“The First White Man Born”

Contesting the “Stolen Generations” Narrative in Australia.

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The Australian political landscape from the mid-1980s into the 1990s was periodically dominated by issues relating to contested versions of its colonial past in conjunction with a discussion on the legal and human rights of indigenous communities within the nation-state. Key moments within this discourse included the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (established in 1987),\(^1\) the Bicentennial “celebrations” of 1988,\(^2\) the High Court’s Mabo land rights decision of 1992 (and subsequent Native Title amendments),\(^3\) and the reception of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s (HREOC) Bringing Them Home report of 1997 (hereafter referred to as BTH), which was the published outcome of a HREOC inquiry into the history of removing indigenous children from their families and communities during the twentieth century.\(^4\)

More than 500 indigenous people provided evidence to the BTH Inquiry. The story told by these witnesses, commonly referred to as “the Stolen Generations narrative” created widespread discussion among politicians, the media, and the general community. The narrative shook existing histories supporting an unproblematic national history project of British settlement in Australia. The BTH report was subsequently
subject to critical scrutiny, with political leaders and populist media commentators alike going so far as to assert that “there was no such thing as a stolen generation in Australia” and that some indigenous witnesses appearing before the Inquiry had been suffering from “false memory syndrome.”

This essay is concerned with the Stolen Generations narrative and its place in the historical conscience of indigenous and non-indigenous people alike though a discussion of the critical, political, and ethical reception of the narrative. The essay also addresses the extent to which these responses provide an insight into the impact of a contemporary telling of the Stolen Generations story on the psyche of the nation.

“SORRY PEOPLE”

Recent contests surrounding versions of colonial history in Australia have been influenced by a proactive engagement with this debate by the Prime Minister, John Howard, who has indicated a keen interest in how the past should be commemorated. Essentially, Howard subscribes to a populist-national representation of the past that focuses on celebration and achievement above “blemishes” in order to produce what he has referred to more than once as a “relaxed and comfortable” view of Australian history. In a 1996 reflection on Australia’s collective identity contained in an interview given to the starstruck *Who Weekly* magazine Howard articulated his views of the responsibility for past acts of violence committed against indigenous people within contemporary society:

> Although we did treat Aborigines appallingly . . . I’m not one of those who say that whenever there is criticism made of Australia or Australian history we should roll over in grovelling apology to the rest of the world

Subsequently, the Howard government gave no apology, grovelling or otherwise, to indigenous people for the concerted attempts to dispossess them of both country and identity. This was despite a pro-
nouncement seeking reconciliation with indigenous people within sectors of the general community, particularly following the release of the HREOC’s report. BTH was a potent document. It included the transcripts of the harrowing stories told by indigenous people who had been removed from their families as children. It was widely accepted that as a result of the evidence of the mistreatment of these children (involving physical and sexual abuse), that those who had suffered were owed a debt by the nation in the form of a public apology to be given by the representative government. A subsequent groundswell of public sympathy toward indigenous people culminated in a series of rallies in 2000, whereby hundreds of thousands of people marched through the streets of Australia’s major cities. John Howard himself though passed on this opportunity to apologize despite his stance being widely regarded as mean spirited and recalcitrant.

Within the political landscape of a post-2001 federal election, the debate on issues of indigenous welfare and human rights in Australia shifted to a draconian “mutual obligation” discourse, a position shared by “spokespersons” within the national indigenous “leadership” group, politicians of various political persuasions and the usual suspects within a populist-conservative press, with one commentator stating that granting autonomy to indigenous people would “create communities held hostage by organized crime.” Critics of these regressive views, such as that expressed by indigenous writer and respected elder, Patrick Dodson, have labelled this shift a tactic of convenience achieving nothing more than “blaming the victims [who] struggle daily to transform their situation against huge odds.” With polling regularly suggesting that issues affirming indigenous rights do not rate during election campaigns in Australia, it seems that the same community who were so vocal in 2000 appear to have gone missing in activism, raising important questions in relation to any future success for genuine reconciliation. Were the marches of May, 2000 an expression of what Jacques Derrida refers to as a “finalized” forgiveness [that] is not forgiveness but rather “a political strategy or a psycho-therapeutic economy”? On whose behalf did white Australia march in such numbers in May
2000? And how do we explain the gulf between an expression of grief and public support for indigenous people during an energised socio-political event but witness an absence of political will when it appears to matter most?\footnote{12}

It appears that the emotional response to the \textit{BTH} report amongst non-indigenous Australians was a reaction for and of the moment, with many people feeling moved to act based upon a sense of grief that they not only felt \textit{on behalf of} indigenous people, but also as a transference of grief from The Other to themselves. This phenomenon produced what cultural geographers Haydie Gooder and Jane Jacobs define as an army of “Sorry People,” who not only marched in support of reconciliation but additionally produced condolence and bereavement testimonies in “sorry books” that were made available to communities nationwide as part of an annual Sorry Day commemoration (which had been a recommendation of the \textit{Bringing Them Home} inquiry). These acts of atonement affirmed within the “sorry people” a sense of what Gooder and Jacobs call being “worthy of love” (presumably by an indigenous person).\footnote{13} To what extent this support for indigenous people masked an emotional self-support mechanism (conscious or otherwise) is uncertain. Although with the collapse of the public euphoria surrounding the movement after 2000 it is clear that the energy created by the release of \textit{BTH} served the function of allowing colonial listeners confronted with a narrative of their own violence contained in the report to simultaneously absorb and purge themselves of a trauma. This outcome lacks the ethic of responsibility, reflecting Slavoj Žižek’s observation that “in order to forget an event, we must first summon up the strength to remember it properly.”\footnote{14} As a result of this behavior, indigenous communities, having facilitated the healing of the coloniser, now carry the burden of being left to live within a state of injustice. The outcome of \textit{BTH} is not an isolated incident of a language being utilized to cleanse the nation’s soul. It is indicative of the gulf between liberal rhetoric and its associated expression of empathy on the one hand, and genuine attempts to alleviate injustice on the other.
"WE TOOK THE CHILDREN"

In 1992, during the United Nations designated Year of Indigenous People the then prime minister, Paul Keating, delivered what is now known as the Redfern Park Speech as a gesture of reconciliation toward indigenous people. The speech utilized the confessional we as a rhetorical device in an attempt to engage the wider community with its past:

we took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life . . . we committed the murders . . . we took the children from their mothers . . . imagine if our spiritual life was denied and ridiculed . . . imagine if we had suffered the injustice and then were blamed for it.15

The speech has since been afforded revered status, particularly within the ranks of the liberal left. Its afterglow continues to linger in the consciences of those who regard it as their own mea culpa. A more critical examination of the speech indicates that not only did it fail to deliver anything of substance to indigenous people, but that Keating’s words served to enable what Elazar Barkan argues is a “new nationalism as a communal healing [that] while going some distance toward reconciliation with the Aborigines . . . moved very little to extinguish racism.”16 Similarly, Elizabeth Povinelli comments that the Keating speech was a performance displaying not only “the good intentions of good people” but also, as with the 2000 reconciliation marches, it attempted to simultaneously “shame and redeem the nation,” allowing the Commonwealth to “trumpet reconciliation” with little political or material cost to the nation.17

The Redfern speech was an orchestrated event produced so that Australia might move forward by looking back briefly before shutting this door to the past. In Ghassan Hage’s commentary of the speech he addresses the closure that it provided, with recognition of the past being also a performance of a targeted erasure; “it is always the dominant who have an interest in the dominated forgetting that there were ever sides
in a conflict . . . [as] a non-contradictory plurality of memories of colonization in Australia is impossible.” 18 In addition to this, Hage argues, regardless of the colonizer’s violence of “a history of land appropriation, massacre and ‘stolen children’ being attested to, this ‘responsibility for a shameful act is an answer to a colonizer’s trauma — not to the trauma of the colonized.” 19 Some in the white community have done more with “Redfern” than use it to ease their own trauma. The speech has produced the phenomenon of pseudo-social justice through aural osmosis, with some who absorbed the rhetoric of the speech subsequently claiming that it did produce a positive outcome for indigenous people. This is generally an act of false consciousness, but at times it is something more.

Recently the federal Australian Labor Part (ALP) parliamentarian and national president of the party, Dr. Carmen Lawrence, evidenced the Redfern speech while claiming that “the progress made in removing the racist underpinnings of both Aboriginal affairs and immigration policies” from the 1960s onward had been undermined following the election of the Howard Liberal-National government in 1996. Lawrence utilized the rhetoric of Redfern to condemn “the existence of racist attitudes and behaviour in our community [that] resist the pull of our common humanity which might otherwise inform our relations with Indigenous people and migrants.” 20 Redfern also provided Lawrence with a chance to forget aspects of her own political history, reflecting an observation of historian, Klaus Neumann, that the Redfern speech was the expression of an “urge to start afresh in the present.” 21 Of itself, this sentiment may commendable, but when associated with amnesia it becomes problematic.

While Paul Keating was confessing “we took the children,” Carmen Lawrence was the ALP state premier of Western Australia, a period when her government was still taking children in large numbers. The Lawrence government was responsible for the introduction of the Crime (Serious and Repeat Offenders) Sentencing Act of 1992 (WA), widely regarded as an opportunistic move by the government to parade its law and order credentials before a reactionary constituency demanding
tougher sentencing measures against young people. The real target of the legislation, referred to recently by retiring human rights commissioner, The Honourable Justice Marcus Einfeld, as “compulsory jailing” did not target young people generally, but indigenous youth specifically. As an outcome of the legislation indigenous youth were increasingly arrested, sentenced, and subject to acts of violence within the states prison system. While Lawrence claimed that the legislation was a means of removing “hard core offenders” from the community, young indigenous people, who represent only 4% of the state’s population accounted for 43% of all juvenile arrests, and a staggering 67% of all juvenile custodial detentions following sentencing. Worse still, indigenous boys represented 66% of all children incarcerated in adult male prisons, some for no reason other than a bed being unavailable in a juvenile detention center. Some on the left side of politics in Australia have chosen to forget this very recent history. Redfern is a fiction, be it a potent one, facilitating a mythology whereby those who have done little of substance to shift the racial status quo in Australia point to it to legitimate their humanitarian credentials.

Following the release of the BTH report, Keating’s then rhetorical “imagine if we had suffered?” became a question that could now be addressed, in both a legal and material sense. In 2000 two indigenous people, Lorna Cubillo and Peter Gunner, both of whom had been removed from their families, presented a civil case before the federal court. In his summary judgment at the conclusion of the case, Justice Maurice O’Loughlin did little to dispute Cubillo and Gunner’s version of their place in the Stolen Generations narrative:

Lorna Cubillo, once a happy young Aboriginal girl, has never recovered from the shock she experienced when she was separated from her family. ...as Lorna and the 15 other “half-caste” children departed, a terrible grief gripped their camp: the mothers howled and beat their heads with sticks until blood was drawn...Lorna lived at the fundamentalist Christian Retta Dixon Home in a state of misery, isolated and starved of human
warmth . . . she lost forever her language and her culture . . .

at Retta Dixon one of the male missionaries beat her so savagely that her face was scarred and a nipple almost torn off . . . [I am] convinced that her profound current mental suffering is rooted in this traumatic state. . . . Peter Gunner was taken by a patrol officer to Alice Springs by force, although only after his mother had given her consent. She was promised her son would return for holidays each year. This promise was never fulfilled. At St Mary’s corporal punishments were brutal. The physical conditions were a real disgrace . . . while at St Mary’s Peter Gunner scoured the rubbish tip for food . . . he was the victim of sexual assault . . . Gunner’s chronic state of depression is a direct consequence of his removal and detention. A psychiatrist who saw him said that he had never encountered such a “defeated man.”

Despite this damning conclusion, O’Louglin stated that the Australian government had not acted negligently against either Lorna Cubillo or Peter Gunner as under Article 6 of the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal Ordinance “the Director of Native Affairs was permitted to take Aboriginal children into custody if he believed this to be in the best interest of the child.”

We need to reflect for a moment and “imagine” what would the resulting political fallout have been if this injustice were ours. We should be haunted by the questions raised in Paul Keating’s Redfern speech rather than look back it with nostalgia.

**“NARRATIVE ACCRUAL”**

A battle for “truth seeking” within colonialism developed into a war toward the end of the 1990s, creating a frenzy of public debate that saturated the media. Although this event was promoted as “The History Wars,” Australians were in fact engaged in an ideological and political war, with the reception of the Stolen Generations narrative the combatant’s target. While some responses to the BTH report did little more than skim its surface in search of a suitable polemic two important
essays that dealt with the report in some detail were John Frow’s, *A Politics of Stolen Time*, 27 and a critique of the Stolen Generations narrative by the historian, Bain Attwood, in an effort to “learn about the truth [of] the stolen generations narrative.” 28 With this contest also being a battle for control of hegemonic versions of Australia’s past, historians have claimed particular expertise and a position of authority within the debate, emphasising a skill for “sophisticated” neutrality and subscribing to a shared view within the profession that “[history] is a secular discipline, and in its idiosyncratic way a scientific one, based on the objective analysis of the vast consultable record of past actions.” 29 The Attwood essay uses the term “sophisticated” liberally as a means of justifying a need to produce what he promotes unnecessarily as a controversial point of view. The tone of the essay suggests that Attwood is confronting us with a truth that some would prefer not to discuss. Critiques of cultural memory “in which the past is continuously modified” provide a valid and important insight into the role of memory in reconstructions of the past. 30 In relation to Attwood’s essay, he is able to achieve the desired conclusion predicated on interrogated indigenous narrative history as a result of glaring absences of methodological and archival research, including a failure to consult with a “vast consultable record” that would seriously question his analysis.

“Learning about the truth” is produced through what Attwood refers to as “memory work” in order to extract clarity from the otherwise “murky” and unreliable narratives produced by indigenous people. 31 Attwood’s pedagogical reference point is the writing of the French intellectual, Pierre Nora, and in particular his essay “Between Memory and History,” the introduction to his seminal two-volume *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*. 32 Attwood states that although his analysis “might readily be regarded as undermining truth claims” of the stolen generations narrative (including those contained in the *BTH* report), his is a necessary venture in order to combat the “simplistic histories of colonialism in Australia [that] have been advanced” as a result of uncritical and sympathetic receptions of *BTH*. He states further that his position must be put forth in order to protect the sanctity
of academic history, with “the risks of not offering [a critique] outweigh those of presenting it.”

The central argument of the essay is that the testimonies of witnesses who presented to the BTH inquiry are a form of “narrative accrual” or “narrative coalescence,” whereby the narrators of their own stories utilize common elements contained in a shared story that subsequently creates a communal fiction. Attwood further states that the post-war stories of the child removals were “scarcely known beyond this [indigenous community] domain” prior to the last two decades. This situation altered dramatically following the release of the Bringing Them Home report in 1997, resulting in a “veritable explosion of the narrative.” As a consequence a distorted view of the history of removing indigenous children has resulted as “the narrative has exaggerated the number of children removed.” If left unchallenged, Attwood warns, the Stolen Generations narrative would threaten the discipline of history itself, as it would be in danger of being relegated to the lowly station of “merely another kind of fiction.”

Developing this theme of an absence of knowledge Attwood claims that “between the late 1930s and the late 1970s, the removal of children was, as far as we know, neither the subject of many stories told in Aboriginal communities nor central to their historical consciousness . . . and it was certainly seldom a part of narratives heard by non-Aboriginal people.” He follows this observation with the more extraordinary comment that “Aboriginal people . . . were baffled as to why they or their children were removed [and did not know] children were also removed from other families and communities.” In order to accept this position, it would be necessary to ignore the wide circulation of removal stories within indigenous communities from the mid-nineteenth century onward, in addition to the extensive written and archived history produced by indigenous people themselves, alongside the voluminous writings of government bureaucrats responsible for the removal policies.

The Stolen Generations narrative circulating in Australia today is not a fiction or form of Chinese whispers. It could be argued though
that a form of “narrative accrual” or “coalescence” has been constructed by the colonial listener who receives and recodifies elements of the narrative in an effort to produce an outcome that promotes the maintenance of a position of authority guarded by the custodians of colonial memory. In his *A Politics of Stolen Time* John Frow comments on the extent to which the *BTH* report “made a claim on the nation, calling upon it to listen.” Essentially the comment is a valid one, but we should also consider an inversion of this position. The Australian nation also made a claim on indigenous people, calling upon the Stolen Generations to speak, not only on behalf of themselves, but for white Australia also. It was white Australia’s history also that was told at the *BTH* hearings, through a form of indigenous *storytelling* that could fill the nation with sorrow, before being digested and “reconciled” with no material or legislative consequence.

In relation to an absence of “evidence” of the knowledge about child removals within indigenous communities, it is important to recognise the attempts by colonial authorities to prohibit an indigenous telling and recording of this history. It is widely known (and previously documented) that in the institutions where indigenous children were incarcerated, attempts were made to inhibit children and their families from remaining in contact. Of central concern in the Frow essay is a discussion of the psychological impact that this had on children subjected to what amounted to an act of psychological violence. Frow comments further on the children who later harbored “hatred” for their mothers after the letters that they sent home were unexplainably never replied to. He refers to the impact of this on children who witnessed their “protectors” destroying letters written to family, and of the children who discovered the answer to the hurtful question, “Why had their parents not attempted to have them returned home?” in the torn pages of letters sent to them by family discovered later, unopened in rubbish bins, producing a destructive fiction, an “underlying lie: your parents don’t love you, your parents are dead.” If some children did in later years decide not to tell, or were unable to reclaim their story it was due to the “theft of the very language” that has inhibited them from
doing this until recently. (Although, as is rarely mentioned, the majority of indigenous people removed from family are yet to have the opportunity to tell their story.)

"SHE IS LONGING TO COME HOME"

It is widely documented that indigenous women in particular used writing in an effort to retain evidence of a further truth that would have been otherwise suppressed, that they were in fact “fit mothers” (to use the social welfare discourse of the period) who did not *commonly* “give up” their children voluntarily to the state. Frow discusses an extract from *BTH* in which a witness relayed a story of a female member of her family carrying reference letters around with her indicating that “she was a good, respectable woman... she carried those letters with her, folded up, as proof, until the day she died.”43 In order to maintain the evidence of her own dignity this woman was forced to literally use her physical body as an archive, a repository of evidence that refused one of Australia’s great white lies, that indigenous children were generally taken from their families “for their own good,” as a result of parental neglect and abandonment.

This story is not an uncommon one. Similar experiences have been recorded elsewhere. In the years immediately following World War One, Mrs Lena Austin, who lived at the Framilingham Aboriginal Reserve in the western district of Victoria, wrote to the state government pleading to be reunited with her daughter, Winnie, who had been taken away from her mother to the Lake Condah Aboriginal Reserve, also in the western district. The letter read (in part) as follows:

Dear sir in writing you these few lines hoping it will find you enjoying the very best of health as it leaves me not very well at present... dear sir I am thinking about my poor little girl winnie [:] she is longing to come home again to her own native part [:] you no [sic] Mr MacCleod that it is quite natural for a child to come home to her own mother and relations... Mrs Galbraith [the Reserve manager’s wife] is treating her very
unkindly [::] she knocked her head up against the door and she struck her ... dear sir if you know what a father’s love is for his children consider a mother’s love for her child ... I have reared my little winnie [sic] from a baby and every one on this very place can tell you that she has never been neglected ... try your level best to get my little girl winnie home again and the Lord God Almighty will reward you for it bye and bye with kind regards to you [:::] yours sincerely Lena Austin.44

Winnie also wrote letters to government officials, seeking permission to go home. A reading of the exchange between Winnie and her family indicates that women went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that correspondence between families was not destroyed. In a letter written by Lena to Winnie in 1917 she indicates her concern that the correspondence might not reach her daughter. To subvert the reserve manager’s attempts to confiscate mail Lena attached a note to the letter to her daughter before she placed it inside another letter, sealed and sent to Lena’s own auntie, Flora Austin, who also lived at the Lake Condah reserve. The note reads:

Dear Winnie

I am sending your letter in aunty flora’s letter because old mother Galley [Mrs Galbraith, the reserve manager’s wife] might open it and I don’t want [her] to see your letter.45

Unfortunately, the efforts of Lena to be reunited with her daughter were not successful, with subsequent correspondence indicating that Winnie was eventually transferred to a Salvation Army Home for Girls in Melbourne, 300 miles from Framplingham, where her family had little hope of visiting Winnie, let alone having her returned home to them. Our ability to access Lena and Winnie Austin’s story, along with those of other indigenous women assists in the validation of subsequent testimonies such as those presented to the BTH inquiry. Any attempt to re-present contemporary Stolen Generation stories as a fiction is
reliant on a mythology that earlier narratives, such as Lena Austin’s are also a fiction. What Frow’s discussion of the *Bringing Them Home* inquiry recognizes is that it provided an understanding of the difference between “telling stories and existing [and] about being made not to exist.”  The Inquiry provided an ethical narrative space where the memory of colonial violence was also restored (willingly or not). The Stolen Generations narrative does not exist in a vacuum, as suggested by Attwood. It weaves its way back through the twentieth century entwined within other stories, written and oral, thus recognizing that indigenous people are fully aware of both government wrongs committed against them and their inherent rights:

We don’t mind the government taking them and training them. We want them to get on and be useful. But we want to feel we have full rights over them and that they are our own children . . . We do not wish to be a burden on the State, but our children have never been state children and we don’t want them to be. The people at Point McLeay would rather give up their mission station than sacrifice their children.  

**“THE FIRST WHITE MAN BORN”**

A work of literary fiction dealing with the history of removing indigenous children from their families was also produced in the late 1990s; Kim Scott’s award-winning novel of 1999, *Benang: from the heart*.  *Benang* is concerned with the experiences of indigenous communities subject to colonial rule in Western Australia during the twentieth century. Additionally, it addresses the extent of white Australia’s pathological views of indigenous identity including its obsession with skin color and the taint of “dark blood.” Through the narrator, the “half-caste” but “uplifted” Harley, *Benang* provides an insight into the anxieties over race and miscegenation that pervade the white Australian conscience, as seen through the characterization of A. O Neville, the Commissioner of Native Affairs in Western Australia from 1915–1940,
a bureaucrat who “had the power under the act to take any child from its mother at any stage of its life, no matter whether the mother is legally married or not.” Attempts to erase indigenous identity through the dilution of skin color and the extent of the restrictions imposed on indigenous people were panoptical, in both a physical and psychological sense.

With Scott’s novel based on extensive archival research in addition to indigenous “memory work” and oral history, Benang demands that the colonial archive speak, both for itself and to the consequences of enacting legislation that controlled not only where an indigenous person could live or work, but with whom they could reside, including their immediate family members. Harley is both a witness to and the narrator of a history that produced him. He introduces himself as a testament to the success of twentieth-century assimilation policies, referring to himself as the one of the “brightest and most useful in the uplifted state.” At the same time he is cast as a traitor to his assimilated self, as it is through the hybridized skills of his “native cunning” and white education that he questions the genocidal project of forced child removals, breeding controls, and forms of government surveillance.

The documented government archive is an unwilling and hostile witness in the retelling of this story, forced to “sing” its secrets by Harley. The questions he raises about the bureaucratic narrative seeks to provoke embarrassment and “uncomfortableness” within his listeners (which is almost certainly a direct reference to John Howard’s obsession with national “comfort” levels).

Harley invites his listeners to hear a song that composes a version of the past providing no escape for those who would prefer to cling to a more “relaxed” and melodious history of Australia. He “hovers,” birdlike, above white Australia’s fixation with assimilation. Harley charts the words and images, terminology and categories of race, reconfiguring the labels of “quarter-caste,” “half-caste,” and “first cross half-blood girls” as a coherent narrative of both the human experience of indigenous people and the psychosis displayed by the colonial protector. In order to deconstruct the banality of regulative language Harley provides
explicit descriptions of the mechanics of assimilation where the bureaucratic language is vague. His white grandfather, Ernest Solomon Scat, a relentless proponent of “absorption policies,” celebrates his grandson as “the first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line-of-white-man-born.” But how did “half-castes” such as Harley come to be? We are provided with two explanations. The first is lifted from the archive, with attempts to control and eradicate color explained as “the need for both biological and social absorption [in order to] uplift a despised race.” And how is this achieved? Harley sings to the reader, about his white grandfather, Ernest, and his solution for the “whitewashing” the “blacks”:

Ern Solomon Scat:
has failed
fucks chooks
fucks his children
fucked all our family before him

Benang also visits other sites of contest between colonial authority and indigenous autonomy. The image of the derided “fringe-dweller” is poignantly conveyed through a story Harley relates about the body of an indigenous boy dumped on the edge of a rural town. The body presents a hazard to the health of the town. It is quickly disposed of to protect the both the sensibilities and more importantly, the “dark” secrets of this place. Wherever the “mixed-blood” of indigenous people is present in the wider community very few care to discuss how the “mix” originated. The colonial sensibility exposed in the story surrounding this dead boy is symbolic of the white nation’s attempts to accrue a narrative “in denial” of colonialism’s hypocrisy in relation to the history and practice of miscegenation.

In another scene Scott lampoons colonial manners and its petty display of cultural and material superiority. In the kitchen at an outstation, a local police officer, Sergeant Hall, asks Kathleen, an indigenous woman of “mixed blood” to sit with him and his wife and take tea “in
the same best china” that they are drinking from. But, as Harley reminds us, Kathleen’s teacup is chipped and broken. Although Sergeant Hall lectures her that if she behaves sensibly and obediently toward her white protectors, Kathleen will one day be able to enjoy life as an “uplifted Aborigine,” living in “a house like this” and drinking from “cups like these,” we know that Kathleen and other “mixed bloods” will never be accepted as equals, as they are forever “tainted” by indigenous blood. Even Harley himself, who is celebrated because his skin is white “where the sun has not been,” will be offered little more than damaged goods.

In consideration of the extent of the attempts to erase indigenous identity Benang is genuinely “uplifting.” Toward the conclusion of the book Harley is told by his Uncle Jack that despite the attempts to erase indigenous identity and culture “to start with, what you are is a Nyoongar” (an indigenous man). Within a contemporary Australia that continues in its attempts to control the identities of indigenous people Jack’s statement bears witness to the knowledge that identity is both a self-determinist and cultural formation as opposed to a politically motivated bureaucratic or “scientific” decision. Benang also informs us that the maintenance of indigenous identity in Australia is assisted by the retention of narratives that inform us of our past and who we are today. These narratives are not reliant on a fiction. They are located in the experience of ourselves as indigenous people, and not “black bit, white bit” people existing in an “in between” void, outside culture and outside history.

NOTES

1. For details of the Royal Commission’s findings see Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Responses by Governments to the Royal Commission, 3 volumes, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1992.

2. For a range of responses to the 1988 Bicentenary celebrations of British “settlement” in Australia see Making the Bicentenary, edited by Susan Janson and Stuart Macintyre, a special issue of Australian Historical Studies, volume 23, number 91, 1988.

3. An analysis of the legal, political and cultural ramifications of the Mabo
decision is provided in In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia, Bain Attwood, ed. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1996).


7. For the Howard interview see Who Weekly, December 30, 1996.

8. A public apology by the Commonwealth government had been a recommendation of the Bringing Them Home inquiry.


12. Although reconciliation as a public event and a phenomenon of both emotion and entertainment has disappeared, some of those who were either involved in, or were inspired by the reconciliation marches are now active in groups such as Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTA) and Defenders of Native Title (DON’T). Both organizations have their own Web sites.


16. Elazar Barkan, “Oceanic models for indigenous groups,” in her The


19. Ibid., 94—95.


22. Speech by Justice Marcus Einfeld, Sydney Opera House, June 26, 2000. A transcript is available at www.vinnies.org.au/files/NSW%20Aboriginal%20Social%20Justice.htm. In the speech Einfeld relates that in his capacity as president of the Human Rights Commission he had gone to Western Australia in an effort to “talk them [the Lawrence government] out of it . . . I have been speaking out against it ever since . . . tragically it took a young boy’s death earlier this year to bring public and political attention to it.”


29. Edited transcript of speech given by the noted historian, Inga


34. Ibid., 183.

35. Ibid., 205.

36. Ibid., 210.

37. Ibid., 241.

38. Ibid., 185.

39. As just one example of the written testimonies by indigenous people that address their situation of incarceration and separation from family, see *Letters from Aboriginal Women of Victoria, 1876-1926*, Elizabeth Nelson, Sandra Smith, and Patricia Grimshaw, eds. History Department, The University of Melbourne, 2002. Similar testimonies are provided in Anna Haebich's Broken Circles.


41. Ibid., 358

42. Ibid., 359.

43. Ibid., 357.


47. Letter written to the South Australian state government by the Point Mcleay indigenous community in 1923, reprinted in Anna Heabich’s *Broken Circles*, 317.


50. For an insight into Neville’s attitudes and the controls over indigenous people in Western Australia see *Commonwealth of Australia, Aboriginal Welfare: Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities*, Common-

51. For Neville’s own insight into “controlled breeding” and the extermination of the “menace” that was miscegenation see his evidence in *Aboriginal Welfare: Initial Conference* of 1937 in addition to A. O. Neville, *Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community*, (Sydney: Currawong Publishing, 1948).


53. A heated debate over the use of the term genocide in relation to the stolen generations history accompanied the wider debate introduced above. For the most concise discussion of the place of genocide in Australia’s colonial history see Colin Tatz, *With Intent to Destroy Reflecting on Genocide*, (London: Verso, 2003).


55. Ibid., 27.

56. Ibid., 304.

57. Ibid., 9.

58. Ibid., 73–76.

59. Ibid., 91.

60. Ibid., 394.

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