A Politics of Stolen Time

in memory of John Forbes

John Frow

Someone must have been telling lies about Millicent D because when she was four she was taken away from her family and made a ward of the state. Until the age of eighteen she was kept in Sister Kate’s Home in Perth, Western Australia, where she was forbidden to see any of her family or to know where they were. She was told that her family didn’t care about her or want her, but that in exchange she would be brought up as a white girl ‘in a good religious environment’. That’s what she was told by the Protector of Aborigines and the Child Welfare Department; but Millicent tells the Inquiry from whose Report I am quoting that ‘all they contributed to our upbringing and future was an unrepairable scar of loneliness, mistrust, hatred and bitterness’ (115).

When she was in her first year of high school Millicent was sent to work on a farm as a domestic servant; she went back there in the next school holidays, and this time ‘it was a terrifying experience, the man of the house used to come into my room at night and force me to have sex. I tried to fight him off but he was too strong’ (117). Back at the Home she reported this to the Matron; but the Matron ‘washed my mouth out with soap and boxed my ears and told me that awful things would happen to me if I told any of the other kids. I was so scared and wanted to die. When the next school holidays came I begged not to be sent to that farm again. But they would not listen and said I had to’ (ibid.).

Millicent ran away from the Home in order to try to return to her family, but she was recaptured, punished, and sent back to the farm to work. This time, she says, ‘I was raped, bashed and slashed with a razor blade on both of my arms and legs because I would not stop struggling and screaming. The farmer and one of his workers raped me several times. I wanted to die, I wanted my mother to take me home where I would be safe and wanted’ (ibid.). Instead, she was returned to the Home. Again Millicent reported the rape to the Matron, and again she was punished: ‘I got a belting with a wet ironing cord, my mouth washed out with soap and put in a cottage by myself away from everyone so I couldn’t talk to the other girls. They constantly told me that I was bad and a disgrace and if anyone knew it would bring shame to Sister Kate’s Home’. She ate rat poison to try to kill herself, but ‘became very sick and vomited. This meant another belting’ (ibid.).

Some weeks later Millicent was examined by a doctor who told her that she was pregnant; again she was blamed and punished. She gave birth to a baby girl who was taken away from her, and she was
told that she could have the child back when she left Sister Kate’s. Some time later she asked the Matron for her daughter’s address, and she was told first that it was not Government policy to give out this information, and subsequently that the child’s whereabouts were not known. She then rang the hospital and was told that they had no record of her or of the birth of her daughter; and when she wrote to the Native Welfare Department they told her that they had no record of her family since the records had been destroyed by fire.

Ten years after her daughter’s birth she returned to Western Australia and again asked the Matron of Sister Kate’s about her family and child; this time, Millicent says, ‘she told me that my daughter was dead and it would be in my best interest to go back to South Australia and forget about my past and my family’ (118). A footnote to this story says that Millicent was reunited with her child when the daughter was 36.

Listen to the actions that are reported here:

- a child is told a story about her family not wanting her;
- she is made untrue promises about the kind of care she will be given;
- when she reports being raped she is punished and her mouth is washed out with soap to signify the uncleanness of the words she has spoken;
- she begs not to be sent back to the farm, but the authorities in the Home refuse to listen;
- reporting a second set of rapes, she is punished, her mouth is washed out with soap, and she is put into solitary confinement so that she cannot speak and the other girls cannot listen;
- she is told that she is bad and shameful; she takes and then vomits out poison;
- she is told a story about the child that has been taken from her;
- she is later told that it is not known where the child is; then she is told that there is no record of the child’s birth; then she is told that there is no record of her own or her family’s existence; then she is told that her child is dead.

This is a story about acts of telling that are true and acts that are false. It is about being told things and not being heard. It is about the relation between telling stories and existing, or about being made not to exist.

Millicent’s story is a part of the Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, entitled Bringing Them Home. Delivered to the Australian Federal Government in 1997, the Report is a record of the history of forcible removal of indigenous children, usually of mixed descent, from their families and communities, and it makes recommendations about current laws, practices and policies, about compensation for the victims of past laws, practices and policies, and about the services that are or should be available for those victims.

I say that Millicent’s story is a part of the Report, not that it is told in the report, because the difference is important. In citing Millicent’s story the Report is allowing her words to describe a system in which
speech receives no answer, or in which it is shameful, or in which it is met with lies. As a bureaucratic document the Report is striking for its attempt to give a voice to those who have not been listened to, or who have had the language in which to tell a story taken away from them. It does this by embedding in its text fragments or extended passages of stories told in the first person by witnesses to the Commission of Inquiry, usually in confidence and sometimes ‘with great difficulty and much personal distress’ (3).

A preliminary passage says that ‘throughout this report we have remained faithful to the language used by the witnesses quoted’ (20); and later, speaking of the 535 pieces of evidence that the Inquiry heard from indigenous people, it claims to ‘relay as many of those individual stories as possible’ (21). ‘Faithful’ and ‘relay’ suggest a transparency of transcription and passing-on that suppresses the processes of writing and of the insertion of these stories into a narrative context; much of my attention in this paper will be to the politics of writing that is worked out in those processes of citation, and in particular to the tension between the political need to speak on behalf of indigenous people, to lend the authority of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to those who are unauthorized in the public sphere, and the desire directly to restore a voice to them within and as a part of the Report.

‘To report’ is to carry a story back from one place to another. This may be an act of commenting on something observed, or it may be the repeating to another person of something that has been said, or it may be the naming of a person to an authority as having offended in some way, or it may be the making of an official act of judgement by a teacher or an investigative body. Millicent reports to the Matron the farmer who rapes her, but her act of reporting is turned back against her. She gives witness, but she is not believed. The Report of the National Inquiry listens to witnesses and reports their words in two ways: by repeating them directly, and by turning them into the material of a larger and more comprehensive narrative.

As a speech act this ‘Report of an Inquiry’ weaves together a double set of enunciative relations: that which pertains to the witnesses, splitting them between an I who speaks in the present and an I who once suffered; and that pertaining to the Commission, split between a present order of exposition and a past order of inquiry. These two relations are hooked together by the temporal coincidence of the order of inquiry and the speech of the witnesses: to inquire is to listen to that speech, and the Report is the secondary articulation of those prior acts of speaking and listening.

In making this double division between a present of speaking and writing and a past of reality the Report is doing what Michel de Certeau says all writing of history does:

instituting a reality by establishing a division between past and present such that the past functions as the other to the time of writing and is made intelligible by this relation.  

History, he writes, ‘constitutes something real to the extent that it pretends to be the representation of a past reality. It takes on authority by passing itself off as the witness of what is or of what has been. It seduces, and it imposes itself, under a title of events; which it pretends to interpret’. This interpretation is characterized above all by its ‘avoidance in the unifying representation of all traces of the division which organizes its production’ (Heterologies, 205).
In the same way, the Report deploys the citational strategy that produces, according to Certeau, the characteristically ‘laminated’ text of historiography, split between a singular, coherent, continuous writing and a plural and ‘disseminated’ set of languages which are quoted, interrogated, and judged as though they were the primary matter of the real itself. It is from the citation of this language of otherness -- the chronicle, the archive, the document -- that knowledge of historical reality is achieved. History is constituted by a play of languages in which the role of quoted language is ... one of accrediting discourse. With its referential function, it introduces into the text an effect of reality; and through its crumbling, it discreetly refers to a locus of authority. From this angle, the split structure of discourse functions like a machinery that extracts from the citation a verisimilitude of narrative and a validation of knowledge. It produces a sense of reliability. (*The Writing of History*, 94)

Citation thus works as an authorizing strategy, in which the cited texts are strictly subordinated to the text of knowledge. Certeau explicitly distinguishes this stratification of discourse from the formal structures of ‘dialogue’ and ‘collage’. The ‘Stolen Generations’ Report displays a formal ambiguity in its commitment on the one hand to a performance of knowledge grounded in citational reference, and on the other to the attempted performance of a discursive mixing without superordination.

The collaging strategy which episodically punctuates third-person reporting and analysis with fragments of stories is designed to allow these voices to have a space of effectivity, of answerability. It makes a claim for justice in relation to the voices of those who were removed from their families, who have lost their language and their traditional knowledges and even perhaps the knowledge that they have lost these things, and who have been shamed when they tried to report the wrongs done to them; it is a claim for but also an attempted enactment of a discursive justice.

The Report both gives its witnesses a hearing (which it relays), and takes their words up into a counter-speech which is *reporting-on* a system of government to which this Government is the legal successor. But this reporting-on is not being done for the sake of shaming; it is done as a claim that a kind of listening -- a response, a taking-on of responsibility -- must take place. **This is why the recommendation for an official apology is so central to the Report, and why the Federal Government’s refusal of an apology, its refusal to assume responsibility for that earlier refusal to listen to Millicent D. and many others like her, is so shameful.** More of this later.

The politics of this Report, then, is, like all historiographic politics, that of the fabrication and the authorization of a domain of facticity; but the Report both separates a past in which reality resides from a neutral time of writing, and at the same time refuses that separation by insisting, against the argument made in the Commonwealth’s submission, that the past is not over and done with, and the present is not a pure space of presence. It is thus, necessarily, an ambiguous document: formally it has the structure of the reporting systems, the systems of close bureaucratic surveillance, that were used to record and control the lives of indigenous people, and its citational practice is not distinct from that of other historiographic or bureaucratic documents; but it seeks to turn this formal isomorphism to different ends.

Millicent is told to forget about her past and her family. The speech act that governs most of the narratives of witnesses to the Inquiry is that of remembering. An excerpt from a confidential
submission which acts as a preamble to the report begins: ‘So the next thing I remember was ...’. What this I remembers is not knowing:

‘I was all upset’, says this witness, ‘and I didn’t know what to do and I didn’t know where we were going. I just thought: well, they’re police, they must know what they’re doing. I suppose I’ve got to go with them, they’re taking me to see Mum. You know this is what I honestly thought. They kept us in hospital for three days and I kept asking “When are we going to see Mum?”’ And no-one told us at this time (2).

The witness’s not-knowing is matched by a supposition that ‘they’ (the police, and perhaps also the welfare authorities) ‘must know’. But what ‘they’ tell the witness is that the children are going to see their mother, and this is a lie. The Report cites this lie in order to deprive it of its power; it produces a knowing which is official but which is not that of the police and the welfare authorities. The witness will know the truth by giving his or her words and having them taken up into a knowledge which is a counter to the lying knowledge of the officials.

The Report will offer a judgement on the basis of this knowledge; this judgement, too, will reverse the judgements made about indigenous people, and taken up by them as the truth about themselves. Listen to the memories of another witness:

I remember my Aunty, it was her daughter that got taken. She used to carry these letters around with her. They were reference letters from the white fellas in town ... Those letters said she was a good, respectable woman ... She judged herself and she felt the community judged her for letting the welfare get her child ... She carried those letters with her, folded up, as proof, until the day she died. (213)

The Canadian Government, apologizing recently to the indigenous nations of Canada for the forcible and systematic removal of their children to residential schools, said:

‘We wish to emphasize that what you experienced was not your fault. It should not have happened’ (The Weekend Australian, January 10-11, 1998).

Like that apology, the Report replaces a language of lies and blame, not with praise but with release; it breaks the hold of a false language, indeed a false reality, a reality which ‘should not have happened’. Its function is thus performative as well as descriptive, or rather it uses a description as the basis for a performative act. It is a more public version of those letters carried around by the witness’s Aunty, a more public and official letter of reference.

Within the system of systematically distorted communication into which children were rescued from their families, letters tended to go nowhere. One story that runs through the report is about letters that were never sent on, from children to parents and from parents to children. A witness who had spent her childhood in the Cootamundra Girls’ Home tells one such story:

We were all rostered to do work and one of the girls was doing Matron’s office, and there was all these letters that the girls had written back to the parents and family -- the answers were all in the garbage bin. And they were wondering why we didn’t write. That was one way they stopped us keeping in contact with our families. Then
they had the hide to turn around and say, ‘They don’t love you. They don’t care about you’. (155)

Another witness, Murray, who was removed to Palm Island, says:

I remember when I learnt to write letters, I wrote to my mother furiously pleading with her to come and take us off that island. I wrote to her for years, I got no reply then I realized that she was never coming for us. That she didn’t want us. That’s when I began to hate her. Now I doubt if any of my letters ever got off that island or that any letters she wrote me ever stood a chance of me receiving them. (87)

No lie is told, but the refusal to pass on letters fosters the underlying lie: your parents don’t love you, your parents are dead. The systematic deculturation of the children is predicated on their social death, and indeed the death of their Aboriginality is the point of the scheme: they are protected, rescued from their blackness because, for the most part, their skins are light and they stand a chance of passing as white.

Hence the comments of J. W. Bleakley, Queensland’s Chief Protector and Director of Native Affairs from 1913 to 1942, on the dual value of the segregation of Aborigines on reserves run as missions:

‘Not only do they [the missions] protect the child races from the unscrupulous white, but they help to preserve the purity of the white race from the grave social dangers that always threaten where there is a degraded race living in loose conditions at its back door (73)’.

But protection, as the Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples notes, is ‘the leading edge of domination’. Bleakley’s confused metaphor which places the ‘child races’ at once in the innocence of an earlier evolutionary stage where they are threatened by rapacious white people, and in the degradation of a late stage which has fallen from innocence and thus threatens the sexual purity of those same white people, unconsciously reflects the double-bind structure on which the Black Gulag is operated.

For if these children are protected by means of a social death, there is nevertheless for most of them no social rebirth. Their place is mapped out by the games that define its impossibility. The structure of the double bind runs right across the system, from the initial game in which local councils drive Aboriginal people from their camps near the towns and then declare the children thus made homeless to be neglected and subject to removal, to the prison-farm structure of the reserves in which they are to be protected, to the systematic punishment and physical and sexual abuse handed out in their best interests by the churches and ‘the Welfare’.

But above all it is their race that is defined in self-cancelling terms by a double negative. Millicent D. again: ‘They tried to make us act like white kids but at the same time we had to give up our seat for a whitefella because an Aboriginal never sits down when a white person is present’ (116). Sarah:

We were constantly told that we didn’t have families and that we were white children. It wasn’t until we went across the road to school that we were called the names of ‘darkies’ and ‘niggers’ and those sorts of names. So when we were at
school we were niggers and when we were at home we were white kids. (173)

And Tony says in his testimony: ‘I’d ask her [his adoptive mother] why I was dark. She would tell me it was because I kept playing with aboriginal kids at school’ (426).

Racial identity is thus simultaneously a kind of Original Sin and a state of shame which is freely chosen. In truth, these kids are driven crazy, and part of their craziness consists in the theft of the very language that would allow them to clarify and to state the wrong done to them. Their knowledge of their own languages is systematically eradicated, and so are the social relations that are bound up with them. Fiona, reunited with her birth mother after 32 years, has to speak through an interpreter, but also finds that she has lost interest in all the questions that she once thought she wanted to ask her (130).

The Jawoyn Association’s submission discusses the problems caused by the removed children’s loss of the ‘knowledge about the law; knowledge about country; knowledge about “the system”; and a social connectedness to all things Jawoyn’ that allow a person to ‘speak for country’ (219). Again, this was the point: the children ‘were to be prevented from acquiring the habits and customs of the Aborigines (South Australia’s Protector of Aborigines in 1909); the young people will merge into the present civilization and become worthy citizens (NSW Colonial Secretary in 1915)’ (202).

What the young people become, of course, is something else. For one witness, ‘what you see in a lot of us is the shell’ (177); another tells the Inquiry that it is as though ‘you’ve just come out of nowhere’ (13). And Carol, who tried to document her stay at a mission reserve and was told there was no record she was ever there, says: ‘I haven’t got anything to say I’ve been to Beagle Bay. It’s only memories and people that I was there with. I don’t exist in this world. I haven’t got anything, nothing to say who I am’ (404).

What the Report documents, then, is both a remembering and an absence of memory. It is itself in one sense a ceremonial act of remembrance, reading -- as its Terms of Reference require it to -- the ‘traces’ of past ‘laws, practices and policies’, ‘tracing’ the histories of the stolen generations of children, reading their ‘scars’ (3). All of these metaphors, with their indexical link between past and present, suggest a reference to a pre-existing reality; but if Certeau’s argument is correct, this reference is also a way of instituting a reality in and for the present, and this reality is, as Martin Krygier puts it, a moment in ‘a contemporary conversation’. 6

The Report involves itself in this conversation by means of a constructive activity of writing which, rather than simply referring to a past located within its own pastness, brings together a heterogeneous assemblage of times:

• first, the time of enunciation, with its two-fold division between the time of speaking and the time spoken of;
• second, a series of chronological times from nineteenth-century Australia through to the more heavily-documented postwar period and the historical present within which the address and the reception of the Report take place;
• and third, a diverse set of what we might call qualitative temporalities:
  • that of indigenous movements seeking to form and assert a cultural and political identity
against the forces of cultural dispossession;

• that of several generations of indigenous children stolen from their homes and their culture;

• that of traditional indigenous culture, rooted in the non-time of the Law, which shadows the previous two;

• that of a modernization process (a process of macro- and micro-economic ‘reform’) actively espoused by the current Liberal government as it was by the previous Labor government;

• and that of the current right-wing backlash, especially in rural Australia, both against the modernization process which has devastated rural areas, and against the politics of Aboriginality, including the overdetermined issue of native land rights.

These temporalities all run at different speeds and according to different social imaginaries, and their intersections, which don’t happen simultaneously, are in many respects random and contingent. In other respects they are not, and the Report documents, in particular, the clash between an assimilationist project which assumes the inevitable absorption or extinction of the indigenous population, and the resistant survival of a disposessed and disoriented people living on stolen time.

These pasts continue to exist in the present in that ‘contemporary conversation’ in which they are invoked to authorize a move within a serious game: the game of working out, or not working out, a just settlement between an invaded and displaced people whose dispossession has never been formally codified, and the people that now possesses the land and which has a diversity of interests including a moral interest in a just settlement (‘just’ within certain definite limits). As it happens, the sides in this game have been rather clearly defined around the question of history itself.

For Michel de Certeau, the writing of history ‘aims at calming the dead who still haunt the present, and at offering them scriptural tombs’ (The Writing of History, 2). The Commonwealth’s submission to the Inquiry and Prime Minister Howard’s address in May 1997 to the Australian Reconciliation Convention enunciate a number of principles governing the relation between the living and the unplacated dead.

The first is a stricture concerning the relativity of systems of value: the Government submission cautions against anachronism by suggesting that in evaluating the laws, practices and policies prevailing at earlier times in Australian history ‘it is appropriate to have regard to the standards and values prevailing at the time of their enactment and implementation, rather than to the standards and values prevailing today’; one epoch may not judge another.

The second principle concerns the absence of moral responsibility on the part of governments or peoples for actions committed at an earlier time. ‘Australians of this generation’, says John Howard, ‘should not be required to accept guilt and blame for past actions and policies over which they had no control’, and the discrediting of laws and policies is not a basis for the recognition of liability on the part of subsequent governments (Commonwealth submission, 32).

The third principle has to do with a distinction between symbolic and pragmatic fields of action. John
Howard contrasts ‘symbolic gestures and overblown promises’ with the need to address ‘the practical needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in areas like health, housing, education and employment’. It is these areas, rather than ‘past injustices’ or indeed an entire history of physical and cultural dispossession, which are ‘the root causes of current and future disadvantage among our indigenous people’. Past wrongs should be acknowledged -- or, to put it more precisely and in a way that does not ‘apportion blame and guilt’, both sides should ‘acknowledge realistically the interaction of our histories’; but extrapolation from the past to the present is useless in addressing those ‘practical needs’. If there is ‘sorrow’ for the ‘blemishes’ on our ‘past history’, it is ‘personal’, not collective, and is thus without effect.

Implicit in these formulations is a kind of brutal imperative to stoicism: stop whining about your life and get on with changing it. More fundamentally, the Government’s position depends upon a historical relativism which seals past and present in their separate and internally homogeneous temporalities; in the words of the columnist Frank Devine, the ‘eternal truth’ in play here is that ‘that was then and this is now’. This stark division between the present and a series of self-contained pasts repeats a classically historicist position for which each period is, in Ranke’s words, ‘immediate to God’. Its purpose is to render the past at once quite strange and quite inconsequential: ‘These ghosts find access through writing on the condition that they remain forever silent’.

The critique of historicism that Gadamer develops in Truth and Method emphasizes its theological character: it is only from the perspective of God that each historical time can be seen in its completeness and its separateness from every other time. But our encounter with the past, he argues, is not a relation between two isolated points; it is an encounter with an open-ended process of which it is itself a part. One of the images through which the Report imagines this intrication of historical times is that of resonance, the passage of a succession of overlapping sound waves outwards in echoing repetition from a point of departure. ‘The actions of the past’, it proposes, ‘resonate in the present and will continue to do so in the future’.

And it goes on, in what is clearly a response to a criticism of the uselessness of historical knowledge, to say:

In no sense has the Inquiry been ‘raking over the past’ for its own sake. The truth is that the past is very much with us today, in the continuing devastation of the lives of Indigenous Australians. That devastation cannot be addressed unless the whole community listens with an open heart and mind to the stories of what has happened in the past and, having listened and understood, commits itself to reconciliation. (3)

The argument has to do with establishing that continuity of will and responsibility that defines the self-identity of the nation state. The authority invoked by the Report in its support is the Governor-General, Sir William Deane, who -- against the Commonwealth’s attempt to turn away from ‘symbolic gestures’ in order to address the ‘practical’ issues of the present (a turn which, as Raimond Gaita notes, ‘treats as irrelevant the fact that the Aborigines are landless because they were dispossessed rather than because of a natural catastrophe’) -- calls for a form of historical settlement which would be the precondition for policy measures to take effect, and which would involve the rendering of discursive justice. He thus stresses the need for ‘appropriate redress for present disadvantage flowing from past injustice and oppression’ (4), one element of which -- the Report concludes -- should be a formal apology made to indigenous peoples by all Australian Parliaments.
But the act of apology is ambiguous. Etymologically the word refers to a speech given in one’s own or another’s defence, and only secondarily does it have its modern meaning of acknowledgement of a wrong. The definition that comes closest to this modern meaning is a subsection of the OED’s: ‘a frank acknowledgement of the offence with expression of regret for it, by way of reparation’. There are three parts to this: something happened; it should not have happened; by saying so, I make it up to you. The apology is thus a complex performative which seeks to de-institute a past reality ‘which should not have happened’ and to transform the conditions of a present relationship.

But given the semantic ambivalence that connects self-protection with concession of error, there can be no guarantee that this is what will occur: an apology may be a way of acting symbolically which feigns weakness in order to defend or even to strengthen power. ‘Forgive me’, it says, ‘I was wrong’: the apologist gains honour, and nothing changes.

Like all gifts, the apology thus has the potential to work coercively. Nicholas Tavuchis stresses its non-reciprocality by calling attention to ‘the morally asymmetrical positions of the protagonists, the essentially symbolic character of the transaction, and the unpredictability of the outcome’. The crucial question then -- since any speech act may be inefficacious -- becomes that of the conditions under which a historical apology will work, and of what that might mean. This is above all a question of the relation between different and incommensurable kinds of costs and values: between rhetorical penance and actual humbling, and between discursive and material costs.

Norma Field’s careful argument about Japanese apology for the war and particularly for the enforced prostitution of Korean ‘comfort women’ points to an inverse relation between apology and material compensation: a good apology must include effective reparation, but material cost must be subsumed within a real symbolic cost to pride, rather than being either a payment for services rendered or a non-committal expression of sympathy -- both of which effectively undo the apology. In the case of a bad apology, it is ‘as if the words themselves were simulating money’. Material compensation must thus be secondary to symbolic reparation, but it is only when the apology gives rise to a chain of consequences that it can be said to be successfully accomplished.

Past realities are not changed in and for the past, but they can be changed in and for the present; ‘apologies are made to the victims of past wrongdoing but for the shared present of victims and apologizers, and most of all, for the sake of a common future’.

Apology is one of the forms taken by discursive justice, but it has two more elementary forms. The first is the reception and recording of testimony, which the Report recommends should be continued by the establishment of an archive similar to the Shoah Foundation’s project of recording the victims of the Holocaust. The second is that ‘listening’ which the ‘whole community’ must undertake and for which the process of the Inquiry as it heard from witnesses in each state was a metonym. Listening is a form of ethical responsiveness which recognizes a duty to the story of the other.

The model of storytelling that holds in the Report is that of a narrative catharsis triggered by the release of memories. If the experience of forcible removal is repeatedly referred to in terms of ‘scarring’ and ‘trauma’, the process set in train by the recording of and attention to the testimonies of the victims is one of healing: ‘The experience of the Shoah Foundation and of this Inquiry is that
giving testimony, while extraordinarily painful for most, is often the beginning of the healing process’ (22), which extends from those directly affected to the larger trauma of the body politic.

The almost unspeakable word here is ‘genocide’. While seeking to remain strictly within the legal framework of the time and to avoid a retrospective moralism, the Report nevertheless concludes that a principal aim of the child removal policies was the elimination of indigenous cultures, and that in the sense given the word by the relevant international convention this aim constitutes genocide. The Government, by contrast, has consistently refused the applicability of the term. But the point is more than a legal one. The assumption made by the Report is that collective acknowledgement of a nation’s past criminality -- and this means, in the first place, naming it -- is essential to something like the honour or the moral integrity of nationhood. The making of reparation to the victims, both materially and discursively, is equally a repair of the wounded body politic. There is also a sense that, in the opening of memory and the restoration of a voice to the dispossessed, a kind of redemption can take place, a cathartic release from the pain of damaged lives.

But perhaps there can be no redemption. Speaking of the ‘first-order narratives’ of the survivors of the Holocaust, Martin Jay writes that, unlike the ‘second-order’ discourse of the historian who seeks to make sense of them, they ‘must approach a kind of incoherence because of the fundamental unintelligibility of what happened to them’. And Lawrence Langer coins the term ‘humiliated memory’ to describe ‘an especially intense form of uncompensating recall’ amongst Holocaust survivors, a form of remembering which, far from restoring a sense of power or control over the past, torments the survivor, ‘reanimating the governing impotence of the worst moments in a distinctly non-therapeutic way’, and refusing to lend itself to the ennobling uses of history.

The writing of history, says Certeau, takes place midway between two poles: one of them, which he calls dogmatism, ‘is authorized by a reality that it claims to represent and in the name of this reality, it imposes laws’; the other, which he calls ethics, ‘is articulated through effective operations, and it defines a distance between what is and what ought to be. This distance designates a space where we have something to do’ (Heterologies 199). It is the interstitial placing of historiography that is important here: its ethical function, which has to do with the time of writing and the contest of forces within and for that time, will have little purchase if it is detached from a sense of the irreducibility of the past to this writing, and if it thus projects too easy a redemption of stolen time.

Elsewhere Certeau speaks of the task of history as being that ‘of articulating time as the ambivalence that affects the place from which it speaks and, thus, of reflecting upon the ambiguity of place as the work of time within the space of knowledge itself’ (Heterologies, 217). This, I take it, is -- with all necessary qualifications -- not dissimilar to Gadamer’s argument that genuinely historical thought must include its own historicity as a component of that history it seeks to understand.

This ambiguity, and this inclusion of one historicity within the objectification of another, are what has here been called ‘resonance’, and Certeau has quite explicitly drawn out its implications for the use of orally relayed stories. Instead of a transcription and exorcism of those voices ‘whose disappearance was formerly the condition of historiography’, the historian may learn to listen to them, and so to discover ‘interlocutors, who, even if they are not specialists, are themselves subject-producers of histories and partners in a shared discourse … A hierarchy of knowledges is replaced by a mutual differentiation of subjects’ (ibid.). This, again, is perhaps too easy.
There are no solutions to the theft of time; nothing gives it back, nothing redeems the lie that systematically falsified the world of the stolen children, and language is never equally shared. But a history which is rigorously committed to ambiguity may open up, as the ‘Stolen Generations’ Report does, a space of listening which will define that ethical distance that gives us ‘something to do’, and it will do so by unsettling its own enunciative relation to the disparate voices and the heterogeneous pasts that structure it. ‘Time is precisely the impossibility of an identity fixed by a place. Thus begins a reflection on time’ (Heterologies 218).

John Frow delivered this paper at De Certeau: a symposium which was held at the University of Tasmania in January, 1998. A revised version of the paper was published in Meanjin in 1998.

Notes and References

1 Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1997 <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/stolen13.html>. All further citations from this Report are given in the text. [Some quotations are hot-linked but the entire report can be accessed via the link given above.] [Millicent’s Story is found by scrolling down to the sub-heading “Millicent” once the “Assimilation” sub-heading has been reached in the Report. Ed.]


7 There is detailed documentation of this project, and of the languages of primitivism and of eugenics in which it was expressed, in Russell McGregor, Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997).

8 Commonwealth submission to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, October 1996, p. 30.

9 John Howard, Opening Address to the Australian Reconciliation Convention, Melbourne, May 1997.

The argument is made explicit in Ron Brunton, ‘Shame About Aborigines’, *Quadrant*, May 1997, p. 39.


Cf. the argument made by Judith Butler in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performatives* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 16-19, that inefficacy is a necessary condition of performatives.


Ibid., p. 37.


Cf. Mike Stekete, ‘Sorry seems to be the hardest word’, *The Australian*, May 24th 1997. Raimond Gaita (‘Genocide and Pedantry’, p. 45.) acutely observes the puzzling absence of any call, from either the left or the right, for those guilty of genocide to be brought to trial; trials are literally unthinkable, and that they are so, he concludes, ‘is the most persuasive evidence that the significance of the crimes against the Aborigines has not been fully appreciated’.


Author/s:
FROW, JOHN

Title:
A politics of stolen time

Date:
1998

Citation:

Publication Status:
Published

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/35002

File Description:
A politics of stolen time