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A Response to *A Frontier Conversation* (review of documentary)

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A response to *A Frontier Conversation* by Margaret Jacobs
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This intriguing and soft-spoken documentary brings together scholars of Indigenous history from both North America and Australia to meet with Indigenous communities and their locally-based historians in the Northern Territory. In these encounters, it becomes clear that scholarly, academic approaches to history often clash with the ways that Indigenous communities and their historians tell their histories. This is not news to

most readers of *Aboriginal History*; however, the film goes beyond this observation. It aims to show the possibilities for dialogue and fruitful exchange, as well as productive debate, when historians trained in different traditions of knowledge production meet and discuss their common passions for history. Rather than making grand claims about cultural breakthroughs, the film is quieter and more subtle, suggesting that this is only the beginning of a long conversation that must continue over many years.

I want to discuss just two of the issues that the film raises: first, the stakes involved for Indigenous people versus academic historians in interpreting and conveying the history of colonialism, and second, the possibility of telling history in myriad ways. As many of the participants point out in the film, many Indigenous people use history to connect themselves to their land, and both land and history are crucial to creating their identities. For historians who work within their own Indigenous communities, the film suggests, the survival, healing, and recovery of their own people is their primary agenda.

In contrast, what is it that drives non-native academic historians in interpreting Indigenous history? The film intimates several possibilities. Choctaw historian Clara Sue Kidwell notes that university-trained academic historians tend to be more interested in facts and causal relations than in questions of identity. Several other commentators in the film point out that academic historians write books that may only be read by a few hundred people, many of them other historians. And why do we write these books? Is it an 'indulgence', as Yale historian Jay Gitlin suggests, a 'first world practice', even a product and vestige of western colonial culture? Do we do it simply to advance our careers, as historian David Carment implies, or do we have higher goals to raise awareness among other non-native people in our nations?

While polite and circumspect, Indigenous-community historians in the film seem to view academic historians as, at best, irrelevant to their work. At worst, they see university-trained scholars as cultural appropriators who have extracted knowledge from Indigenous peoples for their own purposes. This perception may be deeply unsettling to many of us academic historians who imagine ourselves as exposers of atrocities, dispellers of myths, and seekers of justice; in short, as champions of Indigenous people. It is of course troubling to find out that we are viewed by many Indigenous historians much as a kind of latter-day Friends of the Indian, a group of white American reformers in the 19th century, who we now recognise as well-meaning, but ultimately paternalistic do-gooders who often did more harm than good because they did not consult with Indigenous people or see them as equal partners in the enterprise.¹

Such a chasm may exist between Indigenous-community historians and academics because of different conceptualisations of the use of knowledge. Within the academy, we are trained to value academic freedom, the ability to research and write about any subject that compels us and to make knowledge universally available. Indigenous communities tend to emphasise intellectual responsibility more than freedom and to believe that only certain groups of people should have access to certain types of knowledge. The documentary also suggests that Indigenous historians resent the near-

¹ For more about Friends of the Indian, see my book, *Engendered Encounters: Feminism and Pueblo Cultures, 1879-1934*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1999: 10-12, 24-55.

monopoly that non-native historians have had in telling Indigenous history, or at least telling it to a non-native audience. We academic historians have indeed been the arbiters of what constitutes 'real' history — namely books and articles heavy on analysis with scrupulously documented footnotes — and a 'real' historian, a scholar trained within a university PhD program. Without accusation or blame, the film gently prompts its viewers, especially academics, to examine our assumptions about knowledge and to realise our responsibilities to Indigenous communities.

Overall, the film suggests that we academic historians need to do more self-reflective soul-searching. Why do we do what we do? Why do we do it in the way that we do? What are the stakes for us? Is this merely an intellectual exercise? Why are we seen by many Indigenous historians outside the academy as thieves of knowledge? As colonial conspirators? And after self-reflection, then what should we do? The film promotes conversation, exchange, dialogue, respect, and reconciliation as the historical practices we must embrace to overcome the distrust and suspicion that Indigenous historians often feel toward non-native academic historians.

This film also focuses on other ways of interpreting the past and conveying its meaning than through the written word alone, and this is the second issue I want to address. Historian Ann McGrath, the film's narrator and executive producer, suggests that Indigenous communities tell their histories through diverse media: performance — including song, dance, and re-enactment — the preservation of Indigenous languages, travel to and tourism within native lands, rock and bark painting and other visual art, and film. Moreover, the film extols the value of learning Indigenous histories through Indigenous means. We gain a fuller understanding of Aboriginal history, for example, when we hear Northern Territory administrator Ted Egan welcome the film's group in Darwin with a haunting and powerful performance of an Aboriginal song. Apart from the song's content itself, the history that led to Ted Egan's performance of the song suggests something of the complex historical encounters and interactions that have taken place on the frontiers between Aboriginal communities and incoming settlers. Through learning Indigenous languages, historians can also gain a very different sense of colonial history. We can see the power of this in the work of Hawaiian scholar Noenoe Silva, who, after learning the Hawaiian language, was able to access Hawaiian language newspapers of the late 19th century and to recover native Hawaiian opposition to annexation by the United States.² Travel to Indigenous lands and historic sites may also enrich our understanding of the past. I have experienced this myself on a tour of Fort Robinson in northwest Nebraska. While a Northern Cheyenne elder recounted his people's history there, we stood in the barracks which once confined his ancestors and looked out to the hills where they fled in the dead of winter. We could imagine the Northern Cheyennes breaking out of their prison and heading for their ancestral lands hundreds of miles away in Montana, and we could hear the shots of the US cavalry as they killed 64 Northern Cheyenne people on their bid for freedom.³

2. Noenoe Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism*, University of North Carolina Press, Durham, 2004.

3. For more on this episode in Northern Cheyenne history, see Joe Starita, *The Dull Knives of Pine Ridge: A Lakota Odyssey*, Putnam, New York, 1995.

These means of telling history engage the full range of human sensory experience; they rely upon the body itself to convey and understand history. I think in particular of the clowns who perform during ceremonies of the Pueblo Indian communities of New Mexico, who use their bodies to interpret the complicated history of their encounters with Spanish priests or with Anglo tourists.⁴ Such methods of history telling also require us to learn history through our bodies, as I experienced at Fort Robinson.

These are not, however, Indigenous versus white academic ways of doing history, and we should avoid settling into such simplistic dichotomies. After all, these forms of performative, bodily, sensory histories are equally compelling to many non-Indigenous Americans and Australians. In the United States, witness the popularity of Civil War battle re-enactments, or the recent re-creation of the Lewis and Clark journey. Participants are gripped by the fumes of gunsmoke and the aroma of a campfire, the sting of mosquitoes, the chill in the air or the heat of a uniform in deep summer in a way that they might not be by the articles and books that academic historians publish. This was even apparent at the Western History Association conference in St Louis, Missouri where part of *A Frontier Conversation* was screened. One session enabled conference participants to travel by bus from the conference hotel to the remains of Cahokia, the site of a densely populated and complex Indigenous Mississippian civilisation from the 1100s to the 1600s, renowned for building enormous mounds that loom over the Mississippi River nearby. As we historians lumbered off our buses on a beautiful sun-filled autumn day, we were herded into a small, windowless auditorium with concrete benches, where four academic talks about Cahokia were scheduled. As scholars delivered their presentations about ancient Cahokia, we squirmed and fidgeted in our seats. After two presentations, one bold historian asked for a break for air and restrooms, at which point virtually the entire group of western historians stampeded out the door. I fled out into the sunshine and the wind to climb out-of-breath to the top of Monk's Mound, to experience the view and the full sense of the place unmediated by academic dissection. And I was not alone.

These other ways of conveying history, however, also require interpretation. Historians – whether academically or community trained – are still important cultural mediators or, in the evocative term used by Azar Nafisi (author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*), 'guardians of memory'.⁵ The phrase suggests the powerful connection between history and memory, a connection that academic historians cannot ignore, and a topic that has become a major interest to historians.⁶ Nafisi's phrase also suggests that memory – and history – can be assaulted and corrupted. As Czech writer Milan Kundera has asserted: 'The first step in liquidating a people ... is to erase its memory. Destroy ...

4. I have written about Pueblo dancing in *Engendered Encounters*, 1999: 106–48.

5. Azar Nafisi made this arresting comment at a presentation on September 20, 2006 at the University of Nebraska. See also her book *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, Random House, New York, 2003.

6. There is a vast literature on history and memory. Two books that I have found particularly accessible and fascinating in this regard are Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagan: Storytelling in a Family's Past*, Hill & Wang, New York, 1998 and Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, Norton, New York, 1996.

its culture, its history.⁷ This brings us back around to the first issue I discussed. The need for 'guardians of memory' conveys the stakes involved for everyone. The keeper or guardian of memory is an important and powerful social figure, but also one who may wish to keep others from obtaining their own direct relationship to history and memory. This documentary suggests that historical memory need not only be guarded nor conveyed through the work and traditional medium of academic historians, but that Indigenous community historians have a vital role to play, not only in keeping history alive in their own communities but in teaching a fuller and deeper history to the rest of us.

7. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, translated by Michael Henry Heim, Penguin Books, New York, 1981: 159.