and lived there for more than twenty years. The details of his life there are much the same as
in *Sort Of A Place Like Home*, though Thomas Corbett seems to have had more respect for Neville than
most of the people Manshart talked to. The value of this book however, is rather the way it introduces us
to a remarkable man, remarkably talented - whatever work he was set to do he seems to have succeeded in,
even though Moore River had given him only minimal education - but also remarkably spirited. An essay in
*Aboriginal Australia* reminds us that one of the most devastating stereotypes of Aboriginal people is of them
as permanently needy and incompetent. But Thomas Corbett was evidently someone able to stand on his own
feet and succeed anywhere, if only he was given the opportunity to do so.

Looking back, his greatest complaint, was, that "the freedom to be responsible for one's own life
was denied Aboriginal people in my day". This sense of his own dignity makes him a subversive figure,
more subversive perhaps than the more obvious rebellion of political activists because it undermines the
assumptions of the well-meaning who have in the past done almost as much damage to Aboriginals as the
racists. Patronising behaviour, Corbett asserts,

... was the ultimate insult to my intelligence and pride, and that of all other Aborigines. It is
bad enough to be told what to do when one is a child (one has no choice), but when one is
adult, it is. Countless times worse to be treated like a mindless twit.

In a sense, then, this book, the record of his conversations with one of his daughters, is his revenge, speaking
back to the culture which all his life tried to silence him. The heading of one chapter, significantly the one
which tells of his arrival at Moore River is "Grateful To Be Allowed To Breathe" - this is his "no" to the
structure which he has had to inhabit so long, so intimately and so humiliatingly.

As Gayatri Spivak says, the crucial question is not whether the subaltern, people like Corbett, can speak
- obviously they can - but whether people of the dominant culture can hear them.7 *No Options No Choice*,
like *Sort of a Place Like Home* demands our attention not only because of the way it rewrites history but also
because of the new map it draws of our relations with Aboriginal people, turning what we see as the centre,
our position, into the margin and the Aboriginal position into the centre. In this way they are examples of
that ethnocriticism, that Arnold Krupat describes as the "particular organization of cultural studies which
engages otherness and difference in such a way as to... interrogate... what we ordinarly take as familiar
and our own".8 Corbett's story insists that we take him and his culture seriously, as different from ours but
equally valid. He knows about us, our culture and our history - his assessments of Perth and the reasons for
the white man's success are shrewd and judicious, and it is clear that, to the extent that the social system
allows him, he succeeds in whatever he is given to do within that system. But it is equally clear that he
refuses to yield his own ground. In the 1950's, for example, he and his wife scornfully refused the offer of
citizenship - a reward offered to "deserving" Aboriginal people which turned them into honorary whites.

For him it is the Aboriginal way which is normative. Reflecting on the history of settlement in Western
Australia, for example, he finds "a parallel... and the way Aborigines survived in the hard, rugged country",
though he compares our treatment of the land unfavourably with his people's:

*The big difference between my two races is that one conforms to the land - the other
conforms it. Sadly, that is the crux of the problem in today's struggle for land rights for
Aboriginal people.*

His objection to what happened at Moore River therefore, is principled, not merely a matter of resentment,
"the slave's revolt". He recognizes that the universe of rules by which Aboriginals there were obliged to live
was not designed to temper tolerance but rather to satisfy it.
Men, women and children were continually harassed into obedience with no redress, no options, no choice. The criteria for living at the settlement was, "be good, do as you are told and mind your white superiors", or suffer the consequences of degradation and despair.

Thus his story resists the power of normalization, used so powerfully against him from childhood onwards. But it also suggests the possibility of alternatives. Early on, for instance, there is an account of a group of tribal people, Wangkis, who descended on the settlement to be near the children and others who had been taken away to be interned there.

The Wangkis stayed for several weeks. One night they suddenly left without a word. No one heard or saw them go, but the next morning their camp was cleared. The children, who had stayed in the compound of the settlement, had also vanished as if into thin air. The authorities were flabbergasted...

This is an obvious act of defiance. But the story of Corbett and of the thousands of others like him who managed to survive with dignity, refusing to surrender the ground of their Aboriginal identity is also a story of resistance. Even though they were forced to adapt to European ways, they drew their strength from the very things those ways were trying to suppress, their Aboriginality. Taken from his mother and his traditional culture at the age of five, he had learned little of his traditional culture. But he resisted the missionaries' attempts to take what he knew from him.

[Aboriginal] beliefs were strongly discouraged and even ridiculed because they were considered heathen, pagan, or even downright demonic by white society at the time. The Dreamtime definitely had to be stamped out. Indeed, every aspect of Aboriginal culture was to be discouraged and suppressed. Aborigines were made to feel ashamed of their heritage and their dreaming.

Instead, typically, he captured the whites' God for himself, turning him against them, putting him at the service of life rather than death and division. Thus, in church for the first time, he tells us he felt part "of a unity of mankind, giving thanks to a more powerful Being than those in authority at the settlement." Life rather than law is at issue here:

It seemed to me that the God I couldn't see was more merciful than the white people, and I wondered whether this God was white like the superintendent, or black like the Aboriginal inmates. Surely a white God wouldn't show mercy to Aborigines?

This puts paid to victimist notions of history, making his Aboriginal perspective superior to the white one. The second chapter sets up the dialectic which runs through the rest of the book between unfeeling white power and the human feeling on which he and his people take their stand:

The wrench of being taken from [my mother] still haunts me, leaving me with feelings of loss.... But it was one of those circumstances beyond our control or comprehension at the time. We were pawns in a political game, not able to reason or understand why such things happened to Aboriginal women and their half-caste offspring.

I still don't know why I was taken away from her. It was inhuman to say the least. The pain still lingers although I am now an octogenerian.

From this position he tries from time to time to put himself inside the nonAboriginal mind, imagining for himself their "reasoning" about the difference between "half-castes" and "full bloods", for instance, or about white "superiority" and Aboriginal "inferiority" and even "degradation". This is the tactic used so powerfully in Tracy Moffatt's films and films like *Barbecue Area* which worked so powerfully in 1988, turning the anthropological gaze on us for once.

Read together, then, *Sort of a Place Like Home* and *No Options No Choice*, the one more general, the other specific, redefine the frontier, the shifting space between the two cultures, which have coexisted so painfully and with such misunderstanding over the last two centuries. This space, of course, is not physical, not fixed or mappable, but, in the words of James Clifton, "a social setting... a culturally defined place where peoples with different culturally expressed identities meet and deal with each other."
That is the point taken up in a more theoretical way in the essays assembled in *Aboriginal Australia*. They turn the spotlight on the ways in which we have constructed Aboriginal identity for ourselves, inscribing it into our space and into a position of inferiority and subordination. But, unlike *Sort of A Place Like Home* and *No Options No Choice*, they do not turn us to the past but to the future. If the crux of the problem of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations is ideological, a matter of perception, then it can only be solved by a change of heart. Legal and political change is not enough. We need to move from the monolithic and monological world view which reflects difference to what Arnold Krupah calls a "polyvocal polity"10, one in which other peoples and cultures are allowed to exist in their own right and on their own terms and people are able to cross the frontiers between them freely and with mutual respect.

Here individuals can make a difference. *Bunji* tells about the story of one brave and prophetic man who came to understand and respect the Larrakia people of Darwin, decimated by invasion, disease and the power of white society, and put himself at their service in their attempt to fight back and preserve what traditional land was left to them. As Stewart Harris says in his Foreword, Bill Day is an "unusual man, unusually brave and determined, who found raw material (for his struggle) in his own courage and [the Aborigines'] often different, sense of real politic" which, as Harris also remarks, "they had, after all, been learning for 200 years."

The role Day and others like him had to play was not very rewarding, "to be the grit in the pearl shell... But the finished pearl is the main thing", and the goal to which these books, put together, are pointing. From an Aboriginal point of view, what that means is clear, recognition of their identity and their rights to it and to selfdetermination, to be treated as Australian citizens in the proper sense and on their own terms. From a non-Aboriginal point of view, however, this goal is fraught with difficulty because what is at stake is the deconstruction of the picture we have constructed for ourselves as a people and of the history of our settlement in this land, the creation of an alternative cartography.11

This also implies a critique of our dominant culture on the one hand and on the other a proposal for new ways of looking at things, what has been called "the bordering area of the world".12 This essay is long enough already, so there is no time to discuss in detail what this might mean. But two points need to be made. The first is that borders are dangerous places because they are points at which one is confronted with the other. In this sense they also involve the larger question of the Other, of some reference point beyond that of culture. Since the Enlightenment, Western cultures have tended to occlude this question of the Other, appealing instead to the concept of universal Reason. But the encounter with Aboriginal cultures and those of other cultures of Asia, Africa and the Americas makes it clear that this is a Western concept. Their world view is different, more mythical than rational. Seen from this larger point of view, it appears that the concept of Reason is itself a kind of myth, a story which compels quasi-religious assent.

If this is so, then, despite the widespread view that Australia is a secular society, the problem of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians may be essentially religious not just a matter of competing economic and political interests (though both of these are crucial elements of our mythology), but of competing world views. Nor is this exceptional. Karl Popper, for instance, has argued that the main arguments of our time are religious arguments, the product of misguided moral enthusiasm which in our case identifies ourselves as good, the "spearhead of history", and others as Evil, "primitives", the enthusiasm which inspired British expansion through the world in the nineteenth century, for instance, and inspires U.S. expansion today.

Recognition of the power, complexity and richness of Aboriginal culture may serve to relativise these absolute claims. As Popper points out, struggles between peoples tend to be struggles

\[
... between competing theories of how to establish a better world, and our moral enthusiasm is often misguided, because we fail to realise that our moral principles, which are sure to be over-simple, are often difficult to apply to the complex human and political situations to which we feel bound to apply them.13
\]

Thus as Maushart's book and most of the essays in *Aboriginal Australia* remind us, Aboriginal people were often the victims of good intentions, of the ideological blindness which dresses up violence and cruelty to look like kindness and sees our ways not only as the only proper ones but also as the only possible
ones. Nor is this a matter of the past. The conviction that the purpose of the state is to foster economic
development, especially mining and investment, is equally ethnocentric, and has equally brutal consequences
for Aboriginal people and culture.

This brings us to the second and last point. As each of those books suggests in its own way, Aboriginal
people have a good deal to teach us about ourselves, our history and other ways of being in the world. The
destruction of memory is typical of totalitarian societies. In contrast, as Walter Benjamin argues, the memory
of human suffering is an essential element in the story of our striving for a better world. In that story, the
dead, those Aboriginal people who were vanquished and forgotten but who continue to speak in works like
Sort of A Place Like Home and No Options No Choice and the work of many other Aboriginal writers, have a
meaning as yet unrealised.

The realisation of that meaning, I believe, is the task of all of us. The future meaning of our history
does not depend only on us, the winners. Meaning is not reserved to the conquerors; those who suffered and
continue to suffer the effects of power have crucial things to say about it and its future directions.

A society which supposes these and similar dimensions in the history of freedom, and in the
understanding of that freedom, pays the price of an increasing loss of all visible freedom.
It is incapable of developing goals and priorities which prevent the creeping adaptation
of our freedom to a society that is becoming increasingly anonymous and more and more
completely divorced from the subject. 14

It may be, then, that what we most need today as a people is to recover the kind of memory preserved
in books like Sort of A Place Like Home and No Options No Choice and make them work not only upon our
political, social and economic purposes but also on our deeper awareness of ourselves individually and as a
people. Reading may be more important than we think.

NOTES

78-106.
4. John Harris, One Blood: The Hundred Years of Aboriginal Encounter: A Story Of Hope. Sydney, Albatross Books,
5. McCarthy, p.3.
6. Harris, p.25.
8. Krupat, p.3.
11. Krupat, p.3.
12. Krupat, p.3.

The books discussed in this essay are the following:


Important: © Copyright in this work is vested in the author or publication in which it appears. [Copyright in the encoding of the work rests with the University of Sydney Library's Scholarly Electronic Text and Image Service]. AustLit holds a perpetual licence to distribute the text to users, by kind permission of the copyright holder. This work may be used, with this footer included, for noncommercial purposes within a subscribed institution or for personal research purposes for individual subscribers, according to the AustLit Copyright Policy and relevant Licence Agreements. No copies of this work may be distributed electronically or in any other manner outside of the subscribed institution, or by the individual subscriber, in whole or in part, without express written permission from the copyright holder.