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Indigenous Theatres of War and Remembrance

Helen Gilbert¹

(XXX)

The Centenary of the First World War, now in its final year, has prompted immense public as well as scholarly interest in the cultural legacies of this conflict and, more broadly, in how war is – or should be – memorialised. A salient feature of the commemorative landscape marking the WW1 centenary in many nations is an investment in finding new, creative and broadly inclusive ways by which ‘ordinary people’ can understand the long-term impacts of the war and thereby contribute meaningfully to its remembrance. Charged with interpreting their nation’s past, governments, museums, educational institutions and, not least, historians have reached out to local (and online) communities to help bring lesser known stories to light, to connect diverse perspectives and to foster a sense of the war’s living legacies. Initiatives to explore the meaning of commemoration for contemporary cul-

ture and society have included large-scale public history projects, extensive outreach programmes in the heritage sector and the revamping of museums and memorial sites to enhance public interaction with war objects and stories. In Europe, instances of this trend to democratise military heritage include the establishment of five World War One Engagement Centres across Britain and the amassing of a national digital archive of family histories, ‘la Grande Collecte’, in France (both projects running from 2014–18). Even at the elite end of the remembrance spectrum – characterised by high-profile, made-for-media events such as the 2015 international centenary ceremonies at Gallipoli – efforts have been made to involve a range of publics in the process of communal remembering. One outcome of this wide-spread push for public engagement has been more confidence among minority groups

that their stories matter – or should matter – to a broad constituency, not just in historical terms but also in relation to present-day social formations. The (nearly) simultaneous 75th anniversary of WW2 has added impetus to the project of inserting marginalised perspectives into mainstream war heritage, inviting comparisons between the legacies of these two epoch-making twentieth-century conflicts.

Questions about which stories are remembered and which ones are forgotten on a national or global scale seem an inevitable part of these commemorations, especially in countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand, where WW1 is widely mythologised as the crucible in which postcolonial nationhood was forged. Called to war as dominions of the British Empire, these nations collectively sent more than a million troops to European and Middle

Eastern battlefields and were profoundly affected by the consequences. Nearly fifty percent of these recruits were killed, injured or struck by serious illness, while many others went home with invisible but deeply felt psychological wounds. While the sacrifices of such troops, as well as those from other British (and French) colonies, have long been visible in war memorials and cemeteries in Flanders, at Gallipoli and elsewhere, there is limited public awareness of the ethnic and cultural diversity of those who travelled from distant lands to assist the Allies in the so-called 'theatres of war'. By conservative estimates, over four million non-white men, including non-combatant trench diggers and supply personnel, were mobilised in WWI (Das 2011). World War Two likewise brought troops and support workers from (erstwhile) colonies and dominions to Europe on a massive scale, as well as to related conflicts in the Mediterranean, the Pacific and elsewhere.

Among the many volunteers for military service, Māori, Aboriginal Australians and Native Canadians enlisted in their countries' war efforts in disproportionately high numbers for their population sizes, sometimes despite racialised prohibitions against their participation and often with tragic results for their families and communities. For these peoples, whose lives and homelands bore the recent trauma of colonial violence, fighting in and for European countries amounted to a seismic cultural shift, a moment of 'first contact' with a continent that, prior to WWI, had been a distant imagined entity. The precise reasons why indigenous peoples participated in such wars vary, but what was broadly at stake for most of those involved (and elusive away from the battlefield) was a foothold to equality, recognition, social justice and a sense of political belonging, not just at home in

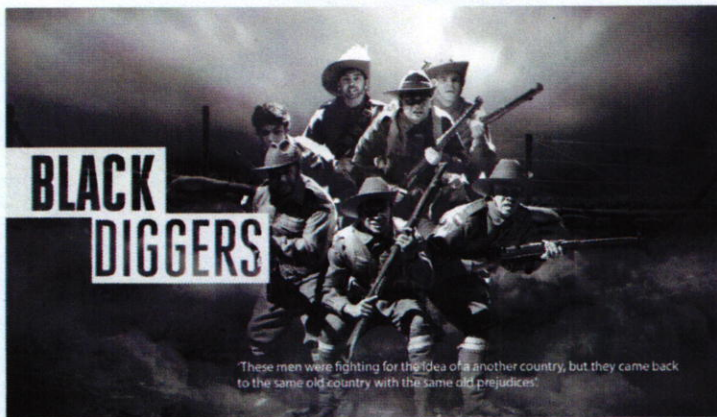
their own countries but also in international arenas. Such aspirations were at best only partly realised in the post-war periods due to slowly paced political and social reform. At the same time, indigenous experiences became invisible outside their own communities, and the national story of war and remembrance in each settler state remained, until recently, a largely white affair.

With the flourishing of indigenous arts in Australia, New Zealand and Canada over the last few decades, this subaltern history has been interpreted in original, profound and creative ways that potentially yield rich insights into both local and international dimensions of war heritage and the ways in which it intersects with narratives of global dispersal, homecoming and belonging in diverse societies. The first wave of indigenous dramas about the world wars began in the late 1980s with a cluster of plays by John Broughton that highlighted the fortunes of Māori soldiers in battlefields in Crete and Gallipoli, while also creatively charting the wars' intergenerational effects in indigenous communities in New Zealand. Examples include *Nga Puke (The Hills)* (1988) and *ANZAC* (1993). In Australia, Jack Davis's *In Our Town* (1990) explored similar themes in its focus on the return home of two WW2 servicemen, one Aboriginal, one white, who fought at Tobruk. Stories about indigenous experiences of the war were also extended into cinematic treatments with Vincent Ward's *Map of the Human Heart*², an epic tale of an Inuit bombardier haunted by his role in the Allied destruction of Dresden. The film, shot partly on location in the Canadian Arctic and first screened in Cannes in 1992, won various awards from the Australian Film Institute, along with a citation for best artistic contribution at the 1993 Tokyo Film Festival. Several television documentaries and short films drawing attention to 'forgotten warriors' among Canada's war veterans also emerged in the 1990s.

The new millennium has brought

a rapid expansion in this broad field of cultural activity, partly prompted by the global dimensions of conflicts in the Middle East since 2001, especially as they seem to implicate histories of Western imperialism. With that larger context in view, indigenous performance makers have seized opportunities to explore the world wars in fresh ways, often linking their own communities' experiences with those of marginalised Others. Michael Greyeyes's *A Soldier's Tale* (2014), for instance, reworks Stravinsky's 1918 dance-drama to create the impression of a permeable spatio-temporal membrane between two war-ravaged communities: one in rural Saskatchewan after WW2, the other in present-day Iraq. With this juxtaposition, this evocative contemporary ballet suggests not only the extent and impact of a long history of Canada's involvement in international wars but also the collateral damage wrought by these conflicts on indigenous societies. In a different but related vein, Witi Ihimaera's *All Our Sons* (2015) tells a multi-layered story about the New Zealand Native Contingent, seen partly through the eyes of a matriarch who witnesses the sacrifices of two generations of her family. The play takes its inspiration from a *kawe mate* (mourning ceremony) and its title from a sense that 'the Māori story is also the Native Canadian, Niuean, Aboriginal and Kanak story' (programme note). Wesley Enoch and Tom Wright's *Black Diggers* (2014) likewise draws trans-indigenous connections across time and place in its treatment of WW1. This haunting musical creatively remaps iconic battle sites on the Western Front and in the Mediterranean into Aboriginal songlines that stretch across ethnic groups, behind German lines and back to frontier wars in colonial Australia.

A marked diversification of styles and genres, increasing international circulation, and active uses of digital me-



Promotional image for *Black Diggers* by Tom Wright and Wesley Enoch, Queensland Theatre Company production, 2014. Photo: Branco Gaica.

dia have characterised the second-wave performances. Native American stories are now visible in this mix as well, following recent interest in Choctaw and Navajo code-talkers who pioneered unbroken military codes, based on their native languages, to enable American victories against the Germans in France and the Japanese in the Pacific. Another feature of such performance work is a strong commitment to cross-cultural and multilingual collaboration, as manifest, for example, in *Strange Resting Places* (2007), a Māori–Italian tour-de-force about the Battle of Monte Cassino in WW2. Drawing from both indigenous storytelling techniques and commedia dell'arte traditions, the play has toured extensively to locations in New Zealand, Australia, Singapore, American Samoa and the United Kingdom, where it won accolades at the Edinburgh Festival in 2014.

State-sponsored events commemorating the world wars have also become important, if controversial, sites for the transnational performance of indigenous memory work focusing on the world wars. Watched by millions across the globe, the Anzac Day Centenary ceremonies at Gallipoli in 2015, for instance, featured an Aboriginal musician on didgeridoo, as well as *waiata* (songs) and a *karanga* (call to gather) led by Māori defence personnel. While such

performances sometimes provoke debates about token multiculturalism, their increasing prominence in postcolonial statecraft invites a closer analysis, not least because of the different investments at play in their staging. Similar ceremonies have marked major refurbishments of the national war museums in Australia, Canada and New Zealand in the last decade as they embrace more inclusive – and more overtly performative – curatorial practices. A case in point is the 2015 opening of the Pukeahu National War Memorial Park in Wellington, replete with Māori song and ceremony. Designed as an urban space for public participation in war remembrance processes, the park encompasses the site of an ancient pā (Māori village or defensive settlement). At the other end of the scale from these high-profile performances, intimate events remembering indigenous participation in the wars are becoming more numerous worldwide, and more visible thanks to web-based media. These events include family pilgrimages to European battle sites, community commemorations, and special observances such as the 2005 'Calling Home Ceremony' at Vimy Ridge (France) to invite the spirits of fallen First Nations warriors to return to Canada to rest with their ancestors. The efficacy of performance in the symbolic repatriation of the dead from distant bat-

tlefields, as evident here, is pertinent not only to a variety of war heritage formations but also to topical debates about the fate indigenous remains held in ethnographic museums in Europe. Among other works, *Black Diggers* contains powerful and moving passages about the fate of the indigenous dead who are separated from their natal lands.

The growing assemblage of embodied arts and remembrances I have described here in brief urges a recalibration of academic knowledge about the cultural legacies of war and the ways in which they map into different and/or distant material sites. Historians have begun to analyse indigenous peoples' involvement in WW1 and WW2, often tapping into rich oral sources to flesh out scant military records (Riseman 2012, Winegard 2012), but their detailed accounts of the past rarely broach the topic of indigenous arts or how they contribute to present-day heritage-making processes. Among other themes, such arts speak to vexed questions about the rights of representation. Put simply, how do interpretations of the past represent the dead in the presence of the living? By rethinking the essence of military conflict from the stance of those relegated to history's margins, indigenous dramas clearly have much to add to the current moment of cultural stocktaking as the Centenary of the Great War draws to a close. They are important not only in their own cultural contexts but also as they interface with recent arts initiatives responding to the centenary in the European mainstream. Recent theatrical works in this vein are as diverse as Sidi Cherkaoui's dance-atorio, *Shell Shock*, a requiem for war's anonymous protagonists; Tom Lanoye's monodrama, *Gaz*, which links WW1 violence to recent terrorism in Europe; Pieter De Buysser's *Immerwahr*, about the early development of weapons of mass destruction; and Thomas Bellinck's *Me-*

mento Park, a wry look at commemoration itself, or 'de herdenkingsmachine' (the memorial machine) as some critics call it. All of these richly varied dramas have premiered since 2014. Participatory events such as *Lichtfront*, an 84-kilometre vigil along a cease-fire line in Flanders, and Alain Platel's flash mob on the centenary of the first gas attacks also explore the construction of Western Front as a complex site of commemoration where cultural memory, heritage tourism and commercial branding often go hand in hand.

The analytical process of comparing differently invested memory work about the consequences of past wars as they continue to play out in the present across culturally and geopolitically diverse localities is yet to be done. That project would situate war heritage as a fundamentally connective, co-constitutive, international, intercultural and ultimately *performative* set of practices. Exploration of the ways in which heritage formations are configured at points of contact between Europe's own citizens and peoples from outside its borders has the potential to illuminate patterns of national allegiance – and

civil dissent – as well as affective dimensions of particular stakes in cultural difference. Such research is crucial and timely when the ethos of an inclusive global polity is increasingly under stress from a range of fragmenting forces, including irregular migration, economic instability, vast inequality and rising exclusionary nationalism. Indigeneity may be a fraught concept at this juncture, especially when it is co-opted at times by far-right politics to bolster anti-immigration rhetoric, but it is precisely the assumption that being indigenous precludes global ties and responsibilities that we need to problematise.

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² Ward, a New Zealand director best known for *The Navigator* (1988), collaborated with Australian dramatist and screen writer Louis Nowra to create *Map of the Human Heart*. While the film's key architects are non-indigenous (as are the two actors playing the main indigenous roles), it is included in this discussion because of its themes and perspective.