Today, I would like to discuss aspects of Aboriginal history – tangible and intangible – and more widely our national consciousness as Australians. I want to explore some examples of ways in which Aboriginal history is created, accessed and understood currently in Australia. What the positives and negatives of these current trends are and what we might look toward for the future.

What is history? The term ‘history’ is highly contested. So too is what aspects of the past constitute it. The forms and practices of history-making are not even agreed upon in the academic world where much of our past is constructed.

My understanding of history is that it is the way that we view ourselves and our place in the world. As individuals, we have a narrative, or narratives, that create our sense of self. Stories that we tell to others and memories we hold on to, that form a basis for our identity. We can deny parts of ourselves to ourselves and to others. We place more weight on some memories at the expense of others. Our identities are a matter of constant interpretation, based upon our cultural views and beliefs.

This is also true for communities – local, regional and national. Collectively, we accept and reject aspects of history to form narratives of who we are as groups of people.

This is an intangible aspect of history – the ways that we feel, experience and understand ourselves. In the case of Australia, the narrative of nationhood is the story of the great forgetting. A man, the President of this institution we are in today, said that when an individual loses his memory, we call it ‘amnesia’ and recognise that he or she is sick. When a country, such as ours, loses its memory there is little recognition of this condition.

How is this important to Indigenous communities? Surely, as many commentators argue, we are talking of the distant past and the recognition of the atrocities that have taken place are only symbolic, not practical, which is the latest catchcry of policy at this stage in our country.

Firstly, I think it needs to be recognised that the colonisation of Australia has only happened within the space of nine generations. Aboriginal people are still living with the effects of the heartless and racist policies imposed upon our people. These actions are not in the distant past, they continue today and their effects are still lived by many people in our communities.

Secondly, I argue that symbolism is an important step forward for all of our people, all of us. In acknowledging the past we are able to move into the
future, repairing fractured relationships and building new ones. If symbolism was not important then we should rid ourselves of the Australian flag, and do away with calling ourselves ‘Australians’ as surely our nationhood is also just a symbol, what we imagine ourselves to be. Or maybe it’s just practical.

This is history in its intangible form which, as I have argued, we need to explore in order to move forward. I would also like to discuss tangible heritage – the bits and pieces that construct history.

These bits and pieces are as controversial as other aspects of history. The books that are written, papers addressed to conferences, photographs, oral history recordings, the objects and creations that comprise Aboriginal history are highly contested. Their ownership, who holds them, who creates them, how they are held and created are debated within various forums.

I would like to start my focus on cultural heritage items. In the early days of the Australian colony, a grand acquisition of Aboriginal material took place. Aboriginal people were viewed as scientific specimens, and a collecting process began of Aboriginal human remains, cultural items, photographs and so on, to feed the appetite for the ‘other’. These items are held in various large institutions here and overseas and the ownership of them is debatable. Institutions largely want to maintain their hold on these ‘objects’ as they are their capital; their collections are what justify their existence.

For Indigenous people, these items have an entirely different meaning. They are our physical ancestors in the case of human remains, who need to be put to rest, and treated with respect. Photographs, artwork, artefacts are all aspects of culture that are essential for the continuation and maintenance of Indigenous identity. They are links to the past and part of our present day experience.

So, where do the two perspectives meet? Institutions have a role to play in the preservation of cultural heritage where there is no Indigenous alternative in place.

But they also have responsibilities:
- To maintain their Indigenous collections with cultural protocols,
- To employ Indigenous staff to maintain the collections,
- To take advice from the community as to the necessary protocols so that they are maintaining these materials with respect.

They also have a responsibility to repatriate or at least negotiate research of material.

In the case of records, which are so essential for members of the Stolen Generations in particular, they have a responsibility to make material accessible which involves undertaking all of the above points I just mentioned – staff, consultation, protocols – in order to do this effectively.

Then we come to the creation of tangible history, the research, collection of data, writing and presentation of Aboriginal histories. This currently takes place largely within three contexts: academic, government and community-based initiatives.

The first two instances of history-making – government and academia – can be problematic. That is why forums like today exist as there is controversy
in this area. Why the debate? Because research has been conducted in Indigenous communities in some highly inappropriate circumstances.

Any Indigenous person can give you an example of an experience of their family or community having a researcher come in and exploit Indigenous knowledge. It has occurred time and time again and has created a fractured relationship. ‘Research’ is largely a dirty word in Indigenous communities.

Government agencies are currently undertaking a huge amount of research into communities for the purpose of supporting or opposing native title claims. This, if anyone here is familiar with the issues with native title in this part of the country will understand, is a minefield. There have been some benefits for communities in this process, but it has also been a very divisive experience. Research collected, as it is legal evidence, is not available for individuals and communities. So, for instance, if you were looking for your family, you would not be able to access any of the resources created in this area or do so until sometime in the future when it is no longer deemed as evidence.

The other area that research is undertaken is initiatives created by and for communities. I was involved for five years in two programs at the Koorie Heritage Trust Inc – an Aboriginal controlled community organisation. The Trust is home to extensive collections of cultural material relating to Koories in Victoria. The work that I did focussed on oral histories and genealogies. I think this work is important to the discussions we are having today for the following reasons:

**Oral History**
- Our objectives were culturally based, we were not undertaking research for the aim of creating something rather for the maintenance of culture.
- Methodology was culturally based – the interviewee controlled the content, direction and future use of the material. Our process was based upon developing relationships with the interviewee over time, allowing interviewees to tell their story when they were ready to do so.

**Genealogy**
- Our information gathering valued community knowledge equally as it valued written records.
- As much as possible access to genealogies was not restricted.

Appropriate Elders managed the flow of information and were consulted in the recording of family knowledge. Our Stolen Generation clients were able to receive a large family tree, showing their extended family rather than their nuclear family, which made the process of connecting to community much easier.

There are many community-based initiatives across the country that are progressive, successful and thriving. For example, a digital culture project in Cape York that is recording cultural knowledge on video and then into a database specifically designed to hold information on land use, plant and
significant sites. Another example is a database that was developed by Anangu peoples of central Australia that has been operating successfully for 10 years.

The difficulty many communities face is finding the support and funding to continue initiatives that they want to pursue. As they are reliant on funding, and funding often comes with conditions. For example, when a government department funds a community history program, they maintain ownership of the material recorded in that program. And that brings us to the question: Who are we making history for?

I spoke earlier about the importance of all of us, as Australians, having access to narratives of our nation that are inclusive of Aboriginal history. This will help to create greater understanding between our people and help us all to heal the scars of the past.

But, tangible and intangible history is needed within Indigenous communities. Communities need to make sense of the past themselves, and need to be supported to do so. To record, write and understand the last 213 years.

Stolen Generations people are still searching for family, and trying to find their way home. Many families who were moved from mission to mission in the early days of the colony are trying to locate where they belong, where their traditional country is located. Context and access to cultural heritage materials are needed for healing, and this needs to be driven by Indigenous people and communities.

Currently, history-making by academics and governments largely focus on the creation of elitist narratives that are not accessible to grass-roots, community people. The limitations of this approach are reflected in the nature of material that they are able to access. People do not trust researchers or governments and give only the surface of what is an incredibly rich and complex series of events and narratives.

I argue, that what is required for Aboriginal history-making in Australia, is the development of meaningful partnerships. Consultation is a positive step in the process as it engages Indigenous perspectives, but it is still a top-down approach. For instance, a researcher goes into a community with an outcome in mind and persuades the community to agree to this. Instead, I believe, that the researcher or government department or whoever, has a responsibility to meet the needs of the community that they are working with. Allow the community to direct the focus and content of the research.

Partnerships imply a process of working together to direct the aims, content and outcomes. This has been applied successfully in a variety of contexts. For instance, the Cape York project I mentioned before. The University of Technology, Sydney, have entered into a partnership with the Indigenous organisation that has created the project, and are supporting it with staff resources and in-kind contributions. This is an example of an Indigenous-driven project that a university sees the value of and are involved in, yet the community maintains control and directs the work that takes place.

These kinds of relationships establish trust between researchers and Indigenous communities and ensure that Aboriginal history is recorded,
maintained and available for all to learn and experience. The benefits for all Australians are great, and for Indigenous people greater. It is time that history-making is determined by indigenous people and that those involved in this process start to listen.

_Koorie Heritage Trust Inc._

Genevieve Grieves is an award-winning oral historian and artist who has worked extensively with Koorie communities across Victoria. She is traditionally from the mid-north coast of New South Wales, a descendant of the Worimi-Kattang nation. She has recently completed a Creative Fellowship at the State Library of Victoria (SLV), where she produced a video and sound installation, _Picturing the Old People_. The installation explores representation, history and power through the recreation of nineteenth century portraiture of Indigenous people. It is supported by the State Library of Victoria, Koorie Heritage Trust Inc., The Myer Foundation and The Anna Weare Trust. _Picturing the Old People_ will be showing in November 2005 at Experimedia, SLV and the Koorie Heritage Trust Inc. Our cover image, 'Desire', features in the installation.