Chapter 17
In and Beyond the Now: A Postscript

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> What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say?
> Audre Lorde, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, (2001).

Abstract We never would have imagined a world so changed, such an uncertain and precarious future, nor such a watershed as 'now' has become. The responsibility of this time weighs heavily on the academy and the disciplines within it by implication. In this chapter we assert that historians are known to embrace interdisciplinary thinking and critical epistemologies, and to stretch boundaries and are therefore well placed to forge ahead into an uncertain future.

We never would have imagined a world so changed, such an uncertain and precarious future, nor such a watershed as 'now' has become. Barnett (2020) tells us that 'From now on (the first quarter of the twenty first century) the world falls into two temporal categories, BC and AC – before Coronavirus and after Coronavirus'. He asks us to consider the interconnectedness of the world, humans and technology, economies, nations, values, knowledge systems and surveillance, and of course, he argues, 'implicated' in them all, is the contemporary university (Barnett, 2020). With interconnectedness comes vulnerability and if COVID-19 has done anything, it has exposed those vulnerabilities and created fissures, pauses and folds for reflection. Barnett ends his blog post with the stark announcement, that this is the time for 'a completely new theory of the university.' '*All* has to be rethought', he declares. Barnett and Bengsten (2017, p. 8) even call specifically for epistemologies to be reconceptualised and argue for a 'speculative epistemology'. 'We suggest', they say:

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> that a 'speculative epistemology' and speculative thinking more generally will enable the emergence of "knowledge, [which] does not merely relate back to socio-political and cultural events and meanings, but also derives from much deeper ontological strata and reservoirs within the university itself".

The responsibility of 'now' weighs heavily on the academy and the disciplines within it by implication.

The work of the historian seems more important and urgent than ever before in this watershed moment. Pietsch and Flanagan (2020, p. 255) see 'the urgency of our times as pressing on historians in a different way – a way that speaks not only to the content of what they teach and research, but also to their epistemic orientation: the way they face the work and the ways they seek to orient subjects towards certain ways of seeing, understanding and acting'. The breadth of this view is also represented in the chapters of this volume, where authors have explored a range of approaches to contemporary issues. What they all have in common is that same sense of doing things differently, and the recognition that how we teach history in the contemporary classroom must take account of the unique expectations, concerns and demands of our times. The rapidly changing COVID climate has made the imperative to act quickly and decisively even more apparent. There is a sense that we are teaching about the past in response to a present that is tumbling into an unimagined future. With that in mind, the Australian Historical Association (AHA) conference for 2020 was prophetically focused on urgent histories. The subsequent edition of its journal, *History Australia*, explores the professional obligation to respond. Rees and Huf (2020a, p. 228; 2020b p. 275) write about the 'current moment of urgency' and the way 'historical scholarship looks less like retreat and more like urgent political work'. The way things are done cannot remain the same. As evidence, Pietsch and Flanagan (2020, p. 254) admit theirs 'is not a conventional research article, but more a kind of improvised reckoning'. They explain that 'answering the call of our times will mean doing some things that are uncomfortable or unfamiliar' (Pietsch & Flanagan, 2020, p 270). Rees and Huf (2020b, p. 277) go even further. They envision historians creating 'new narratives about human (and non-human) existence that offer fresh ways to think about and respond to the fraught present' which will be part of 'an entirely reimagined political, social and economic order'. 'These are formidable KPIs', they declare. At a time when governments dismiss history as not part of the job-ready agenda, the discipline has carved out for itself an urgent, demonstrative role that is nothing short of revolutionary – charged with contextualising, narrativising and historicising the reconceptualisation of our society and using collegiality, inclusivity and interdisciplinarity as the key principals in forward-looking succession in the academy (Rees & Huf, 2020b, p. 285).

If the sense of urgency is there, and the acknowledgement that, perhaps, we even stand at a point of no return, what will be the intellectual drivers for teaching history in the post-COVID world? What lies beyond the now and the knowledge that the discipline must be part of re-imagining the future by re-working the past. One of the biggest questions for the future must be the nature of truth and the value of trust in expertise.

Concepts of contested truths, truth-telling and post-truth have marked scholarly (and political) discussions, challenging structures of power and hegemony that shape 'common sense' (Clayton-Dixon, 2019; Gapps, 2018; Gudonis & Jones, 2020; Mencevska, 2020). Historians are pivotal to compiling the trustworthy histories of global, national and local communities. These will provide the grounding for the pub tests of the future, the public narratives, the lessons in the history classrooms and exhibitions in museums – the stories that are accepted as true. Yet in these times the impact of post-truth has been troubling, most notably writ large in the international arena through the public utterances of President Trump and his followers. Indeed, post-truth was the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year for 2016, the same year as Trump's election (Oxford Languages, 2016; Black & Walsh, 2019, p. 2).

Just as we finalise this book, Gudonis and Jones published *History in a Post-Truth World*. They define post-truth history, even though they recognise post-truth itself is a disputed concept within the pages of their own volume, as:

> the communication of false information on a historical phenomenon that appeals to emotion and personal belief, where both the purveyor and recipient are indifferent to the historicity and contemptuous of expert opinion that contradicts it, and where the underlying objective is ideological, especially in support of collective identity or a political program (2020, p. 1).

Because history is an interpretative discipline which often selects and discards sources in search of evidence for an argument, there has long been a fine distinction between history and fiction. Curthoys and Docker (2010, p. 3) said they found that problem so complex that they devoted a whole book to addressing it. History is more important than ever in a post-truth world because the interpretation of the past that privileges analysis, investigation, questioning and exploration over fabrication, emotion and unsubstantiated belief is essential to our rational knowing and engaging with the world. The key question that Gudonis and Jones (2020) ask, and it is important because of the values layered within it, is whether history is 'better than footnoted fiction?' For better, we could also read 'more'. As we go deeper into the mire that is post-truth, experts will need to assert their authority in new ways to reach an audience increasingly disrespectful and disparaging of that knowledge, while equally oblivious to their own ignorance. Nichols (2017, n.p.) declared that the United States 'is now a country obsessed with the worship of its own ignorance'. The endpoint is that the historian has a professional expectation and perhaps even a moral duty to explicate the past using the ethical methods of the discipline in the public interest, that most contestable, but nonetheless democratically laden term. Political commentator, Waleed Aly (2020) has written about Trump and post-truth explaining that: 'The point isn't that he misrepresents facts. It's that facts are just irrelevant. All that matters is the narrative and how you feel about it.' The end result, cautions Aly, is that 'What we might be about to discover is that it's a very short trip from post-truth to post-democracy'.

Those who entreat historians to become public intellectuals see a future that is precarious for truth and place hope in those who are prepared not just to reassert the primacy of facts, but to negotiate a transparent space where interpretation, based on evidence, can be publicly encouraged (Rousso in Gudonis & Jones, Foreword,

2020). In other words, the historian in the urgent, post-COVID, post-truth age is still an activist. Activism and forms of public engagement are, like most aspects of our lives, transforming under COVID conditions. The opportunity to blog, join online conferences and create panels for public podcasts has been something historians have embraced with enthusiasm. Online engagement has been transformative and liberating especially for those of us living in rural and regional areas. Some of us have been able to attend gatherings, conferences and book launches that distance would usually have precluded. Access to the history community in such contexts has increased dramatically. The work of the Australian Centre for Public History at the University of Technology has proved to be a leader in the online spaces with their *Public History Hour* (2020). Other groups such as the Sydney Feminist History Group and the multiple 'Friends of' history departments have brought together large gatherings online for lectures and panels. We see an important opportunity into the future for such unprecedented access to be continued – even once gatherings begin to occur again on university campuses. The electronic connectivity that has been forced upon us in lockdown will surely be an enduring expectation of academic life as a gateway into public debate and commentary. That opportunity will also be there for our students whose study of history may very well also include the study of history under siege. In COVID times our communities have been fractured, locked down, interconnected, and forward-looking. The entanglements of historical scholarship take on a Baradian space–time–mattering form, where space, time and matter are so entangled and ongoing (Barad, 2011).

The challenges for historians in the future are immense. There will be new issues to explain, new questions to ask and new knowledge and perspectives to share. We could speculate on what they might be, Indigeneity, online spaces, 'planetary stewardship'(Sterling, 2020). We note, for example, the recent public interest in the Spanish Flu as we try to make sense of the present pandemic. Past President of the Australian Historical Association, Joy Damousi, explores the emergent 'fault-lines' in our present by drawing comparisons with 1918–1919. She wrote of three: 'the federal system; transparency and openness in crisis; and the economic management of such moments in time' (Damousi, 2020, p. 219). There was a minimal public interest in the Spanish Flu until we were faced with our own lived experience. Neither, for that matter, do we know much about the history of the North Head Quarantine Station in Sydney. Perhaps there will be more interest now to respond to the request for information on their website to help flesh out the long history of suppressing contagion in Australia (Q Station). But there will always be the surprise, the shock and the unexpected that will demand a reset. Rees and Huf (2020b, p. 270) conclude that 'when the next fires come – as we know they, or something like them, will come – it will mean being ready'. What do we do now to be ready then? How can we ensure that we can respond to the future student's needs and aspirations? We are reminded of Davies' work on emergent listening. Davies describes it as 'slow ethical listening, it requires us to dwell in the moment of the pause before difference emerges' (2016, p. 74). As the universities shift and transform under the new conditions we need to be listening closely (and ethically) to the students of the future and to the historians that shape the discipline. It will be essential for the cartographies of the discipline

undertaken by Miller and Peel (2005) and Crotty and Sendzuik (2019) to be revisited in the coming years to track the impact of the changes on staffing and subjects.

This volume has explored history teaching in the contemporary age, but as we know, 'now' is far from static and tomorrow's 'now' will have its own demands. The history discipline occupies a unique position in global and local debates within the academy. The agile manner in which historians are known to embrace interdisciplinary thinking and critical epistemologies, and to stretch boundaries means the discipline is especially well placed to forge ahead in these uncertain futures. We have argued elsewhere that 'History is both "sure footed" as well as "light on its feet". It is poised to respond' (Clark & Nye, 2020). Surely that is the key message for our classrooms and our students.

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