Introduction: the rise and rise of the public intellectual

My starting point is the remarkable rise to prominence of public intellectuals – and talk about public intellectuals – over the last decade in Australia. Since 1997, especially, this has occurred around Indigenous questions with the result that issues such as the stolen generations, genocide, the apology and reconciliation have also gained new prominence. This is undeniably a good thing. New ways of thinking about history and the nation and new kinds of public ethical discourse have been put into circulation. History as battleground is preferable to the great Australian silence. And yet – my starting point is also the ambivalent effects and meanings of these recent developments, not least the way that the debates have centred so much around the figure of the ‘public intellectual’, the way that certain kinds of intellectuals and intellectual discourse have come to dominate the mainstream representation of the issues.

Many individuals have felt compelled to ‘go public’ in response to one or more in a series of cultural and political events, especially since the Howard-Hanson election of early 1996. Over these divisive years, there has probably been a general ‘ramping up’ of public discourse. But my focus is not on the broad field of academics, lawyers, health professionals, lobbyists and so forth who have gone public over this or that issue; rather it is on the specific, highly valued, and highly publicised sense of the public intellectual, the fullest and weightiest sense of the term, which has come into prominence over the same period.

The case could be pursued through an analysis of the rhetoric of particular arguments and the sense of rationality or history or moral authority which they inscribe. I’ll come back to this, to some degree, a little later. First, though, I want to take a different approach by trying to define the ‘economy’ of the public intellectual. In other words, the structural or institutional context – the relations between the market, the media and the academy – within which the new public intellectuals have not only emerged but thrived. My premise is that public intellectuals need to be understood as structural or institutional effects, not merely in terms of individual capacities. I want to do this, via rather a long detour, by understanding the rise and rise of the public intellectual as one in a series of new developments and major structural changes in what I’ve called Australian book culture.

Most optimistically, I’ll suggest we can read these developments as producing new sites for ‘civil society’. Less optimistically, I want to attack the idea of the public intellectual as it has operated in this contemporary context, and in particular the relations of value between the ethical, the aesthetic and history which it has brought into being.

As a way of getting a lever under the moral weight of the public intellectual, we might note a peculiar feature of their recent publicity – that the new rise to prominence of the public intellectual has been accompanied by a great rise, as well, in talk about the decline of public intellectual life, the narrowing or disintegration of public culture, a crisis in the contemporary public sphere. As we know, only public intellectuals talk that way. Public intellectuals might be defined as those who see a crisis where others see an event. Although generically a form of over-statement, this can be a useful thing to do as shown by many of the interventions provoked by John Howard’s aggressive quietism where the politics of history are concerned. But what does it tell us about how the category of the public intellectual circulates as a specific value? And why might this not be such a good thing after all?

Commodities and crisis: public intellectuals, the essay and the memoir

The recent Australian history of public intellectual interventions has been defined by a series of events dramatised as crises, at once ethical and national: the Demidenko affair of 1994-95; the controversy surrounding Helen Garner’s _The First Stone_ (1995-96); the Manning Clark affair (1996-97); the election of Pauline Hanson (1996); the republican debate (to 1999); the stolen generations issue as brought to light by the Bringing the Home report (from 1997); the subsequent refusal of Howard to apologise to Indigenous Australians; the mounting debate over reconciliation; and most recently the debate over genocide and massacres. Looking at this list, we can see two seemingly unconnected strands: first, ‘culture wars’ over political correctness; second, race and specifically Indigenous issues (with the republican debate as a kind of hinge between them). As Mark Davis (1999a) and Ken Wark (1997) have shown, the weight of argument in the first sequence was reactionary – anti-political correctness, anti-the new academy, anti-‘new class’ and so on. The balance has shifted since 1997. Reconciliation issues have become central, and, as Mannie himself has made clear, the conservative backlash has been savage and sustained. But to understand the particular role of the public intellectual I think we need to remember its founding moment in the culture wars of the mid-nineties, for the kind of cultural and moral authority claimed then is still the kind of moral and cultural authority claimed today, even when the issues have changed. The Demidenko affair for Robert Manne was symptomatic of a larger cultural failure, Australia’s ‘culture of forgetting’, which was sheeted home particularly to the post-modern academy. I tend instead towards Wark’s argument that what we saw over the course of the debate was evidence to the contrary, that ‘the public political process … actually worked quite well … [and that] the pervasiveness of the contemporary media made this possible’ (p. 130).

It also made the public intellectual possible. Since the middle of the nineties, figures such as Robert Dessaix, Drusilla Modjeska, Andrew Riemer, Raimond Gaita, Henry Reynolds, Tim Flannery, Peter Read, Robert Manne, Michael Duffy, Mark Davis, Inga Clendinnen and Ken Wark, to list only some of the more prominent, have joined old staggers such as Donald Horne, Philip Adams and Paddy McGuinness in the higher reaches of our public culture to become prominent commentators and minor celebrities – in short, public intellectuals according to any of the many definitions. There has been a boom in public intellectuals, in their publications and in the publicity surrounding them.

Such abundance is largely unprecedented. Why, then, the recurrent theme of cultural decline or crisis? Both dimensions are present in Robert Dessaix’s collection, _Speaking their Minds_ (1998), a series of discussions with public intellectuals based on an earlier ABC radio series from 1996-97. Dessaix’s list of speakers indeed suggests an abundance in public intellectual life. Close to forty individuals get to speak in the book. But the occasion of the series and Dessaix’s framing comments are stated almost obsessively, in the language of crisis. This is, in a sense, its market opportunity. As the book’s cover blurbs it, ironically enough in the up-beat language of the marketplace, ‘when there is increasing dissatisfaction about the role the academy should play, when media personalities are replacing thinkers as public commentators, and intellectual forums find little place in public life … Speaking Their Minds puts thinking in Australia back on the agenda’. Or in Dessaix’s terms, public intellectual culture in Australia is defined by ‘the lack of national forums, the fragmentation of the public for intellectual discussion, the dearth of independent intellectuals, the corporatisation of the academy, even the spread of excluding, specialised languages’ (294).

I’ll come back to the specific items in this list as the relationship between the category of the public intellectual, on the one hand, and both the media and the academy, on the other, is crucial for understanding the origins of the ‘decline’ narrative. For the moment, I want to consider the rise of public intellectuals alongside two other developments in contemporary Australian culture which I think are equally remarkable: the new taste for the essay and the new taste for memoir.
First, the essay. If the short story was the genre for the seventies, and the novel, perhaps, the genre for the eighties, then the essay has become the literary mode for the present. The number of books of Australian essays published since the mid-nineties is, again, an unprecedented development in the local marketplace – so too the kinds of books of essays being published for the ‘educated general reader’ (we need to take such market categories seriously for they define the field of book culture). These essays range widely over public and intimate, momentous and mundane topics – indeed they specialise in mixing the two. Often the topic is less important than what we might call the ‘writere performance’ or as Peter Craven has recently said of Dessai’s non-fiction, he ‘proved himself to be someone whose signature mattered more than the thing he signed’ (Craven 2001, p. 11). Typically the genre is ‘intensely personal’, registering events and sensations through the modes of interiority. Hence their distance from the formal academic essay (which has continued to appear much as before although with more ‘bleeding’ between genres and audiences).

The growth in the essay field has been remarkable since the middle of the decade (see Figure 1) with, among others, three annual volumes of the best Australian essays, edited by Peter Craven in 1998, 1999 and 2000; Morag Fraser’s ‘Best Antipodean essays’ of 1998; Imre Salusinszky’s historical anthology of 1997; collections by individuals including Helen Garner’s True Stories (1996) and more recently The Feel of Steel (2001); Les Murray’s selected prose (1997); Robert Manne’s The Way We Live Now (1998), Dessai’s And So Forth (1998), David Malouf’s and Inga Clendinnen’s Boyer lectures (1998 & 1999); and book-length essays such as Mann’s The Culture of Forgetting (1996), Ken Wark’s The Vernacular Republic (1997), Clendinnen’s Reading the Holocaust (1998) and Tiger’s Eye (2000), and Modjeska’s Stravinsky’s Lunch (1999). In addition to the books, the Australian Review of Books published essays and essay-style reviews between 1996 and 2001; Australian Book Review publishes a sponsored essay each issue (and has recently become both more literary and more ‘essay-ish’); essay-based magazines like Eureka Street are thriving; and earlier this year, Schwarz Publishing launched the first Australian Quarterly Essay with Robert Manne’s In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right

I’ll return to the essay later and more critically, but in a book culture where a print run of 3,000 is substantial this range of publications is an extraordinary proliferation of ‘product’ at the less popular end of the market. We might also note the publishers – predominantly new independent Australian publishers defining local markets where the multinationals can’t see them. Clearly the industry, the marketplace, isn’t behaving as if there were a crisis in public intellectual life. Why, then, are intellectuals so consistently thinking otherwise? Why, we might want to ask, are they so institutionally blind to their own circumstances?

Figure 1 Books of essays 1994-2001 (selective)
Cassandra Pybus, ed., Columbus’ Blindness and Other Essays (UQP 1994)
Helen Garner, The First Stone (Picador/Pan Macmillan 1995)
Peter Coleman, ed., Double Take: Six Incorrect Essays (Reed/Mandarin 1996)
Helen Garner, True Stories: Selected Non-Fiction (Text 1996)
Robert Manne, The Culture of Forgetting: Helen Demidenko and the Holocaust (Text 1996)
Phillip Adams, ed., The Retreat from Tolerance (ABC Books 1997)
Les Murray, A Working Forest: Selected Prose (Duffy & Snellgrove 1997)
Imre Salusinszky, ed., The Oxford Book of Australian Essays (OUP 1997)
Inga Clendinnen, Reading the Holocaust (Text 1998)
Peter Craven, ed., The Best Australian Essays 1998 (Bookman 1998)
Robert Dessai, And So Forth (Picador 1998)
Morag Fraser, ed., Seas of Light: Best Antipodean Essays (Allen & Unwin 1998)
Cassandra Pybus, Till Applies Grow on an Orange Tree (UQP 1999)
Inga Clendinnen, True Stories (ABC 1999)
Peter Craven, ed., The Best Australian Essays 1999 (Bookman 1999)
Simon Leys, The Angel and the Octopus: Collected Essays (Duffy & Snellgrove 1999)
Drusilla Modjeska, Stravinsky’s Lunch (Picador/Pan Macmillan 1999)
Inga Clendinnen, Tiger’s Eye: A Memoir (Text 2000)
Peter Craven, ed., The Best Australian Essays 2000 (Black Inc 2000)
Michelle Grattan, ed., Essays on Australian Reconciliation (Black Inc 2000)
Helen Garner, The Feel of Steel (Picador 2001)

A number of the titles I’ve just listed could also be tendered as evidence for the second factor I want to mention, the vogue for autobiographical writing and in particular for those forms blending memoir and essay or memoir and fiction. Helen Garner’s, for example, or Cassandra Pybus’, to which we can add such works as the memoirs of Raimond Gaita and Andrew Riemer, Clendinnen’s The Orchard and Dessai’s Night Letters (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Memoirs and related texts 1994-2001 (selective)
Drusilla Modjeska, The Orchard (Picador/Pan Macmillan 1994)
Robert Dessai, Night Letters (Pan Macmillan 1996)
Helen Garner, True Stories: Selected Non-Fiction (Text 1996)
Andrew Riemer, Sandstone Gothic (Allen & Unwin 1998)
Drusilla Modjeska, Stravinsky’s Lunch (Picador/Pan Macmillan 1999)
Henry Reynolds, Why Weren’t we Told? A Personal Search for the Truth About Our History (Penguin/Viking 1999)
Raimond Gaita, Romulus, My Father (Text 1999)
Andrew Riemer, Between the Fish and the Mudcake (Allen & Unwin 1999)
Inga Clendinnen, Tiger’s Eye: A Memoir (Text 2000)
Brian Matthews, A Fine and Private Place (Pan Macmillan 2000)
Helen Garner, The Feel of Steel (Picador 2001)
Modjeska and Dessai are particularly interesting. Almost single (or double) handedly their successes have altered the nature of Australian book culture and, indeed, the industry. They’ve done so through the way their books in the mid-nineties successfully marketed intensely aesthetic, unapologetically high cultural and self-consciously ethical literary works to a wide audience – not a mass audience, perhaps, but they were best sellers in the broad literary market. There was clearly a developing audience for certain modes of interiority and of aesthetic experience – aesthetic in the sense I want to use for this paper to describe what happens when style, voice or authorial persona is invested with ethical value. In the process, both authors have developed a public presence beyond that of ‘mere’ novelists (or mere historians for that matter). They have become writers in the fullest sense of the term, and this in turn has meant them becoming at least one kind of public intellectual. Literariness, as a value, has been transferred from ‘everyday’ kinds of fiction to these, rarer ‘non-fiction’ modes of high value and desirable possessions in a circuit of exchange of symbolic value. Andrew Riemer’s review of Nick Jose’s novel, The Red Thread, captured the sought-after qualities: ‘Everything – the trompe-l’oeil dust jacket, the typeface, the artwork … and the quality of the paper – contributes to a sense of restrained sensuousness, luxury tempered by elegance and good taste’ (Riemer 2000).

Good taste, good books, good readers
‘Good taste’ – perhaps the phenomenon I’ve described can simply be dismissed as an effect of sophisticated lifestyle marketing or of taste being deployed, yet again, as a means for making social distinctions. We can acknowledge the force of both these effects without being dismissive, taking them, instead, as helping to constitute a significant new dimension in Australian book culture: a new reading formation or, more likely, a number of overlapping ‘taste cultures’. Let me, then, expand the notion of taste into that of book culture to consider the social utility of taste. ‘Taste’ is often little more than a sneer word (‘mere taste’), but I want to take seriously, with its full social
weight, the idea of a new set of tastes being formed and circulating in Australian culture. Tastes constitute a habitus. A new set of tastes means a new set of social relations. The effects are at once commercial and cultural.

I'm referring to the kind of cultures sustained by the unprecedented growth of literary festivals and literary prizes, or by the 'good book stores' which have boomed in the inner cities, middle-class suburbs and larger country towns. These are the kind of book stores that are likely to have the full range of Booker Prize listed works, the newest Anglo-Indian novels and Chinese memoirs of the revolution, the latest Latin American and European fiction, contemporary Australian literature too, often alongside cultural studies and post-modern theory, the new best-seller 'boutique histories'; and self-help and lifestyle titles, a serious travel and gourmet section (and probably a good children's department for horribly bright kids). As well as the diversity which such a list suggests there's also a significant continuum to be found here, from literature to lifestyle to Lonely Planet.

Here in the book store (and the literary festival), the forces of globalisation and the local meet, as of course do those of commerce and culture, consumption and citizenship. The beautiful, serious, desirable books on display are the products of global badging and niche marketing; the contemporary literary novel, essay and memoir are more eroticised commodities than ever before; part of their appeal is the cosmopolitanism they embody (so airport book stores no longer stock just 'airport novels'). But they also sustain local cultures, and local small businesses. As the store managers have learnt, their customers are the kind of consumers who expect good books and good coffee in the same neighbourhood. These are the book stores, in turn, that often produce reviews magazines and support reading groups, that other booming phenomenon of the nineties.

Let me turn to these groups for a moment as a way of defining the commercial and media structures significant in contemporary book culture. Reading groups, usually gender-specific, meet regularly in book stores, restaurants, cafes or private homes, to discuss books. Some come into being informally among friends, others are sponsored more formally by bookstores or publishers. Their growth was recently the subject of a feature in the Weekend Australian (Hope 2001). This is an international phenomenon, wherever baby-boomers and young professionals cluster, but it has its distinctive Australian shapes. Professionals dominate, as do women, although men's groups are increasing. Probably the over-forties dominate too, but there are also younger groups. The Australian's feature reports on what it calls a group of 'Generation-Xers' which meets in a pub or restaurant in Melbourne's trendy, inner-city Brunswick St. Indeed I suspect there is a major generational divide, with reading meaning quite different things across the division (as in the writing of essays as I'll suggest later).

Mainstream publishers now produce how-to guides for reading groups plus book notes and reviews on their websites. Bookstores are sponsoring groups, up to fifty, for example, in Perth's aptly-titled Bookcaffe. Perhaps even more remarkable has been the success of ABC Radio National's Australia Talks Books, a radio talkback book club which began as a filler and now has an estimated 50,000 listeners across Australia. Alongside the high-brow Books and Writing, this is an interesting democratisation of the literary field.

In terms of taste, the reading group preference is for ‘contemporary literary fiction’ – Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Peter Carey, Michael Ondaatje, Murray Bail, Memoirs of a Geisha, The God of Small Things, Eucalyptus and so forth. Together with the occasional non-fiction title, these suggest above all a taste for books that deal (stylishly) with ‘issues’ or, as one reader puts it, ‘deep moral or political questions’ (Hope 2001). Certain levels of literary or writerly sophistication are linked with ethical seriousness. Bernhard Schlink’s The Reader and J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace have been reading group successes.

The potential snobberies and lifestyle politics of reading groups – the processes of social distinction in Bourdieu’s sense – were wonderfully and witty evoked each month in a column in the Australian’s Review of Books (‘The Group’). But so, too, was something of the real ethical and intellectual ‘work’ that they might enable:

Warning to her role as host, Camille deftly shifts the conversation to food writing – our reading this month – … Claudia Roden’s Book of Jewish Food won over Jasmine. ‘It’s a fantastic social history as well as a cookbook,’ she enthuses. ‘I love the labour-intensive food preparation it describes. All those little individual pieces. It meant you were never alone in the kitchen.’

Incensed, Portia lunes for Jasmine’s juggler. All that romantic mumbo-jumbo just kept women prisoners in the kitchen …’. Jasmine fires back, ‘It’s better than working at the check-out, isn’t it?’ Puzzled by this salvo and well-lubricated with sake, the Group moves on to the sublime M. F. K. Fisher …

And later:

Too soon it’s time to go and we have to choose a book. Maggie opts for anything by Kwei C. K. Stead. Alex Miller’s prize-winning Conditions of Faith gets the thumbs down, as does Heather’s nomination of Map of Love, an Egyptian saga about love and a clash of cultures in 1901. Portia wants to jump on board the debate about Oz poet James McAuley and the worth of his writing. My suggestion offers the compromise we need to say goodnight. Edward Hirsch’s How to Read a Poem. (Alice B. 2001, p. 26)

That such a fine-tuned reading of taste cultures can exist in the public space of the magazine our paper makes my argument for.

It also suggests why the new tastes don’t operate simply like old cultural capital or old cultural elites – and this is the critical point – for they are precisely the result of the dispersal of cultural capital which has resulted from the expansion of tertiary education, the globalisation of cultures and the relative breakdown of high cultural authority resulting from the spread and sophistication of mass media. As John Frow has argued, ‘high culture … is no longer the dominant culture but is rather a pocket within commodity culture’ (1995, p. 86). The point is not to bury high culture but to indicate the new forms of its public being, its proliferation and dispersal. As we allow the terms for cultural decline under the twin pressures of commercialisation and the media. But dismissal of the middlebrow is just another form of the intellectual snobbery usually directed at the mass media or the populism directed against high cultures. We need to take the shifting patterns of consumption more seriously to understand what’s new about the ‘mid-range’, the ‘post-media’ products: this is reading re-invented in the context of television, the web, contemporary cinema, and pop or post-pop music.

What this contemporary development indicates is a new ‘specialist’ function for literary reading among the array of mediated lifestyle and entertainment choices, a specific kind of ethical exercise by which the process of reading and the process of reading about books operates in distinctive ways. The process is not an argument for the superior intellectual subtlety of the moral authority of literature compared, say, to cinema or television; that argument ran out of steam fifty years ago. Indeed, for many of the readers involved, literature is probably a rare and rather exotic pleasure rather than an authoritative moral centre. My point, though, is to see this kind of literary reading as a distinct ‘technology’; to emphasise, for example, the different temporality involved in reading and how this might be suited to certain forms of ethical exercise or the different ways books circulate as commodities (you can own a book as a personal possession in a way that you don’t own a movie – videos and DVDs notwithstanding).

Perhaps the best evidence for (one form of) the new book cultures is the recent appearance of good reading magazine in July this year. Again this is the kind of thing academics like to dismiss, as it’s neither high nor popular enough to yield rich analysis; but we need to take it seriously to understand the real structures of the culture which we’re working on. Sale in book stores and newspapers, good reading looks just like a lifestyle magazine – like Better Homes and Gardens or Gourmet Living – which is just what it is. Its editor Caroline Baum, at once a literary journalist and a media personality, describes the magazine as ‘lifestyle fuelled’ (ASA Newsletter 2001). It features celebrity readers (‘Jana Wendt’s Shelf Confession’), reviews of literary fiction and genre fiction, cooking, gardening and art books, interviews, book news – and a monthly feature reporting on a reading group from somewhere around Australia. This is where Robert Manne’s or Henry Reynolds’s latest book might well score a celebrity feature. And why not?

Is this high culture or popular culture? Significantly, it’s impossible to say. (The Australian Author[2001, p. 4] describes the magazine as ‘targeted at the mid-range rather than the literary market’ and as ‘sure to be a hit with members of the hundreds of book clubs that are such a unique feature of the Australian book scene’.) By contrast, it’s striking how many of our public intellectuals still seem to think in simply oppositional terms when thinking of media or popular cultures. This is one crucial reason they misrecognise their own institutional location. In a similar way, the opposition between ‘academic’ and ‘public’ through which so much of the public intellectual debate is conducted – as ‘academic’ versus ‘public’ – seriously misrepresents the diversity and cross-over of reading cultures.

It would be easy to see the disappearance of the high-brow Australian’s Review of Books and the appearance soon after of good reading magazine as symptomatic of cultural decline under the twin pressures of commercialisation and the media. But dismissal of the middlebrow is just another form of the intellectual snobbery usually directed at the mass media or the populism directed against high cultures. We need to take the shifting patterns of consumption more seriously to understand what’s new and positive about them, whatever their relation to our own tastes. I happen to think that the expansion of the ‘mid-range’ is a good thing – so long as it is not the only thing.

To bring my three cases together: what reading groups and the new literary modes of the essay and memoir have in common is that they act as occasions for reading that is directed at the mass media or the populism directed against high cultures. We need to take the shifting patterns of consumption more seriously to understand what’s new about the ‘mid-range’, the ‘post-media’ products: this is reading re-invented in the context of television, the web, contemporary cinema, and pop or post-pop music.
reflection. They address, as they constitute, readers who want ‘history’, moral and intellectual sophistication, cultural context, authenticity, and structures for self-reflection (if not necessarily all at once). This is an audience that wants public intellectuals. What’s interesting is this new form of an old project, the linking of interiority and public issues of history and politics through reading. ‘Life style’ is as good a term as any for describing what links the interior and the public self. Thus, across the spectrum that extends from the academic professional to the casual self-fashioner, the public spaces occupied by the readers I’ve described as they pursue their individual and class projects of taste and style represent a new form of civil society-in-Australia. They are, in Inga Clendinnen’s terms, ‘conducive to civic virtue’ (1999, p. 9).

Between ethics and aesthetics

Such a conclusion pushes that particular argument about as far as it can go. But to turn the argument back to face the public intellectual, my point is to note the structural shift that has occurred, relatively recently, in Australian book culture—the structural shift that has sustained, if not actually brought into being, the rise to prominence of public intellectuals and public intellectuals as a cultural force to pose this alternative description of a culture dispersing and regrouping to the notion of public intellectual and disintegration. In the face of all the talk of crisis and decline, I’d point to the expansion, the classiness, the diversity of our reading cultures (the claim is not that they have any particular virtue, merely that they exist). And I’d want to insist on the role of the media and the marketplace in creating the public intellectuals themselves, in defining and refining a new set of niche among its middle-class, professional-managerial class consumers – consumers, in part, of the products that public intellectuals produce.

In this sense the market has been wider than many of the public commentators in recognising growth rather than decline. Obviously, this is not to say that cultural or intellectual life in Australia is problem-free or even crisis-free. Far from it. Nor is it a hymn to the free market, which kills as often as it creates. With cuts to university funding and to the ABC, and with the institutional vulnerabilities characteristic of the Australian publishing, television, music and cinema industries because of their relatively small domestic market, there are on-going structural and sectoral difficulties. Australian publishers have recently been describing their worst market for book sales in at least ten years, a post-Olympics, post-GST phenomenon (Australian Author 2001, p. 4). But a description of the specific difficulties facing each sector would look very different from the general narrative of cultural decline.

Between ethics and aesthetics (continued)

What, then, do we make of the born-again cultural decline thesis? Take Robert Dessaix’s latest again: ‘the lack of national forums, the fragmentation of the public for intellectual and cultural capital, the death of independent intellectuals, the corporatisation of the academy, even the spread of excluding, specialised languages’. These different elements are seen as symptomatic of a general narrowing in public intellectual culture rather than as specific effects in different domains. More than that, the symptoms can be reduced to two or three fundamental causes: first, the role of the market (‘commercialisation’); second, the mass media (commercialisation plus ‘dumbing down’); and third, the retreat of the academy into specialisation (meaning professionalisation, political correctness or ‘theory’).

Reduced in this way, the analysis of cultural decline starts to look very familiar, a dull repetition of two modern traditions—first, intellectual disdain for the marketplace and popular culture, and second, the celebration of the intellectual as outsider, transcending any institutional or disciplinary limits. More dangerous, this latter easily turns into attacks on different publics and different kinds of intellectuals. Dessaix and a number of his speakers have heavily invested in these traditions (we could call them ‘literary traditions’), although across the whole of Speaking their Mind the picture is much more complex as Jill Matthews, one of the dissenters, puts it:

When we speak of public intellectuals, for example, we tend to mean individuals who operate in a specific and fairly elite arena, bounded by certain forms of media and subject matter, whereas the public is enormously broader than that and we actually have public intellectuals operating in a multiplicity of domains. (Dessaix 1998, p. 203)

Against such multiplicity, the cultural decline thesis through which public intellectuals have so often defined themselves is largely defensive, reasserting a ‘modernist’ sense of intellectual authority in the face of major structural changes in print culture, in the academy, and in the media—changes which have involved an unnerving transference of values and practices from one realm to the other. Major structural changes probably always appear as decline or crisis to those whose traditional forms of authority are threatened. The trope of crisis produces the need for public intellectuals in the first place, and thus we shouldn’t be surprised to find the two together—the rise of intellectuals and the narrative of decline. At the same time, given this basic conceit, it is almost impossible for self-elected public intellectuals to recognise how these same changes have created significant new public roles and new media for their interventions or to acknowledge their own dependence upon the commercial media and upon their own institutional locations and disciplinary training. There’s often a kind of institutional bad faith underlying the public intellectual’s writerly persona, something a bit ‘off’ about their ‘moral independence’.

I don’t want to get into the whole debate about the nature and social function of public intellectuals. There’s an enormous European and North American literature, despite which the poverty of theory on the topic is staggering. It’s genuinely surprising how much is still invested, even by someone like Edward Said, in these old stories of the intellectual as outsider—the ‘maverick’ in Dessaix’s favourite term—preserving or redeeming the space of rational discourse from the ravages of the marketplace and the mass media.1 Alan McKee (2001) has shown how the bulk of North American writers on public intellectuals assert that they will be academics—people like themselves if never ‘merely’ academics. In Australia, where the universities have seldom been accorded the same cultural weight, the emphasis falls differently.

If we take Dessaix’s book as a guide, being an academic is about the last thing that matters in becoming a public intellectual: indeed this is precisely what has to be transcended. Thus there’s scarcely any interest, in Speaking their Mind, in the role of intellectuals. Thematics teachers or scholars—that is, in the work that’s done within the institution—although a number of the speakers, such as Henry Reynolds and Denis Altman, quietly remind Dessaix of their importance. Ironically, all but a handful of Dessaix’s intellectuals are in fact academics, something Dessaix never considers in positive terms. Under what conditions, he might have asked, have the universities produced such a mixed and interesting bunch of writers and speakers? And how have they produced the listeners and readers, the consumers, for this kind of work? These seem to me much more interesting questions than ‘what is a public intellectual?’ or ‘how to redeem the nation from cultural decline?’.

It’s not the academy as such that agitates Dessaix and like-minded commentators, but specifically the contemporary humanities academy—post-post-structuralist, post-cultural studies, post-modernist, and, not least, post-feminist. At the heart of this imaginary is still the literary intellectual—or, better, the writerly intellectual—who stands against the figure of the theorist, the specialist, the professional. Dessaix’s preferred term, in his characteristically intelligent and disarming manner, is the ‘dilettante’—the true amateur, the true self-fashioner (Dessaix in Fraser 1998, pp.7-18).

As Mark Davis has argued, in a bracing slash and burn critique, this particular form of literariness has been embodied, above all, in the contemporary fashion for the essay I noted earlier (Davies 1999). It is present not just in individual essays but in the larger claims being made by authors and editors for the essay (or ‘essay-ness’) as a mode that will by its own uniqueness reconstitute the ethical and cultured nation. The distinction between the merely academic and the truly writerly essay, upon which such claims depend, exactly reproduces the opposition between the mere academic and the true intellectual or ‘writer’. Thus the essay is invoked as a mode free of the conventions of scholarly work and free of ideology, neither documentary nor fiction, but diverse, free-ranging, open-ended, both intensely personal and public, intellectual and literary. It’s highly elaborated, self-conscious and street-wise—the genre that transcends and highly elitist. This mix defines exactly what ‘literariness’ looks like nowadays, an ethical quality, as it has always been, rather than mere formalism. As suggested earlier, the necessary term for describing the essay in this mode is the true intellectual—an academic of the true intellectual—who stands...
behind.

Whenever I hear the familiar refrain that we need more public intellectuals, I first think ‘in whose interests?’. I might also want to remind the enthusiasts that more public intellectuals means more Ron Bruntons, more Michael Duffys, more Paddy McGuinesses. I’d want to counter with the claim that what we really need is more academics, not more public intellectuals.

The last decade or so. The problem is that most definitions of the public intellectual claim more: they represent the public intellectual as an ideal form, a bridge between the modern and the post-modern, literary and post-literary generations of ‘educated readers’. The publishing industry is responding to both – but that’s another essay.

Between history and aesthetics

In one of his most astounding mistakes, Dessai x writes that ‘historians seem less visible on the public intellectual stage than they once did’ (p. 186). It’s difficult to guess what golden path past he’s imagining. I would have thought the opposite was true: historians are more prominent than ever before in Australia’s public culture, as it ought to be in a new world or post-colonial society. Newer independent publishers such as Text have successfully marketed history in the same way as memoirs and literary fiction – from Watkin Tench to Inga Clendinnen. It says a lot about Dessai’s ideal of the intellectual that he can’t see this.

Clendinnen, Reynolds, Peter Read, Ken Inglis, John Hirst and Greg Dening, all professional academic historians, have become prominent as public intellectuals in the broader (or narrower?) sense. More than that, writing on history has become the defining gesture of the public intellectual for writers such as Gaita, Manne, Modjeska, Malouf, Hart and many others who aren’t professional historians in their day jobs. History, especially when it involves what Clendinnen calls ‘national morality’ (1999, p. 17), is what makes the public intellectual public. Above all, of course, the history that matters is the history of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations and especially those issues with a public ethical dimension – the stolen generations, the massacres, the question of genocide, and the apology. This is particularly pertinent for the essay and the memoir.

Gillian Whitlock has argued that memoir has become the preferred mode of Australian public intellectuals, as a form of reflection and self-reflection driven by a sense of crisis or ‘moral anxiety about the past’ (2001). This anxiety is centred on dispossession and genocide, and what these mean for national belonging. There is a specific and unequal exchange here, especially following the Bringing them Home report. In Whitlock’s terms, ‘black testimony bigger white memoir’. To put it another way, black testimony bigger white anxiety – a distinctively post-colonial sense of personal implication. This stems, I think, from the peculiar intimacies of place and belonging in Aboriginal discourses and their power to get inside white discourse; also from the way ideas of the nation are simultaneously unsettled and energised. The nation is at the heart of the problem as the recalcitrant historical narrative that resists being rewritten; but as that which can be both ethically and juridically-charged through notions of citizenship and responsibility it may also be part of the solution. The space between the personal and the national is precisely the space of the ethical. There is also a professional implication – how should white historians and non-Indigenous intellectuals practice their craft when history gets to be so immediate and political in its demands? How to narrate the nation beyond national histories? In short, as Whitlock argues, the memoir (and essay) have become necessary forms for thinking and writing through the post-colonial anxieties of national belonging in Australia and reconstituting history and remembering.

The memoir is a performative genre. It evokes the process of ethical reflection. However provisional and open-ended, it offers itself as exemplary. As I’ve tried to suggest through my account of the new book cultures, there is a receptive audience of self-fashioning readers in contemporary Australia disposed towards the kind of ethical work essays and memoirs typically perform. I think we need to value the spaces and styles opened up in the public culture by such writing and reading. The rewriting of Australian history has been profound and exceptional.

I don’t for a moment, then, want to underestimate the ethical or political force of ‘bearing witness’ or of ‘reading history through the conceit of personal responsibility’. The new kinds of work produced differently by Clendinnen or Read or Modjeska, for example, are genuinely new and powerful in this culture. But there are losses as well as gains, of a different order. With a few exceptions, most notably Henry Reynolds, what enables certain figures rather than others to rise to prominence as public intellectuals is not so much the value of their research, say, as their performance of ‘writerly’ qualities. Again the aura surrounding the public intellectual is the aura of the aesthetic, embodied personally not professionally. Something of this even adheres to Robert Manne, the least ‘aesthetic’ of writers, through the moral intensities of his writerly persona. And again the idea is that real/intellectuals, real writers, transcend professional or disciplinary boundaries.

The idea of the writerly intellectual remains powerful. Who hasn’t been seduced by the fantasy of a writer rather than a mere academic (for example). But when we get to that point, it’s time to be sceptical again. It’s time to recall the virtues of historical work that is not about ethical performance or personal intensity. As Reynolds’ work suggests, this doesn’t mean we’re therefore morally or politically inconsequential. To put it another way, what advantages might there be in not understanding the stolen generations issue as a moral question, as the same kind of question as one’s attitude to the Holocaust – understanding it instead in the mundane historical terms of colonisation, racism, and the politics of land? What might be the advantages in trying not to read it as a source of anxiety for us, as a test of our own moral adequacy, or as therapeutic for us? What advantages might there be in histories that are not about ‘telling stories’? The insights enabled by ethical reflection as a writerly genre can also come in the form of blindness (or blinding). The significant work of historians, scholars, academics or teachers can effectively be concealed by the prominence of celebrity intellectuals. The very gravitas, the weight of moral authority, evoked by Manne or Gaita seems to silence other voices, other pleasures, other politics. Ethical arguments are all too ready to imagine reconciliation as a form of closure or resolution. History seems to me to be telling the opposite story.

Conclusion: do we need more public intellectuals?

There is often something fantastic, even grotesque, about the role public intellectuals accord themselves as the nation’s saviours. Notions of the public good or civil society, however necessary to pluralist debate, always tend towards inflation and thus to inflate the personas of those who deploy them. This doesn’t mean we abandon them. Under present circumstances in particular they’ve become useful tools for thinking about better forms of government. They provide ways of reviving the almost discredited notions of multiculturalism or reconciliation. But we should also remember the mundane rather than spectacular circumstances of the public intellectual life, remember its own specialisation and jargon, its niche markets, its limits. As McKee argues, for all the work that has gone into defining the public intellectual as a special kind of figure, nothing more than a certain elevated style and tone of discourse can distinguish this figure from, say, the ‘media personally’ (often assumed to be its opposite). I’m sympathetic to his suggestion that we’d be better off abandoning the term altogether and simply referring to different functions within the knowledge class – academic, journalist, teacher, talk-show host, historian, archivist, producer and so on.

If the idea of the ‘public intellectual’ simply described a certain way of writing or a specific slice of the market, I would not be so ambivalent about it as I am. The kind of public talk that brings ethical, historical and policy issues together within the frame of the national is a politically effective way of sustaining notions of the public good and bringing a concerned public into being. Despite all that’s bad about our media, I think this has happened in Australia in interesting and largely unprecedented ways over the last decade or so. The problem is that most definitions of the public intellectual claim more: they represent the public intellectual as an ideal form of the intellectual rather than one kind of intellectual compartment among others – good for some things, not so good for others; suited to some pockets of the publishing field or the media but hopeless in others; good at summoning certain publics, irrelevant to many others.

Whenever I hear the familiar refrain that we need more public intellectuals, I first think ‘in whose interests?’. I might also want to remind the enthusiasts that more public intellectuals means more Ron Bruntons, more Michael Duffys, more Paddy McGuinesses. I’d want to counter with the claim that what we really need is more academics, more scholars and researchers, more teachers, more historians, and (why not?) more theorists. None of which is deny the value of going public. But let’s leave the baggage behind.
This paper was assisted by discussions and essay-swapping with Kay Ferres, Gillian Whitlock and Alan McKee and Paul Gillen. Thanks.

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This essay has had a response from McKenzie Wark.

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NOTES
1. See for example Said’s recent contribution to the Deakin series of lectures: despite his emphasis on specific interventions, for Said the intellectual is defined first and last by his or her resistance and oppositionality. But we can’t restrict the definition to those on our side. Goldfarb (1998) provides an original argument for what is ultimately a standard defence of the liberal intellectual.

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Civil society is a form of social organisation which occupies a middle position between family and state. Some thinkers are of opinion that it is a concept devised by Anglo-American thinkers. But this view is not wholly correct. The intellectuals propagate the capitalist ideology—particularly its superiority over all other ideologies and isms. They do it by fully utilising the structure of civil society and both the electronic and print media. In other words, the civil society acts as a platform for the propagation of capitalism. Though the civil society has, to some extent, separate existence, it is an integral part of a capitalist state. The public administration is used by the intellectuals and more effectively by the civil society for the propagation of capitalism and its superiority over all other ideologies. Civil society organisations tend to be more effective when they coalesce with like-minded governments, international institutions, local authorities, and the business sector. Engagement with civil society organisations tends to be multilayered and multidimensional, and requires political bargaining and readiness for political compromise. International institutions are increasingly open to establishing formal channels of cooperation with civil society. Governments have numerous opportunities to enhance their foreign policy activity through positive collaboration with civil society organisations.