

## THE CONVERSATION

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# The politics of public monuments: it's time Australians looked at what, and whom, we commemorate

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Australia's first memorial to Indigenous service people. Freya Higgins-Desbiolles

Recent events in the US have seen Confederate Civil War monuments pulled down and painful histories revisited. Comparing these acts to those of the Islamic State terror group, Spiked editor Brendan O'Neill evocatively called this an “Orwellian war on history” and a “Year Zero mentality” on the march.

O'Neill also took aim at Australia's Yarra Council for its recent decision to no longer celebrate Australia Day on January 26. This a result of ongoing calls from Indigenous groups to change the date of the national day. This is because it marks the 1788 arrival of the First Fleet at Botany Bay and is thus, in their view, “invasion day”.

O'Neill is wrong. It is not a matter of erasing history but a question of *whose* history is told. In Australia, it has been called the “the Great Australian silence”, following W.E.H. Stanner, as we

### Author



**Freya Higgins-Desbiolles**

Senior Lecturer in Tourism, University of South Australia

stubbornly refuse to tackle these issues.

Yet as events in the US demonstrate, there is significance in what is deemed worthy to cast in bronze and erect in public spaces. It matters what events are commemorated and celebrated. It may mark power and domination or it may mark diversity and inclusion.

The events in the US have made some look at Australia as a similar settler-colonial state, and ask which of our monuments might come down. From First Dog on the Moon to the ABC's Indigenous affairs editor and Wiradjuri man Stan Grant, Australians are asking themselves questions. This follows ongoing debates about Australia Day and whether the date should be moved.

The concept of "dissonant heritage" describes this situation well. Academic Harvey Lemelin and his colleagues argue this refers to:

*... the perpetuation of grand colonial narratives in Australia, North America and elsewhere which have resulted in the general omission of Indigenous [and other marginalised peoples'] narratives from discourse about, and interpretation and development at, many sites*

These include monuments, memorials and other forms of public commemoration. Sabine Marshall claims:

*Commemoration manifests itself, among other ways, in the (re)naming of streets, cities, and public buildings; the construction of new museums, documentation and interpretation centres; the reenactment of battles and historical events; the identification and official marking of new heritage sites; and the installation of memorials, monuments and public statuary.*

Monuments are as much about forgetting as they are remembering, and they can certainly communicate power and dominance.

This recent discussion concerns memorials that glorify men or events that brought direct harm to others, in the case of Australia through invasion and dispossession.

But there are several manifestations of this issue in public space. For example, there are recent memorials to events telling the experience of invasion from Indigenous points of view. There is incorporation of Indigenous contributions to national attainments such as military service. But there are also memorials and acknowledgements yet to be accomplished as well.

Australia is awash in memorials glorifying settlers and colonists, some of whom did quite heinous acts. One example is the statue of John Batman erected on Collins Street in Melbourne. Batman was

an explorer and settler who participated in the “Black Line” violent removal of Tasmanian Aboriginal people in the 1830s.

Tasmanian colonial governor George Arthur observed that Batman “had much slaughter to account for”. But Batman is not alone in being celebrated despite a dubious history; this applies to place names as well as monuments.

In recent decades, Indigenous advocacy has brought about increasing recognition of and commemoration at massacre sites. An illustrative example is the case of Myall Creek, New South Wales. In 1998, Sue Blacklock, a descendant of a massacre survivor, collaboratively formed a Memorial Committee to see the Myall Creek massacre commemorated. In 2000, the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial was opened and attended by descendants of the victims, survivors and perpetrators of the massacre.

Since that time, annual remembrance and healing ceremonies have been held. Recent research adds to the body of evidence on massacre sites making ongoing silence impossible to maintain.

The first monument acknowledging Indigenous diggers who served in Australia’s wars was opened in 2013 in Adelaide. It was the result of community fundraising and activism to ensure that Anzac commemorations no longer overlooked the service that Indigenous people have given in Australia’s wars, despite not having full citizenship rights in many cases.

Australia does not yet appear ready to extend this recognition of military valour to the wars of resistance to invasion and the “frontier wars” that followed. As Grant noted:

*... there is still no place on our War Memorial wall of remembrance for those Aboriginal people who died on our soil fighting to defend their country.*

The continuing refusal of many non-Indigenous Australians to empathise with this perspective may be a gauge of how far we are from reconciling our past.

I am reminded of a short film based on the Archie Weller short story Confessions of a Headhunter. This work communicates the dissonant heritages of Australia in a 30-minute film.

Two Noongar men are angry at the repeated beheading of a statue embodying resistance warrior Yagan along the Swan River near Perth. They cut a swathe from Perth to Botany Bay, taking the bronze heads of statues honouring murderous settlers encountered along the way. At Botany Bay, they melt these down and recast the metal into a statue of an Aboriginal mother and her children looking to sea evoking hope and resilience.

This is a metaphor for our moment. It remains to be seen if we reconcile our past across dissonant heritages to derive a shared present and build a future together.

 **Racism** **Australian history** **Colonialism** **Indigenous history** **US history** **war memorials** **statues**