Historiography and non-Western pasts

This special issue of *Postcolonial Studies* brings together essays by six scholars of diverse interests and backgrounds—a historian-anthropologist of the Pacific, an anthropologist-historian of indigenous Australia, a social theorist, a philosopher of history, and two of the founding editors of this journal who are also historians of India. What they have in common is that the nature of their intellectual work involves them in writing the history of those who do not necessary live 'in' history, or to put it another way, that they write histories, of the modern, 'rational' type, of peoples who would often not recognize themselves or their pasts in these histories—but who, needless to say, have their own way(s) of relating, and relating to, their pasts. We wagered that it would prove interesting and productive to bring together, in a workshop,[1] those who in the course of their writing had reflected upon this fact and made it an integral part of their intellectual practice. That is, to bring together those who in connection with their own various subject matters have asked questions such as: When you write a history or ethnography of those who treat gods, spirits and ancestors as historical actors and as living contemporaries, is it adequate to 'anthropologize' these and treat them merely as 'evidence' of their subjects' 'beliefs'? Is there any reason to accord modern historiography epistemic privilege, treating it as superior to so-called myth, epic, legend and the Dreaming? What is the epistemic status of these and other modes of thinking and representing the past? Are these and modern historiography simply 'incommensurable', or is it possible to write historiography and do ethnography in ways that are dialogic, such that our categories for understanding the past encounter rather than write over and subsume those of others?

The first two essays in this collection practise the writing of history whilst meditating on what it is that they are doing, and how it might be done differently. Greg Dening offers a phenomenology of the past—the past, not as books and 'Theory and Method' classes, but as 'a common, everyday phenomenon . Everyperson's fine sense of the poetics of their history making' This, he suggests, is how the Pacific or Polynesian peoples—the Sea Peoples of the Sea Islands, in his (and their) preferred description—conceived of their own historicity, which they re-presented and re-lived by telling stories, by dancing them and by ritual memorialization. He examines a map made by Tupaia, priest of 'Oro in modern Tahiti, for Captain Cook, of 147 islands in the Sea of Islands. This was a subject of Dening's early work, when, as a young scholar, more than half a century ago, he sought to show that the traditional legends of Pacific islanders, recounting how they (in the absence of any navigational technology) voyaged and settled their islands, were perfectly plausible; that Tupaia's map was not pure myth. Now, as an older and very distinguished historian of the Pacific, he returns to this map in a different

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vein, suggesting that if historians and anthropologists, who live other people's pasts so vicariously, are capable of humility and respect, they can see the map for what it manifestly is, 'a stilled moment in the phenomenology of a 2000 year past', can see it as a metaphor—as is all history—that gives voice to the past and conjoins it to the present. The end result is a meditation, in luminous prose, on history not simply as something that happened, but as a mode of collective being and belonging.

Deborah Bird Rose is also concerned with exploring alternative ways of engaging the past, and, in doing so, with remaining open to thinking 'the historical' as—in Heidegger's words—'not only something from which one gets information, and about which there are books; … [but] much more, what we ourselves are, that which we bear'.[2] Rose is additionally concerned to develop an ecological understanding which recognizes the relational and intersubjective nature of the link between humans and what some humans have learned to regard as a disenchanted nature, an object to be known and manipulated. These two concerns come together through the stories that have been told to her by her aboriginal teachers in Australia's Northern Territory, stories that are accounts of the past directed toward the present, and stories which, in her retelling and reading of them, seek not only to break colonial frames of understanding, but in so doing also 'break the frames of western historiography'.

In these stories dingoes and trees figure not as part of a 'nature' that is separate from humans, but rather 'are uniquely connected to humans as Dreaming ancestors and contemporary kin'. The personhood of one of her aboriginal teachers and interlocutors, Daly Pilbara, is, she explains, 'situated in country and in time; it is situated in the ongoing generations of trees and people who hold in their lives and in their actions the power of the life that has been and is still coming'. Thus when the white-barked eucalyptus trees near a homestead in the Northern Territory are chainsawed, it is a double destruction—ecological vandalism that is also the destruction of Dreaming trees where a fish Dreaming known as Jajiki had transformed into trees. And if, Rose asks, 'the relationship between past and present lies in ongoing generational partnerships among living beings', how can the relationship continue—how can there be 'history'? As Daly Pulkara says in sorrow and anger, when confronted by the massacred trees, 'we'll run out of history, because Whitefellas fuck the Law up, and they're knocking all the power out of this country'. In Latour-esque style, Rose's essay mixes trees, chainsaws and dingoes, science and Dreaming, philosophy and stories, to make a powerful argument and plea for thinking the past in a way which is open to the Other and, in so being, also involves a different mode of engaging and inhabiting the Earth.

The next two essays are concerned with the uses and abuses of history—with what history-writing can and cannot do, and with its social effects. Dipesh Chakrabarty asks what role professional history can play in public life, at a time when history is increasingly used to ground identities and mobilized in claims for dignity, resources and social justice. In contemporary India, as Chakrabarty shows, there has been a proliferation of combative