Introduction

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In 1981 *Aboriginal History* published a special issue on Aboriginal-Asian contact history. It comprised articles by scholars 'with knowledge of Aboriginal culture and history' on aspects of Aboriginal-Asian relations in Australia. In 2011 we offer a small selection of new work that builds on scholarship in this field over the last 30 years. (The richness and diversity of scholarship produced over three decades is reflected in the Select Bibliography appended to this Introduction.)

To introduce the four articles included in this Special Section it is, we believe, worth revisiting some of the articles published in 1981, partly to acknowledge their groundbreaking significance, and partly to appreciate the continuities and differences between scholarship then and now. Before 1981, studies of Aboriginal-Asian contact had been confined to specific groups and areas (see Berndt and Berndt 1954; Macknight 1976; Warner 1931–32, 1969). The 1981 volume was remarkable for bringing these perspectives together and recognising them as evidence of a much larger and continuing pattern of inter-cultural exchange.

Still, some biases are obvious and were noted at the time. In his introduction to the 1981 volume, James Urry acknowledged that while the articles covered all the major 'Asian' groups that Aborigines had encountered, which he listed as Indonesian peoples in northern Australia, Chinese and Japanese in northern Queensland, and Afghans in central Australia, there were no studies from Western Australia. This is a curious oversight given Western Australia's rich history of Aboriginal-Asian contact. Absence of coverage may have been due to a lack of information, and this lack may have reflected a proto-nationalist determination at that time to narrate Western Australia's history as one of unilateral progress. At any rate it is striking that, apart from a brief mention of Asian people's presence in Western Australia in articles by Ian Crawford and Neville Green, no discussion of the Asian presence or Aboriginal-Asian exchange occurs in *A New History of Western Australia* edited by CT Stannage, which was also published in 1981. This said, we acknowledge that neither the 1981 articles in *Aboriginal History*, nor those published here, achieve a comprehensive regional coverage. Our point is merely that the omission of one third of Australia's landmass is notable.

Another distinguishing feature is that the majority of the contributors to the 1981 issue were anthropologists with ethno-linguistic expertise; in this current collection historians working with the archival record predominate. In 1981, Luise Hercus reported 'Afghan' first contact stories told to her by two Arabana speakers and two Wanganuru speakers; Christopher Anderson relied on Norman Mitchell,

a Kuku-Yalanji descendant, for information about Chinese-Aboriginal contact in North Queensland, while Peter Austen transcribed two stories, shocking as well as amusing, about Afghan male interactions with Indigenous women related to him by Diyari speaker Ben Murray. For these scholars, evidence of Aboriginal-Asian contact had emerged in the course of pursuing other enquiries; it was a side-effect of collecting life stories that were originally valued because they were vehicles of preserving threatened Indigenous languages.

That the primary focus of these writers lay elsewhere had two consequences. One was an astonishingly rich historical contextualisation of the personal stories presented; the other, though, was a relative absence of textual interpretation. On the whole, the testimonies are taken at face value and the language in which they are framed, and the subject positions this implies, remain largely uninterrogated. The reconstruction of the life of artist Tommy McCrae by Cooper and Urry remains an exemplary introduction to the social, economic and legislative disadvantage that one Aboriginal person experienced in nineteenth-century Australia. But its focus is historical rather than biographical. The proposition that McCrae's cartoon 'Aborigines chasing Chinese' did *not* represent anything he had ever witnessed surely suggests the figure of the trickster or fabulator, the same stereotype applied in other popular contexts to the opium-smoking 'Chinaman'. Likewise, Ben Murray's anecdote of an Afghan man exposing himself to an Aboriginal girl surely demands explanation, whether this is to be pathological, cultural or political. The 1981 essays presented a range of visual and oral materials that raised complex issues about subjectivity, but on the whole the authors chose not to develop these.

Athol Chase's study of Japanese influence at Lockhart River is exemplary in another way: it captures in great detail the social, cultural and economic worlds of two 'subject' groups under colonialism. Chase concludes speculatively that the 'multi-ethnic experience' might have strengthened 'local Aboriginal identity to resist later attack'. However, this exception reinforces our general point that the 1981 contributors were primarily concerned with Aboriginal life stories. What has happened since, though, is the progressive reframing of such personal testimonies in narrative and interpretive frameworks derived from a range of disciplines concerned with probing questions of identity. It has also become apparent that the subjectivities of the 'subaltern' communities involved in inter- and cross-cultural exchange are far more variable and complex than earlier historiographies allowed.

The more exhaustive enquiries into personal lives reflected in the articles presented here, as well as in the work of many of the scholars listed in our bibliography, aim at expanding biographical knowledge, but they also insist on the historical construction of these lives. What the 1981 scholars documented in such a groundbreaking way was, it turns out, only the tip of an historical iceberg of environmentally, socially and politically framed *relationships* that new interpretative perspectives from the broad fold of cultural studies has articulated.

The four articles included in this section were chosen from a broad range of offerings in response to our call for papers. They offer fresh perspectives on Indigenous Australian relations with Makassans (Campbell Macknight), Chinese (Victoria Haskins), Filipinos (Anna Shnukal) and Indonesians (Julia Martínez). In a retrospective piece that reflects on his unparalleled contribution to Australian scholarship of the trepang industry, Macknight urges an inversion of geographical perspective. In making this call, Macknight helps incidentally to illuminate the importance of the accompanying articles by Shnukal, Martínez and Haskins. Macknight's reading of the Makassan trade as an encounter with (Indigenous) Australians relocates Australia's north coast on the edge of an eastern 'Mediterranean'. It is instructive to think of the Chinese, Filipino and Indonesian men, albeit few in number, whose life journeys traverse the coastal settlements of Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland in the same way. Instead of appearing as isolated – and proportionally insignificant in terms of the national story – these people are seen to belong to an economic diaspora whose sources are in metropolitan seagoing regions to the north.

Although hitherto little explored, it is likely that this cheap Asian labour was as important to the 'opening up' of Australia's northern and western coasts as the annexation of unpaid Indigenous labour was in occupying Australia's interior. Within this inverted perspective, ethnic and cultural minorities which have been historically and historiographically disparaged as inferior – a racist judgement that underwrites the discriminatory legislation that Shnukal, Martínez and Haskins document in moving detail – prove to be vigorous exponents of a mercantilism at home throughout the archipelago, and more than competitive with their white peers when it came to the organisation of labour, capital and transport. This is a point that the letter written by Charles Gore to Searcy, the Sub-collector of Customs for the South Australian administration in 1903 (reproduced in Macknight's article), eloquently illustrates.

The articles by Shnukal, Martínez and Haskins document similar experiences of legislatively-enshrined racial discrimination from three different ethnic standpoints. It may reasonably be asked what is gained – apart from an intrinsically valuable expanded historical database – from the rehearsal of the history of Indigenous Australian-Asian discrimination along (respectively) Filipino, Indonesian and Chinese lines. Although subtle discriminations occurred in the politics of race in northern Australia, so that Chinese might stand slightly higher in the scale of humanity than Filipinos and Indonesians, the real value of these articles is to extract from the official records the lineaments of exemplary life stories – exemplary because, although numerically few, the characters whose struggles with discriminatory legislation are painstakingly narrated here, experienced the full impact of policies whose practical implications were diffused, and even imperceptible, in other parts of the community.

The Quan Sing affair (Haskins), the story of Santiago Remidio's attempt to marry Nazareth Ansey (Shnukal), and the parallel cases of frustrated intermarriage in the Torres Strait Islands (Martínez), illustrate the attempts of a Commonwealth government to engineer the present and future, socially and economically. But

perhaps their methodological interest resides in the determination of the authors to extract from the official records the historical subjectivities of those involved. This is a necessary procedure where subalterns only speak, as it were, through the enactment of the legislation ranged against them. The bias of court records is obvious: pronouncing as unnatural the desire to contract legal unions, they stigmatise the most normal of activities as monstrous.

Shnukal's study repositions the clash with classifications as an episode within a much longer history of Filipino-Aboriginal encounter, mutual accommodation and 'naturalisation'. In this expanded temporal perspective, it is the white legislation and its executives who seem the 'outsiders'. Martínez, similarly, 'celebrates the endurance of families who survived the dual burdens of immigration restrictions and the so-called protection of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Acts', adding geographical breadth to Shnukal's historical depth. Haskins' account of the extraordinary persistence of Quan Sing and his Australian-born daughter Yuanho Quan Sing to assert their rights to employ Aborigines suggests that in time this family had, against its own will, to define itself oppositionally against a raft of discriminatory laws consolidating its entrepreneurial identity. All three scholars show how life stories can be deduced from the friction with unjust laws when these laws are themselves relativised and placed in the context of perennial human needs for sustenance, security and succour.

Macknight discloses something more: the necessary evolution of the historian in relation to the subject matter. Graduating from archaeology to human geography, and via both to an immersive, almost radical empiricism able to incorporate his personal experience into the sifting of historical probabilities, Macknight shows how the strictest attention to the facts can, and should, coexist with an educated historical sympathy. This tacit alignment with, and respect for, the absences in the historical record is not evidence of any lack of rigour. On the contrary, a vigilant human empathy acts as a stimulant to scour often meagre records ever more patiently. The buried testimonies recovered here have a symbolic significance in understanding the vicissitudes of modern nation building that far outweighs their number. They retrieve pre-colonial and colonial relationships that place white settler narratives of Australia's social development in a wider perspective. In the process they challenge the ideological foreclosures and sometimes methodological timidity of mainstream nationalist histories.

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