material memories and the australian memorial imagination

There is an almost unbearable tension between the stillness of memory and the vibrancy of life.¹

This essay explores the transformation of Australian ways of mourning over the last forty years through memorials—one particular means by which those who live on commemorate the dead. Here I argue that changes to the form, purpose, and use of memorials reflect important shifts in the nature of public remembering and people’s relationship to the past since the 1960s. These changes to public remembering have taken place within the framework of a broader ‘culture of commemoration’ emerging in many western societies, what Erika Doss has succinctly called ‘memorial mania’.² Through this ‘culture of commemoration’, many seek a connection with the past that strengthens the link between the personal, often intimate process, of remembering the dead and the public nature of mourning rituals or memorials.³

By memorials I mean symbolic objects designed to preserve the memory of a person or event, usually away from the place where the physical remains are buried. There are many different types of memorials, from the Harold Holt Memorial swimming pool in Melbourne to memorial jewellery and names passed on to subsequent generations. However, my focus here is on those memorials designed principally for public remembrance—material, three dimensional me-

¹ Robert Dobler, ‘Alternative Memorials: Death and Memory in Contemporary America’ (MA dissertation, University of Oregon, 2010) 1. This article is based on research carried out with Paul Ashton, UTS, and was greatly assisted by a major Australian Research Council grant. We archived a database of 378 memorials across Australia with the help of many researchers, to give a sense of the scope and types of memorials that have emerged over the last thirty years. The database is available at http://www.acph.nicheit.com.au/. The book emerging from this project will be published by Australian Scholars Press in December 2011.

² Erika Doss, Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

³ Doss, Memorial Mania. especially intro. and chapter 1.
morials, that can be touched, scratched, venerated, visited, photographed or defaced—that have a visibility in a public place. These are traditionally designed by specialists and are made of stone, made to endure. More recently, a greater number of memorials have been built from wood and a range of other elements and have been placed in locations throughout the Australian landscape. Many of these are not built and designed by authorities but fashioned by people who want to do the work of mourning themselves, through forms such as roadside memorials. Returning to my earlier contention regarding the shift in memorial culture, even those memorials built formally since the 1960s tend to be less monumental in style than those of a previous era, and as Carole Blair reminds us, many memorials are also created to be emotionally experienced.4

Australia is not the only country where these changes to traditional forms and modes of remembrance have been documented. Indeed, there are now so many memorials throughout nations, cities, regions and towns across the world, that it is tempting to envisage a kind of global movement to set up a greater number of memorials, or at the very least, a similar impulse to commemorate. Certainly the emergence of ‘vernacular’ memorials—those by the people—become what Jack Santino calls ‘part of a global expressive repertoire’ of performative commemorations’.5 This sense of a global phenomenon has been increased in recent years by the emergence of cyber or internet memorials, which have a worldwide reach but are not located physically in place. Many of these virtual sites now operate in conjunction with the physical form of memorials. But we also have physical memorials remote from the original location of the event, such as Australian memorials to the Armenian Genocide, Princess Diana and Elvis Presley, leading to what one commentator has called forms of ‘topological dislocation’. Sudden mass deaths and large-scale catastrophes extensively covered by the media are usually the occasions for the mass outpourings of grief and mourning such as the public reaction to the Bali bombings. These involve a


wider circle of people than those who have intimate connection with the dead.\(^6\)

In the USA, the same phenomenon has occurred with the Oklahoma bombing of 19 April 1995 and the attack on the World Trade Towers on 11 September 2001.\(^7\) Doss maintains that the ‘obsession with issues of history and memory and an urgent desire to express and claim those issues in public contexts’ represents ‘heightened anxieties about who and what should be remembered in America and a struggle for control over nation and public’.\(^8\) She sees memorials as ‘wildly divergent in subject and style’ but ‘typified by adamant assertions of citizens’ rights and persistent demands for representation and respect’.\(^9\) This phenomenon is also evident in Australia, though the context for the politics of representation is somewhat more muted. Doss argues that ‘memorial mania is especially shaped by the affective conditions of public life in America today: by the fevered pitch of public feelings such as grief, gratitude, fear, shame and anger of individual memories and personal grievances’ and this is certainly clear in Australia as well.\(^10\) However, the Australian context is different. Fear is not so prevalent in public discourse, and the personal assertions in memorial form are less about citizens’ rights than they are about connecting to the past through remembrance and a desire to name its individual participants. Additionally, in each country, understandings of what is ‘public’ and the public sphere have altered, sometimes quite dramatically over the last few years. These memorial processes operate in relation to all other commemorative actions in each particular culture.

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\(^10\) Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 2.
Though public memorials have a long history, they began to proliferate in the Australian landscape and were firmly identified with the nation state after the First World War. War memorials from the Boer War to the Vietnam War have already been an intense subject of study by scholars, especially Ken Inglis.\textsuperscript{11} The traditional stone form and Christian symbolism of these war memorials helped to provide a kind of template for those that followed in many countries. In addition, the multiplicity of Holocaust memorials—in Europe, the Americas, Africa and also Australia—have been largely intended for transnational audiences and often specifically designed to have ‘multiple meanings’.\textsuperscript{12} But it is roughly from the 1960s that memorial forms begin to diversify and we see the emergence of a wider memorial culture that has rapidly expanded in the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{13}

Since the publication of Pierre Nora’s three-volume \textit{Realms of Memory}, where he introduced a notion of \textit{lieux de mémoire}—sites of memory—the scholarly study of memorials has been one of the most prolific of these ‘sites of memory’.\textsuperscript{14} Commonly, authors draw on a single memorial as a metonym—it is made to stand in for all other memorials of this type. Alternatively, charting a memorial’s genealogy functions as an expression or reflection of particular historical tensions in the society. While there are now more studies of a whole category of memorials, individually they are often seen as symbols through which to explore society and culture, or to analyse a memorial’s political effects, aesthetic implications, or the responses it elicits from the public.

It is possible to investigate memorials in a range of ways—their physical placement and appearance, their materiality and design, location and condition, the history of their establishment, and their use and meaning. This latter task is not easy, because it requires an approach like that of Martha Norkunas for Lowell, Massachusetts, of regular and constant observation of who visits the memorials.

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and how they use it. But most of the scholarly work on memorials has focussed on the phenomenon of ‘spontaneous’ memorialising in various countries. This has been the subject of study for anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and folklorists in America, as well as scholars of religion and historians, such as ourselves. Where I depart from some of these other scholars is crucial: like Erika Doss, I have not viewed these particular memorials in isolation, that is, separate from other new forms of commemoration. Instead, I see these changes as part of a continuum from informal, participatory memorialising to formal ‘top down’ or institutionalised memorialising. Acknowledging the nature of these changes places memorials in context and reveals shifts in a much broader process of commemoration, particularly in relation to the concerns of the present.

Memorials as a specific mode of remembrance are full of contradictions. The aim to promote greater inclusion and equality means a far greater number of memorials become contentious and a focus for political and ethnic struggles. We remember, with the aid of memorials as a commemorative tool, but every moment of remembering is inevitably partial—no-one remembers everything about another individual or event. In this sense, memorials, like all inducements to remember, are somewhat limited and often unstable. They are probably far more likely to induce widespread amnesia than provide a constant and unmediated presence in the mind’s eye. We might also ask if the presence of a greater number of memorials lessens their overall impact on people who travel through these landscapes on a regular basis. Certainly, one effect of their expansion has been to place the question of mortality and death in western countries firmly in the public gaze and consciousness. It also places pain, grief and trauma before us and makes the connections between the living and dead equally public. This has been intensified because of the role of the media, not only in framing and interpreting sudden or violent death, but also in shaping its individual and collective remembering in the future.

There are two identifiable trends in contemporary Australian memorials. The first is the growth of what are called ‘makeshift’, ‘spontaneous’, ‘grassroots’ or ‘vernacular memorials’. These vernacular memorials are best exemplified by those on the roadside, or at sites of sudden, violent or traumatic death, but they also extend to memorials intended to be ephemeral, such as graffiti and art. These are often characterised by a ‘bricolage’ style, and include intimate items of personal significance. Spontaneous memorials reflect people’s determination

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to have control over the rituals of mourning and to have some agency in the face of the chaos of death. They may be the work of a moment, or of years, and are often opposed by the state for a variety of reasons. Certainly, they indicate a more democratic approach to commemoration. As Robert Dobler argues: constructing a spontaneous shrine allows a mourner to create a meaningful narrative of the deceased’s life, giving structure and significance to a loss that may seem chaotic or meaningless in the immediate aftermath. These vernacular memorials also function as focal points for continued communication with the departed and interaction with a community of mourners that blurs distinctions between public and private spheres. 

Some memorials of this type are erected as counter memorials—deliberately in opposition to the conventional forms and organisational control of setting them up, such as the AIDS quilt, now at the Powerhouse Museum. Or they can be thought of as ‘anti-memorials’, a term coined by Sue-Anne Ware, who believes that an anti-memorial movement critiques ‘the illusion that the permanence of stone somehow guarantees the permanence of the idea it commemorates’. Ware has been involved both in projects designing memorials for the ‘Stolen Generation’ in Melbourne and in setting up an Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims during the 2001 Melbourne Festival.

The second feature or type of contemporary Australian memorial is what might be called ‘retrospective’ memorials. In this instance, I refer to memorials that aim to memorialise someone who has been dead for some time, or memorials of a fatal event in the past that was previously ‘left out’ or ‘forgotten’ (a convenient term but a more complex process than it implies). This is a phenomenon not as well documented as the more potent spontaneous shrines and media attracting ‘events’, but it is nonetheless of considerable significance in Australia. These memorials have been erected mainly since the 1980s, largely by state and local councils, tourist organisations, businesses and community groups. They are usually impelled by forms of identity politics and government policies of multiculturalism, with the result that they memorialise more culturally diverse individuals or places, such as indigenous massacre sites.

The struggle for control over various aspects of European historical memory between various groups in Australia, and the role of the state in attempting to mediate this struggle, is exemplified by the disputes over Australian memorials that represent Turkey’s role in genocide during and after the first World War. In

1998, the New South Wales parliament passed a motion to erect a plaque commemorating the Armenian genocide by the Turks. Turkish groups in Australia and overseas choked the parliament’s email system with over seventy-thousand messages of protest, crashing it (as well as the federal parliament’s internet system when they were diverted there). The government nevertheless unveiled the memorial plaque in the NSW parliament house garden during March 1999 (which has relatively restricted public access) in time to condemn all genocides carried out during the twentieth-century.

In 2010, due to equally forceful lobbying in a climate of ‘competitive remembering’, the Assyrian Christian genocide, which was carried out at the same time as the Armenian genocide, was recognised by the Local Government association but not by NSW state parliament. Fairfield Council’s decision to approve a memorial funded by the Assyrian Universal Alliance was made despite the opposition of the federal Foreign minister Stephen Smith, the Turkish community and the Turkish Ambassador to Australia. The memorial itself, erected in a reserve at Bonnyrig, an outer suburb of Sydney, is a sculpture by Lewis Batros, which depicts the hand of a martyr draped in the Assyrian flag with figures of children at the base. It stands at four-and-a-half metres tall and is a memorial set up to be noticed, to assert its emotional power in the landscape. Unsurprisingly, not long after its completion on 7 August 2010, the memorial was vandalised and painted with a Turkish crescent and star. These activities probably tell us more about people building and opposing the memorial in the present than the people and pasts being commemorated, but the incident very clearly demonstrates the way in which different versions of the past in memorial form stand against each other in public arenas. The activities surrounding the Assyrian memorial demonstrate the emotional grip of history, which still matters to those ethnic and religious identities who live thousands of miles from the original context, competing for recognition and legitimacy.

Some argue that this inclusive memorialising reflects the state management of cultural difference; others view this as an act of a more benign government eager to right the ‘wrongs’ of the past through conciliatory remembering. That the state continues to intervene in the regulation of memorialisation is evident

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17 In this instance, one-and-a-half-million Christians were killed by Muslim Turks. Turkish peoples claim the conflict was a Civil War, not a genocide. The weight of Western historical scholarship supports the latter view and more recently scholars have agreed to name the Assyrian Christian killings also as a ‘genocide’. The numbers of dead remain in contention: between 350,000 and 700,000 people.
in the heritage industry. What is the relationship between the memorialising process and the preservation of cultural heritage? State classificatory taxonomies and heritage listings of memorials have traditionally shaped what is considered significant and worthy of remembrance. Moreover, although state and federal
heritage organisations may be slow to address new modes of commemoration, like makeshift memorials, other state cultural organisations, such as museums, have begun to take over the work of archiving the ‘memory work’ involved in the process of setting up memorials and mourning. Such cultural organisations often involve themselves in photographing and collecting what remains at the site, so that they enter ‘new taxonomic registers’. These material remains may then be re-used in the holding of anniversary exhibitions, such as that held in the Melbourne Old Treasury Building for the fortieth anniversary in 2010 of the Westgate Bridge collapse, a disaster in which thirty-five men were killed and seventeen men injured.¹⁸

Some of the retrospective disaster memorials that make news are designed to acknowledge the people (usually men) who were killed during the building process. In the twenty-first century, such memorials have a mandate to promote social unity. In 2010, at the fiftieth anniversary of the building of the Warragamba dam—which supplies about eighty per cent of Sydney’s water—a newspaper story shaped its commemorative narrative around the friendship between two workers on the site. As part of the ‘celebrations’, a memorial to the fourteen men who died building the dam was unveiled by the Sydney Catchment Authority. Acts of democratised commemoration such as this result in the displacement of other histories which, for example may be linked to inadequate work safety practices, the failure of unions, poor supervision and management mistakes, as well as the families who suffered without a male breadwinner. Increasingly, memorials loom large in the landscape, but they conceal as much as they reveal, and many of them, even the temporary ones, are highly stylised.

But for the families and friends of men who die in these sometimes harrowing disasters, it is not necessarily the physical form of the memorial that continues to be significant, but the fact that it provides a focus for ritualised acts of commemoration. The original memorial to the Westgate Bridge disaster in Melbourne for example, was a somewhat anodyne plaque with the names of the men who died after a section of the bridge collapsed during its construction on 15 October 1970. Nevertheless, it had considerable local importance. All of the men killed came from the local district and there are still children and grandchildren who attend the annual ceremonies.

Initially, the West Gate Bridge memorial was closely associated both spatially and historically with Melbourne. The Bridge itself, one of Australia’s largest cable-stayed girder bridges, was built over the Yarra River to make the city more coherent by linking Melbourne’s western suburbs with the city. In 2004, a group of organisations, mainly departments of the Victorian government, decided to extend the memorial, to make it bigger and better, but also to broaden its local and emotional significance. One million dollars was spent to build a memorial park on the corner of Douglas Parade and Hyde Street, in Spotswood. Thirty-five sculptural pillars commemorate those who died in the disaster. The park was intended to be ‘a tribute to all our Victorians who have lost their lives in industrial accidents’. Only time will tell whether this reinterpretation weakens the specific meaning of the original memorial for those directly affected. Certainly, most of the commemorative ceremonies involve a united front between unions and the state. On the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the West Gate Bridge disaster in October 2010, both the minister for Industrial relations, Martin Pakula, and the Construction, Farming, Mining and Energy Union secretary, Tommy Watson, were speakers. Furthermore the memorial committee established since 1990, is supported by both employers and unions in the building industry. The ceremony itself bore a remarkable resemblance to the commemoration of casualties of war with a minute’s silence and wreath laying. The Westgate Bridge is also the site of many suicides, but like ‘The Gap’ in Sydney there are no permanent memorials to these deaths.

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There are other trends of note in Australian memorial culture since the 1960s. There has been a growth in individual (and individuated, whereby all names are listed) or personal memorials alongside those that commemorate collectives of people or animals. These memorials show a considerable diversity in form and purpose. Some are designed as a warning, others a kind of moral beacon. Those set up at indigenous massacre sites like Myall Creek function to promote reconciliation or forms of redemption, and to strengthen communities. Recent post-colonial memorials with an emphasis on the inscribed texts are a means of educating visitors through narrative of a difficult past; still others are designed to elicit shared memories. Finally, while a memorial’s purpose can be all of these things, other somewhat more mundane purposes also prevail—to increase tourism and heritage visits, particularly since the emergence of what is known as ‘dark tourism’ or the visiting of sites of atrocity and death.
A good example of retrospective memorialising for purposes of reconciliation or acknowledging cultural diversity is the plaque and memorial unveiled in January 2009 for the centenary of the loss of the *Clan Ranald*. This was a turret ship from Mauritius that arrived in Port Adelaide in 1909 to take on wheat flour and coal for South Africa. When it set sail on 31 January, there were sixty-five crew on board, of whom fifty were from India and elsewhere in Asia (commonly known as Lascars). The ship was driven onto the rocks and eventually capsized towards Troubridge Hill along the South coast of the Yorke Peninsular in South Australia. While twenty-four men survived, forty men died, of whom thirty-four were Lascars. Of those who died, the white officers were buried in separate graves to those from Indian and Asian crew, and while the white men were named, the Lascar grave was titled ‘names unknown’. There are several accounts of what happened subsequently to the remaining sixteen to twenty Lascar men. They were separated from the white seamen and all given the Immigration Restriction Act dictation test, which they failed, and were sent to Columbo within the next week. This shameful treatment did not go uncontested in South Australia at the time, and there was a great outcry about their treatment consequently, the men were given money to salve the collective conscience. As a result of the disquiet, a section of the Immigration Restriction Act was changed and people who were shipwrecked were given freedom to land with no restrictions.\(^\text{19}\) In 2009, the Edithburgh Museum committee and the South Australian Department of Environment and Heritage set up a new memorial at the cemetery, which names each of the Asian and Indian men buried in the communal grave. This was clearly an important act of restitution. The names inscribed on the memorial were listed on official documents, unfamiliar to those writing down at the time, a poignant reminder of casual racial blindness. Perhaps one of the reasons the incident has resurfaced is because of its resonances with the Howard government’s treatment of refugees arriving by boat from Afghanistan and Iraq not quite a hundred years later.

Rarely has a disaster revealed so much about the politics of memorials as the one that befell the 353 refugees, who died when their tiny fishing vessel sank in international waters off the coast of Australia in 2001. These refugees, mainly from Iraq and Afghanistan, comprised of 146 children, 142 women and

65 men. The disaster occurred on October 19, not long after the September 11 bombings in USA, during a time when there was an atmosphere of fear and anti-Muslim feeling. A recent article by Beth Gibbings in *The Public Historian* journal tells the story of setting up a memorial for the 353 refugees from the point of view of someone involved in the process. The Australian government at the time refused to accept responsibility for the disaster, the Prime Minister declaring ‘it was nothing to do with us’ and there was a suspicion that the Australian authorities involved in coastline patrol, either took little action or ‘hesitated’ to rescue the survivors. However, a group led by Steve Biddulph and Rod Horsfeld, began to raise money for a memorial. Gibbings asked herself: ‘How do you memorialise nationally an event which has not taken hold of the collective conscience and where the national role may well be a shameful one?’

The most important strategy was the setting up of a national competition inviting high school visual arts teachers to encourage pupils to design a memorial although there was not a great deal of physical evidence from the disaster, the stories of survivors assisted the memorial team’s reconstruction of the ‘story’. The ‘ongoing process of consultation’ throughout the memorial’s establishment assisted in building necessary community support.

The final outcome is a temporary anti-memorial situated in Canberra. It was instructive that Jim Lloyd, a former federal minister, declared that it ‘trivialised’ other memorials, particularly those to war dead. With the approval of the ACT authority, yet without that of the Labour federal government, the memorial stands uneasily in the landscape and its future remains unknown, some believing it to be ‘just protest art’. Nevertheless, the memorial’s continued existence owes much to its form, 353 poles, standing ‘in for the bodies themselves’, that are decorated with both Australian and Muslim motifs, and set out in the shape of the boat; in addition to its appeal to democratic control of commemoration and compassion, as the powerful commemorative ceremony, on 6 October, 2006 demonstrated.

Memorials allow us to mark death by physical means in space and time, the anniversary being a central and potent ritual for commemoration. As we have seen, there has been a major increase in the setting up of memorials spontane-

20 Beth Gibbings, ‘Remembering the SIEV X: Who Cares for the Bodies of the Stateless, Lost at Sea’, *The Public Historian* 32 (February 2010), 13–30. SIEV stands for ‘Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel’ with the X for the unknown name.

21 Gibbings, Ibid., 13–30. See also Julie Stephens ‘Commemorating the SIEV X’ *Arena Magazine*, no. 93 (February–March, 2008), 43–5.
ously, on a more democratic basis, in addition to those memorials erected with an eye to permanence, that require time and money to design and construct. Central to all memorials is the struggle over locus and control of the process of commemoration: some memorials are remarkably effective in mobilizing action and have a strategic role to play politically and culturally, others serve only the immediate family; and still others live on in wood, stone or cement, but their reason for existence is no longer remembered. Erika Doss argues that memorials are ‘archives of public affect—repositories of feelings and emotions that are embodied in their material form and narrative content’. Ultimately, we need to be attentive to shifts in commemoration as a cultural process, of which memorials are just one manifestation. The history of memorials as objects is simultaneously a history of memory and commemoration.

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