The Guardian

# The world is being undone before us. If we do not reimagine Australia, we will be undone too

*Richard Flanagan*

In the full transcript of his speech to the Garma festival, the author says the country can make itself stronger by saying yes to the

Sun 5 Aug 2018 08.00 AEST

When my father died at the age of 98 he had largely divested himself of possessions. Among what little remained was an old desk in which he had collected various writings precious to him over the years: poems, sayings, quotes, a few pieces he had written, some correspondence. Among them my elder sister found a letter written by one of my father's cousins many years before. In it she told my father that his mother, my grandmother, was of Aboriginal descent, and that in her family she had been brought up to never mention this fact outside of the home.

My father loved discussing interesting letters with his family. He never discussed this letter. Yet he kept it. The story of covering up Indigenous pasts was a common one in Tasmania, where such behaviour was for some a form of survival. There is no documentation to prove my father's cousin's story is true, but that doesn't make it untrue. It leaves the story as an unanswerable question mark over my family.

The theme of this year's Garma festival is truth telling. My father's story is about the questions truth raises, and where the truth takes us. I don't tell this story to claim I am an Indigenous. I have too much respect for Indigenous people to make such a claim.

And yet, if it were correct, it would explain so much that is inexplicable about my father. It would make sense of his beliefs in reincarnation as wombats and wallabies, beliefs strangely at odds with those of an ostensible Catholic born in 1914, as were his strong, almost obsessive feeling for his ancestors and for the land of the island's north-east.

It would make some sense of my father's odd, wry acceptance of the two times he suffered the indignity of being refused service in bars as a "half-caste" when we went on a family camping trip to Western Australia in the 70s. It was, I later learned, not the first time. In a PoW camp in Japan an English PoW refused to work with him on the grounds he would not lower himself to work with a "half breed".

Our family, like so many other Australian families, has numerous Indigenous connections. I have Indigenous cousins. My brother's first grandson is Indigenous. But the questions remain hanging over us, as they remain over all Australians.

Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?

I have flown the great length of our vast nation to speak to you, from the snow and rainforest and rivers of the island of the Palawa in the far south, to here, the country of the Yolngu in the far north-east, a country almost mythical for its music, its art, its leadership. Five thousand kilometres I travelled, twice the distance of London to Moscow.

And as I boarded flight after flight, making my way slowly northwards, I wondered what joins us over such a vast expanse, what connects wintry worlds with tropical? What finally joins us as people into this idea that we call Australia?

And the answer is story. The story of us as a nation. The story of us as Australia and as being Australian.

And yet, in recent years, that story has grown increasingly threadbare as the poverty of its original conception has been revealed as too thin to hold, as the warp and weft of our national myths have under strain torn apart, only to be covered up with rougher patches crudely stitched into the growing holes: war memorials, Captain Cook statues. It was, as they say, a bad day when the first blackfella discovered Captain Cook.

A member of the Gumatj clan of the Yolngu people from north-eastern Arnhem Land prepares for the Bunggul traditional dance at the Garma festival on Friday. Photograph: Mick Tsikas/EPA

Australia has achieved many great things as a state. But it will fail as a nation if it cannot find a way of admitting our Indigenous people, and with them, our continent's extraordinary patrimony: 60,000 years of civilisation. When the first corals began to form of what we now know as the Great Barrier Reef that civilisation was already 50,000 years old. They had known unimaginable changes of climate, ecology and zoology. We stand as the inheritors of a people whose languages, cultures and Dreamings are founded in that experience of deep time unknown to humanity anywhere else in the world.

And yet we turn away from it all, and, with a growing hysteria, feverishly return to our crumbling myths, seeking to build new statues and new memorials to collapsing fictions.

Among the audience here are some of the most powerful people in Australia: leading politicians, senior bureaucrats, heads and executives of some of our biggest corporations.

I bring you a warning.

The world is being undone before us. History is once more moving, and it is moving to fragmentation on the basis of concocted differences, toward the destruction of democracy using not coups and guns to entrench autocracies and dictators, but the ballot box and social media.

We see gay and transgender people being once more scapegoated, and we see race and religion used to divide. We see truth everywhere denied. Duterte. Orbán. Erdoğan. Putin. Democracy is withering in Poland. Slovakia. Cambodia. Once great nations are lost in division that with each passing day grows more intractable. The chaos of Brexit. The catastrophe of Trump's white nationalism.

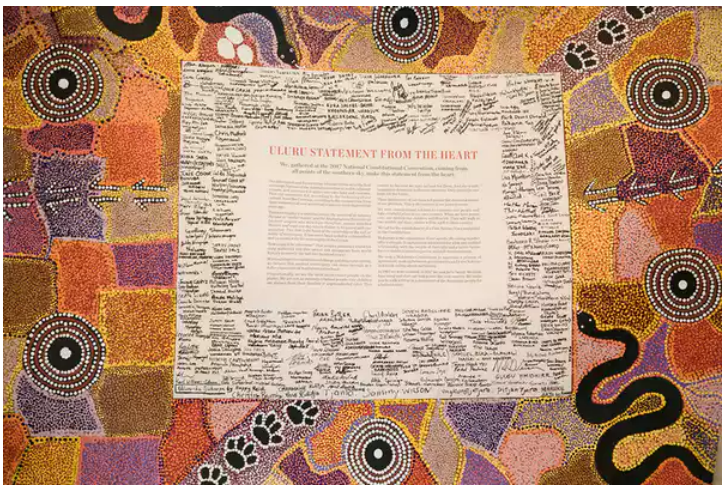
My warning is this: if we here in Australia do not reimagine ourselves we will be undone too.

Other nations did not foresee the moment of their undoing; they had perhaps not the materials and tools at hand to fashion defences, to reimagine their democracies.

Our bewilderment with the greater world we live in is buttressed by our determined ignorance of our own country. If Australia chooses to remain cloistered in that ignorance at this time of dissolution, it is no less pregnant with catastrophe than anywhere else. The bonfire of our vanities is fully loaded with the fuel of growing inequality, fear and division.

And yet, it is at this moment of peril that we have been presented with an extraordinary opportunity rarely given to nations, a way of reinventing our country in a way that makes us stronger, more democratic and more inclusive.

And that opportunity is the Uluru statement.




The Uluru statement of the Heart. Photograph: Carly Earl for the Guardian

At a time when the common consensus was that the worst was in the ascendant it was an appeal to what was best. It was a great achievement of our democracy that those who, from the beginning of our nation, have been locked out, would now, for the first time of which I am aware, accept the sovereignty of the commonwealth in return for a recognition of their sovereignty within that commonwealth.

That it was done with dignity and with a generosity wholly out of character with the humiliation and hate that has been visited on Indigenous people for 200 years gave the Uluru proposals a majestic grace.

The Uluru statement was modest in its proposals but it demands a radical recognition of who we are. We are not a nation, we are state divided by race and a refusal to acknowledge history.

Race, of course, is not a personal or scientific distinction; it is a political distinction. Race, with its ideas of Indigenous Australia as a problem, can only be maintained through power, and it can only be undone and unmade by power.

At the heart of the Uluru statement is a single terrible, haunting sentence, which reads, “This is the torment of our powerlessness.” To end that terrible torment there is finally only one remedy: it is to accord Indigenous Australia a measure of power through constitutional recognition of its sovereignty.

The great question of Indigenous sovereignty has been repeatedly acknowledged as a fundamental problem of the Australian state by successive national leaders. White Australia could not solve that problem. In a democracy that has constantly denied them, it was Indigenous Australia which, in a democratic process, came up with a solution.

But the historic magnitude of the Uluru statement was matched only by the smallness of the government’s response, which was akin to watching circus clowns standing on a wet soap bar. It was always going to end pathetically, and so it did, with a shameful lie the government knew was a lie, pretending a moment of democratic history was an attack on our democracy, the lie of the third house of parliament promulgated by a man who would go on to blame his newborn child for his many problems, a calumny sadly repeated by the prime minister.

I don’t doubt that, for the government, the constitutional and legal questions are complex, that the politics are pregnant with the possibility of failure. The Indigenous community is also of many minds on many aspects of these various issues. Yet in spite of these difficulties, in

spite of labyrinthine politics, the Indigenous community managed to find common cause, and with one voice say what it wanted.

And one might have thought that our government would listen and emulate the hard graft, the gritty politics, the trust in democracy, and aspire, at the very least, to the same hard-won achievement.

But a government that boasts of its determination to fight hard for company tax cuts ran from the fight for democracy. A government with the stamina to resist the overriding public mood for a royal commission into the banks for four years washed its hands of the Uluru statement in as many weeks.

And a government that claims to be of good heart to Indigenous Australia publicly humiliated a generation of great black leaders. All that the government has achieved in so doing is to lay a fertile ground for proponents of extremism and violence to preach to the next generation of black leaders who will rightly think Australian democracy is a sham that excludes them.

The effort it demanded of Canberra was perhaps too large; it demanded it imagine the country anew, stronger, richer. It required people who knew a life of the mind and a life of the soul, a largeness and generosity of spirit, and all these things are not just absent in the Turnbull government but consistently attacked and destroyed by them whenever they appear in Australian life.

Perhaps they knew themselves it was a task beyond their desiccated souls. The Uluru statement was a historic moment for our nation and, by refusing it, the Turnbull government chose to write itself out of history. Of them, only shame will endure.

But if Canberra needs Australia, Australia does not need Canberra. By framing the Uluru statement as a political request that awaited a political response, by thinking it was about Canberra and not Australia, what has been forgotten is the immense power of the story Indigenous Australia is seeking to tell to all Australians.

And it is this which I think forms the heart of what Galarrwuy Yunupingu has characterised as a great gift to Australia.

The Makarrata - the less-discussed aspect of the Uluru statement - calls for a commission charged with two tasks: seeking agreements at various levels of government with Indigenous people and with truth telling about the past.

Indigenous Australians know the truth of us as a people for they have lived the lie of the white explorer and the white pastoralist who brought not freedom but chains, not food but poison, not home but dispossession, not law and order, but massacre, murder, rape and the stealing of children.

But most Australians do not. Most Australians would be horrified to learn the full extent of the massacres, of the fireside killings, of the wars of extermination, of the rapes, of the destruction and desecration of sacred sites, of the children taken, of the countless lives allowed to continue life without living. It is a terrible story, a story of shame, but it is my story as much as it is your story, and it must be told, and it must be learned, because freedom exists in the space of memory, and only by walking back into the shadows is it possible for us all to finally be free.

The Bunggul dance at this year's Garma. Photograph: Mick Tsikas/AAP

I hope one day someone finds an Indigenous word to describe the unique nature of this enduring tragedy, this eternity of crimes, crimes that continue and that continue to deform us all, black and white, a word particular to our national tragedy's own epic lineaments of suffering, resistance and endurance, a word such as the Holocaust is to the Jewish tragedy, as the Holodomor is to the Ukrainian tragedy.

And that word would also perhaps include the way in which this tragedy was also other things, how those who murdered also made love, how those who orphaned also had children, how those who derided and persecuted the Indigenous also took on Indigenous ways, thinking and dreams.

I have spoken elsewhere of the extraordinary extent to which early Tasmanian settlers took on Palawa ways of shelter, diet, clothing and lifestyle. But consider another example from the Kimberley: when the colonial police were hunting down the great Bunuba resistance fighter Jandamarra, they came to believe that he was, as the Bunuba said, a magic man.

Many white settlers came to believe Jandamarra could fly and even police reports described bullets passing through his body. The Bunuba believed that a magic man could only be killed by another magic man, and so police brought one down from the territory and it was he who killed Jandamarra.

But who really won?

To defeat the Bunuba the whites had to enter their Dreaming, and accept their beliefs as the truth of the Kimberley. And in this way the story of the frontier is a story of birth as well as of killing, of values and mentalities changing as much as it is also of segregation, oppression and violence.

If we can as a nation learn and understand some of these things we can also appreciate the second story which is as transcendent as the first is tragic, and that is a different story of the past, a story of glory. It is the 60,000-year story that manifests itself here at Garma.

It is in the Indigenous languages I hear all around me here, each a different way of divining the universe, unique and irreplaceable. It is in the cosmology and wisdom of traditional communities; it remains artfully written over much of our landscape in the fire-shaped patterning of bush, scrub and grassland; it stares back at us from the great rock paintings of the past and the extraordinary Indigenous art of today, from the films of Warwick Thornton to the paintings of Emily Kame Kngwarreye to the dance of Stephen Page, to the exquisite beauty of Michael Long holding the ball out to Carlton in the 1993 grand final, daring anyone to be

better, as a grand final became wholly about his time, and his place, and his magnificent wonder.

And in that strange frozen moment of pure motion, as Australia thrilled as a man seemed to move at once backward and forward in time in defiance of time and space, it is possible to see also that our great struggle as a nation has always been to find ourselves in each other - the white in the black, the black in the white.

That is why though the Uluru statement has been denied, it is not dead.

I do not think that the majority of Australians have even started thinking about it. I do not believe that presented with the great drama of our nation going back into deep time that they will not be moved; that in being shown the vast tragedy of invasion that they will not understand the enormity of the crime; that in being shown the great wealth and diversity of Indigenous culture they would not feel an immense, shared pride.

And I think that they will come to the view that in denying black Australia that they have finally denied themselves, that this denial damages us all, and that they accept that it must now end.

If Australians can understand these stories as the mighty stones on which their nation could rest, I believe we could then combat the forces of racism, of hate, of fear, that are presently destroying other nations. We might even finally become a truly independent nation, knowing our strength resides not in obsequious alliances with power elsewhere, but within the marvel of our own people.

But for these things to happen the truth must be heard.

I began writing this speech at my place on Bruny Island. Opposite my writing room across D'Entrecasteaux Channel is Oyster Cove, where, in a remote outstation, the 47 spirit-shocked survivors of the Tasmanian genocide were dumped by the colonial authorities. After hearing of their story - he called it a "war of extermination waged by European immigrants" - HG Wells wrote The War of the Worlds in which Martian colonists exterminate Europeans.

Tonight I am here in Garma, a guest of the Yolngu people, and I realise that war never ended. Not the trauma, not the pain, not the damage, not the ongoing injustices, not the cruelties, nor yet the humiliations, not the torment of powerlessness.

In Yolngu the word for selfish is *gurrutumiriw*, which translates as lacking in kin, or acting as if one has no kin.

And Australia as a nation, after 200 years, is faced with a fundamental truth. We are now entwined peoples; by custom, by humour, by friendship, by love, by work and by sport, in art, in music, in words, and through the land; in all these ways we have over 200 years found ourselves in each other.

Black and white, we have become kin. We cannot be selfish.

And because we are kin it is not possible for white Australia to pretend that it is not damaged by the war that so damages black Australia, that it is not crippled by the same wounds, that it too is not rendered oddly mute by the same silence.

We should aspire as a nation to the hard-won knowledge that a war that began over 200 years ago can now be ended, and with it the crimes, the violence, the massacres, the murders, the

rapes, the stolen children, the smashed Dreamings, all this can finally become history rather than an enduring present.

We can belong here if we choose to anchor our identity in Indigenous Australia's history, a history that must include the cost of the invasion - and the path to that new identity is saying yes to the Uluru statement.

Indigenous Australia is offering the possibility of completing our commonwealth of Australia, a commonwealth brutally deformed at its birth by its exclusion of its First Nations.

Commonwealth is an old middle English word that derives from an older word, *commonweal*, which was understood as a general good that was shared, a common well-being. It suggests a mutuality and shared strength. It evokes relationships, the idea of a common inheritance. It is, you could argue, the counterpoint to the Yolngu word for selfishness, for lack of kinship. Commonwealth *is* kinship.

It is to a completed commonwealth that I wish to belong. A commonwealth not just of states but more fundamentally a commonwealth of kin, a commonwealth of the Dreaming, of 60,000 years of civilisation. That's the land I want to walk to, and it's time we began the journey along the path Indigenous Australia has with grace shown us. To tomorrow. To hope.

It doesn't take 20 years or 50 years or forever to get there. *It takes political courage.* And it is we who must give our politicians the courage they lack.

For too long we have confused civilisation and our European heritage as the same thing. We have been blind to the sources of freedom and hope that were uniquely our own, the vitality and antiquity that were uniquely our own, the complexity and the beauty that were uniquely our own and always there just in front of us.

But, like Burke and Wills, dying of a hunger created by their illusions in a land of plenty, we couldn't see the food that was there in front of us. We only had to ask and it would have been given. But for over 200 years we turned our backs and our souls withered.

"At Uluru we started a fire," Galarrwuy Yunupingu has said, "a fire that we hope burns bright for Australia."

Indigenous leader Galarrwuy Yunupingu at the Garma festival on Saturday. Photograph: Mick Tsikas/AAP

I began with a warning. I spoke of how our story as Australia is no longer holding. We have before us the chance other nations do not. If white can find themselves in black, as black Australia has through the Uluru statement sought to find itself in white, we can begin a new story - a better, richer, more sustaining and more hopeful story.

To do that though we must choose to become history's actors, all of us, because no one else will change these things for us.

For Australia lies before us, waiting to be written into the Dreaming and the Dreaming into it. It is far from easy, but I believe that if the Uluru statement is taken to Australia, rather than to Canberra, that Australians are ready for this new story, that there has never been a better time, and that we must dare everything in our telling.

Yothu yindi. Garma. Makarrata. Yolgnu words that mean: coming together. Working together. Making peace together. This is our indispensable task as a nation and we cannot shirk it one more day. It is our time. Let us begin *our* country, as nobly as we are able, with kindness, with courage, with the love of brother and sister for brother and sister. Let us seize the fire.

Topics
- Uluru Statement from the Heart
- Garma festival
- Indigenous Australians
- Australian politics
- Indigenous peoples
- Tasmania
- comment