

TONY BIRCH

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### **‘Promise not to tell’: Interrogating Colonialism’s worst (or best) kept secrets**

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Tony Birch's most recent essays include 'Surveillance, Identity and Historical Memory in Ivan Sen's *Beneath Clouds*'; 'Empires, Ruins and Networks: The Transcultural Agenda in Art', edited by Scott McQuire and Nikos Papastergiadis, Melbourne University Press, 2005, and 'Death is forgotten in victory: Colonial landscapes and narratives of emptiness', in *Object Lessons Archaeology & Heritage in Australia*, edited by Jane Lydon and Tracy Ireland, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2005. Tony Birch also publishes poetry and short fiction. His first novel, *Shadowboxing*, will be published by Scribe Publications in March 2006. Tony currently teaches in the English Department with Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne.

#### **Transcript**

There are so many things that we all know that are held as secret in this country, and when the story is revealed, when stories are uncovered - supposedly by the media - we react with shock, as if we have not known of these things.

What I won't talk about today in detail, but a potent example of this, is the Cornelia Rau case: an Australian citizen who was kept in detention for over a year and who suffered torture and great violence in prison. When the media supposedly exposed this secret, we reacted with shock and horror. This seems surprising, considering that I'm sure that all of us knew before this case was exposed, that many, many hundreds, if not thousands, of people are being tortured and suffering violence in our detention centres, but not enough people chose to say enough about it.

The other thing that I want to talk about in brief is something that has been central to the construction of my next book: a novel that will be released in about four weeks. It is the first notion of the public secret that I want us to think about, and it's a public secret that acts at a very local level and a local culture, that is in fact a story of domestic violence. It's a subject that often people shy away from, a subject that is one that is discussed very openly in Australian relationship to indigenous communities, but I think one that the rest of the community needs to understand and think about.

## TONY BIRCH

And I'm going to begin with a reading from the novel - a very short reading - and then explain the basis of this storytelling or this fiction.

### *The Butcher's Wife.*

I was on my way home on the last day of school when I saw her. I was coming out of the corner shop just as she was going in, carrying her baby under her arm. I caught only a glimpse of her face as we passed each other, but I noticed it immediately. I didn't really want to look, yet I found it hard to look away. Her bruises were probably less than a week old and any swelling that she may have suffered had gone and there were no obvious cuts. She'd done a reasonably good job disguising the mottled blue yellow patches around her eyes with a heavy foundation of powder. It was probably the same one my mum used. But the layers of make up never quite did the job. The shadows under the surface always managed to give themselves away. I'd seen the same shadows around my mother's eyes as she waited for me after school on the opposite side of the road from the gate. I took a final look at the butcher's wife... She looked back at me. I'm still not sure why, but I smiled at her. She lowered her eyes at her crying baby while rocking her awkwardly up and down. It was then that I noticed that there was some swelling and a small cut above one eye, a small curved cut. That would have been where she was hit by the edge of a wedding ring. I had also seen that before.

Ok, this work, or this part of the work, is based on a real life event from when I was a very young boy, where a woman in our street, who had suffered many years of domestic violence at the hands of her husband, could not take it anymore - as they say. One night, while her husband was in a drunken sleep, she hit him over the head with a hammer and cut off his head. She cut off his arms and legs and dumped his body all over the suburb that I lived in. A fairly gruesome, but I think appropriate crime.

This is the vacant allotment where the man's torso was found. Even as a young boy I was struck by several things. One is that the secrecy that we all shared about domestic violence in our suburb meant that we never spoke about what was happening in any of the houses that we lived in. So you could go to school and you would go to swimming training and you'd see a boy who had bruises all over his body. You'd ask him about them and he would offer up an excuse as we always do, but you knew without asking what it was that had happened. We would see the bruises on the faces of our mothers, and we would certainly hear the sounds of cries of violence being enacted up and down the street during the night. And what struck me about this case, was that this woman, in committing this violent crime, exposed and shattered this secret so that we all had to face and confront it. Even as a young boy I understood quite clearly what this woman had done, that she had committed an act that would no longer allow us to look away from it again.

Probably one of the things that I would ask us to think about today, as we produce or talk about stories that may form part of this conference, is the vital role of being able to tell stories, being able to share them and not shying away from the difficult stories. People cringe when you talk about or mention even the phrase

## TONY BIRCH

domestic violence, but when you consider the extent to which it is pervasive in Australian society, pervasive in so many societies, it should be a commonly held story and one that should be told. I think in doing that, in telling that story, it offers up the greatest challenge to that crime.

I'll close with a final scene from this segment of the novel and then briefly sum up before I move onto the next session.

In the weeks after the murder people came from all over Melbourne to visit the scene. While there was a lot of talk amongst the women in the street about the forthcoming case, the men remained quiet about the killing. My father appeared particularly shaken by it. After we'd done the shopping one Saturday morning, my mother walked around to Little Charles Street with Katie, I followed behind them. She stood in the street at this vacant allotment. She stood in the street staring at the now heavily bolted gates of the stables. She looked down and studied her own hands and then looked at the two of us. None of us spoke a word whilst standing at the stable door, nor as we walked back home. On the final day of the trial the street anxiously waited for the court's decision. I was sitting in the kitchen eating a salad sandwich for lunch when the news came through. Katie, my sister, burst in the front door yelling, "she got off, she got off." She skipped down the hallway into the kitchen. Mum was at the sink. Katie could not contain her excitement. There are these reporters in the street; one of them is making a story with a camera out front of the house. He's telling everyone in the street that she got off. The butcher's wife is not guilty, not guilty. I looked across at Mum. She turned around and wiped her hands on the apron and then she smiled, briefly enough for Katie and me to see it. She looked down at her hands and then out of the window into the yard.

And I suppose the final point on that story is that in real life and in fiction, the woman who had cut her husband's head off was found not guilty. A remarkable outcome for 1963 and one that I would say would not happen today. In fact we've regressed I think in the courts in relationship issues of domestic violence, which again I think adds weight to the need to have these stories told and not to be ashamed of them. I think this woman still paid an enormous price for having us confront each other, but a price that I think, I hope - in the telling of her story through fiction - I've been able to recover some dignity for this woman.

The second issue is of public secrecy: the one that's mentioned in the preamble. It is much more an issue of national secrecy, but something that I'd say is not really a secret at all. And this revolves around the continued inability to confront the deception of selective amnesia and lies that surround the colonial history of Australia. Again, a point that the Prime Minister reiterated in his Australia Day speech. I want to look particularly, in this segment, at how one of my favourite filmmakers Ivan Sen, an Australian filmmaker, an indigenous filmmaker, has dealt with this issue of public secrecy and its effect on indigenous people, by looking at two of his films *Beneath Clouds* and *Dust*. And I'm particularly interested in the way that Sen, in these films, discusses and highlights the impact of colonial secrecy on indigenous elders and indigenous

## TONY BIRCH

youth in particular, in contemporary Australia. The first film I will look at is *Beneath Clouds* and I'll just give you a brief preamble for those who have not seen it.

Ivan Sen's 2002 debut feature *Beneath Clouds* utilises the highway to interrogate the state of race relations between indigenous and non-indigenous Australia. The two central characters of the film, Lena and Vaughan, walk the roads of rural New South Wales and head towards the metropolis of Sydney in search of home. Through their journey, Lena and Vaughan confront both the value and burden of an indigenous identity in Australia. *Beneath Clouds* also interrogates colonial violence in Australia, contemporary and residual, the history and ramifications of which are located in the physical and psychological landscapes of this country. As *Beneath Clouds* illustrates, these sites remain contestable spaces with more colonial than post colonial sensibilities dominating the nation's state

While we're waiting for that first clip to come up, people may remember that I presented this clip at a conference here 18 months ago, *Empires, Ruins + Networks*. I was originally loathe to present it again, because the clip for me is so emotionally empowering that people here may remember I found it difficult to go on after I showed the clip. I did a 'Gwyneth Paltrow' before a group of very well-dressed people, which my mum says is always a bad thing. "Don't show them what you're thinking", she says. But in the clip I particularly want you to pay attention to what Vaughan says. He we go.

[clip transcript]

Vaughan: It's pretty eh? My pop, he used to tell me about that place. The farmers chased all the black fellas up there, a long time ago. They just shot them and pushed them off. And now no one gives a shit. I suppose they've got their own shit to worry about. No wonder she left man. Must know how I was going to turn out. F... criminal for a son.

Lena: Don't be stupid.

Vaughan: Well it's true ain't it?

Lena: My dad left me you know.

Vaughan: How come?

Lena: Mum blames me, reckons he wanted his own life and that.

## TONY BIRCH

Vaughan: Is that what you reckon?

Lena: I don't know.

Vaughan: Never knew any white fellas before, not like you anyway.

Speaker: G'day Vaughan

Speaker: Yeah well hop in there man.

Vaughan: No worries.

Speaker: Hey Vaughan you know your mother's been sick ey?

Vaughan: Yeah.

Speaker: Seen her?

Vaughan: Na just being out fishing.

Speaker: Wouldn't call that f... fishing. Catch any?

Vaughan: No f... all man, only f... carp. Can't even catch a f... feed anymore.

[end clip transcript]

Ok I won't do a 'Gwyneth' today, but it still gets to me to see the three people in that scene looking up at that cliff face. They all know what that landscape contains, they know the history of that place, and in a sense this is the notion that I'm talking about of public secrecy. We all know it. Even if we think we don't know it, we know it. But what occurs in Australia is that people such as the elder represented here, the young people represented here, all indigenous people, carry the burden of public secrecy for the rest of Australia. And I think that what we need to understand is the demoralising effect that this can have on indigenous youth. So again, when the Prime Minister talks about what constitutes the national on Australia Day, he is excluding people and in fact demoralising people through the processes of the stories that he said we should tell. The other issue here is that this contains a version of that clichéd statement, the great Australian silence. And

## TONY BIRCH

again I would hope that in all forms of the potential democratisation of story telling, such as can be achieved through digital story telling, that we can overcome and deal with these silences.

Now the second, and I think even in some ways more remarkable, film in which Ivan Sen deals with this issue is in his short feature *Dust*. *Dust* was produced during the height of the reconciliation frenzy in Australia in 1999. A film that also examines the history and silence narrative contained in the shared landscapes of indigenous and colonial experience. *Dust* focuses on a group of itinerant cotton chippers in rural New South Wales. Most of the workers are young indigenous people with the exception of an indigenous elder Auntie Ruby and a teenage white brother and sister. The film begins by providing a brief insight into the history of the land on which the cotton is grown when a car carrying two young indigenous men, Leroy and his friend Vance, and Auntie Ruby cross a ditch bearing the name Slaughter Creek. Leroy asked his mother, have you been out this way before? Her reply - "I don't think so" - deflects her memory of the violence contained in this landscape. A story and knowledge that will be conveyed with a searing testimony by Auntie Ruby towards the conclusion of the film.

A dramatic shift occurs in *Dust* when Leroy and the white teenage boy Mick have a fistfight over a stolen or allegedly stolen necklace. These young men represent the realities of conflict that continue to exist between indigenous and non-indigenous Australia. While the boys are fighting the cotton field is struck by a fierce dust storm.

[clip transcript]

Leroy:           What you looking at white boy?

Mick:           Where did you get that chain from?

Leroy:           None of your f... business.

Mick:           No it is my f... business you thieving black prick, give it here.

Leroy:           You say you want it?

Mick:           Are you deaf dickhead, I said f... give it here.

Leroy:           F... ya. You want it, come and get it.

## TONY BIRCH

Mick: F... you too.

Leroy: Is that all you white boy?

Mick: Don't worry about that mate.

Leroy: Well come on then.

Mick: You white piece of shit.

Leroy: I'm going to kick your ass white boy.

Mick: Yeah well f... do it dickhead. Come on. You fight like a flaming old woman, you dog. Come on dickhead. Stay still you f... idiot.

Mick: Come on then

Leroy: Come on. Don't you know white boys can't fight me?

Mick: F... asshole.

Leroy: Had enough yet white boy?

Mick: Shit.

Auntie Ruby: Leave him alone.

FIGHTING. CAR DRIVING OFF

Auntie Ruby: Mad things are happening. All around here. They're rounding up your people. Women and kids too. Mad things. Mummy told me a long time ago. Now I tell you they were real people.

[end clip transcript]

## TONY BIRCH

Ok, just to conclude on this second segment, there's not much that needs to be said if you watch the film and follow it, but I think in this scene both Auntie Ruby and the landscape itself have demanded justice from us - the viewer. And I believe it's incumbent upon this gathering of young people as presented by Sen, to listen, absorb what it is that is being spoken. And therefore, I would suggest it's incumbent upon all of us. I'd make an obvious motherhood statement that I think all our stories should be shared and have equal value. If I took the Prime Minister at his word, and we're all equal, it's incumbent upon us to accept and value the stories of each other. I don't think indigenous stories should be given any particular hierarchical status in the story of narrative in this country, but indigenous stories must be recognised first. And they are not recognised. And until that happens it is very difficult for us to accept that we are a democratic country of any sort or that we have any sense of democratisation in regard to story telling. So that is the point I want to make there.

On the third section of this, the concluding section, it is a brief reading, but I'll explain this and how this fits in with what we're doing today. I want to conclude with a reading of my most recent work, *The True History of Beruk*. And it is to remind each of us in doing this, and myself included, that the construction of a shared story and social memory should always remain contested. Any potential democratisation of memory and story does not, and should not, produce an alternate sanitised version to that which is spoken about by, for instance, John Howard again. So in other words, I don't think that in trying to have a more democratic approach to story telling, that we simply produce that other extreme. That we need to tell stories that continue to question ourselves, continue to question our communities and value them at the same time of course. My true history of William Barak actually uses the notion of truth with deliberate irony. So whether it is a true history of William Barak is not as important to me, as it is a version of the past that I'm most interested in telling.

Now I'm inspired by three things here:

Firstly the recent dredging of the river - the Yarra River or the bay - which people may have heard about. Commercial interest, globalisation means that we're going to become a gateway city again in Melbourne and that we need to have a deeper channel to get bigger tankers into the port so that we can ship more goods into the hinterland as we would have said in the 19th Century. I was very interested when this dredging occurred, that in fact part of the exploration talked about the original pre-European Wurundjeri river bed, which is in Port Philip Bay and which exists today at about 115 metres in a ravine at the centre of Port Philip Bay. So I was interested in that Wurundjeri story which is deepest within the landscape here. I'm also very much interested in these stories reflecting contemporary landscapes. So I do not want William Barak's story or the story of the Wurundjeri people to be a historical story. I want it to be a story that resonates in Melbourne today, so that we understand it today - and its why I use photography quite a lot. All the images that I use with this work are contemporary photographs taken around the CBD. People may know this gentleman here, it's actually Captain Cook if you're not too sure.

## TONY BIRCH

And the third person of course is William Barak himself who was a nine-year-old boy at the signing of the so-called Batman Treaty in 1835. He lived to see Federation in 1901. He was a person who was a great artist and painter, a political activist for his community, and I suppose what we might call a negotiator between the indigenous and white society. One of the things that I want to stress in telling this story, my version of William Barak, is that I think he's been produced by non-indigenous tellings, non-aboriginal tellings, in a very sanitised way, as if he is someone with complete agency: 'He negotiated his own status and he lived very comfortably between two worlds'. I want to remind people that William Barak was incarcerated against his will at Coranderrk near Healesville, an aboriginal station. The conditions at many aboriginal stations were akin to prison camps for a lot of the 19th Century. That is quite widely understood from the documentation, and that some terrible things happened to William and his family while at Coranderrk. And I think when people talk about so-called shared stories, the non-indigenous sharing is often one which does not face up to these difficult realities.

So this is to conclude, it's a poem of sorts, *True History of Beruk*, William Barak. And each segment has a heading which I'll read:

### *My words, Barak, 1835*

Captain Cook marched in jacket and brush button. Buckley stood ragged in possum skin at Muddy Creek. Batman came looking with glass beads, powder and mirrors in a wooden boat around the sea. Buckley spoke his old tongue. The visitor is not ghost, he is not ghost. Look at Batman's face, do not touch his skin, his bread or his house. Do not touch his house. Barak spoke the truth, white fellow shoot us down like kangaroo, white fellow come by and by and shoot us. Shoot us down, shoot us down like kangaroo.

### *Coranderrk, 1866, 30th of April*

Cost of acquiring land from, and incarcerating the blacks. Flour 108,610 pounds. Tea 2991 pounds. Sugar 28617 pounds. Tobacco 1983 pounds. Rice 3024 pounds. Oatmeal 450 pounds. Soap 3181 pounds. Meat 787 pounds. Blankets 1175 pairs. Shirts 478. Tool shirts 464. Jumpers boys 183. Petticoats 424. Tomahawks 142. Pint pots 180. Quart pots 100.

### *Coranderrk 2, 1866*

And in that year the protector celebrated before God and Queen. He rejoiced with ink. The blacks have become, if not civilised, very interesting, social and industrious. They have decorated the terribly well furnished, neatly swept, and very comfortable huts with pictures taken from *The London Illustrated News*. "Here", proclaimed the protector, pointing a finger in the direction of the gates at Buckingham Palace. "This is your mother The Queen of Victoria, she watches over you." And that night the protector wrote, they are no longer savages, they have become seven children reading simply and clearly. 14 males and 4 females taking lessons from the bible. 15 boys and 11 girls that study in the schoolhouse. They have become three bullocks, five cows and one calf,

## TONY BIRCH

seven acres of land fenced in, two acres of oat and three of potatoes. They are now six huts, diligent subjects, dutiful souls, they are working men receiving each week: sugar two pounds, tea three ounces, flour five pound, tobacco, one fig. There are additionally several deceased natives, including some children. We rejoice in conclusion that in the year of the Lord 1866 William Barak of the Yarra Yarra Tribe married Annie of the Lower Murray in a Christian ceremony.

### *Coranderrk, 1881*

And so William was put on a coach to Melbourne carrying his son David in his arms. When they arrived at Richmond they were left to themselves in the dark and cool and late in the night. William arrived with nothing, he was left with nothing. He carried the boy to his hut through the streets where heavy black brick and stone denied the footsteps of William's father and the footsteps of his own childhood. David clung to his father, William's love stayed with his son until he fell. And when the boy was dead William returned to Coranderrk alone. In the following year William appeared before the governors. He told them the story of his own people. He told the story of his loved son David. When his testimony had ended all that they could bother to ask the sombre suited civil servants was, "Was this a wild country when you were born? Are you too old for work and do you have undershirts provided each year?" William did not know his age, but was sure that he had worked very hard for these men, all to build a house of freedom. His wife was dead, his son dead, the protectors knew nothing of the boy who was now with William. David's skin with William's skin. His name murmured a song on William's lips, his spirit ebbing through the body of his father.

### *Painted by King Billy, the last of Yarra Tribe, 1890*

William paints with a soft voice. He paints with indigo, rouge and charcoal. He paints the emu, the serpent, dancing men, women in cloaks. William paints for God. He witnesses the future and paints the past for a shadowy figure by the name of private collection. He paints for the glass and stone temples of the city. William rests his paintbrush while posing in a starch white suit. William resting with hands in pocket. The caption reads 'William the friend of the white men with white men friends all smiling too'. William hunts, William dances, William tells a story, listen to him. I will be all gone, all gone soon, I will be gone. And then William becomes gone. Barak sheds his white suit, discards his indigo, his rouge and charcoal. As the city sleeps Barak walks away leaving the spirit of William behind. The colony mourns him dead, William Barak the last of his tribe. William is no more, but he is Barak and he is here.

### *Barak watches Melbourne from the sky, 1945*

Half the world is a bombsite, the spoils of liberation. A is for amen and V is for victory, signal to those on the move searching for the dead, seeking a home amongst the ruins. H is for Holocaust and Hiroshima. H is for hydrogen, a civilised solution for disorder. All are equal before the bomb, but the burning flesh of Europe and Asia do not smoulder here in Batmania. Ours is a city of cold light and dead shadows, tombstone towers reach for the sun casting their dark and skeletal

## TONY BIRCH

frames over fields of gold, reduced now to a sludge of shifting grey. The veins of the city are empty and still. Barak follows the story of his footsteps away from the temples to the ground at Coranderrk. He looks for his people toiling in the shadows. They have become shadows also. He looks for his father, he looks for his son. Barak searches for William who comes to him in his white suit. It is not time William tells him. When the bed of the river rises to meet us again it will be time.

### *Barak visits the river bed, 2005*

Barak moves quietly through the [unclear] of the city, all is stone still now. He passes the winking lights imitating life. He listens for machines grinding to failure. Barak observes his reflection in the floors of glass now inhabited by the petrified few. Women offer themselves, men spit abuse, while dead children drift silently by on a journey from the river to the ocean. Barak slips into the water beneath the heavy metals, the leaching arsenic, iron oxides, poisons and the death throws of toxic fish. Below the monster hulls of ships the current carries Barak onward and down to where the river bed of the Wurundjeri await his return. Barak calls into the darkness, singing his travels until his feet meet the floor of 100,000 lives once lived. In the beauty and blackness of the river bed, Barak greets his son David, he then greets his father, they sing, their feet raising a rhythm and shifting earth. We will be gone, all gone soon, we will be gone, but we will come and we will come and be, we will be.

Thank you.