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'This Is Not a Day for You'Barry Morris
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Anzac's Shadow
March: 'This Is Not a
Day for You'

Barry Morris

Barry Morris is
Conjoint Senior
Lecturer in
sociology and
anthropology at the
University of
Newcastle.**Challenging the Anzac account of the birth of a nation**

Since 2011 an unofficial 'lest we forget the frontier wars march' has taken place in Canberra: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal supporters march in the wake of the official Anzac parade carrying placards and banners recording massacre sites throughout Australia. This march has taken shape at a time when the Australian War Memorial (AWM) has rejected calls to acknowledge Australia's colonial frontier wars, and this in the context of a major shift in the meaning of Anzac commemoration.

Anzac has come to be used as a vehicle of nationalism, with a much-increased role for the state, as witnessed in the extravagant funding of the 100th-anniversary Anzac commemorations (\$600 million) and the refurbishment of the AWM (\$500 million). Anzac has become incorporated into state agendas in a way that it never was before. The original historical experience of grief and commemoration, and more spontaneous popular organisation around the meaning of Anzac, has been almost wholly superseded.

Ironically, the shadow march not only ruptures the logic of the Anzac narrative about the 'spirit of the Anzac' bequeathing the nation its unique qualities and characteristics but also speaks to the older significance of Anzac memorialisation. The shadow march asserts a counter-memory of the silenced historical experience of Aboriginal people in Australia, and signals something more than a struggle for recognition or incorporation into the mainstream celebration. Its silent, solemn commemoration bears witness to acts of violence beyond recognition.

My interest in the frontier wars march was aroused by reports of the event in 2015. An Australian Federal Police (AFP) senior officer expressed his disapproval to those assembled ready to march, saying, 'This is not a day for you'—the national day of paying homage to the 'fallen'. Then, after a scuffle during the march, officers were filmed demanding that NITV footage be confiscated as evidence. In the exchange that followed between a reporter and the officers, disapproval turned to mockery and derision, with the officer asking why the reporter 'would want to record the march' for the Indigenous broadcaster. When the reporter responded by asking if he was to be arrested, the officer replied, 'No, unfortunately, stupidity is not illegal'. Disapproval and derision—to act remained the prerogative of those who exercise ultimate authority.

The media coverage of the unofficial march described it as a 'protest' and its participants as 'activists' and 'protestors', but the organisers have, since the inception of the march, stressed that it is not a protest but rather a

silent commemoration of the thousands of Indigenous men, women and children who died defending their country, were massacred, or were victims of dispossession and removal from ancestral lands.

Ghillar Michael Anderson, an organiser of the event, asked in the *Canberra Times* why the AFP had turned 'this normally peaceful event into an ugly confrontation'. The apparent arbitrariness of the police response no doubt reflects something of the marginal status of Aboriginal people in their struggle for a more meaningful place in the social and political life of the nation—within and against the broader national narrative. But the frontier wars march and reactions to it expose more deep-seated issues involving complex questions about the relationship of Aboriginal people to the settler state and its claims of sovereignty over their lives.

Challenging the dominant narrative

The contradictions of liberal democracies in settler-colonial states are made clearly visible when Indigenous communities challenge state claims to absolute sovereignty. The assumption of homogeneity of judicial, political and territorial sovereignty is called into question. By contrast, the accommodation of degrees of cultural difference ('we [Australia] are the most successful multicultural nation') can largely take place without institutional reform and falls more readily into a social compact around tolerance and civic responsibility.

Likewise, where there is acknowledgement of preexisting Indigenous rights as mandated through the courts, this effectively mollifies Aboriginal land claims that might unsettle the prevailing national institutional order. Alternative narratives that speak of more diverse sovereignties find themselves set against the institutional and territorial imperatives of political life that permit only one absolute authority.

Thus, since the first attempts to recognise native title as land rights, efforts to explain and redress the effects of Australia's violent past have confronted unilateral executive action by federal parliament to defeat anything that challenged the absolute sovereignty of the nation state. For example, the Howard government (1996–2007) set about passing legislation for what then deputy prime minister and National Party leader Tim Fischer

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promised would bring about ‘bucket loads of extinguishment [of Native Title]’. The polemic directed at native-title legislation and the rights of native-title holders to veto was symptomatic of governments’ historical dealings with Indigenous peoples. Prime Minister Howard called the Mabo ruling ‘a stupid property right’ rather than seeing the ruling as acknowledgement of retroactive Indigenous rights. Politically redefined, Indigenous rights fall outside of history, to be explained as the High Court’s unwarranted and misguided extension of British property rights, which required urgent parliamentary redress. The High Court rulings in *Mabo* and *Wik* quickly spiralled into a national issue about the impending menace of Indigenous rights and the nation’s future.

The issues involved in attempts at institutional reform are evident too around calls for the AWM to incorporate a gallery dedicated to the frontier wars. Historical accounts developed over the last half century have extensively documented the violence associated with the frontier wars carried both in the knowledge of the Aboriginal communities themselves and in historical records.

A substantial body of historical evidence testifies to the violent frontier that was an outcome of the settler colonies’ rapid pastoral expansion. The evidence is longstanding, cumulative and ongoing. Recent research by Lyndall Ryan, at the Centre of the History of Violence, has carefully compiled a map of massacre locations, recording some 150 sites on the east coast of Australia (2017); see also the *Guardian*’s current ‘Killing Times’ project. Yet appeals for formal recognition of the frontier wars has been dismissed by the AWM. Director Brendan Nelson, responding to a question at the National Press Club in 2013, said:

...the Australian War Memorial is not, in my very strong view, the institution to tell that story. The Australian War Memorial, as I say, is about Australians going overseas in peace operations and in war in our name as Australians. The institution that is best to tell those stories, in my view, is the National Museum of Australia and perhaps some of the state-based institutions who [sic] are most likely to have whatever artefacts or relics that exist from this period in our history.

Nelson’s ‘this is not a place for you’ reply effectively excludes the frontier wars from the charter of the AWM. In the same speech, he stated that ‘the Australian War Memorial, in my view, represents the soul of our nation’. Nelson’s alternative to the AWM—the national or state museums—gives some credence to the mistaken claim by Aboriginal Australians that they were classified under the flora and fauna act in the Constitution as non-human until the 1967 referendum. Such a belief may capture more

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accurately the inhumane, oppressive and discriminatory treatment that Aboriginal Australians endured under many parliamentary acts.

The frontier wars march addresses the absences and omissions that official commemorative ceremonies reproduce, rejecting the unity of the sovereign law that imposes obligations on Aboriginal people. As Ghillar Michael Anderson put it:

With the ANZAC memorial, they're saying that people went to war to defend their freedoms, to have a free future. What our people were doing was defending their own future, their own rights to country. They didn't want to be invaded. They were invaded. As a consequence of that we must remember the dead and the blood that was shed in defence of the land, just as they argue other wars were in defence of their freedom and their land.

Anderson is asserting the presence of an Indigenous population that exercised a political authority that existed prior to, and contradicts, state sovereignty claims to legitimate authority.

In recent years, the long-overlooked service of the so-called Black Diggers has been acknowledged and commemorated. This marks an end to a long history of rejection. Their incorporation was highlighted in the invitation to lead Canberra's Anzac Day March in 2017 in recognition of their status as veterans. The body of literature around Black Diggers reveals that, when they returned from service, they were subject to the same racism, rejection and oppressive government legislation that they had always endured. For example, land grants offered to returned soldiers under soldier-resettlement schemes excluded Black Diggers and, in some cases, involved the selling off of Aboriginal reserve lands. Remuneration for war service was also frequently denied to Black Diggers, and few gained entry to Returned and Services League clubs. Nevertheless, the recent revisions highlight reconciliation coextensive with the commonality of the national interest. Here, reconciliation is possible only for those who fought for Australia rather than those who struggled against Australian colonisation.

Similarly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans have a pseudo-official Canberra memorial (1991), set up and sponsored by volunteers, that remains outside the AWM. An Anzac Day service has developed at the site, which is now managed by members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans and Services Association for 'Remembering the Aboriginal people who served in the Australian forces'. (The focus on 'those who served' rather than the 'fallen', has increasingly gained emphasis in the televised capital-city commemorative speeches following the deaths of the last Gallipoli and Great War veterans.) There is a fundamental difference here when Aboriginal interests are deemed to be coextensive with those of the state. Long-overdue recognition of the Black Diggers engages in an act of reconciliation and is an attempt to improve the equality of relations, but

the institutional structure of relations is not changed in any significant way.

'A moderation of bitter earnestness'

There are echoes of earlier configurations of Anzac in the unofficial site set up and sponsored by volunteers to commemorate the Black Diggers. On Mt Ainslie, in the shadow of the AWM, a separate Indigenous ceremony is held after the official dawn service has concluded. In the aftermath of the Great War, Anzac services were the result of voluntary efforts by committees and organisations in cities and towns across the nation. As K. S. Inglis observed in *Sacred Places* (2005), the cost and construction of war memorials bore the imprint of the local community, as they were funded by public subscription. According to Inglis, some 4000 to 5000 memorials stand in public places.

In this earlier configuration, Anzac commemorations and war memorials can be distinguished from expressions of state nationalism. Anzac initially largely took form in local responses to tragedy: in affective connections to the trauma of war. As Hans Blumenberg aptly puts it in *Work on Myth* (1985), the commemorations are 'a moderation of bitter earnestness' beyond recognition—that is, a 'manifestation of an overcoming, of the gaining of a distance' from what was a profound loss on a national scale.

The solemn reflection in the shadow march is commensurate with the sentiment that followed the catastrophic loss and suffering of the Great War, which has to some degree lost emphasis in recent years. The slaughter of a whole generation of youth crystallised into its most poignant expression in a singular event, that of the Gallipoli landings in the Dardanelles, at Anzac Cove. In this respect, like Bruce Kapferer in *Legends of People, Myths of State* (1988), I stress the sacrificial structure of the Anzac rite and its commemorations. The Anzac memorials were sites of commemoration and remembrance but also a principal locus of a terrible mourning for those who died and were buried in foreign lands.

The shadow march involves a similar element of solemn observance that carries the tragic legacy of brutal destruction through colonisation and the incalculable loss that befell Australia's Indigenous peoples as a consequence of their violent dispossession. It is here that institutional exclusion and erasure from the national narrative has profound consequences. The nation state's ongoing refusal to acknowledge the violence and death associated with the frontier wars places that experience beyond the limits of recognition. 'Beyond recognition' is more than a failure to incorporate the history of violence; it also denies any official public space to 'moderate the bitter earnestness' of a violent colonial past and its cumulative suffering beyond recognition. In the 'lest we forget the frontier wars march', in Kelly Oliver's terms (2001), 'those othered by the dominant culture are seeking not only, or even primarily, recognition but also witnessing to something beyond recognition...'. **a**

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