

[Review] Bonny Cassidy, *Monument*. Giramondo, 2024. 288pp.

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Monument by Bonny Cassidy is at heart a very specific family history. It covers a range of discrete times (1830s to the present) and visits many places (Naarm, van Diemen's Land, Central Victoria, the Wimmera Mallee and Anaiwan Country or Armidale in the 'New England'). The people in the story are all in Cassidy's family tree and though their lives are interesting, their relationship to the dominant historical narrative is tangential. Nonetheless, tracing the finer details of the lives that constitute her tree is the primary activity of this book. The result is far from quaint; it is a deeply emotional reckoning and important historical task.

In telling a family history, the work contends with the personal sense of culturelessness, placelessness and historylessness that many white non-Indigenous people have in settler colonies. This absence of family history is materially false (we all have a culture, a place, a process of how we came to be who we are and where we are), but it seems true because most of us don't know what it is. Beyond class-based limitations to knowing this history, the story of the absence of these stories is repeatedly legitimated by a lack of attention to or interest in investigating the varied historical processes of how we came to be here. Also, settler family histories often draw on tropes of colonial mythmaking and in their absence, the space is easily filled with a loosely personal identification with the narratives of the colonial state and associated monuments.

As Aunt Doris Paton et. al. argue such monuments are 'active scripts that continue to assert settler power, and that embed settler narratives in the landscape in ways that legitimise the dispossession of Aboriginal people and anchor local memories to white identity, belonging and pride' (7). In crossing out the word monument in the title, Cassidy moves towards a new kind of understanding, against racialised narratives of national pride. But what is the opposite of pride?

Shame, as Alexis Shotwell specifies, is not only about past actions (such as murdering Indigenous people to establish the colony). Shame is also 'about something we are' and this 'something' is 'sticky and hard' (n.p.). The trouble with shame is it is not a viable antidote to pride. Shame hides and thrives in silent shadows. When forced to speak shame is defensive; it seeks to resist accountability by denial or shifting blame onto others. Or, more readily, it asserts itself in proud fictions as a desperate bid to avoid reckoning with the shame. Despite this Shotwell persists: it is important to 'embrace shame about whiteness' rather than to ignore it and move forward in shameless denial (n.p.). The challenge though is how. If certain forms of pride are problematic, and the shame does not want to be looked at, what it means to embrace shame is unclear. Cassidy's book offers a blueprint.

Cassidy's path out of the pride/shame trap begins when she cycles by a monument to an alternative view of history in central Naarm. It commemorates the lives of two Palawa men, Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheener—freedom fighters who resisted colonial expansion and were condemned to death by local colonial courts in a trial stacked against them. Cassidy did not know much about them; she'd not learned this history in school. 'I tapped a search into the browser. The image loaded in my palm ... the monument had turned down the traffic's volume. Embedded in my path, it pulsed' (5). Most often a pulse refers to the beat of a heart. What separates a pulse, what *makes* it a pulse, is the silence between the beats: a pulse needs its ~~pulse~~. This book is not about the pulse of Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheener, it is about getting curious about the ~~pulse~~ of settlers' silent complicity in their execution and the alternative story that such attentive curiosity might yield. Herein lies a viable antidote to both shame and pride. To foreground the Indigenous perspective on Australian history, while revisiting her own, Cassidy says that the story of Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheener 'isn't mine' but she's 'standing by it' (13). This is the work's conceptually captivating move: being motivated to tell her own story in order to more powerfully be able to stand by the story of another.

What follows is a deeply curious work that writes into the interstices of Australian history—not for the gaps to be incorporated in that history, but rather to bring the history down. In this regard, the project feels responsive to Indigenous calls on non-Indigenous folks to know their past, know the lands and waters that grew them up, know where they came from. Such calls carry with them a risk that in provoking people to know their history, there'll simply be more people fluent in the colonial fiction—a risk that Cassidy heads off at the pass by aiming to write with the story of Indigenous freedom fighters.

To spend a lot of time investigating something niche only to question its value is a practical and psychological paradox. On one hand, settler family histories need to be known so we can fully reckon with how our lives are part of the colonial project. To do this it is necessary to see it as valuable enough to investigate in the first place. On the other, the aim is *not* to have them accounted for in how the nation mythologises itself. Rather it is to use them to move towards solidarity with the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty. In other words, Cassidy's story needs to be both memorable and forgettable at the same time. The stories are interesting but non-heroic. There are surprises, especially in the overlaps with US Colonial-Slave history. But it's *Monument*'s meta-historiography that really elevates this work.

Finding a tone and a genre capable of holding this complexity without replaying structural denial is tricky. Cassidy refuses denial and the defensive settler 'moves to innocence' (Tuck and Yang 3-4), quite explicitly in the sense of directly telling her story of complicity, but more structurally by unsettling the status of her own stories. She asks, 'Am I cementing stories to fix them for good, or am I preparing for them to be dismantled, when the time is right?' (249). To my reading, the stories of *Monument* do both, partly because they are not staking a claim for what is, but instead working to understand the process of how the 'what

is' came to be. In addition, Cassidy challenges the desire to stake a claim for originality: 'A first generation arrives many times over / their firstness itself is not really a story: the story is what they entered / into' (43). Her story is not about her family's involvement in claiming lutruwita for Australia, but rather about their involvement in the wider colonial project.

Cassidy also subtly compares her family history with the experience of her immediate family's present. This mundane Cronulla family household seemingly has nothing to do with colonisation and yet, of course it does: frontier violence, dispossession and the possessiveness enabled by Torrens title property law to name a few connections. But also one day, without warning, Cassidy is forced to confront the emotional and material consequences of living in denial. Cassidy receives a call from her father telling her of a parallel life he leads with other children she never knew about. Her parents' lives that seemed settled, predictable and boring even are no longer stable and coherent. The story of her life is shattered, and her family are left 'standing amongst the fragments that were supposed to stay disconnected' (34).

Denial is problematic for truth seekers. In the context of Cassidy's life it is one thing, in the context of Australian history it is another. But in both cases denial is a protective psychological mechanism to prevent the experience of feeling shame: if I can deny this happened, I don't have to feel so bad about it, I don't have to *do* anything about it. In the case of Australian history, we can see this replay over and over, the desire to avoid the shame of reckoning is routinely enabled by consistent denial. Cassidy arrives at a new perspective on the ultimate futility of this denial, by way of this family story. The staggering duration of her father's denial (over 30 years) means the present becomes, 'within moments', built on nothing much (34). Relationships, and understandings of the meaning of those relationships, undone in an instant.

This text should be of interest to anti-colonialist practitioners working in the Australian settler context not only as a meditation on denial. The text also offers a way of rethinking non-Indigenous approaches to anti-colonial historiography and localised complicity and has wider ramifications for how we respond to environmental crisis in Australia too. In theorising the troubled relationship settler writers have with place in Australian literature, Jack Kirne and Emily Potter argue '*not* that non-indigenous authors should not write about climate change, but rather that they should work towards new frames of reference, outside the settler-colonial' beginning 'with being critical of this paradigm, acknowledging it, and working away from it' (968, emphasis in original). Cassidy's text helps to craft this new frame of reference.

I felt some discomfort while reading and reviewing this memoir. I get this stuff intellectually; I write about it a lot. But in practice what am I doing other than letting myself off the hook over and over again? Sometimes it is hard to spot denial in operation. Sometimes the shame is so all-encompassing and the salve for the shame is so soothing you

become convinced by your own denial. To look at colonial history and be both heartbroken and enraged by the destruction, afraid for the future and simultaneously brave enough to reckon with one's own shameful complicity, means somehow coming to grips with how all non-Indigenous folks play a part in the monumental historical processes that led to Indigenous dispossession. Such work requires a level of tenacity few seem to have. In *Monument*, Cassidy proves to be a valuable exception.

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