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"Our own Hurricane Katrina": Aboriginal Disadvantage and Australian National Identity

Abstract:

Since Prime Minister Howard's declaration in 2007 that child sex abuse in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities was Australia's "own Hurricane Katrina", the trope of natural disaster has been a regular feature of print and television media coverage of indigenous affairs in Australia. The effect of this rhetorical strategy is to separate what happens to Aboriginal people from the fabric of "mainstream" Australian cultural and political life; to render it alien and unconnected to the relative privilege enjoyed by other Australians. This strategy also produces peculiar temporal effects by erecting a *cordon sanitaire* around Australian history and the national identity that it supports. Howard's comparison of aboriginal disadvantage with Katrina, if read alongside his politicization of the teaching of Australian history, demonstrates an unwillingness to incorporate systemic injustice towards indigenous people within the composition of that history.

This article interrogates the relationships between the manifold understandings of aboriginal disadvantage and attempts to commemorate its violent history, as these aspects of Australian life are both integrated and refused by National identity narratives. Specifically, the paper reinterprets the trope of natural disaster as a means of comprehending indigenous disadvantage and Australian identity by drawing on Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history. Benjamin's understanding of activism as a constructive retrieval of the past will be developed to reconnect catastrophe to history, and to enable an exploration of

responsibility for that history as an integral condition of contemporary

Australian identity.

"Our own Hurricane Katrina": Aboriginal Disadvantage and Australian National Identity

Towards the end of his term as Prime Minister, John Howard relegated Aboriginal affairs twice over to the disorderly realm of natural disaster, characterizing life in remote Northern Territory (NT) communities as both a "Hobbesian state of nature" and "our own Hurricane Katrina" (Howard, 2007). The first of these representations harks to a mythical pre-political era, understood as a "war of all against all" (Hobbes, 1.13, 185) – where men live in imminent danger, and so contract their freedom to a sovereign, who protects but also wields a violent power over them:

> Tonight, in our rich and beautiful country, there are children living out a Hobbesian nightmare of violence, abuse and neglect. Many are in remote communities in the Northern Territory. To recognise this is not racist. It's simply an empirical fact. If anything our duty of care is greater because of who and where they are. We can debate root causes until the cows come home. Governments and NGOs at all levels can consult and search for a cherished consensus on what to do and the order in which to do it. We could all declare with abject timidity that by 2020 indigenous and other Australians should all be equal... We can do all this in the sure knowledge that, without urgent action to restore social order the nightmare will go on ... (Howard, 2007)[1]

The 'state of nature' that these remote communities comprehend, according to Howard, represents a danger not only to the women and children he purports to protect, but also to the sovereignty of the Australian nation itself, as a disorderliness that thwarts Australian law and threatens morality.[2] The reference to Hobbesian political philosophy is a call to bring 'outlier' communities under the same law as the rest of the nation – ironically, by suspending rights that the rest enjoy, and by bringing those communities, in effect, under martial law.

In the background of this evocation is the specter of a rival claim to sovereignty by indigenous activists who continue to trouble the legitimacy of Australian nationhood by holding that Aboriginal sovereignty was never ceded, and that, in the absence of a treaty and land rights, the government has no claim over them. Some argue convincingly that the hidden basis for the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) was, indeed, a neo-colonial assertion of sovereignty: to secure land tenure back to the state and to protect mining interests (Stringer; Turner & Watson; Dalrymple).

Even more vividly, in the "Stabilise and Protect" speech, Howard urged Australians to take responsibility for reported child sex abuse in NT communities *as if it were our Katrina*.[3] Howard's timely reference to what is now a touchstone of catastrophe – surfacing seaward like a contemporary leviathan – is complex. Hurricane Katrina, a literal "natural" disaster, was as over-determined by political circumstance as Hobbes's war of all against all. Rendering the impoverished Mississippi Delta uninhabitable, the U.S. government was slow to respond to this event. Katrina thereby both brought to light and deepened the disadvantage of black Americans living in the South, without services, security,

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or the protection of the nation.[4] The effects of natural disaster, in this context, cannot be divorced from social and political circumstances, and particularly in that instance a neglect that protracted the suffering of unseen groups of people who were not only left stranded, but were even constructed as a social threat by police and the mainstream media (Sommers, et al, 2006).

This social and political dimension of 'natural disaster' – the victim blaming and abandonment – was not the comparison that Prime Minister Howard had intended. Far from admitting such a kinship between these situations, in acknowledging the inadequacy of the U.S. government's response to Katrina, Howard instead juxtaposed against that negligence his own government's responsiveness to crisis. His initiative was characterized as a rapid response, *in contrast to* a belated and incongruous intervention into a situation exacerbated by social and political neglect. Howard referred very deliberately to the social situation of remote indigenous communities as "natural catastrophe" in order to invest it with a sense of urgency that requires *emergency response*, and through which his government could then position itself as morally correct – a claim well served by the intervention's emphasis on physical and moral safety of children (Hinkson, 2007; Faulkner, 2010 and 2013).

This reference to natural catastrophe – as a "state of nature" – was also telling, however, of Howard's political ontology respecting (post)colonial Australia, and particularly his discomfort about unrecognized indigenous claims to land. Aboriginal people are seen, accordingly, to reside both inside and outside the political community: subject to the sovereign will of the state, but also, like the sovereign, their own unruly force of nature. Pushed already to the margins of Australian awareness, these communities were further marginalized by a

comprehensive state intervention mobilized in the model of humanitarian response.[5] Those who stopped to debate the merits of military-style intervention were silenced by charges of timidity in the face of disaster. Politics could then be mobilized in the guise of humanitarianism, and indigenous people depicted as "natural": outside the bounds of citizenship, and extraneous to the historical movement of progress that defines Australian nationhood.

This article examines the rhetorical, political and temporal effects of framing indigenous lives in terms of natural disaster: what does this deployment indicate about national identity in Australia, and particularly in relation to race and colonization? One disturbing consequence already theorized by others is that the intervention reduces aboriginal life to *bare* life, for which talk of equality or rights then seems inappropriate, even frivolous (Tedmanson & Wadiwel, 2010; Kramer, 2012). The trope of Katrina, when applied to communities, not only describes, but also *constructs and authorizes* a state of exception in which anything goes, and laws that would usually protect citizens from the state (in this instance racial anti-discrimination laws) are suspended, supposedly for their own good.

Yet a further effect of this representation becomes more visible once considered alongside another of Howard's interventions: that is, his intervention in the national school history curriculum, and particularly his desire to excise from it colonial violence. A very public, and at times heated debate about history education values took place during the Howard years leading up to the intervention, involving politicians, media pundits and academic historians, and in a variety of fora. At stake was the control of a national narrative and sense of national identity that it would inform, and especially in relation to the place of

Australia's first peoples and the pressing concern for the injustice to them upon which that nation was founded. I would contend, then, that the Hurricane Katrina trope is also symptomatic of a more chronic disorder of memory and temporality that afflicts (post)colonial Australian identity.

To elucidate this claim – but also to salvage something constructive from the reduction of aboriginal life to catastrophe – I will turn to Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history. Benjamin brought to light the manner in which history, and even an ontology of history, is interpreted and constructed according to political interests. Writing in the foreshadow of Auschwitz and the imminent destruction of the Jewish people, Benjamin instructs in a manner of revisiting the past in the light of present injustices by taking "hold of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger" (Benjamin, VI, 255). By bringing into play Benjamin's conception of history, we may be brought to recognize the manner of catastrophe Aboriginal Australians survive, and the viability of a national project of reconciliation in its wake. Howard's "catastrophizing," by these lights, may yet serve to furnish the affectively charged context in which an awareness of alternative histories and ways of imagining a postcolonial future might be formed.

Australia's Present: the rhetoric of catastrophe and the media
Natural disaster as a descriptor of indigenous life was a ready trope for Howard and the media that supported his push into the NT: a trope embedded with colonial assumptions about race, class and gender. The Enlightenment project alignment of women, children, and natives with 'nature' enabled an ambivalent regard through which a relationship to 'self' – that is, the white, male subject of

reason – was organized. The representation of the "noble savage" gives indigenous peoples to be in touch with "nature" (glossed as the land, animals, their own unclad bodies) to the extent that they fail to achieve a conscious transcendence of nature that nominally distinguishes 'mankind' from the 'brutes.' As Patrick Wolfe has argued, the "assimilation" of Aboriginal people to the land enabled colonials effectively to "efface" them from it, "leaving 'a blank page on which the white man could write his will and his hopes'" (Wolfe, 1997: 72. Internal quote from dust jacket of Fisher, 1968). The doctrine of *terra nullius* was thereby supported by the representation of the 'native' as 'natural man.'

The figure of "natural catastrophe" further intensifies these associations, bringing with it a temporal or historical dimension. Despite what we now know about global warming, natural disaster is figured as disconnected from human agency. It signifies an event that happens unexpectedly – or which even issues from the "hand of God" – and for which communities could not adequately have prepared. Natural disaster is, in this vein, only mitigated through rapid response and the coordinated charity of individuals. It elicits humanitarian responsibility – which is guilt-free and, indeed, improves donors' self-esteem rather than inducing shame. It reminds us of the struggle against nature that makes us human, but thereby also produces hierarchies within 'the human': distributing "humanity" unevenly between those most exposed to the caprices of nature, and those in a position to offer them aid. As Kate Soper argues, there is a dialectical relationship between our ideas of nature and the human:

> … as the 'human' has been re-thought, so too has the 'nature' to which it
> has been opposed. What is then presented as if it registered an absolute

and static division of realms is in reality a rather mutable construct within which the 'nature' that always figures as the antithesis to the 'human' also always bears the imprint of our equivocations and changing perceptions about ourselves.

In this sense, 'nature' may be viewed as a register of changing conceptions as to who qualifies and why, for full membership of the human community; and thus also to some extent as a register of Western civilization's anxieties and achievements. (Soper, 1995: 73-4)

When the victim of disaster is rendered as less autonomous, complete or competent than others, a renegotiation of the boundary between the human and nature thereby also takes place. This effect of subjection to nature is moderated by the degree of disparity between the victim's usual condition and the situation brought about by disaster. The victims of Hurricane Sandy in 2012 were deeply sympathetic for middle-class humanitarians, who could imagine themselves in the place of those caught unawares, losing their homes, possessions, and documents. Conversely, those continuously subject to the vicissitudes of climate (who live predominantly in the Global South), are perceived already to be closer to nature: to live outside of political and civil structures, and so to be less diminished by disaster than their first-world counterparts in New York. To the extent that they are depicted as more continuous with nature, these peoples are also deprived of their full humanity (Soldatic and Biyanwila, 2010).

Inhabiting the remotest regions of a very urban continent, NT indigenous communities stage anxieties about Australia's distance from the Global North, enacting the part of 'the third-world-within' both in fact and in fantasy. Insofar as

Northern Aboriginal people are represented at all, they are seen as abject: as the part of 'the nation' that must continually be repudiated in order to shore up a coherent national identity as 'modern' (that is, as aligned to progress, individualism, and the subjugation of nature). While in truth the profound poverty of remote indigenous people has a history – connected as it is to generations of social exclusion – its portrayal as "natural catastrophe" is telling. Politicians and the news media deploy abject images of indigenous ("bare") life to negotiate a complex relationship between their sense of national identity and the moments of Australian life that do not fit that image. These images attempt to master the Australian national relationship to the past *and* to nature: that is, to the violence through which settlers appropriated their wealth, and the hostile environment that most of this continent represents to European Australians. Aboriginal people, figured in terms of catastrophe, embody the vestiges of that past and that land, which might return forcefully to reclaim what has been taken.

Media coverage of the NTER was striking, in terms of both the imagery and the headlines that were used to demonstrate the situation of indigenous communities in remote Australia. "Indigenous children beg police for help," screams one such headline, beneath which children shambolically wander, barefoot and apparently neglected, an older child in the foreground lying on his back shading his eyes from the sun (Chilcott, 2007). Another story headed "Stark figures ram home plight of Aborigines and islanders" is illustrated with a fisheye lens photograph of two naked aboriginal children, disheveled and dusty, standing alone (except presumably for the white photographer capturing their "plight") in rubbish-strewn red sand (Colebatch, 2008). Even after the flurry of media coverage that saw the NTER legislation through parliament, aboriginal life

continues to be represented as bare life, depoliticized and subject to nature. As late as 2011, the image of natural catastrophe still organized such representations, as the story "Children swam in sewage ponds" shows, depicting a scene of beds and belongings left in the open air, floating on the desert sand as if on the waters of Katrina (AAP, 2011).

Such images – the power of which derives from their vision of humanity exposed to nature – not only represent aboriginal people (especially children) as abandoned and subject to the laws of nature: without a sovereign and therefore also without normativity or security. Following Soper's insights, they also support an understanding of indigenous people as less endowed with reason and other humanly virtues than European Australians. And following Wolfe, this framing of the 'Aborigine' renders aboriginal people as identical with the land, rather than as legitimate rivals with respect to an economic interest in it. Ultimately this construction of aboriginality strips aboriginal people of a history, and of a relationship to contemporary Australia.

Such constructions exert profound pressure on the status of aboriginal people as members of a 'national community.' Systemic ignorance of the far-reaching effects of colonization typifies many Australians' understanding of indigenous disadvantage, as a result either of cultural backwardness or the cumulative failure of individual rationality, rather than as integrally tied to an ongoing process of dispossession of land, language and culture. Such ignorance enables them to tolerate in 'good conscience' the gap between Aboriginal and white Australia in economic circumstances (Altman, 2000), incarceration rates (ABS, 2013b), and life expectancy (ABS, 2013a). The understanding of indigenous disadvantage as natural catastrophe rather than an inheritance of

colonialism, allows non-indigenous Australians to refuse a connection between 'their' history and 'ours,' 'our' situation and 'theirs.'[6] Indigenous disadvantage can then be separated from white advantage – conceived not only as their own fault, but also as intrinsic to their nature.

History as a Site of Political Contention

> The pre-eminent mode in which indigenous people are remembered in Australia is as absent. (Healy, 2008: 11)

The NTER was only the apex of a concerted effort, over the course of Howard's administration, to deny present-day white responsibility for aboriginal disadvantage. After the tabling in parliament in 1997 of the report into the removal of aboriginal children from their families, there had been calls for government to issue an official apology and make reparations to the stolen generations (AHRC, 1997). Howard's "common-sense" response took the form of a kettle-logic fallacy that both confounded and refused the typical temporal structure of official apology, as a gesture that would "intervene into shared understandings of political community and its temporality" (Bastian, 2013: 96). Howard's argument can be summarized as follows:

1. Present-day Australians did not remove children from their families. "We" are not responsible and so *cannot* apologize;

2. Those in the past who removed children did no wrong according to the values of the day. They acted out of a sense of compassion, and so we *should not* apologize on their behalf;

3. In any case, there's nothing to apologize for: the scope of the "stolen generations" is exaggerated, and the children who were taken had been neglected and were in 'moral danger.' Under the same circumstances today, *we would remove them again*.

The official apology attempts to address the temporal disorder of the traumatized, colonized Aboriginal subject, insofar as he or she lives the present as a disruptive or uncanny return of the past (see Prager, 2006). As such, *Bringing Them Home,* in its recommendation for a formal apology to the stolen generations, acknowledged the expectation that apology might *stitch time back together,* or repair subjective untimeliness – trauma – by constituting a community who would recognize and receive that traumatic past, and so allow the stolen generations to live in a future-oriented present. This possibility was explicitly rejected by the Howard Government, in favor of a litigation-averse separation of past from present and future that recollects Aristotle's conception of time as a series of "nows" that 'exist' only when they are present (Aristotle, 1936: IV, 219b, 9-14). There can be no conversation about responsibility in the present for what has passed, according to this conception. Non-indigenous Australians are only bystanders to history, and, likewise, indigenous Australians are responsible for their present situation. Indeed, the failure of the Howard government to accede to this recommendation was motivated by more than the prospect of litigation: while apology's promise to the victim is to stitch time back

together and thereby address the intrusive and uncanny past, for the perpetrator unready to issue an apology, the victim's very existence is uncanny. Acknowledgement of a shared past in this context is profoundly disorienting, *unheimlich*: discomforting a sense of 'being-at-home' as a settler nation in present-day Australia.

While the first two of Howard's premises, as reconstructed above, make metaphysical arguments about the relation of temporality to responsibility, the third is the most polemical, and brings most into contention conceptions of historical truth. Conservative historian Keith Windschuttle further developed this rationale, through his contributions to what is now known as the Australian 'history wars' (Macintyre and Clark, 2003; Attwood, 2005). Against historians of aboriginal history such as Henry Reynolds, Windschuttle took up the mantle of official historian for the regime by casting doubt on the accounts of massacre and child removal that their work had elaborated – his chief concern being the preservation of a proud sense of national identity (Krygier and van Krieken, 2003). This debate was not confined to the academic sphere, but was in fact mainly played out in the daily newspapers and in the conservative magazine *Quadrant*; and concerned discussions of exhibits in the National Museum as well as the books that would be shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Prize for Australian History (inaugurated by Howard).

More was at stake than the correctness of one's data or references: more explicitly than before in Australia, history became highly politicized and historians were brought into an acute awareness of the political import of their work (Lake, 2003; Moses, 2003; Reynolds, 2003; Macintyre and Clark, 2003; Attwood, 2005; Curthoys, 2006). History teaching in schools and universities

was a matter of political comment and oversight. What conservatives named the "black armband" view of history was opposed to a history that celebrates Australia's achievements. Howard and education minister Julie Bishop echoed each other's concern that school history should teach facts rather than interpretations, narrative rather than issues and themes, deemed to be "postmodern" (Howard, 2006). Bishop bemoaned that Australian children do not take the same pride in their national history as Americans (ABC, cited in Curthoys). This was, indeed, a victor's history, which aimed to mitigate national shame regarding unpalatable aspects of our past.

As Ann Curthoys argues with respect to the government's remarks, history is not simply a sequence of facts strung together by narrative: one historical interpretation is imposed only through the eclipse of another, and Howard's historical mandate did not include women's history, aboriginal history, labor history... but rather focused on sites of national pride such as sport and military achievement (see Lake, 2010). At stake in episodes like the 'history wars' is the role of history as a narrative through which a particular conception of national identity is forged: one that structures the conditions of belonging to national community. As Bain Attwood contends, invoking Benedict Anderson, "[i]t is narratives that largely provide a nation's people with a sense of nationality – a sense that they belong together to the community called the nation" (Attwood, 2005: 13). It is through a shared and authoritative understanding of history that the feeling of being part of a nation is produced. Particularly for conservative politics, this has meant having either to gloss over or rail against cultural difference, as anti-Asian and –Muslim sentiment shows. The narrative of harmonious multiculturalism attempts (with some success) to

address this demand for narrative coherency. The story Australians tell themselves about national character, however, remains unstable to the extent that colonial history cannot be incorporated into a narrative of mutual belonging. Indeed, this instability is borne within the very mechanism of national identity, which founds itself on a denial of other claims.

> National historical narratives can be regarded as a means of organising a sense of time and space. This has been particularly evident in modernity, but no more so than in settler societies since they are modern societies *par excellence*. At the heart of modernity has been a vision of progress in which there is a constant movement that continuously breaks with the past... (Attwood, 2005: 14)

In other words, the 'nation' – apprehended in terms of a narratively organized affective investment through which its citizens identify as constituents of a community – is conceived through a self-founding act of story-telling that renders it temporally all-encompassing and spatially identical to the land, precisely by means of a constitutive act of *forgetting* both the past and those with a competing interest in the land. The commitment to progress is vital to the national project insofar as it orients the citizen forward, away from a critical regard for myths of origin. History in this context is valued not out of a concern for veracity, but rather as a means of investing citizens with national sentiment: hence the focus on military and sporting history rather than the dispossession of aboriginal claims to land.

Walter Benjamin calls this forward orientation "historiography," understood as a scientistic conception of time as an empty vessel for events to follow in simple causal succession one after another, and through which humanity is thought to undergo a process of self-improvement. This account of history is loosely, even parodically, Hegelian, assuming a dialectical understanding of thought and action as cumulatively tending toward enlightenment and freedom, and on which can be plotted various modes of society ordered in relation to their proximity to liberal democracy.[7] The commitment of this model of history to continuity and progress toward enlightenment belies the extent to which alternative histories are forgotten for its sake — histories that may even be instructive to approaching difficulties or impasses in the present.

In this vein, Howard's political use of history constructed a form of willful amnesia – a disordered sense of time and memory that continues to arrest Australia's development as a "*post*-colonial" state. Even after Prime Minister Rudd's apology (Rudd, 2008), temporal discontinuity remains an issue for Australian identity formations. This is arguably because the facticity of colonization – and the *unheimlich* manner in which settler-society articulates its relationship to "home" – is yet to be addressed to national identity. In the remainder of this article I will recruit Benjamin's philosophy to a project of situating Australian identity *within* this disruption of time and memory – which, we could even say, is a catastrophic sense of history, pregnant with possibility, between apology and reconciliation. Through such a project, we might finally begin to take responsibility for the past.

Catastrophic time and Australian National Identity

A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin, 1968: IX, 257-58)

If instead of simply disputing Howard's invocation of natural catastrophe to describe the situation in the NT we were to read it seriously, deeply, delving its tensions and resonances, then what potential openings to a different future might be opened? The notion that the abuses and degradations experienced within remote aboriginal communities constitute a rupture from human history, on the one hand, serves a politics of denial of white responsibility – and, as I have argued above, also contributes to stereotypes of aboriginal people as more continuous with nature, and thereby less civilized, less human, and less entitled to land than Europeans. On the other hand, were we to recruit the notion of catastrophe to a *re*imagined ontology of history, following Benjamin,

opportunities for change or "redemption" may present themselves. Thinking about the figure of catastrophe *beyond* the tight bounds of Howard's evocation may even present an opportunity to think about the wound inflicted by colonization upon cultures and peoples – and moreover, to think *through* to something that might be found on the 'other side of catastrophe,' so to speak. For, while for many colonized peoples "catastrophe" marks a suspended time after which temporality seemed to come to an end and "nothing happened" (Lear, 2006), the concept of catastrophe may also present a way to reconstitute the present in its relation to the past, through attempts to embody culture that continue to reflect upon and interpret the present.

What Benjamin's discourse of catastrophe enables is the hope that there might be a different kind of intervention: a way of being situated *ecstatically* within history, conceived as integrally prone to disruption and unpredictable turns. This is a particularly fitting approach for a national history such as Australia's, which, as a settler colony, is founded on disruption and haunted by the portent of its return. By refiguring history as catastrophic, Benjamin places into question the political privilege afforded by the predominant conception of history as a seamless continuity of cause and effect. Benjamin was concerned that the notion of inevitable progress, which had taken hold of the modern historical imagination, left humanity bereft of the conceptual resources needed for revolutionary action: if history represents progress, then it not only vindicates the victors, but also leaves those who struggle without a means of imagining and enacting change.

Significantly, the very same language that in Howard's argot of denial separates indigenous disadvantage from human agency – the divine imagery of

the "hand of God" and of catastrophe – in *Benjamin's* system, brings into play the potential for intervention and activism on the part of the participants of that history. Far from authorizing intervention by those nominally seen to be 'outside' of the NT situation – who assume the role of the sovereign – Benjamin's historical "messianism," as we shall see, brings into acute focus the responsibility of those involved in the present to redress injustices done in the past, and empowers them to bring its lessons to bear in the future.

The "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1968) represents Benjamin's effort to make sense of the failure of the left to counter the rise of Nazism. The image in the quotation that heads this section – of history as a catastrophic heap of wreckage and the angel of history as paralyzed by the idea of progress – demonstrates the helplessness of a historical materialism that invests hope in a *future* redemption (Benjamin, 1968: IX, 257). In the shadow of the monstrous progress of that apparently inevitable movement, Benjamin refigures history in the image of the "state of emergency," which, he argues, is not the *exception* – in which is invested the authority of the sovereign (pace Schmitt, 1985) – but rather, the *rule*. He thereby also refigures redemption so that it occurs not in the future, but rather, the past, through the agency of a reimagined historical materialism that is able to "stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (1968: IX, 257). Benjamin's method here is to exploit the catastrophe as an occasion to reconnect to moments of the past that had apparently been lost to the victors' interpretation of history.

This awakening of the dead – an arch rebuke to Marx's advice in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* to let the dead bury their dead[8] – can only take place, according to Benjamin, at a "moment of danger," through an attention to the past

that flashes up as images in response to the exigencies of the present:

> To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'… It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. (Benjamin, 1968: VI, 255)

What this portentous passage signals is that the past, rather than being fixed and "dead," is continually subject to renewed attempts at reinterpretation and re-appropriation. Through the agency of Benjamin's reworked historical materialism, formations or "images" from the past that resonate with the present situation can bring about disruption to what would otherwise be considered as the normal, continuous course of history – that is, a past already stamped by its cooption by the ruling class. Benjamin's conception of history, then, both enables alternative understandings of our relationship to the past, *and* reconceives *the present* as an uncanny site of interruption (instead of the Aristotelian complete and immaculate plenitude).

It is here in this interrupted present that postcolonial Australia now finds itself. Suspended between conflicting interpretations of the past, between the apprehension of guilt and of responsibility, between apology and reconciliation, Australia as a nation finds itself at a sovereign moment of decision: to continue down a road that suppresses its violent history and leads inevitably to deeper tensions, or to take on board that the nation is constituted upon an abyss – the "*terra nullius*" on which Australian sovereignty stakes its claim. We can

understand this as a moment of danger that opens to change, however, only if we revisit the past with eyes attuned to darkness, newly receptive to obscured interpretations and potentialities.

We can approach this temporal disturbance of settler subjectivity through contemplation of the calendar seasons that continue to overlay, in profoundly discordant fashion, the diverse ecologies of this continent. Indigenous "seasons" are distinguished according to the movements of flora and fauna, rain and wind, and groups of people, who are socially organized not only in terms of territory, but also temporally: according to a cycle of activity through which obligations to land are honored. Conversely, Anglo-Australians steadfastly retain a European calendar that is insensible of the local climate and rhythms. We might approach this in the light of Benjamin's description of "calendar time," where he writes that calendars do not "measure time like clocks do" (1968: XV, 261). They are, rather "monuments of a historical consciousness" through which "it is the same day that keeps recurring," that is, which is enabled to return to awareness (Ibid.). This repetition of the same allows an access to the past that deepens the present, as its meaning to our lives is embodied through ritual. Benjamin referred here to Jewish holy days, and the survival of Jewish culture through the annual re-reading of the Torah (Gibbs, 2005: 201). Such renewal of culture by means of its cyclical commemoration connects us to tradition, and may equally take place through regularly recurring hunting rites, conferences (corroborees), and the inter-generational transmission of narrative (or Songlines).

Consequently, the introduction of a *new* calendar – Benjamin cites the July Revolution – attempts to explode the continuum of history (Benjamin, 1968: XV, 261), and thereby to disrupt and reorganize the orienting touchstones of any

given culture. The colonial project in Australia involved such a transformative intervention, or project of deracination. The 'new calendar' enacted a blanket transplantation of "little England," complete with Christmas trees and roast dinners in the middle of summer, and the celebration of the Christian Spring festival in Autumn. This connects settlers to traditions embedded in the European calendar, and so enables them to maintain a relationship to the past and to "home," in an act of remembrance that is both comforting and melancholic. The national calendar has since been supplemented by holidays that consolidate the connection to England (e.g., the Queen's birthday), and which further monumentalize the assumed legitimacy of colonialism. The annual celebration of Australia Day on the anniversary of the proclamation of British sovereignty is the most contentious of these, and its Aboriginal monikers, "Invasion" or "Survival" Day, attempt to critique and transform its significance. Insofar as culture and tradition is maintained through the cyclical commemoration of holidays, colonization expresses itself, then, in the form of an uncanny calendar that both remembers its existence in a past elsewhere, and actively forgets that which was in place here before it.

In truth, then, the English calendar not only serves to establish a new culture; but it also attempts to obliterate aboriginal cultures, temporalities, and traditions. To the extent that colonization disrupted traditional practice, the settler group also forced a rupture in the temporal experience of those whose lands they appropriated. As Jonathan Lear has argued with reference to the Crow Nation of the Yellowstone valley in America, the catastrophe of settler colonization, whereby peoples are removed from their lands and meaning-giving practices, can produce a prevailing experience of time having stopped and events

no longer happening (Lear, 2006). This experience (or destruction of experience) is certainly reflected in NT remote communities, where for many there is literally nothing to do that would contribute to the kind of broader framework of significance that meaningfully structures lives and identities.

This is the catastrophe that belies the set of circumstances characterized by the Federal government as such in 2007: a catastrophe that has been extraordinarily detrimental but which, contra Lear, I would contend is not absolute, as vestiges of traditional meaning-giving frameworks remain in practice, ready to return again, calendar-like, to reconstitute a life-world. Through the study of history, in league with an attention to the present, we may identify these fragments and bring them back into circulation.

For aboriginal people, cultural meaning is traditionally constituted and elaborated through relationships of obligation between a people and their country, as well as to ancestors. Separating people from their land and mixing them with other groups on missions disrupted these relationships of obligation. The enforcement of Christian ritual and prohibition of the practice of traditional rites prescribed a loss of cultural identity as a path to spiritual salvation. And critical to the Christian mission was the inculcation of proletarian work habits that embodied the biblical working week, and rigidly-observed "clock time" (Donaldson, 1996).

Because Aboriginal workers attempted to adapt the temporality of the working week to obligations to country, they were stereotyped as lazy, prone to "go walkabout," and as cunningly aversive of labor (Donaldson, 1996; Reynolds, 1989: 128). Through such adaptation, however, indigenous temporalities and ways of life were sustained (Donaldson, 1996). As long as some indigenous

people continue to observe these subversive temporalities, the metaphysics of time and history remains a political issue today. Politicians are still prepared to criticize aboriginal people who pursue traditional relationships to land, as Amanda Vanstone did in 2005, accusing them of being 'museum exhibits': anachronisms who are maladapted to modern Australia, and the imperative of progress that it embodies. Arguably, then, the Dreaming retains its relevance and potency not only as a life-world, but also as a strategy of political resistance.

In this pursuit, Benjamin's invocation of history as a tool of political struggle takes on a deeper significance. Benjamin famously wrote that the "past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption" (II, 254). This past is recovered through an interpretive practice that searches the interstices of the victors' history for images that might explode that history's privilege. This historical method reads for a suppressed past: an experience of suffering that had been deemed inconsequential, or a trajectory of liberation that had been obscured and cut short. It is that past which is thought to be lost to history, but which, by virtue of what Benjamin calls "a *weak* messianic power" (Ibid.) might be resurrected: *remembered* through our own struggles, and so come to exert an enduring, critical influence on the present. Benjamin's wager is that by means of an attention to the experiences of history's subjugated peoples, new possibilities and strategies may emerge in the present. Benjamin finds hope for the future in the connection between those who presently struggle and their brothers and sisters of past generations. As he puts this, rather more poetically:

As flowers turn towards the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history. A

historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all

transformations. (IV, 255)

The task of the "historical materialist," then, is to read for moments of the past

that are reflected in the present, and to bring them to bear on action before they

recede again from view. Crucially, these opportunities to resurrect the past occur

when they are most needed, flashing "up at a moment of danger" (VI, 255). An

event or epoch presents itself as "a moment of danger" where its significance is

up for grabs, to be claimed by one or other historical interpretation. To prevent

the moment from returning to history's victors, new interpretations of the past

must be produced; and memories brought to the light of day with the potential to

"wrest tradition away from ... conformism" (Ibid.), and so to present alternative

solutions, and ways of living together. The creative retrieval of a repressed

history in the present comprehends, for Benjamin, the meaning of redemption.

This involves a human agency, however: that of the "historical materialist," who

"brushes history against the grain" (VII, 257), or against the conservative re-

appropriation of the past to established power. Justice belongs to a potentiality

in the past that is yet to be fully realized, and that waits to be awakened by

present need – and by those who take responsibility for it.

Benjamin's view of history – as a series of open possibilities that connect

to the present, rather than fully realized actualities closed to further revision –

may aid a comprehension of Australia's present moment. Our here-and-now

might be prevented from folding into a mere repetition of the same colonial

future were we to take seriously Benjamin's imperative to remain responsible

for, and *responsive to*, the past. Such responsiveness may be approached through

what he terms a *Stillstellung*, or zero-hour, where in a moment of danger

"thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions" (XVII, 262).

The invention of catastrophic aboriginal life presents an opportunity for there to

be a new event: a suppressed past hailed to the present to engender a new

relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. To awaken

this suppressed past and give it a new life, however, we would need to upset

received accounts of the emergence of this present. In particular we would need

to brush against the grain of the victor's account of inequality between

Aboriginal and white Australians: that it is a catastrophe emerging from

indigenous people's nature, and disconnected from white advantage.

In place of a militarized emergency response we would, following

Benjamin, need to engage in a practice of "remembrance," understood as the

resurrection of an overlooked past in present experience. Specifically, what

"remembrance" recalls is a mode of experience that has been refused or

annihilated by the victors: certainly the massacres, the stealing of children,

stolen wages, and stolen lands – a history that implicates us inter-generationally

by virtue of the benefits we derive in the present on the basis of this history.

Especially in the context of the continued colonial violence in the NT, such

remembrance is apposite. "Moments of danger" such as the NT intervention may

then be seized as *Stillstellungen*, intervals of reflection and possibility. Such

moments could produce flashes of remembrance that connect us most vividly to

previous colonial violence, but also to a secret kinship with those from the past

whose actions fleetingly brought into view the promise of reconciliation or

reckoning. Rather than consolidating representations of aboriginal people as

both subject and resigned to catastrophe, the situation of NT communities in

peril could provoke remembrances of aberrant recognitions of indigenous culture, ingenuity and sovereignty.

Thus the historian would – like Benjamin's historical materialist – brush against the grain of history, picking up threads that do not fit to the dominant reading of the relationship between settlers and Australia's original people. Remembrance of Batman's treaty, for instance – as well as the massacre that succeeded it (Attwood, 2009) – could provide material for a future that builds on these elective affinities. It would be incumbent upon Australians to attempt to interpret these dual moments, of treaty and betrayal, in terms of a present that is similarly characterized: in which governments regularly exchange a discourse of aid with one of 'individual responsibility,' leaving indigenous people feeling belittled and betrayed in turn.[9] A less ambivalent instance is Royal Marines officer William Dawes's friendship with Gadigal people at first contact, promoted by Kate Grenville's fictionalized account in 2008. That Dawes's notebooks now form the basis of a revival of Gadigal language is one such encounter with the past.[10] Were Australia to confront the implications its colonial origins, the return to negotiate treaties with NT communities in recognition of their prior sovereignty might become another such encounter with the pregnant possibilities of history.

A task that is perhaps more difficult to imagine is the remembrance of a temporally elaborated life-world that *resists* the history through which settler Australians have been privileged, to find again its revolutionary energy (see Mosès, 13). Benjamin's "messianic" approach to comprehending temporality, which recruits Jewish theology to historical materialism, also finds surprising cognates in the indigenous temporalities that have been suppressed by

colonization. In a passage that uncannily doubles Benjamin's advice to the historian, Mike Donaldson writes of traditional aboriginal conceptions of time:

> History, present and intimate, was not about events and persons strung like beads through time, but about the past containing the present, and the present representing the past in accordance with the Dreamtime law. Time was enveloping. (193)

Likewise, Benjamin's historian, enacting remembrance, "stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary" (1968: A, 263). Each of these conceptions places into question the linear model of time, for which one moment follows inevitably from the last, pulled along by the irresistible force of progress as if moments were beads threaded on a string. This latter conception of clock time forms the consciousness of the temporally disordered colonial. Divided into empty, homogenous units for the measurement of labor, and driven by thoughts of human progress, this sense of time engenders a mode of life that imagines itself able to separate from previous generations and from ties to land. It is thus also a conception of time that cannot recognize indigenous ways of life, embedded as they are in precisely these affinities. Benjamin's messianic time emphasizes intergenerational obligation as a *catalyst* for change, and to this extent dovetails with indigenous conceptions of time, understood as a repertoire of temporally elaborated responsibilities to land and people.

Importantly, this obligation of remembrance does not entail a simple identification with aboriginal people. Rather, there is a need to take account of one's privilege with respect to the "movement" of history – and most critically, to

acknowledge the extent to which one's freedom is supported by others' struggles. The inheritance of settler colonialism thereby involves a redoubled effort to brush against the grain of history: reading for the contingencies of one's advantage, in terms both of the circumstances of colonialism and the reorganization of temporality that has conditioned these circumstances. For *the victor* to enact responsibility to a suppressed past, then, would involve a recognition that indigenous temporalities have existed alongside European clocks and calendars in Australia all along – and moreover, *as a form of resistance*. It would involve questioning representations of Aboriginal people as undifferentiated from nature, savage or work-averse; and it would involve creating a space for the pursuit of a life that enables people to fulfill their traditional obligations – not only in remote communities, but also in urban factories and offices, through the recognition of traditional obligations supported by special leave entitlements in workplace agreements, for instance.

The view that aboriginal life is an impoverished humanity that has failed to overcome nature – that it is in some sense *pre-political* or outside of human history – is as old as colonization itself. It is also this view that informs representations of aboriginal communities as akin to natural disaster, and motivates calls for an emergency response in preference to facing the political and historical complexities of endemic disadvantage, and white Australians' complicity in it. As the Hobbesian state of nature rhetorically verges into natural disaster, we might reflect not only on the political implications of identifying aboriginal people with nature, but also on non-indigenous people's disarticulated relationship to the environmental rhythms that impinge upon our lives despite attempts at disavowal. Consciousness of our temporal homelessness could

operate as an equivocal interval akin to Benjamin's *Stillstellung*, enabling the constellation of past, present and future to become visible. It presents an opportunity to reinterpret the past *with* those who have been subjugated by colonialism, and thereby to jam the apparatus that incessantly reproduces the effects of colonial violence by reducing aboriginal people to artifacts of nature rather than subjects of their own history.

Notes

1. There is a tension between (at least) three senses of 'state of nature' that operate in the text of Howard's speech to produce multiple and co-constitutive meanings: (1) the Hobbesian sense that he cites, more or less deliberately, to a mythical, pre-political natural state of humanity; (2) simply, social disorderliness; and (3) in Agamben's sense, a condition that is produced politically, of having been abandoned by law, and in which life itself comes to be the site of power relations (biopower). My contention would be that there is a slippage between these meanings in Howard's usage of that phrase, regardless of what he took himself to mean by it, and that while these different senses are, in turn, emphasized and de-emphasized, together they overdetermine the meaning of aboriginality as a state of nature (all at once pre-political/disordered/abandoned). Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for urging me to clarify this.

2. The Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) was triggered by an interview on the national broadcaster, ABC, with Crown Prosecutor Nanette

Rogers, who sensationally claimed that men in remote Aboriginal communities were sexually abusing children unchecked. See http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2006/s1639127.htm (accessed 29 July 2013).

3. "Many Australians, myself included, looked aghast at the failure of the American federal system of government to cope adequately with Hurricane Katrina and the human misery and lawlessness that engulfed New Orleans in 2005. We should have been more humble. We have our Katrina, here and now. That it has unfolded more slowly and absent the hand of God should make us humbler still." (Howard)

4. Engineers remarked that the infrastructure in the Mississippi was so degraded and poorly planned that a disaster like this was not only foreseen, but also inevitable (ASCE, 2007). The sociological dimensions of the disaster – in particular the disproportionate distribution of suffering according to race and class – has also been studied (Dynes & Rodriguez, 2010).

5. What is commonly known as the "NT Intervention" was enacted in Parliament as the "Northern Territory Emergency Response," and was supported by both major political parties. The "Emergency Response" deployed army personnel, doctors, health workers, police and social workers, much as any natural disaster would. However, by suspending the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA), this legislation also authorized a raft of interventions by the state, including: the prohibition of alcohol and pornography; quarantining (for welfare recipients) of 50% of their benefit, which could then only be spent at particular stores, sometimes hundreds of miles from where people lived; removal of the permit

system whereby Aboriginal people controlled who could access their land; abolition of the government-funded Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP); mandatory schooling in English rather than their own language for Aboriginal children; compulsory acquisition of land, and the requirement that communities lease land to the government in exchange for basic services; the subjection of Aboriginal children to mandatory health check, without consultation with parents.

6. I am conscious that the resort to an 'us' and 'them' configuration here risks effectively erasing differences between indigenous cultures as well as the diverse migrant populations the constitute the contemporary Australian Nation. My intention is to reflect a division that operates ontologically to entrench disadvantage, inherent to the settler-colonial mindset. There is a vague antipathy for 'them' because they are not supposed to exist, according to that *Weltanschauung*. The movement beyond that structure is therefore necessary for there to be any semblance of reconciliation in Australia.

7. Simon Lumsden argues against a simplistic interpretation of Hegel's philosophy of history in "Hegel, Habit, and World History" (unpublished at the time of writing). Here he argues that Hegel's philosophy of history describes how cultural processes are embodied through the flow and atrophy of particular 'shapes of life,' being fundamentally concerned with how these 'shapes of life' collapse and transition into new 'shapes of life.' Such a process, far from being linear and teleological, is intimately connected to a specific cultural context. Notwithstanding these refinements of understanding Hegel, the

misinterpretation of his philosophy of history as teleological has been extremely influential, and encapsulates well the settler-colonial mindset.

8. "The social revolution of the nineteenth century can not draw its poetry from the past, it can draw that only from the future. It cannot start upon its work before it has stricken off all superstition concerning the past. Former revolutions required historic reminiscences in order to intoxicate themselves with their own issues. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to reach its issue" (Marx, 1905: 7).

9. The personal responsibility approach to Aboriginal affairs has been co-sponsored by indigenous leader Noel Pearson and John Howard, who both advocate home ownership and a Western understanding of rights and responsibilities as a pathway out of welfare dependency. See Noel Pearson, 2000. There has been a great deal of critique of the implicit individualism of this approach, however. See Foley, 2007; Cronin, 2007; and Maddison, 2009. On theorizing sites of aboriginal resistance and agency, see Nakata, 2003 and Birch, 2003.

10. See also Bell, 2003.

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