3. Ngarranga Barrangang:¹ Self and History, a Contemporary Aboriginal Journey

Victoria Grieves

Sometimes I think I was born an historian. I was certainly a child who asked many, many questions. This was often a burden and an embarrassment to my mixed-race mother, who could be identified as Aboriginal in some contexts, and who was anxious to fly under the radar in conformist and settled rural New South Wales of the 1950s and 1960s.

On reflection, this is paradoxical, since it was the stories and memories of my mother, told to me in the isolated life we lived together, that inspired my interest in the past and the forces that shaped our lives. It is also the curious outsider position that I have occupied in various social contexts throughout my life, through the agency of mixed-race, and initially through my mother's choice of isolation from urban contexts, that has led me to reflection and enquiry. Latter day engagements with theoretical approaches to knowledge production, such as the 'border thinking' of Walter Mignolo, emphasise the unique opportunity for critical analysis possible for the *mestizo*, the ubiquitous and transnational person of mixed race. I now understand myself as an insider to particular knowledges and a product of world history.

I am writing this ego-histoire piece in the full sense of a history of self after the work of Pierre Nora that has become accessible to me. I can only read what is available in English and what I have read agrees with me entirely. I have long understood the position that Nora has framed: that when reading history we learn mostly about the person who wrote it. The aim of ego-histoire writing, then, is to uncover more of the person who is the historian by telling a history of the person's relationship to history. I write here of how it is that the person that is me—very close in many ways to others of mixed race origin in Australia—has found the pursuit of history so important in my life's journey and my survival. All of what I write here has been grist for the mill; it is the background to my theoretical approach to history making.

Thus it is that I write selectively for the first time of my formative years, my insatiable appetite for knowledge of the past and the inexorable development of

1 'Ngarranga Barrangang' is Warrimay for 'listen to me'; the deeper meaning is about having a right to speak, having the authority to speak of the matters at hand.

my identity. However, the experience that has made me is against the stereotype of what it means to be Aboriginal in Australia today. Importantly, even the word 'Aboriginal' and the contemporary meanings attached to it are historical in their nature and formation. I prefer to call myself Warraimay, a word that connects me to the country of my mother through the female line which is powerful in a matrilineal society. And that is what I am from, a family dominated by challenged, frail and wounded, but ultimately strong and surviving women.

My childhood and adolescence in a highly segregated settler colonial society were isolated and often lonely, marked by social isolation and later social ostracism. As an adult I have found that I am not so alone in the world, there are many others who share a similar experience on a national and global scale. The position I occupy is normal for many and some aspects of my being and my position in Australian society are unique and valuable.

My earliest memories are both of the sheep station near West Wyalong where we worked and of the wonderful heady days in the house of my grandparents on the mid-north coast. I say 'we worked' because I was apprenticed to my mother in the kitchen and in domestic work from the earliest age. She first sought work on stations before I was one year old and I generally accompanied her in whatever she was doing.

The first place we went to was a remote station in the vicinity of Brewarrina where my mother had a position as a housemaid. The station owner or manager would not allow her to bring me into the house and so she had to leave me alone in a hut built of rammed earth. She put my cot in the centre of the room, its legs in small tins of water, a barrier against crawling insects, and she went around the room with a stick, attempting to crush any spiders in the cracks in the walls. I asked her if I cried or fretted and she said no, I played happily most of the time. I think too that I was full of milk and a baby photo of the time attests to that. As does an aversion to cow's milk, even to this day.

I remember an idyllic life on the next station we went to, 'Carinyah', on the Ungarie Road near West Wyalong, when, at the age of three or four, I told myself I should never forget one seemingly perfect morning, and I never have. I picture it in my mind's eye like glimpses of another world entirely. The sensations return to me: the crackle of frost on the grass, the clear fresh air, full of scents of sweet pea, lilac, pencil pines, the daphne in huge pots on the verandah, and, later in the heat of summer, the scent of the tomato bushes as I brushed by them, the crush of stones beneath my sandalled feet. My life was full, with pet dog and bird companions, baby chicks, ducks and lambs, and adults who more than indulged me. Except for my mother, who swung unpredictably from indulgence to severe punishment and whose private anger was often frightening. What is important is that I was with her and for this I am now particularly grateful.

My mother and I spent most of the time in or near what was called 'the old kitchen', the original stationhouse that had been retained as an informal dining room where everyone ate together on a workday. In the normal, everyday work life of the station we had access to the whole of the house. When other family members visited from Sydney it became an 'upstairs, downstairs' situation and servant/master relationships were invoked. My mother became a rather reluctant and unhappy waitress for the table, instead of one of the people sitting at it and I was banned to the kitchen. I remember having a tantrum about that on one occasion. I was very small but not happy to be excluded.

The stationhouse proper, built from the profits made from wool and later than the old kitchen, was more formal, with higher ceilings and larger rooms, surrounded by a verandah and almost grand. Beds covered with rugs of fox fur both repelled and fascinated me. This was the domain of the aged and demented patriarch who I worried over. When on occasion he tore around the house naked and screaming, I tried to comfort him: 'Now, now, Poppy. Don't worry about that.' When he died I was heart-broken. I crept out of my room at night to witness the fistfight that occurred between his sons, probably over the inheritance. I adored his daughter, Muriel, who was very sweet, who frequently entered into conversation with this small child, and who had a great sense of fun. Much older than my mother and never married, she was also more relaxed about social mores. She taught me to squat and wee in the wheat shed when I was caught out, too far from the pit-toilet near the house. The blissful relief is also unforgettable.

My life here was full of play and discovery, indulged by the adults around me. I held impromptu concerts on the piano that I could not properly play and waited expectantly for applause that was enthusiastically given. While I was encouraged to play the piano rolls for something more tuneful, my feet could not reach the pedals, so I persisted in my own compositions. It must have been torturous for the small audience of station workers who nonetheless good-naturedly persisted with my childish whims and seemed to enjoy me immensely.

Through all of this, I had a sense of the arrival of these people in this country, from their talk and their demeanour and, after all, my mother and I had also arrived. The contrast of this country to the lush and bountiful coastal land we visited was palpable. In my own childish way I wondered how these outsiders got to be here and where they came from. The answers were that they came by horse and dray, from England. I imagined the place of their origins as a kind of kingdom, with flags flying from turrets, such as existed in the books of fairy tales.

I knew where I was from and that was my grandmother's country on the coast, well worn in my memory and never forgotten, that always seemed to have been there, a part of the natural world that we went out into and lived on when we

visited. I really wanted to be there all the time and suffered extreme homesickness when we left. The small timber house by the lake that my grandparents lived in could hardly contain the huge family they had. For all the bareness and poverty, my heart was there with my grandparents, in and around the saltwater of the sea and freshwater of the river and lake. By contrast, I had a sense of the impermanence of the green oasis of the farmstead that we rarely left to go out into the paddocks. There it was dry and brown and often withered and we were always in the shelter of a vehicle and, wearing stout boots, only vicariously in contact with the earth. The impermanence of 'Carinyah' was a fact; it has long been in ruins. That family lasted only three generations on the land that was taken up for farming in the mid-nineteenth century. There is no lasting legacy of their time there. They would be long forgotten with the deaths of their contemporaries and there is no lasting memorial to that farming operation.

Every visitor to that farm in the time I was there, until about seven years of age, is remembered by me. That is not so difficult, as there were not very many. I remember particularly the swaggies who were still on the road long after the depression and the war had ended. Some were old fellas who knew no other life and others were younger, maybe shell-shocked from war experiences, and who now preferred a solitary life. They were not strong, often shy and humble. My mother was always kind to them and they mostly preferred to do some work in exchange for food, so tasks were found for them to do, such as chopping wood, raking or cleaning the yard. They were given food and drink, strong black sweet tea at the station and sandwiches packed for them on the road. There was always the small brown child that was me there, dressed in gathered cotton and lace trimmed dresses, and tiny white-sandalled feet, watching and thinking.

Many years later when I was appointed as the inaugural Koori Teaching Fellow at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst I remembered a colleague from when he was a skinny boy in short khaki shorts, scrambling over the back of a produce truck with his twin brother. Both he and I were intrigued by the history and the social stratification of country towns that put paid to the idea of a completely egalitarian Australia. West Wyalong with its 'Top Town' where the poor lived and Cootamundra with its equivalent 'The Warren' were in contrast to 'The Hill' of the more well-to-do and betrayed the class stratification that underlies the social life of these places. I was never really a part of it. I was apart in the beginning and later in life have felt more comfortable keeping myself apart. Many years later, when I read Jill Ker Conway's celebrated account of an Australian girl's country childhood, *The Road from Coorain*, there was little for me to recognise as similar to the life she led on the farm near Hillston, not so far from West Wyalong and 'Carinyah'. Her family had taken up land further west, more recently than the established squatters that my mother worked for.

Hers was an earlier childhood than mine. However, I do recognise the class nature and male domination of Australian society that she was made aware of and which led her to be active in breaking down barriers for disadvantaged women in her work in the USA. My experience also includes that of racism and epistemic violence in the academy and in the whole of my education.

School for me began in the town of West Wyalong for two years, then one year in Yass, one at Muttama, and the rest in the town of Cootamundra. At the beginning it was truly terrifying and uncomfortable. I never felt settled and was mostly miserable. I was shocked by the aggression and cruelty of the other children to each other, especially in the toilet block and the weathershed. I stayed out of their way as much as I could, though I was called a greasy Greek, partly a play on my surname but also in recognition of my colour. Even without this, I would have much preferred to stay home. Miserable and unhappy is the story of my whole school experience, except for a year at the one-teacher school at Muttama, near Cootamundra. The time with Mr Price at this school was a delight.

Moving from 'Carinyah' and eventually resettling on a farm that included both 'Hamilton' and 'Lochinvar' near Muttama and Cootamundra, where my mother again found work, was a difficult period for me. I became a reader as a way of escaping from the difficulties of my life. During long periods of illness from ear, nose and throat infections I worked my way through a set of encyclopaedias, a fact that fascinated but also alarmed my mother. Newnes Pictorial Knowledge, these quaint British texts were mostly unremarkable except for the stories from ancient Greece and Rome. These stories were framed as foundational to English society and I admit to having trouble working that out from my position. As a child in the colony, far from the metropole, I was perplexed about this. It did not relate to my life in any way.

By the age of ten, when I travelled for an hour and a half each way to school, I was also a daily visitor to the Cootamundra Library in the school lunchtime and was reading as much as a book a day. I remember the books there fondly and I fear going back because the storybooks that I treasured would be long gone. I miss them like old friends and harbour a secret wish that is difficult for me to utter: that they will all be there if ever I do go back. I would treasure them and remember many of them now. Part of my life's work has been the expression of my love of books; the development of a huge personal library that threatens to take over my life.

While many fiction books introduced me to a historical consciousness, at about 13 or 14 years of age I began to read history, fascinated by world events and facts about the past. I was never able to study history at school because it clashed with domestic science on the timetable. At first I wanted to take domestic science as it was easy for me and I was successful at it, having long been tutored

by my mother. By senior school, when I received a Commonwealth Secondary Scholarship to continue to years 11 and 12, I agreed to stay at school if I could enrol in history. Perhaps the only time my mother came to my school was at the request of the headmaster to discuss this. They conscripted my mother into the scheme to have me continue with domestic science. The irony of this: my mother, who, by her own admission, had worked like a slave in domestic work. History and domestic work still play a tug of war in my life to this day.

My main engagement with Cootamundra was through school, as we lived 25 miles from the town. At the school there were Aboriginal girls who lived a segregated existence and who resided in the Aboriginal Girls Home on the edge of the town. They had a matron who drove them everywhere, to and from school mostly, in a bus. I asked why they were there and my mother told me they were orphans. 'Orphans!' I exclaimed in alarm. 'What happened to their parents?' I was struck by the thought of all these people dying at the same time. My mother did not want to answer questions about them. Maybe she did not really know the full story. Maybe she did.

It was not possible for me to mention to my mother that I was called racist names by other children at school, names that had me feel tense all over my body, especially in my stomach, instantly hot in my face, and the tears spring to my eyes. I had no idea what it meant to be a 'coon', or a 'boong', or to have a 'touch of the tar', or that all I needed was 'a bone in the nose' to be fully black and recognisable as such. I also had to endure the most obscene and profane racist 'jokes' about Aboriginal people, and when I did not see the humour I was derided for being a bad sport and too serious. I had nothing to say when this happened and just hoped it would go away. I can't describe my feelings and there was no support for me. At school I was very anxious, sometimes burst into tears, and stuttered so badly that I could not really speak from eight until 14 years of age. I had unexplainable health problems. I was confused and bewildered.

How could I report to the teachers harassment that was commonplace and also somehow a shameful thing about me? The environment at school actively discouraged me from achievement. Sometimes when I was in the town after school, running errands for my mother (who preferred not to leave the house) people would ask me if I was 'one of the little girls from the home'. Only recently did I realise with a start that if I had said yes, they would have called the police. It was always the police who dealt with the girls when they tried to run away or to take the liberty of movement around the town.

Even now I find the prospect of telling of my friendships with girls from the home then and since very painful and I won't go into those stories here. Suffice to say that any friendships were more than difficult across the race divide, and they were more divided from society than anyone. As for my understanding of

the reality of the Aboriginal Girls Home at Cootamundra, it was not until some ten years later, when I was finally in Redfern in Sydney and Peter Read had published a booklet 'The Stolen Generations: The removal of Aboriginal children in New South Wales, 1883–1969' through the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, that I began to learn the truth about child removal. A realisation hit me with full force: that the parents must have really died, but died inside, under the full impact of this genocidal policy. More recently, I have been overcome and wept over growing up in a town with a concentration camp for girls on the edge of it. That is what it was, a fascist conceit of white Australia, and the way it was in Cootamundra, it was alarmingly normal.

There were several of us who were coloured and who were flying under the radar as much as possible as children in school. For me, this was not conscious and I only acted on hints and concerns of my mother. There was some unspoken recognition between us coloured kids at school, but any tentative attempts I made to seek common ground were not taken up. I remember not only girls from school but some older boys that were around town and surveilled closely by the law, who I suspected shared my position, whatever that was. However, there was only a deep fear of recognition, no solidarity. Now I know that some have family names that are recognisable as Aboriginal, such as Roberts, Little, Sutton and Buckley from the Wiradjuri.

Many other (white) people asked me if I was Aboriginal or not—in school, down the street, at the tennis—and I did not know how to answer it. This may have been construed as evasion at the time, but I was a child whose identity was forming, and I was not really informed by my mother. I am sure the people who asked me did so because I was a child and I might have let something out. Asking my mother was a difficult matter because, as most children do, I instinctively knew her no-go zones of discussion. There was a conversation I initiated, after a long period of people asking me if I was Aboriginal, when I was about fourteen. They did not and would not ask my mother. It was extraordinarily stressful for me to raise the topic; I felt it in my stomach and a loud beating sound in my head. The conversation went something like this:

'Mum, what are we?'

'What are we? What do you mean?'

'Well, we are different aren't we?'

'Different? In what way?'

'Well, the colour of our skin. You know how you said we have olive skin.'

'Have you heard of the Black Irish?'

‘No.’

‘Pop’s grandmother was Irish. That’s where it comes from. The Black Irish’.

Now I wonder, what was I to do with that? I went back and dutifully told the people who had asked me that I was, in fact, one of the Black Irish!

Twelve years later I caught up with a friend who had lived on a farm nearby. She had her own set of family difficulties and fled to England when she could. There she met and married a black man from Trinidad. They had a young family when my children were also small. When we met at this time, I told her I had important news:

‘I am Aboriginal. My mother and I, we’re Aboriginal!’

‘Of course you are. Everyone at Muttama and Cootamundra knew you were Aboriginal.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I thought you knew. And anyway I didn’t think it made any difference.’

I was in awe of her strength of character, and the memory of her acceptance of me makes me emotional even now. I stay in touch with her and will always enjoy her wonderful soul. Because it did matter to other people, and I did feel discrimination and unfair judgements. The impact of this was as deficiencies on my part and in such a context it is very difficult to retain self-esteem. This is what it means to be an Aboriginal person living within a settler colonial regime. I know this from my own life experience. That I am Aboriginal made a difference to others but not to her. She was a person who sat next to me on the school bus where I often sat alone.

The times that I spent with the farmer who became my (step)father have become precious memories for me. He was gaunt and lean, no stranger to hard work, patient, understanding and fostered a deep independence in me. Though I did not know it at the time, he was a man who embodied decency; quiet, humble, capable and kind. He was hard when he needed to be. There was no way that he would be flash. There was always a subtext of dry humour when you were around him. Everything in the seemingly ordinary days, including the antics of dogs, horses, chickens and sheep, contributed to a deep but understated sense of fun. He had also spent many years shearing, on the Hay, Hell and Booligal run amongst others, and was a gun in his time. I enjoyed immensely travelling about the paddocks with him in the blue Dodge truck he drove. He spoke to it as if it had a personality and of course I began to speak to it too; the truck was there as a third person in our halted conversations and made its opinion known by

various splutters and jerks. He gave me a licence for freedom on a horse or on a bike and I explored the extent of the 2,000 acres or so and the laneway that went by the properties, seeking and absorbing the personality and history of that land as if a sponge. He introduced me to responsibility by giving me the tasks to do with medicating the stock, including injecting pigs when to everyone's great amusement I found out the toughness of bacon rind. I learnt some mechanics, as all of the machinery for cropping was continually breaking down, and I was the one standing by handing over the tools as assistant or wielding the grease gun. I learnt how to trap foxes and rabbits and how to use a rifle and shotgun to shoot ducks, rabbits and snakes. Once he took me with him to shoot the dying sheep in the midst of drought when many farmers would not waste the bullets; he could not see them suffering with no hope of recovery.

Through my time with him, the past of the farm became alive to me. There were paddocks named after the Aboriginal shepherds who were once there, Paul and Barmy. I have come to understand the latter was no doubt *Biami*, from the name of the creation ancestor for Wiradjuri people. This would have been a man of high degree. When the rest of the Aboriginal people who worked on the station left, (the question of where they went haunts me to this day), the old fella wanted to stay. His name is the clue to his status; this man may have embodied Law as a senior lawman. He lived in a shack in the back paddock by a spring of groundwater and my father and his family would bring him food from time to time. I spent many hours searching for a vestige of the old hut when I was an adolescent. I would ask, 'Was it here?' And he would answer, 'No, up a bit further'. I would say, 'Are you sure?' And here I was, walking up and down and across the side of a big hill, looking for some remains of the hut, while he was at the bottom mending a fence or doing something similar.

It was in this vicinity that I was riding the old creamy mare right on dusk and she reared up all of a sudden and headed for home. At that moment, while clutching wildly at the saddle pommel, I saw small lights dancing around on the top of a ridge nearby. I can't describe my feeling of awe, fear and wonderment. My father was highly amused at the unusual speed of old Creamy and as we entered the house paddock asked what had happened. Yes, he said, that's what spooked her, the Min-Min lights. He went on to explain the phenomenon as if it was ordinary and everyday. Amongst other things I learnt how animals are more sensitive to these spiritual experiences, ruptures of the Dreaming, than people. My father knew many things, could predict rain a week ahead by observing the movements in the natural environment. My white father had grown up amongst Aboriginal people on what was at that time an isolated farm. He learnt from them and then he was also teaching me. He was in tune with something of the deep spiritual

movement of this country and this was the reason why he found it possible to marry my mother. When I read Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* I thought he could have modelled Stan and Amy at least to some extent, on my parents.

Our lives on the farm were not centred on the radio but it was there at mealtimes, especially in school holidays. I enjoyed the ABC News at breakfast, 'Dad and Dave' at lunchtime, and the news and various serials on some evenings. Whenever girls tried to escape from the Aboriginal Girls Home in Cootamundra and ran out along one of the roads, heading home or just heading anywhere else I guess, it was reported on the radio. I was perplexed and worried by this, wondering who it was, why she had run away, and if she was safe.

My interest was piqued at the time of the Freedom Rides through northwest NSW in 1965. A student action group from the University of Sydney had hired a bus and invited a prominent Aboriginal spokesperson, Charles Perkins, to join them. Each day I would be listening for this news. I was excited by it and not sure why. I felt as if I was busting inside. I could not talk about it much to anyone, but those around me must have sensed my excitement. I remember my mother at the sink with her back to me, clattering the washing-up as the news report of the Freedom Rides was broadcast. Then, without even turning, she said, 'It won't make any difference to anything'. There was such a note of defeat and resignation in her voice; it felt like death to me. In more recent years I have begun to think she was right, so little has improved, and there have been backwards steps. As for the Freedom Riders, I was all the time wondering if they were going to get to Cootamundra. In fact I still don't understand why they did not get there and protest, since that Aboriginal Girls Home was a site of huge cruelty and injustice.

My mother fed me tantalising titbits of information, stories of her life as a child, and a sprinkling of words from our language, whetting my appetite for our family history. Paradoxically, perhaps, she did not want me to explore it. She wanted me to leave well enough alone. In the spirit of the child who always takes direction from the life of the parent, even against the express wishes of the parent, I did eventually set out on that road. The journey to establish the truth of my family history, over 35 years of off and on research, culminated when I was given a photograph of the Aboriginal woman from whom we are all descended, Anne Butler. All these years the photo had been in an old biscuit tin in someone's back shed. She looked so familiar to me and to other family members. I thought, 'Yes, that is her'. That recognition, very deep, I do not understand. Every picture tells a story but this one more than most for me.

The woman in this photograph is Mrs Anne McClymont nee Butler and the children are from left John Alexander and Mary Wilhelmina, who is the author's great grandmother.

Source: Courtesy of Eric Dates.

This photograph dates from the mid-1860s and is not of the genre of the formal posed photographs of the time. It looks like a homegrown photograph, perhaps taken by her husband, William McClymont, or by another member of his family. She is seated in grass that forms a wild and unusual background. She has my great-grandmother, Mary Wilhelmina, on her lap and a son, John Alexander, beside them. She has a very cute small hat on, with a voile veil draped around it and her face. Her blouse has sleeves to the wrist and ruffles at the wrist and neck. Maybe it is made of silk. The children are also dressed very well in the hand-made, elaborate velvet dresses of the day, worn by boys as well as girls. Her wedding ring is visible on elegant hands that I recognise as like mine but more my mother's. She looks content and in love.

Much of what passes for Aboriginal history which has developed since then has been sometimes exciting, but overall difficult for me to relate to personally. I am aware that it barely reaches members of my family and my countrymen and women, many of whom remain illiterate. My engagement with history has become an attempt to address aspects of my wellbeing and that of my family and kin. This puts me outside of the institution of history in Australia.

Surprisingly, I graduated with honours and a double major in history in 1981, the first Aboriginal graduate with honours and the first with a degree in history. In this, I owe a great deal to my supervisor, Professor Beverley Kingston, whose work is celebrated in women's history and who I credit with teaching me to think critically. She met my questions only with more questions, forcing

awareness of the complexity of the past. The natural progression for me was into a PhD program, and I did enrol, but was racially vilified by my supervisor so promptly did a disappearing act. I was recruited into Tranby Aboriginal College in Glebe as the first head teacher of a tertiary preparation course and shared responsibility for coordinating the Aboriginal Studies program.

Tranby met all of my expectations. It was cutting edge in terms of teaching methodologies and curriculum development. There was an opportunity to learn from the students and community people from across the whole of the country who dropped into our Aboriginal home and haven. Regular visitors that I was able to engage with included John Newfong, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Jack Davis, Joe McGuinness, Jim Everett, Garry Williams, Gary Foley, Mick Miller, Jack Walker, Shorty O'Neill, and Harry Mumbulla. We were cossetted by the wonderful Kevin Cook, the lynchpin of the vast connections that nurtured Tranby. Kevin told me they had known of me over at the University of NSW for some time. I asked him why they had not come and got me earlier! So many bright and dedicated staff members, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, made the programs excellent, relevant and rigorous, arguably equal to a cutting-edge university.

Employed at a university, I am a marginal academic in Australia; it is an enormous struggle to produce Indigenous knowledges within the western academy. Somehow I have held on to my engagement with history in spite of uncertain employment prospects. I have a strong conviction that it is our Aboriginal understanding of history that will bring about change for social justice. It has not been easy, but I would not have it any other way. Everything that has occurred has been valuable including being made unwelcome on racial grounds, especially within PhD programs at two universities, whereby I was awarded the degree much later than I should have been in a just world.

I have been extremely fortunate to have met and learned from people of great worth including my kin, the late Patricia Davis Hurst, Mae Simon, Norma Fisher, Vilma Simon and others too many to mention. Others include Louise Campbell, Jean Carter, John Heath, Grace Close, and Micko and Neville Donovan, lawmen. Then there are some of the first of the Aboriginal health workers at community level in NSW who taught me while I was ostensibly teaching them. The time I spent with them in 1986 was my first experience as a lecturer in a university and I am immensely grateful to them for much of what I have learnt and now understand as important in our knowledge production.

Photograph of students and staff in the Diploma of Aboriginal Health and Community Development 1986. Some people in this photograph are now deceased and very much missed by all of us. The people whose names could not be remembered are not forgotten. My thanks to Edna Craigie who helped me to name the people in the photograph, who are as follows: Back row from the left: David Nean, Quirindi/Newcastle; Terry Doolan, Dubbo/Wilcannia; Vicki Grieves, Forster/ Redfern (staff); Lurline Ardler, Wreck Bay; Jan Yow Yeh, Redfern; Minnie lane. Goodooga; Margaret Morgan, Deniliquin; Cheryl Cowan, Nowra; Pamela Duncan, Toomelah; Vince Quayle, Dareton; Jenny Beale, Western Sydney (staff); Hal – (staff). Middle row: unknown; unknown (staff); Vince Kennedy, Walgett. Front row: unknown; Carl McGrady, Toomelah/ Tenterfield; Teresa Ellis, Western Sydney; Graeme Skinner, Lismore; Edna Craigie, Terry Hie Hie/ Moree; ? Fay Williams, La Prouse.

Source: Victoria Grieves.

There are also many others who influence my history writing, such as Steven Tjampitjinpa Patrick of the Walpiri, and Jim Everett from Tasmania. My network is nationwide, international and also deep. Laurelyn Whitt, a Choctaw scholar, has been my friend and colleague for 20 years and first gave me the opportunity to publish. I have had the opportunity to learn about the important philosophical underpinnings to many Aboriginal cultures and knowledge bases and I am grateful (Grieves 2009).

The process of writing history has sometimes been an immense emotional burden, such as when writing of my mother's great uncles, Billy and Johnny (Grieves 2011). This project had me cloistered in a house in my country for six weeks with the research evidence and my own fragile being. A local elder was practically the only person I spoke to at length during this time, she would call by and have me talk to her about what I was writing. She was the best of counsellors who then reported to the others, who have been a wonderful support. There were times when I felt the burden of this history as unbearable, the realisation that we as a family and as a people were actually struggling to come out of the institution of slavery. How this explained the existential angst of my mother's generation and the effects on me. I changed as a person through this experience.

History has taken me into the belly of the beast, into the netherworld of genocide and brutality, secrets and lies, the complexity and mystery of interracial sexual attraction and intimacies and the social consequences for the mothers, fathers and the children. It has taught me about gender relationships that betray slavery and fascist social organisation. As a descendant of survivors of these regimes along with others, I am as they are, extraordinarily well equipped to explore and develop these histories that get to the nub of colonial relations and colonial aspirations. I want to bring the histories that spring from our own world-view into the academy.

Paradoxically, my survival is through an engagement with history and this, as I have outlined here, is the best side of my life, it overshadows all of the worst experiences and gives me a reason to be alive. It is also this historical endeavour that has made me what I am, that has helped to forge my identity over time. I was asked today, as I often am, which community I feel most accepts me in Australia, the black or the white. I often find such questions intrusive. They come from an acceptance of the binary of segregationist ideologies that I do not share. Nonetheless, I am often obliged to respond, given that I do live in a highly segregated, race-conscious society. My answer was honest, not wishful thinking, which would have me say both communities accept me equally. The truth is that I am black I can never be white, only white blackfellas, coconuts, are truly accepted by white society. I have to say, in closing, that this settler

colonial nation is most marked by the lack of a just and proper settlement or any vestige of fair dealing for my people. If this were different then my identity would also be different. Perhaps, all too late, history will be the judge.

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This text taken from *Ngapartji Ngapartji: In turn in turn:*

Ego-histoire, Europe and Indigenous Australia

Edited by Vanessa Castejon, Anna Cole, Oliver Haag and Karen Hughes,
published 2014 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.