Can sites of violence or pain be exorcised? Can memorials or plaques help to purify them? Who interprets the sites and writes the plaques? Who should do so? Who can purify the place of pain, trauma, or death? In this paper I will investigate the difference between sites which are interpreted by those who had the experience and those which are not.  

Lastly I will explore the idea that trauma victims are able to design and word their own memorials powerfully and not necessarily to the exclusion of others.

To ascertain the feelings of victims towards the memorialisation of a site of pain will not be easy, not least because not everyone will agree on what should be done. Psychological and physical violence awaken very different responses in those who experience their horrors.

Cyclone Tracy struck Darwin in December 1974 and destroyed ninety percent of the city's houses. Twenty years later Dr Mickey Dewar of the Northern Territory Museum, curating a historical display on the cyclone, was told by at least half the people she contacted 'Don't do it. Leave the past where it was'. One cyclone victim thought the entire program 'inappropriate, macabre, repulsive and repugnant'. For visitors, curators, journalists and public historians she had only one message, 'Will you please leave it alone'. At least as many people she contacted 'Don't do it. Leave the past where it was'.

One cyclone survivor thought the entire program “inappropriate, macabre, repulsive and repugnant”. For visitors, curators, journalists and public historians she had only one message, “Will you please leave it alone”. At least as many cyclone survivors were delighted with Dewar's exhibition. Besides the display the city authorities arranged public concerts, tours, the unveiling of a major monument and new signage. Some official pronouncements, indeed, were far from inspiring. This is the inscription outside what remains of the first Christ Church, now attached to the Darwin Cathedral:

The original Christ Church which stood on this site was built of local porcelain stone in the style of an old English Country Church designed for the tropics. When it was built in 1902 it was so the church services in the midst of Chinatown it was intended as a Lady Chapel for a future Cathedral.

(here follow two paragraphs on the history of the church and the diocese)

In 1958 the Northern Territory, previously part of the Diocese of Carpentaria, was created a separate Diocese and Christ Church became the Cathedral Church.

On the morning of the 25th December 1974, about an hour after the Christmas midnight Eucharist had finished, the cyclone 'TRACY' completely destroyed the parish hall, the clergy residence and the Cathedral leaving standing only this part of the west wall, the porch and the entrance gateway.

Such sentiments, more informative than emotional, are very far from the memories of a woman compulsorily evacuated from the city three days after the cyclone:

All the men outside (the bus) were standing there, and just helping with those getting on the bus. Then there was a most pitiful sound which I will always remember - the sound as we drove off as every woman on the bus started to cry, I included. ...And then just utter silence as we drove through the streets and looked out the windows to the ruined city.

Many victims revisiting Darwin for the first time since the disaster found the act of standing at the sites where they had once lived, or worked, or from which they had recovered bodies, was a more significant ritual than the church services and concerts. Equally far from the dispassionate church plaque were the memories of a woman who in the suburb of Wagaman recognised some cracks in the pavement which she had known, twenty years earlier, when taking her small children for a walk. From this humble vista she was able to calculate where her own house had stood, and where had lived, opposite, three little children she had cared for, killed in the devastation.

I’d been back a lot to that school in the time after the cyclone, and there were always ghosts, there were the faces I could see of kids that I had in my pottery class who'd been killed, mainly in playgroups, kids that I’d handled and had in my house.

From cyclones to bushfires, to retest the suggestion that the intense emotions of those who lose a loved place are frequently suppressed by public authorities in the supposed interest of some public good. 2003 is the anniversary of the devastating bushfires known as Ash Wednesday that swept through southern Australia. Among the many towns where lives and houses were lost was Macedon, some 100 kilometres north-west of Melbourne. Here in 1996 I could find no memorial to the destruction or the trauma, though the Ash Wednesday Park contains a sign which concedes a little to the terror which the townspeople endured:

The Ash Wednesday Memorial Park is dedicated to the determination and courage of the Macedon community after the devastating fires of 16th February 1983.

One man who approved the sign was among those who narrowly survived the fire but who believed that life in the town had to proceed. He told me that his attitude was “There was a fire here once, so what?”. Another memorial plaque nearby is in the entrance to the Macedon hotel where half the town took shelter from the fire for six terrifying hours. It reads:

Erected to commemorate the valour of the volunteer firefighters who risked their lives on the 16th of February 1983 (Ash Wednesday) saving the lives of 300 persons who sheltered in this hotel from the fires of that night.

The same heroism was displayed throughout the area by other groups and individuals who, likewise, put themselves at extreme risk to protect the lives and property of the people of this community.

Erected by the councillors and ratepayers of the shire of Gisborne.

Both signs commemorate the fine qualities of the people of the community, but neither acknowledges the trauma of the destruction nor the sense of loss of the familiar place revealed in conversations long after the event.
For the profound emotions of terror, loss and grief of Ash Wednesday have certainly not been forgotten. People remarked of the ruins of Macedon, 'it looks like Hiroshima'. Fourteen years after the fires a woman told me:

I remember the (fire brigade) boys came in, they had this great big tractor, and they were going to pull [the chimney] down, and they hadn't even asked us or anything, and I was so angry and I went out there like a mad woman screaming 'Leave it alone!' That was all we had, just a chimney. It's ridiculous now, but that was how I felt. That they'd come onto our block. It seemed we weren't anybody, we just seemed a piece of paper being processed. As if someone died and the body taken away and it doesn't belong to you.

The emotions of loss for a loved site endure as much as the artefacts salvaged from the ashes. Melted or charred objects placed in cabinets or behind glass and brought out, perhaps, on anniversaries to show visitors or the children, are among the private rituals of lost place.

From fires to flood, to furnish a last example of the too common disjunction between the public memorialising and private grief. Adaminaby was a town in southern New South Wales, inundated by the Snowy Mountains Authority in 1957. The rituals of the former residents included uprooting roses grown in the old new town and planting them in the new, annual visits and picnics at the site just above where the old town stood. Twenty years after the inundation, not a sign informed the visitor of the town which once flourished below the waters of the lake or of the catastrophe which overthrew it. A single dismal and obscure sign in the new town congratulates the Snowy Mountains Authority for having saved the old.

The responsibility for the interpretation rests mainly with the Authority itself, which tried to change the name of the old town area to Coolawye and the new town to Chifley. Its propaganda insisted that the residents of the old town ought to be grateful for being rescued rather than resentful or sad. Yet emotions about the loss of the town run as deep as they do in former residents return for picnics in the gardens of what were once their homes, or say prayers in the site of the old church. The waters recede during drought, some former residents return for picnics in the gardens of what were once their homes, or say prayers in the site of the old church. The most poignant ritualised memorial I saw in what is to this day called the old town was a little pile of crockery gathered on a foundation stone of one of the houses. Surely a resident had found them and gathered them together. The emotions were those of the local poet Marge Mackay:

The stations, farms, the sheds, the barns
Are all awash in the deep waters
While ghosts of men swim through the glen,
Drowned faces haunt their sons and daughters.

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The rituals and signage of remembrance, then, take many forms, of which the large, formal and collective is only one. People remember destroyed sites through objects and rituals of many different kinds of meanings, and these feelings are very often at variance with public memorialising. Public remembrance of events or places can be pretty dull, even insulting, unless they are informed by the emotions of those who have actually participated in the trauma, and feel strongly about those events.

I am currently completing a book Haunted Earth, the third in a series on the way in which people understand the Australian landscape, about inspirted and magical places. Many inspirted sites are the sites of former habitation or trauma, including, as we have seen, the cracked pavement in Wagaman and the Adaminaby church foundations. Some are sacred to Aboriginal people because the spiritual ancestors created them. Some are thought by non-Aboriginal Australians to contain inherent spiritual power; they are spiritual because they have always been so. These demand their own rituals of maintenance or care or respect, which themselves are a kind of inspirting.

More common, unfortunately, are the sites at which something traumatic has taken place. The majority of such sites have neither signage nor interpretation, in the absence of which both site and event gradually are forgotten. There was no ritual or memorialising activity obvious when in 1977 I visited a site of a well-attested Aboriginal massacre at Nutwood Downs in the Northern Territory. There two elderly men showed me the place and told me the story. I wonder if anyone remembers the exact site now where the shooting and the burning of the bones took place.

Given the likelihood of disagreement among the victims, and the propensity of officials to represent the lowest common residue of feelings, we may well ask if it is possible ever to represent communal feelings adequately through a public memorial. Indeed it is, as several examples drawn from Aboriginal remembrance will show.

The 1838 Myall Creek massacre in Northern NSW was one of the very few killings in Australian history in which the perpetrators were brought to justice, and perhaps for that reason it is one of the best known events of the violent contested frontier. Twenty-eight Aboriginal men, women and children were killed by a party of white men at Bingara, near Moree. In 2000 a memorial to the victims was opened near the site of the killings. A television documentary was made of the occasion in which hundreds of people, many of whom were descendants of one side or the other - or both - walked together to the site.

Heather Goodall, the historian of Aboriginal New South Wales, writes:

This locally initiated project, planned over many months by Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents, brought together descendants of the clan from which twenty-eight Wirrayaraay people died in 1838 and descendants of the perpetrators of the massacre. They stood side-by-side at the ceremony held in June 2000 to dedicate the memorial, without accusation or challenge, but with each group sharing a common sense of both the sadness of the site and the value of communication the two groups had struck up.

The memorial stands on a hill on public recreation ground overlooking Myall Creek as it winds peacefully across a private property. The walkway to the main memorial consists of seven small granite boulders, on each of which is a plaque with an engraved image and bilingual text in Gamilaraay and English. The plaques are simple and uncompromising, each representing an episode of the Wirrayaraay story — a productive life disrupted by the violence of a systematic and brutal attempt to clear traditional owners off the land to make way for cattle. The walkway leads just over the crest of the hill, to the main memorial which stands on the edge of the sharp drop into the valley. The single, massive granite boulder carries one brief inscription:

In memory of the Wirrayaraay people who were murdered on
the slopes of this ridge in an unprovoked but premeditated act in the late afternoon of 10 June, 1838.

Erected on 10 June 2000 by a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in an act of reconciliation and in acknowledgement of the truth of our shared history.

We remember them. Ngāyani winangay genunga.

Heather Goodall was present on the day of the memorial’s unveiling. She writes that the most moving moment was the slow walk from the little hall up the long hill to the actual reserve where the walkway and final monument are placed. The walk was very solemn but also relaxed and communicative too, with a chance to talk to people as we all walked up. And then the site itself, the size of the massive boulder and the view across this idyllic, sunlit, now totally peaceful scene was very moving. The final boulder so much more expressive because of its open meanings, than the small very representational graphics along the walkway. And the laying of small stones and rocks: just wonderful. The presence of the perpetrators’ descendants as well as the victims’ descendants was important, and made the onlookly of the ‘peaceful’ scene even more edgy and almost painful. Unresolved tensions still around. Strongly emotional, but it was also very restrained, unpretentious and modest. There was a feeling of doing something new not just memorialising a past tragedy or repeating the rhetoric of victimisation. A man whose ancestor escaped hanging but who later went mad spoke very simply but powerfully about the corroding burden of guilt and disturbance the events had left.  

The memorial’s importance is its quality of evoking a response beyond the spoken or engraved. The towering boulder conveys a little like the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC, a powerful sense of presence in its size and mass. And like the Vietnam monument, the Myall Creek memorial invites people to contribute their own stories and meanings. For the final element is a shallow trench, encircling the central boulder on a radius of around two metres, into which those coming to the memorial have been asked to bring a stone to lay around the centre. Some had tiny plaques, some had words written in pen, recording the community and country from which they came, others were unmarked. Together, they attested to acts of violence in other places but simultaneously the stones were revivifying gifts arising from living community relationships to the country. Their memorial becomes ours by the act of bringing a stone from our own country. Each pebble is a tiny act of purification of an infamous site.

Several memorials to separated Aboriginal children, better known as the stolen generations, are erected at the sites of their institutions. The Bomaderry Infants Home, in southern New South Wales, was a United Aborigines Mission home for Aboriginal boys and girls to the age of seven or eight. After decades of absence, in which the former inmates nursed their hurts privately and alone, Bomaderry is now extensively remembered. The first formal gathering of the survivors and well-wishers took place in 2001. The front gates are now in the National Museum of Australia.

The buildings of the Retta Dixon Home in Darwin, destroyed by Cyclone Tracy in 1975, were the institutional home of many hundreds of Northern Territory Aboriginal girls. Lorna Cubillo, who famously but unsuccessfully sued the Commonwealth government for wrongful removal and ill-treatment, was incarcerated in Retta Dixon for most of her teenage years. The monument in Karu Park, Darwin, where the building once stood, has two plaques attached to it. The first, rather unexpectedly, to modern eyes, commemorates the work of the two missionaries Retta Dixon and Amelia Shankleton. The Retta Dixon Home is only of equal, and perhaps of secondary importance, to the two women. The first part reads:

In Memory of Retta Dixon who in 1906 established the Aboriginal Inland Mission in NSW and of the children who lived on this site in the building named after her 1961-1980. The home was devastated by cyclone Tracy in 1974 and closed in 1982.

The plaques underneath, added ten years after the first, reveals the changing attitude of the girls themselves, as well as the public:

This plaque is in recognition of Aboriginal children displaced from mother and country. Karu Park accommodated a children’s institution named Retta Dixon Home.

Similar institutions were established at Kahlil, Garden Point, Croker Island and Groote Eylandt.

This plaque is dedicated to the memory of those children and their mission workers.

The ten years between the formulation of the wording of the two plaques is significant. The intervening decade emancipated the participants from their first, European-style education. It allowed them to search for, and then to find, their own collective voice in contrast to the missionaries’.

Like the Retta Dixon Home, the Presbyterian Colebrook Home for Aboriginal Girls, in Adelaide, today has vanished. No sign even of its foundations remains.

The former inmates, encouraged by the local Indigenous and non-Indigenous community, during Australia’s Bicentennial year returned to the site to design and build a memorial to themselves, some of the mission workers and to the site. A sign today attracts the casual visitor to enter a space which cannot be seen clearly from the road. Beyond the plaque and up the stairs the visitor is invited along paths in different directions, passing granite rocks, a fountain, inscriptions, photographs and a sculpture of a grieving woman.

The fountain is the Pool of Tears, which remembers the grief of the families of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children taken away as a result of the policy of forcible removal of Indigenous children.

Tiny frogs sit in the granite enclosure symbolise the natural environment from which the children were removed. Prints cut into the granite of the bare feet of a child become the school shoes which turn into the prints of high heels, symbolising more clearly than a thousand words that the unlocked-for journey towards the Whites lasts a lifetime.

Group photographs of the children follow, with the inscription representing a family’s grief:

And every morning as the sun came up the whole family would wait. They did that for 32 years until they saw me again. Who can imagine what a mother went through?

But you have to learn to forgive.

Separation through the children’s eyes: The former inmate Doris Kantiyer writes:

10
We are the stolen children who were taken away
torn from our mother's breasts.
What can a child do?
Where can a child turn?
Where is the guiding hand?
A child is meant to have?

The texts, inscribed in bronze in various locations of the several
paths of the garden, reason with the reader rather than
declaim. One begins

Colebrook Home began with the United Aborigines’ Mission in 1924 in Dunjiba (Oodnadatta). Then in 1927 it
was transferred to Quorn in the Flinders ranges, with 12
children cared for by sister Ruby Hyde and Sister Della
Rutter. In 1943 they moved here to Eden Hills.

Sisters Hyde and Rutter were each awarded an MBE for
their unselfish devotion. They left in 1952 to establish
tenderra Hostel, and the succession of superintendents who followed them at Colebrook Home enforced a strict
discipline. Many of the children had been removed from
their families under the government’s policy of assimilation,
some never to see their parents again.

Supporters of the campaign by the stolen generations for
recognition by the community and national government probably would be surprised at the careful wording of this
plaque. Only ‘Many of the children had been removed’ – not
all? The authors, who underwent the trauma, now just as
carefully separate the good child carers from the bad. Hyde
and Rutter are praised for their ‘unselfish devotions’; others
‘enforced a strict discipline’, That is not, perhaps, what most of
us, who weren’t there, would expect to read – because we can
only imagine what happened within the grounds of the
institution in which we are now standing. The former inmates
are guiding our reactions and emotions. We’ve already
received a signpost

But you have to learn to forgive.

Another plaque nearby shifts the focus to the present, in the
form of an apology by the Mayor of the City of Mitcham on the
first ‘Colebrook Community Day, 1 June 1997’. A former
resident takes the reader to the future in invoking the children’s
culture of caring, sharing, and making strong the ties of family
and community.

The rituals involved for the community on the first Colebrook
Day are easy to apprehend: they were mostly enacted by
meetings and huggings, walking about, crying and exchanging
news.’ That atmosphere of that bittersweet reunion still lingers
in the leafy alleys and shadows. But although this is their place
and their monument, their memories, sculpture and signs, the
presentation leave no doubt that even the happenstance visitor
is intended to become a participant. In another spot along the
path the Mayor invites all of us to come to grips with the
dreadful saga, to feel with the people, their anger and pain.
Another plaque acts as an Invocation:

Hearts break, tears fall, fear cried out
from the wretched hands and arms of a mother and child separated
and then shifts to sharing the emotions with the observer-participant:
Feel the pain, touch the ache, caress the tears.

The words are meant literally, for these actions are the rituals
which the visitor can, and should perform. Caress the sculpture
of the mother, touch that little frog, put your hands, or feet, into
the shoeprints, wet your hand in the pool of tears. The clearest
message to be derived from the Colebrook memorial is that
everyone, not only Aboriginal people, not only Colebrook
inmates, can participate in this place of forgiveness.

For the first plaque which confronts the visitor entering the
Colebrook memorial garden is magnificently restrained. In its
simplicity it achieves nobility. It invites, it pleads, it offers, it
reminds, it beseeches, yet retains its dignity. The words are the
inmates’; but the invocation is sponsored also by the city of
Mitcham, the Aboriginal Lands Trust of South Australia, and the
Blackwood Reconciliation Group. Its majestic sentiments are
for all Australians:

Let everyone who comes to this place know
they are on Aboriginal land
the site of what was once Colebrook Training Home where,
between 1943 and 1972,
some 350 Aboriginal children lived,
isolated from their families and the beloved
land of their ancestors.
This is part of the country of the Kaurna people whose heritage and presence
continues today.

The lives of the Colebrook inmates were transformed here. In turn,
by the collective act of memorialisation, they have
transformed a site once secular, non-Aboriginal, and general
into one which is inspired, indigenous and local. The grounds
of the institution are no longer only Kaurna country, the site has
become also the country of theColebrook children. Their life on
that site, the trauma they suffered, have made it theirs. The
memorial garden has purified the dead place.

We can now, very simply, tie the threads together. Let’s
recognise that rituals of traumatic place take many forms. Let’s
invite those who have the closest connection to the trauma to
create their own monuments, write their own inscriptions, and
conduct their own rituals. For by what may have seemed
initially to be an excluding process, the dead place of
Colebrook, now purified, is the least bureaucratised, and the
most inclusive, of all the thousands of Australian sites of misery
and pain.
Endnotes

1 Frequently contemporary memorials are constructed after close consultation between victims and designer, such as the Vietnam Memorial in Anzac Parade, Canberra. They seem much the better for it.

2 Peter Read, Returning to Nothing, CUP 1996, ch. 7.

3 Read 1996, pp. 76ff.


5 Goodall, pers. comm to author.

6 Goodall, pers. comm.

7 Lowitja O'Donoghue, pers. comm.

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