

Who owns the past?

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I was born in NSW and was a part of the assimilation policies of the late 1960s onwards. My experiences with this have always been negative, but I have managed somehow to stay positive with life. This, I believe, is where my identity has given me strength, my dreamtime has supported me and life generally has been a rollercoaster ride.

Acknowledgment of the past by European Australians is crucial when working with Aboriginal children. Our own recognition of who owns the past influences our every day decisions. How Aboriginal constructions of the past are different to European constructions depends entirely on how we approach these decisions. An Aboriginal person such as myself does not have the same interpretations or understanding of the past as the dictionary defines it.

My interpretation of the past is about recognising my dreamtime, my identity, family and knowing who they are. It is also about which part of the country I come from.

Prior to 1788 Aboriginal past or history was and still is recounted by Aboriginal people in their oral accounts of dreamtime, paintings and memorised stories either in the form of dance, art or song. My ownership of this history comes from knowing my ancestors were hunters, gatherers, warriors and farmers of this land. Therefore, the links that we still recognise today are imperative for our identity to exist.

Yami Lester said:

Aboriginal culture cannot be separated from the land. On the land are stories. Aboriginal stories that explain why people, rockholes, the trees came to be there. The land is full of stories. Every square mile is just like a book, a book with a lot of pages, and it's all a story for the children to learn' (cited in Bourke, 1993).

Although this book may be in a different form today, the spirituality that comes from being an Aboriginal person has never changed, died or disappeared. As an Aboriginal woman who has been dispossessed from her people and her land, my spiritual history has survived giving me my identity and the strength to find my people and land.

The evidence of dispossession is over 210 years old. When Captain James Cook invaded Australia in 1788, he declared that this land was *terra nullius*. The impact of this arrival affected the clan groups closest to the coastline from Sydney to Perth. As Europeans arrived by sea, it was inevitable that the central and remote areas of Australia too would be invaded. As conflict over the land became more intense, so did the massacres and killings of Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal people resisted the invasion:

Armed Aboriginal resistance varied widely in duration and intensity, but was a recurring feature of the history of frontier Australia from the 1790s to the 1930s (*Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia*, 1997).

This reflects the true history of frontier Australia post-1788, which was never taught in my years of attending school.

In the beginning of such conflicts where a white person would inflict killings, the punishment would take the form of tribal lore or revenge for the killing of kin. Some other strategies that were used were known to hinder and in some cases halt economic process, such as the burning of crops and the killing of sheep. As time progressed so did the European sophistication of attacks, improvements came with weapons and the knowledge developed in the exploitation of Aboriginal people of the land structure. Survival techniques required going bush and then hunting of various groups or clans by what was to become known as the 'native police' began.

Once the invaders were satisfied by the progress they made, the conflict took a new form of intrusion, exploitation and control. The construction of policies and legislation was based on the assumption that Aboriginal people were a dying race and the government of the day needed to 'smoothe the dying pillow'. We may ask – for what other purpose did European constructions play in dictating the subsequent course of our history?

In 1897 the *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of Sale of Opium Act (Queensland)* was established. This enabled the government of the day to become the legal guardian of all Aboriginal people, as it also became obvious that the only way to deal with the conflict over the land was to enforce a tighter control over Aboriginal people. This took place through the establishment of Missions and Reserves. The controller was a 'Chief Protector' and legislation empowered this person or Church to control and intrude into the lives of Aboriginal people and to suppress any aspect of Aboriginal culture as was possible.

As Marcia Langton (1997) has stated, 'the impact of invasion and colonisation has never stopped having an affect on Aboriginal people'. This effect has been widely researched. Aboriginal identity is not an aspiration but a reality relevant to almost any Aboriginal person who identifies with their culture and land. For

