

# Against Hauntology and Historicide:

## Urban Indigeneity in the White Imagining

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*Aunty Alma's Seats, a work of public art by artist Julie Shiels, can be read as a 'contra-memorial' to urban indigeneity, which is truly 'contra-modern' in its contingency and alterity to white Australia. I argue that urban 'parkies' are imbued with 'the spectre of first contact'; the Seats is unique in the way it speaks directly of history through a restaging of this spectral scene, which is a point of rupture in both indigenous and white Australian historical narratives. As a contra-memorial, Aunty Alma's Seats achieves two things. It gives urban Kooris a site for their own history and representation, based in their memory and experience of being 'at home' in Melbourne. The Seats emplaces indigenous memory and being in urban space. To deny urban indigenous people emplacement within urban space is to reject any imprint of Koori history and memory that is not 'traditionally' emplaced in 'traditional land': it is to partake in a form of 'historicide'. Secondly, the Seats takes the burden of 'hauntology'—of attending to the spectral absence of indigenous people—away from the bodies of living urban Kooris. The Seats becomes a site where the problematic of the 'white man's burden' of memory and responsibility is detached from the Koori body and returned to where it belongs: in the memory-work of white Australia. This is done through the Seats' symbolisation of the deferral of memory and responsibility, a deferral that characterises Australia's 'white imagining'.*

# I.

## Introduction: the contra-memorial *Aunty Alma's Seats*

The idea for this work came from a conversation with Aunty Alma in 2002 when we were both sitting on plastic milk crates in O'Donnell Gardens. I remarked what good seats they were but she said she often had to hunt around to find one. I suggested that we could turn them into bronze and put them in permanently. After that, every time I saw Aunty Alma she would say, “You got to do that, babe. Put it in bronze.”

— artist Julie Shiels<sup>i</sup>

In social terms, [hybrid Aborigines] belong to neither race...and lacking a racial background they have no history.

— N. J. B. Plomley, 1977<sup>ii</sup>

Postcolonial critique bears witness to those countries and communities constituted, if I may coin a phrase, ‘otherwise than modernity’. Such cultures of postcolonial *contramodernity* may be contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in contention with it, resistant to its oppressive, assimilationist technologies, but they also deploy the cultural hybridity of their borderline positions to ‘translate’, and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity.

— Homi K. Bhabha<sup>iii</sup>

Following Homi Bhabha’s lead, my discussion will employ a theory of the *contra-memorial*: memorialisation practices that—while challenging hegemonic forms of history and memory-work—are not necessarily in binary opposition to these forms. The often-used term *counter-memorial* implies a binarised opposition that is—I believe—necessarily reactionary. And it is inaccurate, as the Birmingham Popular Memory Group argues<sup>iv</sup>: to posit a ‘counter-memory’ is to assume its existence as separated—and wholly unified in its separation—from dominant versions of the past. Contra-memorialisation begins in itself and leaves open the possibility for dialogue between the dominant and the subaltern—for that is the only way the white imagining of ‘both metropolis and modernity’ will be reinscribed.

The first strange but necessary (and necessarily strange) term I will be using is *hauntology*, borrowed from the historian Carla Freccero. Hauntology is the discursive processes that create and shape conditions of what Derrida calls

*spectrality*, a ‘non-living present in the living present’ that is no longer with us but somehow continually appears.<sup>v</sup> As Freccero writes,

We inherit not ‘what really happened’ to the dead but what lives on from that happening, what is conjured from it, how past generations and events occupy the force fields of the present, how they claim us, and how they haunt, plague, and inspirit our imaginations and visions for the future.<sup>vi</sup>

This essay investigates how present-day urban indigeneity is hauntologically shaped by the historical trauma of first contact and the radical absence of indigenous peoples that is its consequence. Urban Aboriginal people become spectral, their presence paradoxically representing this radical absence in dominant discourse. As Ceridwen Spark writes, ‘Aboriginal bodies in the city are interpreted as signifying displacement.’<sup>vii</sup>

This discussion necessarily narrows its analysis to the form of urban indigeneity represented in ‘public place dwellers’ (in policy-speak), or ‘parkies’ (in local parlance).<sup>viii</sup> Parkies are not always homeless; they are defined more by the way they use public space in a way that is not ‘socially acceptable’ to the majority of white Australia; in the way that they are ‘at home’—‘emplaced’—in public space.

The contra-memorial I will examine is *Aunty Alma’s Seats*, by artist Julie Shiels. It comprises of three cast-bronze milk crates, placed under a tree in O’Donnell Park, St. Kilda, not far from a quintessential example of traditional memorialisation; the statue of Captain Cook on the foreshore. The crates were unveiled as part of the ‘National Day of Healing’ (formally ‘Sorry Day’) commemorations on May 26<sup>th</sup> 2005. It functions as a memorial for the recently-deceased Aunty Alma Roach—‘queen of the park’ and sister of Archie Roach—and Boom Boom Forbes, two elders and leaders of the local parkie community. The memorial plays upon notions of ‘stolenness’ and appropriation. By irreverently memorialising ‘stolen’ crates and ‘public’ space appropriated as ‘home’, the *Seats* speaks of the unspeakable: of stolen children and ‘empty’ space appropriated as ‘city’. Their size and clustering is reminiscent of the small cairns littered around Flinders Island, which mark the indigenous prisoners’ anonymous graves. The *Seats* is placed firmly within the ‘natural’ urban landscape. An inscription on their base by Aunty Myrtle Roach reads— *Alma was my sister. We used to meet in the park every day. It’s not the same without her.* And local parkies Boots and Patrick write about Boom Boom— *He had a heart bigger than Phar Lap.* (Phar Lap’s heart is a monumental, triumphalist symbol of White Australia; it is fitting to a contra-memorial that Boots and Patrick should appropriate its discursive currency.) The presence of a third crate—‘for the living’, as Shiels describes—turns this personal memorial into a contra-memorial for urban indigeneity. As Shiels said, ‘the parkies feel that they and the extended Indigenous community have ownership of [the crates].’<sup>ix</sup> At the unveiling of the work, Port Phillip mayor

Darren Ray expressed a similar sentiment: ‘the crates say to the world that parkies have a claim on this place...[they] demand that Koorie [sic] history be told.’<sup>x</sup>

This contra-memorial exists in what Bhabha calls a ‘borderline position of translation’; it marries the typical ‘monumental’ object (bronze statue) and vision (‘permanency’, ‘glorification’), with an anti-monumental object (milk crate) and vision (subaltern representation). The fact that the *Seats*, as an idea, was born in conversation between non-Koori Shiels and Alma Roach, highlights its position at the border. The *Seats* memorialise an urban indigeneity that is truly contramodern in its contingency and alterity to white Australia<sup>xi</sup>.

## II.

### The Importance of Being Ernie Dingo: The unspeakability of parkie life and the spectre of first contact

Where is the hope? This sitting around the park creates the wrong atmosphere and leads to prejudice.

— A Kalgoorlie clergyman in the *Western Australian*, 1965<sup>xii</sup>

Until now, [the Aborigines] had to sit on milk crates from nearby shops. Now they can sit on ratepayer-funded bronze. But do Aborigines really want to be celebrated as park dwellers? Is this the image, or aspiration, they deserve or need? Strange, how idleness shameful in anyone else is honoured in Aborigines. How patronising. And how racist. Can't we instead celebrate Aborigines who have made their own way in the world through their wits and sweat, and in doing so shown they are as good as any man or woman?...Think, for instance, of Ernie Dingo...on his travel show you can now see him, an Aborigine, walk into a five-star hotel as if he earned it, which he has. A bronze crate...would insult such a man. A bronze ladder would do him more credit.

— Andrew Bolt in *The Herald Sun*<sup>xiii</sup>

The parkies feel that people look at them and dismiss them as a bunch of Kooris drinking in the park. They don't understand the strength of their community, how they share everything.

— Julie

Shiels<sup>xiv</sup>

There is scant representation of post-contact history in Australian urban centres; many 'historical tours' of Melbourne and Sydney only give treatment to sites of pre-contact (pre-*history*) importance. Bulbeck notes that 'most monuments avoid the sore spot of race relations, the moment of contact'<sup>xv</sup>. 'In averting our gaze from those sites that were produced in encounters between Aborigines and Europeans,' Hinkson similarly writes, 'we shield ourselves from having to confront the reality of our involvement in the colonial process.'<sup>xvi</sup>

I believe that urban parkies are imbued with the *spectre of first contact* (in contrast to non-urban, 'outback' Aboriginal people who are imbued with the *spectre of pre-contact*). Contact between parkies and the white majority of Melbourne is always a 'first' contact of sorts: because the white majority does not want Koori people 'just sitting in the park', parkies become not-there until we chance upon

them again in a perpetual ‘first contact’. In the white imagining, the visual trope for first contact is a scene where a white man in finery approaches a group of natives who are sitting under a tree and doing, upon appearance, not much. Such a trope is found in many early colonial paintings of first contact, an example of which is the work of the anonymous but prolific ‘Port Jackson Painter’ (see figure 2)<sup>xvii</sup>. The *Seats* are unique in the way it speaks directly of history, through a restaging of this spectral scene of first contact, which is a point of rupture in both Koori and white Australian historical narratives.

Urban Koori peoples suffer from what Perera Suvendrini refers to as ‘historicide’<sup>xviii</sup>; their continuing marginalisation within current political and popular representation, which effectively denies them a history or identity. This essay does not directly approach the realities of the urban indigenous in Melbourne. Rather, my discussion centres on their ‘discursive realities’ within the white Australia imagining—their deployment within dominant discourse—which *in turn* effects the real life possibilities of urban indigenous peoples. The most common white deployment of urban indigeneity is to construct it as ‘unspeakable’. *Unspeakable* has two meanings: what cannot be spoken and what should not be spoken.<sup>xix</sup> The ‘cannot’ is fantastical, the ‘should not’ is normative; together they function to curtail the representation of urban indigeneity.

As Audrey Lorde remarks succinctly, ‘we forget what is not possible.’<sup>xx</sup> Urban indigeneity *cannot* be spoken because it remains ‘not possible’, in a liminal place between white urbanity and an indigenous culture that is constructed as non-urban. ‘Indigeneity is constituted by the notion that one is already at home’<sup>xxi</sup>; thus ‘urban indigeneity’ is a logical impossibility when Kooris cannot be the original inhabitants of colonial-made cities. Kooris are seen as the ‘settlers’ in cities; they ‘come later’, settling in white public space. Thus what occurs is a reverse discourse of colonisation, which serves to legitimise censure of urban Kooris in the white media and political imagining.<sup>xxii</sup> As Spark writes,

The disturbing element of settler occupation of Australia has always been Aboriginality because (even displaced) indigenous persons embody a distinctive claim to homeplace. ‘[M]aking home’ has never been straightforward for non-Aboriginal Australians. For more than two centuries the effort to create places which engender white security and belonging, in contrast to alienation and fear, has frequently involved conflict that has impacted negatively on Aboriginal bodies.<sup>xxiii</sup>

White Australia remains forever displaced in its ‘ethical homelessness’ and lack of national history.<sup>xxiv</sup> Indeed, white anxiety constructs a continuing battle against indigenous peoples, not for land but for *emplacement*. The settler anxiety over our inability to successfully settle into an antagonistic ‘other’ land, is reawakened when we see indigenous people adapting to our (urban) landscapes.<sup>xxv</sup> White Australia tries to deny indigenous people their supremacy in emplacement by

portraying them as ‘wanderers’ or ‘itinerants’. We lovingly mythologise the ‘walkabout’<sup>xxvi</sup>. Indeed, indigenous Australians can walkabout as much as they want to (Michael Long can walk from Melbourne to Canberra as often as he wants to) as long as they don’t set up camp anywhere like the King’s domain.

The parkie’s liminal state of unrepresentation follows the logical paradox Michel Foucault assigns to the general censorship mechanisms of power, which take the form of three conflicting injunctions: ‘affirming that such a thing is not permitted, preventing it from being said, denying that it exists’.

[O]ne must not talk about what is forbidden until it is annulled in reality; what is inexistent has no right to show itself...; and that which one must keep silent about is banished from reality as the thing that is tabooed above all else. <sup>xxvii</sup>

Parkie life is a prime site for this play of power of ‘nonexistence, nonmanifestation, and silence’.<sup>xxviii</sup> We *should not* speak of urban Kooris in popular discourse of media and politics, for a history of urban indigeneity necessarily refers to and augments a history of invasion. The sheer fact that Koori people are living in cities points to their removal from traditional land and/or their families; it points to the conversion of traditional land into white urban space. Once again, it is the presence of the Koori body that signifies the ‘proof’ of colonisation, not the presence of the white body. The coloniser always escapes the burden of hauntology.

In a play on the concept of *terra nullius*, Patrick Wolfe calls the hybrid indigenous body a *corpus nullius*. In assimilationist and protectionist discourse, the part-Aboriginal was a non-category, an emptiness that ‘could legitimately be claimed for society’.<sup>xxix</sup> Modern urban Kooris, no matter what their ‘blood’, are cultural half-castes; *humanitas nullius*; existing in a ‘cultural hiatus’,<sup>xxx</sup> as the anthropologist Elkin described. They are neither ‘authentic’ enough, nor assimilated enough.<sup>xxxi</sup> (It must be mentioned that in this discussion, ‘urban indigeneity’ is a term in which race and culture are conflated. My conflation of a hybridity of race and a hybridity of culture is not unreflexive, but descriptive of the (white) construct of urban indigeneity. This conflation is understandable, when ‘culture’ is read from the body as readily as biological ‘race’.) Nothing much has changed since 1981 when Marcia Langton asked for ‘urban Aboriginality’ not to be defined by white discourse as ‘culture of poverty’, as ‘remnant’, or as a non-signified ‘lack’; assimilationist constructs that are still alive in the public imagining today<sup>xxxii</sup>. Her message was simple: urban Aboriginal ‘culture’ must be seen as ‘complete, integrated and consistent systems relevant to their members—not merely as a castrated version of any other socio-cultural systems.’<sup>xxxiii</sup>

What makes parkies so abject to white Australia? I argue it is not their non-white colour but their non-white *occupation of land*. In the white imagining, parkies are not a threat to white culture (for the ascendancy of white culture is absolute and assured), but rather to white history. Parkies are such a threat because by

existing ‘behind the frontier’, they upset the historical binary between invader/invaded. The way they occupy the space—the way they turn it into homeplace—erases its status as public city space; their small enclaves of homeplace work to erase a history of white settlement. ‘We’ see them sitting in the park, as if they are indeed uninvaded.

Wolfe describes the trope of ‘the frontier’ as a linear metaphor of polarity:

The salient ideological effect of the frontier was that it rendered spatial coexistence anomalous. This does not, of course, mean that there were no Aborigines left “this side of the frontier”. It simply means that their presence was anomalous.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The parkie body—in the way it embodies ‘uninvadedness’—is rendered anomalous in the white imagining. Historically, the ‘anomalous body’ is never simply itself—nor its own—because of its automatic ‘betokenism’ or metonymic function: the monstrous body always-already ‘tells’ something else that is bigger than itself. The parkie body is seen as a (sad) metonymy for the Aboriginal race. The term *monster* is derived from the Latin *monstro*, which means to show, to ordain, or later, to *demonstrate*. The body-monstrous of the parkie is appropriated by the white imagining to demonstrate the failure of assimilation. The failure of the policy becomes spectrally embodied in its subject; the failure of white Australia is hidden behind the overt ‘failed aborigine’. The ‘noble savage’ falls into savage ignobility, in the only ‘savage’ urban space: the public park.

The public urban park has always been a potent site in modern Western culture for the contestation between civilisation and wildness, between order and disorder. The park is a place for (heterosexual) families in the day, a place for homosexuals and other ‘criminals’ in the night. ‘The history of planning can be rewritten as the attempt to manage fear: fear of disorder, of disease.’<sup>xxxv</sup> Parkies disrupt the intended working of the civic park. In the 1980s, an unused factory site in the indigenous-populated Block in Sydney was handed over to the council for civic use. The council rushed through an approval to demolish the buildings, to make way for what the non-indigenous anti-Block residents wanted: a park with a police station at its exact centre. Such a design is a veritable Foucauldian panopticon, designed to control the body-politic of Redfern’s indigenous residents. Colonisation is a perpetual endeavour.

Part of the white flight from parkie life is not just to do with the ‘shamefulness’ of public-dwelling and alcohol consumption, but our fear of contact with Kooris who have not been rendered ‘recognisable’ and ‘intelligible’ by either their entry into, or retreat from white culture. The disadvantaged urban Koori is the most unrepresentable of all white imaginings of indigenous Australians. As Day writes, ‘identity is removed from ‘long grass’ people [the Darwin equivalent of parkies], who are seen as beyond the structures of Black and White societies.’<sup>xxxvi</sup> Parkies are confusing, visual markers of both the failure and



achievement of assimilation ('achievement' in the sense that parkies are not visibly 'traditional').

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault argues that ethnology is situated within the particular relation that the Western ratio establishes with all other cultures; and from that starting-point it avoids the representations that men [sic] in any civilisation may give of themselves, of their life, of their needs, of the significations laid down in their language; and it sees emerging behind these representations the norms by which men [sic] perform the functions of life.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

White Australians in positions of political and bureaucratic power have always been 'ethnologists' in this sense: white Australia—with a paternalism common to all colonizing cultures—has always believed that it can best identify the normative ideals of indigenous culture ('tradition', 'art', 'bushtucker', 'out bush'-ness) and then proceeds to judge all indigenous individuals by these normative ideals. Marcia Langton argues that this historical management of indigenous bodies takes place within a relationship that is 'not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors. Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists.'<sup>xxxviii</sup>

White Australian discourse can only accommodate representations of traditional, non-assimilated indigeneity from 'out back or out there', or representations of assimilated, 'successful' indigenous Australians such as Ernie Dingo.<sup>xxxix</sup> The importance of being Ernie Dingo is to be the certain type of Aboriginal body 'onto which reconciliation could be seen'<sup>xl</sup>. Under the terms of Baudrillard's theory, Dingo is the representational 'banal'. The representational 'fatal' is the image of the drug-riddled, violent Aboriginal man from Wadeye. Both the banal and the fatal have valid discursive currency; are easily representable in their respective sameness and otherness to white Australia. In Baudrillardian terms, the parkie is unrepresentable due to its liminal position between the 'fatal' and the 'banal'.<sup>xli</sup> A drunken aboriginal man in remote Wadeye is 'properly placed' in the white fantasy of space; the drunken aboriginal man in a St Kilda park is—in Mary Douglas' famous formulation—so abject because he is not in the 'proper place'.

Marcia Langton similarly talks of the historical attitude of white urban dwellers, who imagine that urban Kooris can be 'sent back to where they came from.'<sup>xlii</sup> While the title of the Stolen Generations Commission report, *Bringing Them Home*, has the affirmative context in which "'home"' is cast as the right of Aboriginal individuals and families'<sup>xliii</sup>, it also unwittingly carries the message that the stolen generation should be brought out of the cities in which most of them find themselves, to the non-urban, rural or settlement homes of their birth-parents. As Spark writes,

The ongoing dispossession of Aboriginal people through the construction of them as the improper inhabitants of domestic and city space and the resilience of images which associate Aborigines with so-called “outback” space, attest to the imbrication of discourses about the body and space, as well as to the abjection associated with the body of the “other” in certain spatialities.<sup>xliv</sup>

As the logic goes: the urban Koori was ‘displaced’ from traditional land, thus s/he must be ‘out of place’ in urban land, thus s/he is the abject. It is an insidious formulation: by emphasising the urban Koori’s real historical ‘displacement’ in purported commiseration, white Australia effectively justifies the *dis*-emplacement (and disempowerment) of Koori people in urban space. In denying urban indigenous people emplacement within urban space is to reject any imprint of Koori history and memory that is not ‘traditionally’ emplaced in ‘traditional land’. This is historicide.

### III.

#### ‘The difficulties we have in belonging’: Contra-memorials and Memory Emplaced

You fought for your country.  
Where are your monuments?  
The difficulties we have in belonging  
—these, these are your cenotaph.

from Bruce Dawe’s ‘For the Other Fallen’

Wherever we [indigenous peoples] have lived in urban areas, there is a newer imprint and history, one that is meaningful and creates a sense of belonging.

— Larissa Behrendt <sup>xliv</sup>

The original plaque on the Batman memorial in Melbourne CBD credits Batman with ‘founding’ a settlement ‘on the site of Melbourne then unoccupied’. In 1992 the Melbourne City Council attached a small disclaimer-plaque underneath the original, informing that *When the monument was erected in 1881 the colony considered that the Aboriginal people did not occupy the land. It is now clear that prior to the colonisation of Victoria, the land was inhabited and used by Aboriginal people.* I argue that a contra-memorial to urban indigeneity works to highlight the inadequacy of this fine-print, which admits only to past indigenous emplacement (and forced displacement). The contra-memorial counters this injustice of compliancy with its own fine-print that might read: It is now clear that after the colonisation of Victoria, the land is *still* inhabited and used by Aboriginal people.

As a contra-memorial, *Aunty Alma’s Seats* achieves two main things. It works to give urban Kooris a site for their own history and representation, based in their memory and experience of being ‘at home’ in Melbourne. Secondly, it takes the burden of hauntology—of attending to the spectral absence of indigenous people—away from the bodies of living urban Kooris. Removing the burden of ‘hauntology’ is *not* the same as removing the ‘burden’ of memory-work, which James Young saw as a dangerous consequence of traditional memorialisation. For, in a sense, the burden of hauntology is the burden of white man’s memory that *masquerades* as subaltern memory. As Indigenous academic Michael Dodson has pointed out,

the relationship we draw with our past is not to be confused with the relationships with the past that have been imposed upon us. One is an act of resistance, the other is a tool in the politics of domination and oppression.<sup>xlv</sup>

Thus the *Seats* becomes a site where the problematics of the ‘white man’s burden’ of memory and responsibility is detached from the Koori body and returned to where it belongs: in the memory-work of white Australia. This is done through the *Seats*’ symbolisation of white deferral of memory and responsibility, as I will explain below.

The previous section sought to present the way white Australia has rendered urban indigeneity ‘unspeakable’ and unrepresentable. This section looks at how *Aunty Alma’s Seats* seeks to undo this unrepresentation by memorialising urban indigenous emplacement. *Aunty Alma’s Seats* precociously honours what Langton calls ‘the adaptive capacity’ of urban Kooris<sup>xlvii</sup>; that which illuminates white anxieties of emplacement. Thus, this section highlights the importance of space-over-text memorialisation, and seeks to help undo ‘the notion that space is an emptiness which exists separately from subjectivity, power and knowledge.’<sup>xlviii</sup>

It is not a crude essentialism to stress the importance of place in indigenous memory and ‘history’: where historical events are less conceived of as temporally sequential than as ‘movement through real geographical space’<sup>xlix</sup>. This place-based understanding of the past is not surprising in a cosmology that considers ‘life as the annexation place’<sup>l</sup>, and personhood as the extension of place. The ascension of place is evident in indigenous language: for instance, the Yolngu matha term for ‘to die’ is *dhawal mukthurra nhanggu*, literally, ‘his/her place of origin silenced’.<sup>li</sup>

Western sites of memory are not ‘part’ of the landscape in the same way: they are a *textual impositions* in the sense that the western monument ‘speaks’ of an event or a person but is not ‘the’ event or ‘the’ person. Western memory sites are examples of the inherent failings of linguistic representation—of Derridean *différance*. *Différance* is the paradox where words can never successfully summons the thing they signify but can only be defined or explained using more words that can never successfully summons the thing they signify, *ad infinitum*. Therefore, words and signs are always *different* from what they mean, and the actual things they refer to are always *deferred* by language. The signified (in the case of the western monument: ‘the past event/person’) is always absent from the site of memory. In a sense, any monument to indigeneity is necessarily anti-monumental in its assertion of the past’s contra-linguistic presence in the landscape of the present.

While acknowledging the primacy of emplacement in indigenous memory and history, the *Seats* does not try to memorialise indigenous peoples through ‘traditional’ modes that refer to the ‘sacred’. The *Seats* is unusual in indigenous memorialisation in that they are not (intentionally) within a traditional sacred

place; thus it avoids the failings of white textualisation of indigenous sacred spaces. An example of such a failing is the treatment of a *corroboree* tree in Fitzroy gardens. In 1983 it was suddenly pronounced ‘significant’ to the Wurundjeri peoples by the Heritage Act. It was surrounded by railing and ‘explained’ by a plaque; in other words, ‘textualised’ by western modes of memorialisation. This cordoning off of the site served to contain indigenous emplacement within a white-designated cartographic area, which eclipsed their claim to *land-through-time*. Ware writes how the ‘design language’ of the railing and plaque

identified the *corroboree* tree as a memorial object recognisable to non-Indigenous (or non-traditional Indigenous) members of the public. This divorced the tree from its cultural origins and from the larger landscape, and was counter to how these trees operate in Wurundjeri memorial practice. While such memorials may increase the visibility of othered cultures in Australian society, they may not always do so in ways that empower those memorials as genuinely alternative forms.<sup>lii</sup>

Thus *Seats* becomes an argument for the possibility of a non-sacred emplacement of urban indigeneity. Such emplacement, I believe, requires the subversive appropriation of the white notion of monumental permanency. It requires a borderline position between textual and non-textual monumentalism, to be a site of translation between white and indigenous memorialising practices. Subsequently, I am suspicious of the current movement towards ‘ephemeral counter-memorialisation’ in the sphere of indigenous history-making in Australia. A memorialisation of ephemerality does not work to emplace urban indigeneity into the urban landscape and imagining; rather it works as an *apologia* for their effacement from dominant discourse. James Young describes his idea of a counter-memorial as

the antiheroic, often ironic, and *self-effacing* conceptual installation that marks the national ambivalence and uncertainty of the late twentieth-century postmodernism.<sup>liii</sup>

Young’s description immediately presents the moral problem of how to memorialise those who are *always-already* effaced by dominant discourse, who do not yet have the luxury of self-effacement. While Young’s counter-memorial marks ‘national ambivalence’, my notion of the contra-memorial marks ‘national unspokenness’. For the unspeakability of parkies in white discourse is not a product of ambivalent reaction but of recoil, the active and unambivalent retreat to a position where reaction is not required, and silence becomes a form of discourse.<sup>liv</sup> For national forgetting is not the antithesis of memory, but rather an active form of collective memory: ‘Active forgetting can be understood as the hegemonic...experiential “script” that is learned, embodied, and passed on as the cultural record of ‘normal’’.<sup>lv</sup>

Sue-Anne Ware, a prominent commentator on Australian anti- (or counter-) memorialisation, champions temporary and ephemeral modes of memorialisation, and criticizes ‘romantic’ notions of place. She distinguishes the counter-memorial as that which

denotes impermanence and even celebrates ephemeral notions of time and space, thus contradicting the perpetual memorial and established notions of collective memory.<sup>lvi</sup>

Ware was creator and co-judge of the 2001 Stolen Generations Memorial Competition<sup>lvii</sup>, a design competition that encapsulated her counter-memorial philosophy. The commended designs were noticeably similar in their adherence to the strictures of ephemerality. Liz Herbert’s ‘Curiosity Box’ was a large folding cabinet designed to sit outside the Museum of Victoria. The cabinet was only half of the anti-memorial—the other half consisted of the ritual of its opening and closing every morning and night. Inside the box were thousands of ‘memorial tags’ engraved with information about individual stolen children that were, in effect, ‘locked away’ every night. Renee Romyn’s ‘The Hessian Wall’ was an installation of hessian sheets printed with extracts of protectionist policies, laid over personal narratives of separation. Spectators were invited to literally unravel the official history by removing the lengths of hessian that made up the overlay of official-speak, to reveal individual testimony beneath. This design, in effect, promoted the idea that there is an ‘authentic’ victim narrative that exists unmediated by disciplinary technologies of power. In their ‘Act of Uprooting’, Annabel Stanton and Damien Pericle played with the great Australian fetishisation of lawn to create a literal ‘uprooting’. Letters making up the lyrics ‘acting white, feeling black’ from Archie Roach’s *Took the Children Away* were to be cut out of the lawns of Carlton Gardens and stacked in front of the museum: spectators could then return these stolen letters to their place of forcible removal. It is worth quoting in full the response of architectural theorists Stephen Cairns and Jane Jacobs to this memorial competition:

Must a postcolonial memorial be denied hard monumental expression? Does the language of healing have to be formed through the intimately ephemeral? Do these assumptions enrich or impoverish our forms of remembrance? The politeness of these diminutive, impermanent installations leads us to wonder who exactly is meant to be the beneficiary of these remembering. If coming to terms with the tragedy of the Stolen Generations is so central to a reconciled Australia, then why is it that we lack the courage to imagine something permanent and heroic? These qualities are not the sole domain of the imperial, just as emotional solace does not have to belong to the small spaces of individual interaction.<sup>lviii</sup>

What I term the ‘contra-memorial’ spans the provisional positions of counter- and dominant memorialisation. Contra-memorials are not created in reaction to

dominant notions of memorial, and are thus not forced into a position of polite ephemerality, that which does not confront us for too long, or does not demand a place in our urban space. I argue that the contra-memorial of *Aunty Alma's Seats* achieves a different sort of unperpetuity. Contra-memorials need not be impermanent in state, but rather *impermanent in meaning*. The *Seats* will always be a memorial to the lives of two victims of the stolen generation, but, as a greater memorial, its meaning is open for perpetual reinscription. The *Seats* enshrines both pan-Aboriginality and locality; both the displacement (from 'traditional land') and the emplacement (in urban space) of Koori people. Handler Spitz writes how memorial work

enables us to make transitions from grief to celebration, from losing to keeping.

But is this suspect? What, we may wish to ask, might be the purposes of memorial sculptures, over time, vis-à-vis their changing spectatorship?<sup>lix</sup>

The *Seats* are in some sense outside of this transition from grief to celebration, loss and gain, because they memorialise transition itself; the current liminal state of urban indigenous people. They do not directly talk of the horror of invasion, genocide, assimilation, the Stolen Generations, but of the horror of an aftermath of silence. *Of waiting*. This is not to suggest that indigenous Australians are passive in their waiting, and that their political mobilisation is not important. But what it does highlight is that such mobilisation is fated when white Australia still refuses to take up the hauntological burden of indigenous decimation. Even at its most vibrant and potent, current indigenous activism is still *waiting* for white Australia's response. The Howard government will be remembered for its spectacular deferral of response (and responsibility) in the face of indigenous resistance.

The trope of 'natives just sitting under a tree' that the *Seats* subversively memorialise, is a *static* scene of white Australia's creation: as a contra-memorial the *Seats* forces white Australia to face its own moral and political stagnation. The state of 'waiting' is indeed a strange thing to memorialise; possibly why the *Seats* are so offensive to the progress-obsessed Right, as captured in the vitriol of columnist Andrew Bolt. Australians are inured to the memorialisation of martyrs or heroes of national advancement. We are accustomed to memorialisation that requires 'the object of commemoration be understood as a completed stage of history, safely nestled in a sealed-off past'.<sup>lx</sup> But of course, every act of memorialisation is an affront to a 'sealed-off' notion of the past: the past is never 'safe' from memory. Horst Hoheisel called his anti-monument, the sunken Aschrott Fountain, a 'historical pedestal' upon which people stand on to 'remember their own histories'.<sup>lxi</sup> As a 'historical pedestal', the *Seats* does not speak directly to the injustices of the past or reconciliation of the future. It is found firmly in the present, where our memory-work must take place—and be emplaced.

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<sup>i</sup> artist's website, <http://www.julieshiels.com.au/public-art/aunty-alma-moreinfo.html>.

<sup>ii</sup> Plomley was a historian of Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Cited in I. Anderson, 'Black Bit, White Bit', 2003:46

<sup>iii</sup> Homi K. Bhabha cited in T. Smith, 'Public Art Between Cultures: The "Aboriginal Memorial", Aboriginality, and Nationality in Australia', 2001:639

<sup>iv</sup> The Birmingham Popular Memory Group, cited in P. Hamilton, 'The Knife Edge: Debates About Memory and History', 1994:18

<sup>v</sup> cited by C. Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*, 2006:70

<sup>vi</sup> Wendy Brown, cited in Freccero, 2006:77

<sup>vii</sup> C. Spark, 'Home on "The Block": Rethinking Aboriginal Emplacement', 1999:61

<sup>viii</sup> As described in a government report: 'Although these people are often categorised as 'homeless', a number see themselves as being both 'placed' and 'homed', and prefer instead to refer to themselves with such labels as 'parkies', 'goomies', 'long grassers', 'ditchies' or 'river campers'. They are public place dwellers who identify with particular public or semi-public places as their 'home' environment, usually conforming to a 'beat' of such places where they camp and socialise.' P. Memmott, et al, *Categories of Indigenous 'Homeless' People and Good Practice Responses to Their Needs*, 2003:i

<sup>ix</sup> cited in *A Crate Act of Reconciliation*, press release from the 'National Day of Healing' Committee, May 2005.

<sup>x</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>xi</sup> I follow after Ghassan Hage with the usage of 'white Australia' to denote the non-indigenous majority. As Hage points out, 'white Australia' is not a positivist term but a fantasy that is both the cause and effect of racialised discourse. It does not denote 'Anglo-Saxon' but all those who align themselves with the predominantly Anglo-Saxon class of socio-political power, and against indigenous Australians. See G. Hage, *White Nation*, 1998.

<sup>xii</sup> in 'Native Area Is Disgusting, Says Pastor' (The West Australian, 8.1.65, p. 8), cited in S. Mickler, *The Perth Press and Problematising Aboriginal Status*, 1998.

<sup>xiii</sup> A. Bolt, 'Our Racism in Bronze', 2005.

<sup>xiv</sup> Shiels, quoted in K. Hagan, 'Crates Shrine to Parkies', 2005.

<sup>xv</sup> Bulbeck, 1991:170 Hinkson talks of how 'contact' and 'post-contact' Aboriginal sites are 'largely invisible' compared to 'pre-contact' sites. She argues that 'the status of Sydney's Aboriginal places appeared to directly mirror the experience historically common for Aboriginal people living in urban areas—the denial of their existence as Aboriginal.' M. Hinkson, 'Exploring "Aboriginal" Sites in Sydney: A Shifting Politics of Place', 2002:62

<sup>xvi</sup> Hinkson, 2002:64

<sup>xvii</sup> *Mr. White, Harris and Laing with a party of Soldiers visiting Botany Bay Colebee at that place, when wounded*, Port Jackson Painter, c.1790, 26.6 x 42.8 cm. From The Natural History Museum of London website, First Fleet Art Collection online, <http://internt.nhm.ac.uk/jdsml/natureonline/firstfleet/>

<sup>xviii</sup> P. Suvendrini, 'Claiming Truganini: Australian National Narrative in the Year of Indigenous Peoples', 1996:394

<sup>xix</sup> For a discussion on the unspeakable in the context of Holocaust memorialisation, T. Trezise, 'Unspeakable', 2001.

<sup>xx</sup> cited in C. Bold et al, 'Feminist Scholarship and Cultural Counter-memory', 2002:128. As Larissa Behrendt writes, 'The invisibility of the real...creates a kind of psychological terra nullius, where, even though Aboriginal people are physically present, they are not seen. [This] is particularly a feature of the urban areas where Indigenous presence is pervasive.' L. Behrendt, 'What Lies Beneath', 2005:6

<sup>xxi</sup> Spark, 1999:58

<sup>xxii</sup> see Franz Fanon's famous discussion on the colonised man's dreams of 'colonisation': 'The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession—all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible. The colonised man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive 'They want to take our place'. It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place.' F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 2001 [1961]:30

<sup>xxiii</sup> Spark, 1999:56

<sup>xxiv</sup> see A. Curthoys, 'Entangled Histories: Conflict and Ambivalence in Non-Aboriginal Australia', 1997:121

- xxv Stuart Hall writes about the British equivalent: 'young black people in London today are marginalised, fragmented, unenfranchised, disadvantaged and dispersed. And yet, they look as if they own the territory. Somehow, they too, in spite of everything, are centred in place.' This statement by Stuart Hall—while problematic in many ways—nonetheless highlights the tenuity of the colonisation of space—as opposed to the colonisation of land, which is complete. Stuart Hall, cited in M. Keith, 'From Punishment to Discipline? Racism, Racialisation and the Policing of Social Control', 1993:208
- xxvi As Garraway Yunupingu pointed out in a speech to the National Press Club in 1997 (paraphrased by Ann Curthoys): 'Aboriginal people who stay on their own land to protect it, become in white Australian mythology the wanderers, the nomads on 'walkabout', while the true wanderers, the white Australians who have strayed far from their homelands, are named the settlers, those who stay at home.' Curthoys, 1997:122.
- xxvii Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality vol. I* 1998[1976]:84
- xxviii Smadar Lavie echoes Foucault theory of the illogics of power in her pronouncement: 'Some homes become borderzone tents and then disappear. Other homes do not exist in the first place, as far as the dominant group is concerned. It is precisely because such homes do not exist that the Eurocentre dynamites them.' S. Lavie cited in Spark, 1999:63
- xxix P. Wolfe, 'Nation and Miscegenation: Discursive Continuity in the Post-Mabo Era', 1994:113
- xxx Elkin, cited in Anderson, 2003:46
- xxxi see Brook Andrew's discussion on the remote/urban, authentic/inauthentic constructions in present-day Aboriginal art criticism. B. Andrew, 'Telling Our Own Stories (interviewed by Peter Minter)', 2005
- xxxii M. Langton, 'Urbanising Aborigines: The Social Scientist's Great Deception', 1981:17
- xxxiii *ibid*, p.18
- xxxiv *ibid*, p.102
- xxxv L. Sandercock, 'When Strangers Become Neighbours: Managing Cities of Difference', 2000:22
- xxxvi 'For example,' writes Day, 'when 'long grass' Aborigines protested in Darwin for rights to shelter and services in 1997, they also carried banners referring to conditions at the settlement of Maningrida (NT News March 18, 1997). A Gunavidji couple, who were traditional owners of the Maningrida area, complained to me that the televised banners had made them 'shamed'. Although most of the protesters originated from Maningrida, the couple reflected the liminal status of the fringe camp when they said, 'Don't say Maningrida people - they are long grass people'. Day, 2001: 48
- xxxvii M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 1970:378
- xxxviii M. Langton, 'Well I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...', 1993:33
- xxxix Muecke writes that 'The avenues for "being Aboriginal" are paradoxically narrow, and they tend to be overdetermined by "the cultural". While culture is not a natural endowment, it is treated as if it is, so that the only "respectable" ways for Aboriginal people to find identity tend to be through particular forms of culture. "Aboriginal artist" is in this sense [as a normative identity], is almost tautological.' To illustrate his point, Muecke contrasts this normative identity with "Aboriginal bureaucrat": a term that is 'monstrous' in its illicitness and its impossibility. It would be illicit both for the political left (as it conflicts with the anti-institutional, libertarian standing of social justice movements) and with the right (as it conflicts with notions of white institutional power, and the position of the Aborigine as the object not subject of bureaucracy). S. Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies*, 2005:15
- xl A. McKee, 'Ernie Dingo: Reconciliation (A Love Story Forged Against the Odds?)', 2001:193
- xli see Alan McKee's discussion of Baudrillardian theory in a comparison between indigenous representation in Australian popular discourse and Black representation in American popular discourse. A. McKee, 'The Aboriginal Version of Ken Done: Banal Aboriginal Identities in Australia', 1997.
- xlii M. Langton, 'Rum, Seduction and Death: "Aboriginality" and Alcohol', 1997:78. The prevalence of this notion of Melbourne Aborigines as 'coming from out somewhere' is discussed in McCalman: 'Aboriginal people, one might think form the media, had always been inland people and the campers at Mooroopna or Jackson's Track had come from "out somewhere". We now know that Victoria was the most densely populated part of pre-contact Australia and the least nomadic—southeast Australia was home to 50,000-60,000 people.' J. McCalman, 'Mapping Aboriginal Victoria', 2006:216. (McCalman does not cite where she obtained her figure). Day talks of the similar phenomenon in Darwin: Since a 1992 parliament report, the Darwin media refers to public dwelling Aborigines as 'itinerants', even though many had either been born in Darwin or had lived in the city for many years. See Day, 2001:53
- xliii Spark, 1999:59
- xliv *ibid*, p.58
- xlv Behrendt, 2006:7
- xlvi M. Dodson, 'The End in the Beginning: Re(de)finding Aboriginality', 1994:10
- xlvii Langton, 1981:17
- xlviii Spark, 1999:58
- xliv D. Rose, 'Ned Kelly Died for Our Sins', 1994:176
- l T. Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Aboriginal Being*, 1993:39
- li F. Tamisari, 'Names and Naming: Speaking Forms into Place,' 2002:89
- lii S.A. Ware, 'Contemporary Anti-Memorials and National Identity in the Victorian Landscape', 2004:122
- liii J.E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, 2000:96. My emphasis.

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<sup>liv</sup> In his work on sexuality, Michel Foucault argues that silence should not be the opposite—or limit—of discourse, but rather a form of discourse in itself. See Foucault, 1998[1976].

<sup>lv</sup> Bold et al, 2002:127

<sup>lvi</sup> Ware, 2004:123

<sup>lvii</sup> This competition was a collaboration between *Link-Up Victoria* (an organisation aiding members of the stolen generation to find their families), the Melbourne Museum and the RMIT School of Architecture and Design.

<sup>lviii</sup> Cairns & Jacobs, 'What Are the Possible Formal and Spatial Qualities of a Postcolonial Memorial? The Stolen Generations Memorial Competition', 2001:37

<sup>lix</sup> E. Handler Spitz, 'Loss as Vanished Form: On the Anti-Memorial Sculptures of Horst Hoheisel', 2005:419

<sup>lx</sup> K. Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: race, war, and monument in nineteenth-century America*, 1997:5

<sup>lxi</sup> Hoheisel, cited in Handler Spitz, 2005:418

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