



Writing History and Affect in the Archive: trauma, grief, delight and texts, some personal reflections

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WHEN: FRIDAY 20TH OCTOBER, 2017

TIME: 2.30 – 3.30PM (REFRESHMENTS TO FOLLOW)

WHERE: RESEARCH HUB, 19.2072B



Historians, as users of archives, often discuss the thrill and emotion of their 'discoveries'. The eminent historian and writer Greg Dening reflected that time spent examining archival sources was 'rewarded with a sensitivity that comes in no other way'.¹ We can form romantic attachments or be repulsed across the decades, with long dead correspondents and observers. I recall the delight I experienced at the British Library when reading a copy of a book that had belonged to Joseph Banks and I realised his marginalia related to the colonization of Australia. I could literally see his thinking about how to fit out ships for the long voyage south. He was considering somewhat ludicrously if Galapagos tortoises might be kept on ships in pens and harvested for fresh meat. Fortunately for the crew and the tortoises he quickly gave up this idea. Before the Museum of Melbourne digitized Alfred Howitt's correspondence, I once opened a letter written by him on classic nineteenth century blued paper. As I pulled the missive from its envelope, I could smell tobacco smoke. I was immediately in the room with him. Recently after completing an article on the topic of frontier violence, my co-author and I both described a feeling of stress and trauma that came from reading colonial records of 'skirmishes' and 'dispersals'. In July this year, during NAIDOC week, Lyndall Ryan and her team launched the Massacre Map, an interactive online resource documenting the massacre of Aboriginal people for the period 1788-1872. While sitting riveted in the audience, I felt physically sick. The time line set to automatic started and the map was blank. As we moved through time the massacres began to flash across the screen, each one a flash of hideous violence, the death of six or more people; first New South Wales, then Tasmania, Victoria, and Queensland.

In this lecture, I want to reflect on the experience of affect in the archive and consider how this might be productive for history writing.



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