

National Pride and Shame in Australia: History, Ethics, Truth-Telling, and Civic Responsibility

Enoch Chi Ngai Lim 

Translational Research Department, Specialist Medical Services Group, Earlwood NSW, Australia

Email: enoch@smsg.au

How to cite this paper: Lim, E. C. N. (2025). National Pride and Shame in Australia: History, Ethics, Truth-Telling, and Civic Responsibility. *Advances in Historical Studies*, 14, 388-395.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ahs.2025.145021>

Received: June 16, 2025

Accepted: December 21, 2025

Published: December 24, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

History is not neutral. It is shaped by memory, power, and identity. Australia holds both pride and shame. First Nations peoples show strength and carry pain. Colonisation began with invasion. Its effects still shape lives today. This article asks how we should feel about a national past. It treats pride and shame as moral positions, not only emotions. It employs moral luck to explain why we are not held accountable for past harms, but we are still responsible for our response to them. It also treats national identity as a story that we can revise. The paper reviews the concepts of truth-telling, apology, and reform. It looks at inquiries and commissions. It notes the debate over Australia Day. It shows how trauma continues in health, education, and justice. It also shows how healing grows through culture, language, and Country. The article argues for truth-telling across schools, services, and policy. It promotes cultural safety in healthcare, and it supports voice and treaty work. Shame should not freeze action. It should push action. Pride should not hide harm. It should rest on truth. The goal is to fulfil a civic duty by facing the past and building a fairer future.

Keywords

National Identity, Pride and Shame, Truth-Telling, Reconciliation, Indigenous Australians, First Nation People

1. History, Memory and Identity

History is not a neutral record of events, but a contested space shaped by memory, power, and identity, where conflicting narratives reveal its complexity. Pride and shame lie at the heart of Australia's story—a nation that is both profoundly Indigenous and deeply colonial. For over 65,000 years, Indigenous peoples developed thriving, complex cultures—until British colonisation disrupted them in 1788.

Contemporary Australia remains shaped by its colonial foundations, with First

Nations peoples still facing significant challenges. There are enduring gaps in health, education, and justice, as well as ongoing struggles for land, cultural recognition, and sovereignty. First Nations peoples carry stories of cultural strength and pride, but also of pain, rooted in their relationship with the Country (ancestral land) and shaped by intergenerational trauma from dispossession and marginalisation.

Thus, Australian history includes not only settler-colonial violence but also the enduring resistance of First Nations peoples in their fight for justice and recognition. The historical tension between pride and shame offers an opportunity—if confronted honestly rather than ignored—for a more constructive national identity. Omitting one side of the narrative risks perpetuating past injustices and repeating historical harms. In contrast, transparent reconciliation enables critical reflection and creates the conditions for meaningful change.

This paper adopts a historical and ethical perspective to examine whether individuals should feel pride, shame, or both regarding their national history. Drawing on historical accounts, government reports, and Indigenous scholarship, this paper examines how national memory is shaped by trauma and resilience. An Indigenous-informed lens is applied to examine the legacy of settler-colonialism in Australia, its enduring effects on First Nations peoples, and the contemporary processes of healing and reconciliation. By centering marginalised voices, this approach sees national history not in terms of pride or shame alone, but as a space for reflection, shared responsibility, and dialogue. While individuals are not morally culpable for ancestral actions, they inherit civic responsibility for acknowledging the truth. Thus, national pride must be informed by history, not insulated from it.

National shame and pride are not merely emotions but moral orientations—ethical responses to our shared collective identity. Philosopher Bernard Williams (1973) argues that “moral luck”—the idea that people can be held morally affected by actions they did not control—complicates how we think about responsibility, both individually and collectively (Pages 20-39). We do not choose our past, but we are morally responsible for how we respond to it [1]. In the Australian context, moral luck helps explain why contemporary non-Indigenous Australians inherit a moral relationship to a history they did not personally create. While they are not culpable for colonial actions, they nonetheless benefit from social, political, and economic structures shaped by those actions. Moral luck, therefore, clarifies that responsibility arises not from blame for past wrongdoing, but from the present-day obligation to address its ongoing consequences. National history is a shared moral inheritance: just as we take pride in a nation’s scientific and democratic achievements, we must also acknowledge its historical injustices. Moreover, Charles Taylor (1989) contends that collective identity is inherently narrative—we understand who we are through the stories we tell about ourselves and our past. Revising these narratives is not a threat to national cohesion but a moral imperative, essential to any inclusive form of collective belonging.

2. Colonial Beginnings and Historical Narratives

Australia's colonial trauma began not with the Stolen Generations, but with the initial act of invasion in 1788—a foundational rupture whose impacts are still felt today. The so-called “settlement” period—long portrayed in official histories—was, in reality, marked by forcible land dispossession, violent conflict, and the systemic disruption of First Nations communities. The growing preference for the term “invasion” over “settlement” reflects a broader recognition, particularly within Indigenous discourse, of the violent and non-consensual nature of colonisation. Colonisation was not peaceful nor consensual; it was met with resistance, bloodshed, and loss. This shift is essential to how Australian history is understood.

Australia's national identity is the result of the intertwining of historical accounts, culture, and politics. Enlightenment history saw the past as a period of progress towards self-sovereignty, concepts that framed colonisation as a mission to “civilize” the conquered and described the land as “empty”. It later evolved into what [Black and Macrauld \(2017\)](#) describe as the “Whig tradition” in history (p. 34), which is characterised by strident nationalism. In this context, Australia has been portrayed as a successful nation, devoid of any narrative of dislocation, marginalisation or resistance of Indigenous peoples. Moving past Whig history requires grappling with the more complex and less idealised parts of Australian history, as well as narratives that confront trauma and affirm the fight for justice.

3. Truth-Telling and Moral Responsibility

For Indigenous peoples, the shame comes from the impacts of systemic racism, removal, and sociopolitical marginalisation. This dolorous continuum of trauma includes the Stolen Generations. Children were taken, causing lasting emotional distress ([Pes, 2019](#); [Hand & Short, 2024](#)). For non-Indigenous Australians, shame is more from realising these injustices and understanding that the identity of the nation rests on the erasure of the voices of Indigenous people. Narratives like these have created opportunities for reckoning where truth-telling projects have facilitated healing processes ([Mencevska, 2020](#)). The 1997 Bringing Them Home report from the Commonwealth of Australia was the first comprehensive report to document the experiences of the Stolen Generations and provide recommendations for redress and reconciliation. In 2021, the Victorian Government established the [Yoorrook Justice Commission \(2025\)](#), which conducted formal hearings to address both longitudinal and contemporary injustices perpetrated against Aboriginal Victorians, informing treaty negotiations and systemic reforms. Community action programs, such as the Community Truth-telling Pathways programme by [Reconciliation Australia \(2025\)](#), have developed localised frameworks for truth-telling that highlight the resilience of Indigenous peoples in the face of historical injustices. This helps to strengthen the discourse among all Australians towards an inclusive national narrative.

The 2008 National Apology to the Stolen Generations was politically and morally motivated by a change in framing and context. Former Prime Minister Rudd's

apology recognised the First Nations People's suffering from policies that sought complete assimilation.

Critics of historical shame often argue that it risks weakening social cohesion by encouraging guilt over events modern individuals did not perpetrate. Former Prime Minister John Howard argued that contemporary Australians should not feel responsible for past actions—a stance echoed in other liberal democracies wary of what some label “postmodern guilt”. But this view conflates personal culpability with civic responsibility. It is also important to distinguish shame from settler-colonial guilt. Guilt implies personal wrongdoing, whereas shame concerns the moral condition of belonging to a community whose history includes serious injustice. Shame can therefore function as an ethical orientation without implying individual blame. This distinction helps clarify that acknowledging shame is not an act of self-reproach, but a recognition of inherited responsibility within a national community. We inherit the benefits and freedoms of our national past—so we also inherit a duty to recognise and address its harms. Pride and shame are not moral opposites but intertwined forces—each essential to shaping a more reflective and ethically grounded national identity. Some say national pride unites us, but pride without truth is shallow. Real unity comes from honesty—facing pain together, not ignoring it. Rather than being paralysed by shame, nations can pursue what [Avishai Margalit \(1996\)](#) terms a “decent society”—one that neither humiliates its members nor conceals historical injustice, but works to repair it through truth and accountability (pages 9-27, 150-188). National shame, then, becomes not a burden, but a bridge to moral repair. A clear example of this dynamic can be seen in the national response to the findings of the *Bringing Them Home* report [Commonwealth of Australia \(1997\)](#). Public recognition of the harm caused to the Stolen Generations generated widespread moral reflection and collective shame, which contributed to the momentum behind the 2008 National Apology. This moment of formal acknowledgement helped catalyse policy reforms in child protection, intergenerational healing programs, and the expansion of Link-Up services supporting family reunification.

Colonisation has left both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians grappling with a complex mix of reflection, shame, and moral reckoning. This tension is especially evident in debates surrounding Australia Day, held each year on 26 January. Many Indigenous Australians regard it as “Invasion Day”—a symbol of the beginning of dispossession, violence, and institutionalised oppression. Public debate is often polarised: some political leaders advocate changing the date to promote inclusion, while others resist altering what they see as a national tradition. First Nations leaders urged the communities to engage in respectful discussions about history and establish a new national day, emphasising that education and awareness must accompany reconciliation, which enables the country to confront its past.

4. Enduring Impacts and Pathways to Healing

The colonisation's lingering impact has entrenched Indigenous peoples into cy-

cles of poverty, incarceration, and substance abuse, creating social disadvantages (Walke et al., 2024). The cumulative impact of decades of being excluded from full participation in education, justice, healthcare, and other systems results in profound intergenerational trauma and cultural dislocation (Walke et al., 2024). It compels the nation to grapple deeply with its past and poses the challenge of whether it is appropriate to cultivate a sense of shame if the goal is to foster pride based on truth and justice.

This sense of shame has manifested through the failing prison system, and the foster care system also accentuates the ghettoisation of Indigenous people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders constitute approximately 3.8% of Australia's population, while the prison population, composed of these people, is about 32% (AIHW, 2023), proof of this disparity. It reflects the legacy of colonialism and brings emotional torment and shame. On the other hand, many Indigenous people have countered the challenges by finding strength in their pain and are working back through activism and cultural revival. Healing and cultural renewal programs, including on-country camps, language revitalisation, and community mental health services, have been vital in reviving pride and identity (Willmot et al., 2023; Bennett & Gates, 2022). One example is the on-Country healing camps documented by Willmot et al. (2023), in which Elders guide participants through cultural practices, storytelling, and connection to land. These camps have been shown to strengthen identity, improve social and emotional well-being, and rebuild intergenerational relationships. Such programs demonstrate how cultural renewal actively fosters pride, resilience, and community-led healing.

Education under colonialism has been doing both: creating the feeling of pride for the First Nations peoples and causing suffering. Under colonial rule, education systems promoted pride in colonial narratives while simultaneously suppressing Indigenous cultures, languages, and knowledge systems, producing both exclusion and harm for First Nations peoples. Western education systems have oppressed and sidelined Indigenous knowledge and cultural identity systems, generally portraying them as inferior or unimportant in formal education (Akena, 2012). Such exclusion breeds cultural decline. Emphasis on individualism and formal instruction often clashes with Aboriginal oral and relational learning (Sheehan, 2004; Young et al., 2013). These approaches caused many Indigenous children to disengage (Harrison & Sellwood, 2021). Today's curricula expose students to Indigenous viewpoints and allow many Indigenous youths to rediscover their roots. For example, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2019) emphasised the importance of Aboriginal students feeling valued and having a cultural identity (Holt & Perry, 2023). New educational perspectives help shift from binary emotions toward an understanding of the nation's historical complexity.

The addition of Indigenous content in school curricula and professional development programs can be one way to address a colonial shame prevalent in Australia, wherein there are issues of dispossession, marginalisation, and cultural

erasure and promote healing. Narrative inquiry and storytelling as ways of practice are relevant applications because Aboriginal people can share their stories from their own personal life experiences, and Indigenous youth can learn about their culture and restore their dignity (Edwards-Groves, 2023; Holt & Perry, 2023).

Institutional reforms—particularly in healthcare—reflect a growing willingness to address the legacy of colonialism and contribute to a more inclusive and constructive national identity. In 2025, fifteen nationally regulated health practitioner boards mandated cultural safety training as a compulsory component of continuing professional education and annual registration renewal across sixteen health professions (AHPRA, 2024). This initiative addresses racism in healthcare and fosters a deeper understanding of colonisation’s legacy. These reforms counter stigma and affirm Indigenous identity and pride. By acknowledging past harms, these efforts honour Indigenous resistance, spirituality, and cultural diversity—qualities that should inspire national pride, not shame.

5. Reconciliation and Shared Future

Across Australia, diverse stakeholders are working to shape a more inclusive national narrative through truth-telling commissions, treaty initiatives, educational reform, and justice-focused policies. To be meaningful, citizenship, especially as defined constitutionally, must reflect the full history of the nation, including its injustices. The 2017 *Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017)* marks a critical shift in national narrative, asserting that “this land was never ceded” and affirming that Aboriginal sovereignty remains active and coexists with that of the Crown. The Uluru Statement reclaims sovereignty not as a legal technicality, but as a living, moral foundation for reimagining Australian identity. The Uluru Statement articulates three core proposals: Voice, Treaty, and Truth. A constitutionally enshrined First Nations Voice would provide a permanent mechanism for Indigenous peoples to advise Parliament on laws and policies affecting them. A national process of Treaty-making would formalise relationships between governments and First Nations communities and acknowledge continuing sovereignty. Truth-telling would establish an honest account of Australia’s history, ensuring that past injustices and their contemporary impacts are publicly recognised.

Truth is the foundation of reconciliation and essential to addressing the injustices suffered by Australia’s First Nations peoples. Truth-telling means integrating Indigenous perspectives into education and public awareness, not just documenting the past. Acknowledging the truth, particularly its psychological consequences for future generations, is neither easy nor emotionally neutral.

National pride should not blind people to the wickedness of history. To move past binary emotions, Indigenous histories must be included through education and policy frameworks. Shame can lead to action, taking responsibility and addressing the harm of the past. Emotional guilt, when grounded in understanding, can lead to healing. In this way, guilt is not paralysing—it transforms into a sense

of moral responsibility and social engagement.

Understanding national history requires recognising that feelings of pride and shame can co-exist simultaneously. Australia's history contains accomplishments and systemic racism, especially targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. One must recognise historical wrongs and their current effects and pledge to create a future of truth, justice, and inclusion. Pride shifts from denial to collective acceptance and confronts the past together. The truest form of national pride is born not from forgetting history, but from facing it.

6. Conclusion

Australia's history is marked by both greatness and grief. Pride and shame live side by side in this story. To be proud without truth is to celebrate a myth. To feel shame without action is to stay silent. Both emotions must lead to responsibility. Facing history does not weaken a nation; it strengthens it. Truth-telling and listening to First Nations voices create a more honest identity. When citizens accept that the nation's benefits and harms are shared, pride becomes grounded and moral. Reconciliation is not an apology alone. It is a daily act of recognising what happened, repairing what can be repaired, and preventing future harm. Education, cultural safety, and fair policy are the tools of this work. In the end, national pride is not found in perfection, but in courage—the courage to face what is difficult and to build justice from truth. That is how Australia's story can move from denial to dignity, from guilt to shared hope.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- (2017). *Uluru Statement from the Heart*. Uluru Statement. <https://www.ulurustatement.org/the-statement>
- (2025). *Yoorrook Justice Commission*. <https://yoorrookjusticecommission.org.au>
- Akena, F. A. (2012). Critical Analysis of the Production of Western Knowledge and Its Implications for Indigenous Knowledge and Decolonization. *Journal of Black Studies*, 43, 599-619.
- Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) (2024). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Strategy*. <https://www.ahpra.gov.au/About-Ahpra/Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-Health-Strategy/CS-ACPD-Project>
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2023). *Adult Prisoners: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*. Australian Government. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/adult-prisoners>
- Bennett, B., and Gates, T. G. (2022). Decolonization and Trauma-Informed Truth-Telling about Indigenous Australia in a Social Work Diversity Course: A Cultural Safety Approach. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 32, 137-152.
- Black, J., & MacRaild, D. (2017). *Studying History* (4th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Commonwealth of Australia (1997). *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.
https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social_justice/bringing_them_home_report.pdf
- Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2019). *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*.
<https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>
- Edwards-Groves, C. (2023). The Sand through My Fingers: Finding Aboriginal Cultural Voice, Identity and Agency on Country. In K. E. Reimer, M. Kaukko, S. Windsor, K. Mahon, & S. Kemmis (Eds.), *Living Well in a World Worth Living in for All* (pp. 87-114). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-7985-9_6
- Hand, S., & Short, D. (2024). Indigenous Rights and Reconciliation: Lessons from Australia. In S. Lightfoot, & S. Maddison (Eds.), *Handbook of Indigenous Public Policy* (pp. 308-331). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800377011.00026>
- Harrison, N., & Sellwood, J. (2021). *Learning and Teaching in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Holt, L., & Perry, J. (2023). Shaping the Narratives—Indigenous Knowledges through Storying. In M. Vicars, & L. Pelosi (Eds.), *Storying Pedagogy as Critical Praxis in the Neoliberal University* (pp. 29-47). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-4246-6_3
- Margalit, A. (1996). *The Decent Society*. Harvard University Press.
- Mencevska, I. (2020). Truth Telling in Australia's Historical Narrative. *NEW: Emerging scholars in Australian Indigenous Studies*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.5130/nesais.v5i1.1552>
- Pes, A. (2019). Different Shades of Shame. the Responsibilities and Legacies of a Shameful History in Australian Fiction. In D. Attwell, A. Pes, & S. Zinato (Eds.), *Poetics and Politics of Shame in Postcolonial Literature* (pp. 122-137). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429201653-6>
- Reconciliation Australia (2025). *Community Truth-Telling Pathways*.
<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/our-work/truth-telling/>
- Sheehan, N. (2004). *Indigenous Knowledge and Higher Education: Instigating Relational Education in a Neocolonial Context*. Master's Thesis, University of Queensland.
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Harvard University Press.
- Walke, E., Townsend-Cross, M. L., Garay, J., Matthews, V., Dickson, M., Edwards, D. et al. (2024). Where Our Identity Lies: Confirmation of Aboriginality—Narratives of Colonial and Lateral Violence. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 20, 3-11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801241235756>
- Williams, B. (1973). *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139165860>
- Willmot, J., Hamer, J., Riggs, D. W., & Rosenberg, S. (2023). Healing from Intergenerational Trauma: Narratives of Connection, Belonging, and Truth-Telling in Two Aboriginal Healing Camps. *Settler Colonial Studies*, 14, 125-139.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473x.2023.2260547>
- Young, S., Zubrzycki, J., Green, S., Jones, V., Stratton, K., & Bessarab, D. (2013). "Getting It Right: Creating Partnerships for Change": Developing a Framework for Integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges in Australian Social Work Education. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 22, 179-197.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2013.843120>