

Chapter 4

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities

Nicole Watson

Introduction

Identity has long been and remains a bitterly contested issue. For the Coloniser, the power to define Aboriginal people facilitated colonisation. *Terra nullius* had the effect of erasing violent dispossession from the historical memory. The power has subsequently been used in various attempts to 'merge' Aboriginal people into Australian society, giving rise to the tragedies of the Stolen Generations. From the perspective of many Aboriginal people, this painful history remains palpable and, consequently, the power to define our identity is one that is jealously guarded. This chapter will be divided into two parts. Part 1 will provide a historical analysis of various attempts by the State to define and suppress Aboriginal identity. Part 2 will discuss contemporary issues revolving around identity.

Part 1: The history of suppression of Aboriginal identity

One of the constants of the history of contact between Europeans and Aboriginal people has been the imposition of the former's values, for the 'benefit' of the latter. Aboriginal people's salvation lay not in recognition of their sovereignty, but rather, the erasure of their identity. The belief that Aboriginal culture held no intrinsic value facilitated the mythology of *terra nullius*, and provided a veil over the often violent means by which Aboriginal people were dispossessed.

Such thinking surely motivated Governor Macquarie to establish the Native Institution in 1814; a place where Aboriginal children would be raised as Europeans and imbued with Christian values. At his annual feast with the 'natives', the Governor called on Aboriginal parents to admit their children into the Institution. Initially, some agreed, but most refused when it became clear that they would be denied access to their children (Hinkson 2002, p. 70). Macquarie's experiment ultimately failed, but it would become a precursor to the devastating child removal policies of the twentieth century.

Protectionism

By the latter part of the nineteenth century, introduced disease, dispossession and frontier violence had taken a devastating toll on the Aboriginal populations. The wretched lives that many Aboriginal people led on the fringes of colonial society accommodated the belief that they were a 'doomed race', whose 'extinction' was an inevitable consequence of the process of natural selection. Governments responded to such dire conditions with protectionism; a form of wardship applicable only to Aboriginal people.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, protectionist legislation had been introduced in every state, with the exception of Tasmania (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997). Once subject to 'protection' one was liable to removal to a reserve, where all aspects of life were subject to government control, including employment, marriage and even the care of one's children.

The fluctuating definition of 'Aboriginal' in the legislation allowed governments to alternatively seize control over particular individuals, and eject them from reserves. Those considered to be capable of adopting 'civilised' attributes were granted exemptions from the protectionist legislation, but exemptions



Figure 4.1 Portrait of Private Harold Arthur Cowan, an Aboriginal soldier in 6th Light Horse Regiment (LHR), his cousin Hazel Williams and her baby sister. Cowan (also known as Arthur Williams) enlisted at Grafton in 1917. Despite fighting for their country' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service people did not enjoy the same rights and benefits as other soldiers. Australian War Memorial

could always be revoked. In Western Australia, for example, an exemption could be lost for a failure to adhere to 'habits of civilised life' (Cunneen 2001, p. 68). Little has been written about the impacts of exemptions on identity. Many of those who were granted exemptions disassociated from other Aboriginal people, in exchange for a life of freedom. Their children often grew up in ignorance of their Aboriginal identity, or alternatively, were encouraged to hide it.

Theories revolving around blood quantum suggested that while the 'full-blooded' Aboriginal race would ultimately perish, the 'half-castes' could be merged into the white community, but would never be equal. So while their families remained incarcerated on Reserves, fair skinned children were prepared for a life of menial service. In 1914, the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board determined that all 'mixed descent' boys and girls had to either go into service or an institution (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997). The desires of the children and their families were irrelevant.

Although protectionism affected all elements of Aboriginal society, its impacts were gendered. Prior to the invasion, Aboriginal women enjoyed a high degree of autonomy and some exercised significant political power (Williams & Jolly 1994). Early European observers struggled with not only a lack of understanding of Aboriginal societies, but they were also blinkered by their own cultural mores. Consequently, many early Europeans viewed Aboriginal women as mere sexual and economic commodities.

This stigmatisation would be perpetuated by protectionist legislation. One of the constants of protectionism was the regulation of Aboriginal women's sexuality, in order to prevent 'miscegenation' (people of different racial backgrounds producing children together). In jurisdictions such as Queensland, Aboriginal women could not marry without official sanction (*Aboriginals Protection Act 1901* [Qld] section 9). Historians have described instances in which such powers were exercised capriciously. Huggins and Blake have written about the case of Minnie Koran, who was arrested at her home in Rockhampton and then sent to Brisbane to be wed. Minnie, however, was already married. She valiantly declared to her husband in Rockhampton, 'I won't get married to nobody as I am already married to you' (Huggins & Blake 1994, p. 42).

Assimilation

The first Commonwealth-State Native Welfare Conference was held in 1937, out of which emerged the policy of assimilation. The conference resolved that:

... the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end.

Cited in Australian Human Rights Commission 1997, p. 26

Those who were targeted for 'absorption' were kept under surveillance by various arms of the state. The tools used to define racial categories were crude and dehumanising. Koori writer and historian Tony Birch has described a visit by a welfare officer to the home of an Aboriginal family in Melbourne in 1948. The social worker described her client as 'almost a Nordic type', but was assured that he was Aboriginal because he possessed 'an aimless air about him, and seemed quite listless' (Birch 1995, p. 32).

Such crude instruments were also used by those who undertook a census in the Northern Territory for the purpose of creating a 'list of wards'. Once declared a ward, an individual was liable to be controlled under the *Welfare Ordinance 1953–1957*. Although the legislation appeared to be racially neutral, only Aboriginal people were entered on the list. Douglas and Chesterman have written about the case of Ruby Carew; a 'full-blood' Aboriginal woman who was married to a white man, Lance Carew. When Lance Carew sought an exemption for his wife, her liberty came to depend upon the whims and prejudices of those who administered the legislation:

In deciding the ward status of Mrs Carew, public relations officer Sweeney urged the Chief Welfare Officer to consider that when he had visited her home a week previously, Mrs Carew had several 'full-blood' relatives in the house with her and some in the yard outside. He noted that should anything happen to Mr Carew, she would return to those 'full-blood' relatives. On the other hand, sometime earlier patrol officer Ryan had noted that Ruby had 'never caused any trouble', that Lance Carew was held in 'high repute', and that Ryan had recommended the marriage.

Chesterman & Douglas 2008, p. 384

The Stolen Generations

The assimilation policy had dramatic impacts on the administration of child welfare laws. Whereas non-Indigenous children were removed on the grounds of neglect, Aboriginal children were removed for the additional purpose of advancing the cause of assimilation. Due to incomplete and destroyed records, it is not possible to determine with precision the number of children who were removed. The *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families Bringing them Home* report concluded that 'between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970' (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997, p. 30).

In the 1970s, individuals within Aboriginal communities and their organisations campaigned to publicise the legacies of child removal policies. In particular, some within the fledgling Aboriginal Legal Services voiced their concerns about the nexus between adult incarceration and earlier removal as a child. Such work led to the creation of Link-Up, founded in New South Wales in 1980, in order to reunite removed individuals with kin and identity (Haebich 2000, p. 601). Link-Up currently offers a range of services, including holistic counselling, assistance in locating families and ongoing support (Link-Up 2010).

Due to activism by Aboriginal people and their supporters, the Commonwealth established the above mentioned Inquiry in 1995. It received testimony of the varied ramifications for those who were removed. The impacts included damage to self-esteem, the loss of connection to community and an inability to claim rights under land rights and native title legislation. The consequences of the loss of identity were profound. According to the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre:

... it is our experience that most Aborigines raised within the Tasmanian Aboriginal community are far more secure in where they belong than are those who were raised outside the Aboriginal community. We have seen Aborigines raised outside the community being confused, uncertain and insecure about their belonging. This is not, of course, the case with every displaced child.

cited in Australian Human Rights Commission 1997, p. 177

One of the founders of Link-Up, Peter Read, has written of the traumatic and varied journeys of those who reconnect with their families (Read 1999; Read, Maynard this volume). While some are able to establish close ties, this is not always the case:

Though some reunions are spectacularly successful, many do not follow the fantasies long rehearsed in the minds of separated children. In the twenty, thirty or forty years between birth and reunion, parents remarry, or die. Families can disintegrate. Young adults who want to begin to live as Aborigines often find that the degree of Aboriginal identity in their families (which can range from passionate involvement to off-hand denial), does not match their own expectations or desires.

Read 1999, pp. 121–2

Once taken into State care, many child wards were taught to deny their Aboriginality, which would have an indelible impact upon their identity later in life. In one particularly tragic example, Read described an Aboriginal woman, 'Jane', who had been institutionalised at the age of six and sent into domestic service when she turned 14. After six years of domestic service, Jane was committed to a mental hospital, where she stayed for 22 years. In 1981, Jane's nephew sought assistance from Link-Up to find her. But by the time that Jane was found it was too late. As she said to Coral Edwards, a co-founder of Link-Up, 'I don't mix with Aborigines, you know' (Read 1999, pp. 102–7).

In spite of suffering considerable hardship, many of those removed have fought to reclaim their Aboriginal identity. In a research project, members of the Stolen Generations were questioned about how they reclaimed their Aboriginal heritage. While some established close bonds with their natural family, others reclaimed their identity by attending Aboriginal educational institutions and participating in community life. The author of the study concluded:

The present research suggests that there is a need to move away from simplistic and traditional theories of identity that view identity as a consistent, stable, and coherent phenomenon. 'Stolen generation' survivors are actively engaged in negotiating and affirming their identity through the varied and contradictory practices that make up an Aboriginal way of life. While the non-Indigenous majority tend to represent and construct Aboriginal people as passive and inactive ... the stories of survivors like those in the present study clearly demonstrate the very active way in which Aboriginal people are, despite their adversity, in the process of reclaiming a meaningful and purposeful Indigenous identity for themselves.

Clark 2000, p. 156

Part 2: Contemporary issues

In recent decades, the State has retreated from determining who is, or isn't Aboriginal. In essence, a person will be defined as Aboriginal, if he or she identifies as such and is accepted as a member of an Aboriginal community. Two centuries of colonisation have not only had an indelible effect on individual psyches, but have also impacted upon Aboriginal people's relationships with each other. In some communities, identity is an explosive issue and seemingly intractable disputes over identity have on occasion ended up in the courts.

In *Shaw v Wolf* (1999) 163 ALR 205, the Federal Court considered the meaning of 'Aboriginal person' for the purposes of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989* (Cth). The petitioners, who were members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, challenged the Aboriginality of some of the candidates who stood in the 1996 ATSIC Regional Council election. The Court determined that there were three elements of Aboriginality – descent, self-identification and community recognition.

The role of the legal system in determining questions of identity remains controversial. On the one hand, courts must be available to all Australians for the purpose of resolving disputes. On the other hand, the argument that Aboriginal people should decide such questions is compelling. As stated by Birch:

... despite all efforts, past and present, attempts to eradicate Aboriginal identities have failed. And, despite enormous hardships, Aboriginal communities have truly survived. It should now be accepted by all Australians that a person's Aboriginal identity is a decision for themselves and their community alone.

Birch 1995, p. 40

Chapter 5

To get back home, to belong: Nancy de Vries: A story of the Stolen Generations

Peter Read

Introduction

Many members of the Stolen Generations have now told their stories in autobiographies, films or interviews. One of the most powerful stories is that of Auntie Nancy de Vries, born in *Barkindji* country, near Bourke, in 1931. I chose her story because, despite her terrible experiences as a child, she remained an indomitable optimist. Despite her lack of formal education as a child, she was a wonderful historian and storyteller. Although she never embraced her mother in the way that one day she imagined and hoped that she would, she raised her own children and grandchildren as proud Aboriginal citizens of Australia. I chose her story because for many years I worked with Auntie Nancy in finding her family, and because I admired her immensely.

So as not to interrupt Auntie Nancy's narrative, the questions for discussion and some excerpts from important historical documents are in the breakout boxes.

Nancy de Vries was removed from her mother, Ruby, when she was a baby. The terrible experiences as a child which she recounts here were typical of what happened to so many removed Aboriginal children. These experiences included institutionalisation, a succession of unpredictable foster placements, running away, physical and sexual abuse, racial prejudice and being prevented from finding out her true identity.

One theme of Nancy de Vries' story is her search for her mother, whom she calls 'my Ruby', but it was many decades before she finally met her. Nevertheless, by the end of her life many other good things had happened to her. She studied hard to become a registered nurse, and when she succeeded, she chose to work in Bourke, in her own Aboriginal 'born country'. She met many of her extended family and formed close and loving relationships with some of them. Just after the publication of the Australian government's report into separated Aboriginal children, *Bringing Them Home*, the New South Wales Premier Bob Carr made a formal apology to some 12 000 Aboriginal children removed in that State. It was Nancy de Vries who received the apology. During the ceremony she made a speech about her own life to the Parliament. The Premier said that no more moving words had been heard in the House in 150 years.

This part of Auntie Nancy's story concerns only her life until she was about 18. It seemed a good spot to stop, as by this age all young people have left, or are leaving, school. What a contrast.

The recording from which this story has been taken, and shortened, was made by author Coral Edwards in 1986, and was first published in the oral history *The Lost Children*. More information, including what happened to Nancy de Vries later in her life, can be found in some local libraries and online (de Vries et al. 2005; Edwards and Read 1989).

Nancy's first memories

'My earliest memory is with a family at Merrylands and their name was Adderton. And it was at Christmas, and I remember waking up in a grey cot and there was a doll at the end of the bed and it had brown eyes. I must have been pretty small. They were my foster parents, I didn't realise it at the time,

I thought they were my mother and father and my sister and my uncles and aunts. It didn't occur to me at that early stage that I was any different to them. But I didn't know I was a Koori. It was never discussed. And they had another boy, his name was Ross, and I honestly thought he was my brother. That was it, he was white.

I'd been taken away from my mother when I was 18 months old. She had tried to keep me, and because of the years, 1930s, it was a shame to have a child out of wedlock. There was not very much employment because it was just after the Depression and things were pretty tough in those days. There were no pensions, it was a very tough time and my poor mother could not find a position to take me with her. And they took me away from her.'

Nancy de Vries was removed under this part of the *Aborigines Protection Amending Act 1915* (NSW):

The [Aborigines Protection] Board may assume full control and custody of any child of any aborigine, if after due enquiry it is satisfied that such a course is in the interest of the moral or physical welfare of such child. The Board may thereupon remove such child to such control and care as it thinks best.

'And they threw her out on the street. Because we were at Corelli [a State-run infants and mothers' institution]. I have seen it written on my file. They'd taken me away – and the letter that was there said, "Why is this girl [Ruby] still living in this hostel? She must leave immediately."

So they just literally threw her out.'

'Goodbye Nancy, goodbye': childhood, dislocation and school

'I was with the Addertons till I was five. I started school but I think I must have been a bit of a rebel at that early stage, because my first day at school I decided I didn't like school and I was going home. So I was rebelling even then, at five. They were gentle people. Seventh Day Adventist people actually. Very, very gentle people and I was given a good home and treated very, very well. But the biggest shock in my life came when they got me to get into the car, which was an old model T-Ford with the running board and all, and I was sitting in the car and I happened to look in the back seat and saw all my dolls sitting up. I asked them why were all my dolls in the back seat, and with that Mr Adderton jumped in the front seat, and the old aunt was there, and they had these hankies and they were waving them to me, "Goodbye Nancy, goodbye", and I started to cry because I couldn't understand why they were saying goodbye to me. Couldn't understand it at all. Many years later I found out that they had me removed because Mrs Adderton had stated that I was sexually precocious. Possibly I'd seen that Ross was a boy and I was a girl and I was curious!

And they took me to a family in Marrickville that was so different to the roomy home, everything nice, calm family atmosphere, into this family where they were always drinking. The lady had bright red hair, which terrified me, and I slept on an old black ottoman underneath the stairs. I went to Chapel St School for about 10 weeks I think, and I didn't have very good memories of that place. I then went on to living with a lady who lived on her own with this Alsatian dog that was in Arncliffe. I remember going to school and being picked on by one child there. She was a pretty little thing with blonde hair, Shirley Temple ringlets, and every time she came round to me she'd give me a broken pencil so I'd get into trouble. Even at this stage I was not aware that I was a Koori. It never crossed my mind.

Until Mrs Williams after about six weeks decided that I wasn't what she was looking for to lavish all her love on. Must have told the Child Welfare that she didn't want me, and she must have been instructed to take me to Bidura [another State-run children's institution].'

To Bidura and back: an awareness of identity

'Bidura is another story altogether. The matron was an obese brute. She had glasses which enlarged her eyes and she was a terrifying woman.

It was there that I found out. I was in trouble again. I think the King died and I didn't stand up when they played the national anthem. They were telling everyone to stand up, and I thought, "Why should I, I'm eating my lunch". I was promptly put into the corner for this crime, and I happened to turn around and there was this girl who was very dark-skinned and had curly hair like an Afro hairdo. I got a hell of a fright and screamed and screamed. This nurse came running up, shook the hell out of me and she said, "What are you crying for, you stupid little thing? Don't you know you're the same as her?" I suddenly found out I was a Koori. I was about six, 1938. If a child can be shocked, I was shocked at this revelation that I was the same as this girl. It just hadn't dawned on me.'



Figure 5.1 Bidura Children's Home in Glebe, where Nancy was sent numerous times. Repainted now, and seen from the street, it gives little indication of the experiences of children such as Nancy who once lived there. The City of Sydney Archives

Questions

Would it have been better for Nancy to have been placed with relatives? Why didn't this happen?

Consider the words of Robert Donaldson, who later became the Aborigines Protection Board's Chief Inspector, speaking to the Australasian Catholic Congress, 1909:

Amongst all those who have had large experience with the aborigines, and who take a deep interest in their welfare, there is no difference of opinion as to the great solution of this great problem – the removal of the children and their complete isolation from the influences of the camps. Under no circumstances whatever should the boys and girls be allowed to return to the camps ...

Quoted in Edwards & Read 1997, pp. xiii–xiv

'In Bidura someone came to interview the matron and to pick out a child. By the way, they called it Bidura Depot. You had to walk up this veranda towards the matron sitting there with her glasses, terrifying you in case you made the wrong move. You had to stand there with the usual hands behind the back, head down. You were introduced, you had to shake hands with the lady and say, "How do you do, I'm very pleased to meet you." Then they'd discuss you in front of you, then you'd go back down and be full of suspense whether you were going to leave this dreadful place and be taken away by these wonderful people, or were you going to be lining up for tea again that night. When Mrs Monsarrat from Chatswood came and decided they'd have me, I went up there and had a reasonably happy life. I went to Willoughby school, and I can remember being a real rebel, raiding persimmon and peach trees. The things I can remember most clearly were that I loved the garden because it was very old and had old sheds, a wonderful place for kids. Pigs trotter soup on Saturday because I hated it.'

I was made to feel dirty

'Until one day I was sent to buy eggs from the shop and I had a school bag on my back. In those days they used to put half a dozen eggs in a paper bag and twist it round, I was running home with them, and this friend of the family stopped me and he ended up raping me. The whole time that this was happening he was telling me that this was what would happen when you were married. I remember when he ran away I jumped up and ran screaming, screaming home. What frightened me most was where the eggs had broken in the bag on my back and were running down the back of my dress and onto my legs, and I didn't know what it was, I didn't know what it was, it was just the most terrifying thing because I could feel it, this gunk running down my legs and I didn't know what it was. I ran into the house and the kitchen was that dreadful bright cream and green that they used to have in those days. She went over, they didn't put their arms round me and comfort me, and they didn't even do anything. They just went over to a drawer, got a knife out and came back to me and said, "If you tell anybody I will cut your tongue out." It wasn't long after that, that I was back in Bidura. There's no way I can prove it happened after all those years but it did. I was seven. I was made to feel dirty. Really horrible.

I just hated going back to Bidura. Every time you went back there from when you were tiny, you were made to put on one of the nighties. Oh, I hate thinking about it. And this dreadful old doctor used to do an internal examination on every child while the matron was standing there. They made me feel like a criminal when they examined me after what had happened at this place. They just made me feel so terrible.

So I was there for a while and in the meantime I was getting to know Aboriginal girls, we were getting to know each other. When we came back we'd automatically seek each other out – Gloria and Violet were two of my best friends. It was funny, the Koori kids were the ones who just laughed and got through it. Our weird sense of humour kept us going I guess. But I was beginning to feel different. I noticed that I was being treated in a different way to other children. I noticed that I was being excluded from things. It was quite obvious, and I was getting a feeling that I wasn't as good as the other kids. I can remember feeling very angry and that this was beginning to show up in my behaviour, because, boy, I was a rebel. I just refused to comply, I was always in trouble. And of course every time I was in trouble, I was being told that it was because I was Aboriginal, bad, lazy. The usual stereotyping was very obvious in those days because I think they firmly believed all those things.

Then I think it was the Stephensons in Bankstown. I was in third class, I was eight. It was near exam time. They were quite alright, I shared a bedroom with their daughter. I was sent to school, I had nice clothes and I was taught tennis and things like that. Until one night I woke up and I could hear the family, mummy and daddy and daughter Leslie, who was 12, "What's up? What's up? Something's wrong." Later that evening, Mrs Stephenson came rushing in and proceeded to give me a damn good hiding and telling me that I had taught their daughter to lie and that she didn't lie before I came into their house. She'd apparently lied about the results from the exam at school, and rather than face up to the fact that their daughter was a bloody liar, they came in there and there's the poor young Koori in there who was the best one to blame for the whole thing. So I got a bloody good hiding for that, and the next thing I'm going back to Bidura again.'

Affection and punishment

'Mrs Webster [fictitious name] came into my life. She lived at Strathfield and she had green dress with white daisies on it, it was a crepe de chine dress. I can remember her very clearly, very clearly. This little brown straw hat on, and these brown suede shoes on. I can remember the day she took me back to Strathfield. I remember us getting off the bus, and Margaret her daughter came running down the road and she was yelling out "Whoopee, Whoopee, here comes my new sister." We got up to the house, and there was Mervyn their baby. I fell in love with that child from that minute. Here was this little boy who didn't give a damn whether I was Aboriginal or not, who grew up loving me as a sister. When he was about 10 or 11 he was being told that I wasn't his real sister, and he was saying, "Well I'll marry her when I grow up and then she will be part of this family." Mervyn and I have never had an argument. I love him dearly and whenever I go there he and his wife and his kids all accept me as just Nancy whether I'm a Koori or not.

Mrs Webster was a Christian, and in those days to be a Christian meant that you were very, very narrow minded. She was very uncompromising in everything, she was not flexible at all. She led me merry hell. I can remember the cat weeing in the bathroom and me being woken up in the middle of the night and belted with a piece of wood because I had weed on the bathroom floor. When she caught the cat doing the same thing a few days later she just laughed and told me. Didn't apologise. I remember once that I had eaten my lunch and didn't eat my crusts. So I wrapped them up and put them in my case. It was during the war and at Strathfield Park that night there was a searchlight display put on by the army, all the people going up to see it. To make it more enjoyable for me, she spread castor oil on those crusts and made me sit there and eat them. The whole time this was going on she was pinching either my arm or my ear. I hated this lady sometimes, I hated her so much. And yet at other time she could be so gentle with me. Being a soft sort of person even as a child, I would respond to this love and I'd think, "She loves me, she really loves me and things are going to be different from now on." And then she'd turn round and do something to me that was just as horrible as that. The mental cruelties – besides physical cruelties, she was forever baiting me with this mental cruelty. She drove me to the point that when I was a 10-year-old child I drank a bottle of stuff in the cupboard that had "Poison" on it. Because I wanted to die. All it did was taste bloody awful, and nothing happened! A ten-year-old child wanting to die.'

Question

When the infant's attachment [to a primary carer, especially the mother] must be transferred to a large number of ever-changing adults on the staff of an institution or because of multiple foster placements, the objective of attachment behaviour [i.e., by the child's attempts to attach herself to someone] is defeated ... The consequences can be extremely severe. Bowlby [a child psychologist] concluded that 'childhood loss of mother is likely to lead a person to become excessively prone to develop psychiatric symptoms and to do so especially when current personal relationships go wrong.

Bowlby 1988, p. 174 cited in Australian Human Rights Commission 1997, pp. 183, 185

Why is it important that an infant's attachment to their primary carer be maintained and not disrupted?

My mother's name

'It was about this time that I began to run away in the night. Looking for my mother. I'd see a car and being a true Koori I'd shinny up a tree. The police being bloody fools would only look round, not up. I learned that very early as a child in my escapades. I took myself off into the Births Deaths and Marriages [Registry] one time, trying to find out who I was and where I came from, and that man told me my mother's name. While he was telling me my mother's name, they were ringing the police telling them I was there.

I just hated it. I was very, very unhappy. I used to cry at night, not loudly because I probably would get a hiding from it. There was a need in me to know who I was. I would see Aboriginal people and Mrs Webster would say, "Look at them, look at them, aren't they dirty, aren't they awful." But I didn't believe this. I wanted to run up to them and say, "Do you know Ruby, my mother? I couldn't, of course."

His filthy hands on me

'I was moved again, and this time the Church Missionary Society had control over my movements, and they put me in with a Reverend and his family. I was in high school, about 11. He tried to interfere with me sexually up in his study. He was pretty near doing it too, his filthy hands on me. I remember running

away and I told a lady up the road who was one of his parishioners who thought he was a saint. I was immediately branded as a liar, a cheat, typical Aboriginal behaviour, and removed from them. Nowadays if a child says this, thank God it's investigated thoroughly, but in those days it wasn't, and because I was an Aboriginal child it was probably hidden even more.'

Question

Stories of sexual exploitation and abuse were common in evidence to the Bringing Them Home inquiry. Nationally, more than one in six (17.5 per cent) witnesses to the inquiry reported such victimisation (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997, p. 194). Why were children not protected from such dangers?

'And as I grew up I never had a boyfriend, to go to the pictures, dancing and all that sort of thing. I think that the things that were happening in my life were frightening me. It was probably making me think that sex was a vile and dirty thing. Then, I think it was just after this man had sexually interfered with me, I was in high school, and they took me away from there not telling me anything, and they put me in the Reception House [Psychiatric Centre]. They were trying to say I was mad. It was like a big holiday! But they decided I wasn't crazy so I was sent back out to the Websters.'

Moonahcullah: a beautiful free life

'I think it was about the time the Aborigines Welfare Board decided that they'd better take me over. They sent me down to Cootamundra [Aboriginal Girls Home]. I was uncontrollable and they thought this would be the place that would really straighten me out. It did. After they took me away from Cootamundra

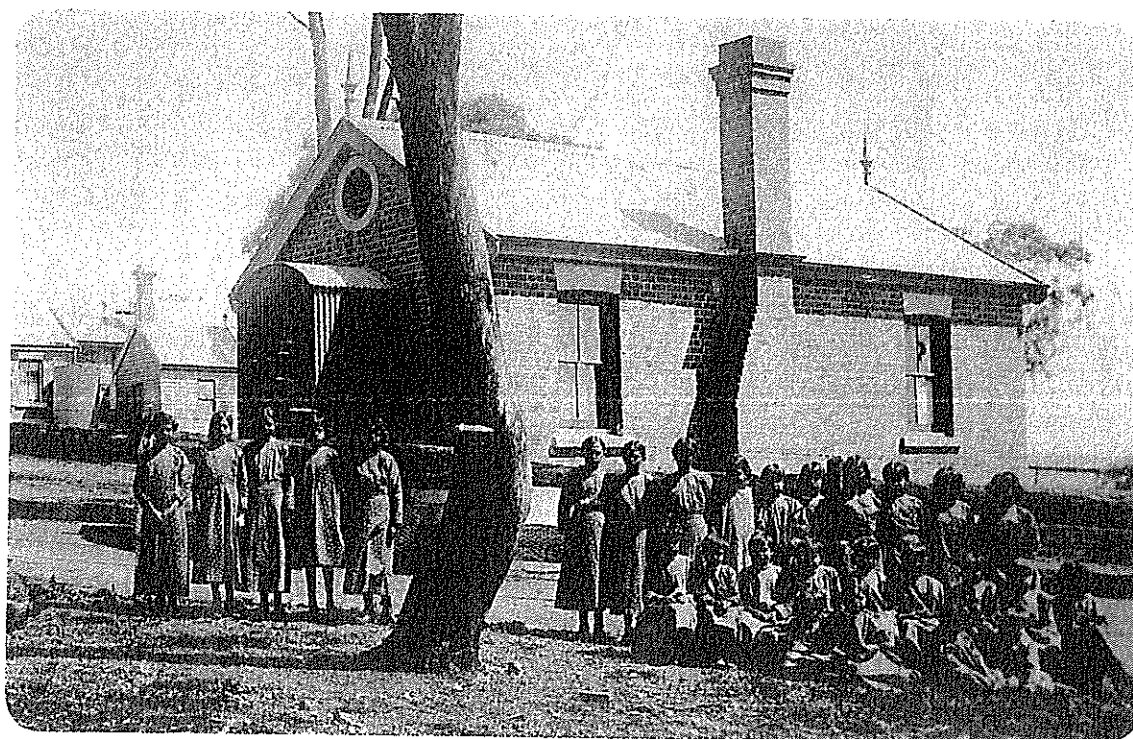


Figure 5.2 Cootamundra Girls Home, where Nancy was sent by the Aborigines Welfare Board.
State Records New South Wales, Australia

they thought they'd send me further into the bush to be with my people. So they sent me to Moonahcullah [Aboriginal reserve], near Deniliquin. I loved it there. I loved it. It was a beautiful free life. There's a river, there was swimming, there was a beautiful big orchard across the river to raid, great big Murray cod for breakfast, great big dust storm that turned day into night, there was kicking fungus footballs at night that had been soaked in kerosene for about three or four weeks. These are the memories of those places. There was old Dinny, who'd take us into the bush and make us listen to the sounds and show us tracks. He was a full-blood, a delightful old gentleman. There were trips into town in the back of the truck. There were beautiful times sitting round the fire at night being told all these stories that frightened the hell out of you. Old hessian huts with dirt floors that were immaculate. Cooking those Murray cod in the morning in the old camp oven. It's just something that I will never forget.'

'But I didn't last long there. As Koories well know, you fight. Koories fight, but Koories love. Koories fight but Koories get over it the next day, but of course the whites [i.e. the management staff] couldn't see that. The whites saw me only as a troublemaker.'

The Girls Shelter

'And lo and behold we walk into the old Aborigines Welfare Board building down there in Bridge Street, and there's Madam Webster waiting to greet me and forgive me and take me home again! But of course our relationship fell to pieces again, I kept on running away looking for my mother, so I was into the Girls Shelter. Which I'd been threatened with all my life, if I didn't behave I'd be put in it.



Figure 5.3 Nancy de Vries on the day she addressed students at Reconciliation Week discussions held at New South Wales Parliament House, 29 May 2000. Fairfax Photos/Robert Pearce

Finally the day comes and I'm in the Girls Shelter. When I got there I had a bloody good time, it wasn't too bad after all. Went to court, I think Mrs Webster came, she spoke for me, she took me home and started again I just was not going to settle down and do all the things these people wanted to make me do. Or accept their attitude towards me as an Aboriginal. [Much later] I found in my papers, "We feel that this family [the Websters] have regretted taking a member of such a despised race into their home." I couldn't believe that shit when I read that. You know, I hadn't been wrong as a child. I was lucky getting my papers 'cause it helped me come to terms with what I'd done as a child. When I read that bullshit that's in my papers, I thought, that's why I did it. They don't know why I was playing up, they haven't got a clue. They didn't take the time to find out.

I think it's important that people realise that these kids that were taken away from their families, separated from their culture, had to put up with dreadful, dreadful things. How many of us have survived sane I don't know, and I realise why so many of us have died through alcohol. [Several times] I tried to commit suicide. I was lonely, I was unhappy, I wanted my mother. I wanted my identity, I felt cheated, and I wanted to be me. And I wasn't being me.'

To be able to identify

'But it's the younger generation that's growing up that didn't know what happened in those days, to them it's just like history. These young people cannot understand the agony, the loneliness, the mental torment. They forget the struggle is still going on for these people who are lost. To get home. To get home. To belong, to be able to identify.'

[Aboriginal people in communities] have got to remember that they had their kids taken away from them, it's true, but what did the kids have taken from them? They've got to realise that we lost our way of talking that is distinctly Aboriginal, it's a wonderful, wonderful thing to listen to, but I can never copy it. I still feel apart because I can't talk like this.'

'One principal effect of the forcible removal policies was the destruction of cultural links. This was of course their declared aim. The children were to be "prevented from acquiring the habits and customs of the Aborigines" [quotation from the South Australia's Protector of Aborigines in 1909]; the "young people will merge into the present civilisation and become worthy citizens" [quote from the New South Wales Colonial Secretary, 1915]. Culture, language, land and identity were to be stripped from the children in the hope that the traditional law and culture would die by losing their claim on them and sustenance of them.'

Australian Human Rights Commission 1997, p. 175

A lonely, horrible life

'Finally I was charged, one final last time, with being uncontrollable and I was sent to Parramatta [Girls Reformatory]. I think it was nearly four years later, after being held prisoner at Parramatta and going through some pretty horrific things in that place. Being punched to the ground by this man, being locked in a cell for 24 hours. Forty-eight hours as punishment. It was tough. The kids today don't know what tough is, they don't know what survival is.'

'We look back with shame that many of these little ones who were entrusted to institutions and foster homes instead were abused physically, humiliated cruelly, violated sexually. And we look back with shame at how those with power were allowed to abuse those who had none.'

Commonwealth of Australia 2008

'We had love taken from us. The families still had some form of support, but the child that was taken away had none. I don't give a stuff what anyone says, one of the biggest tragedies in this life is for someone to grow up totally without love. As a child, without ever anybody opening their arms and saying 'Don't cry'. I never had that luxury and the majority of us never had that luxury. They make you feel in debt to them for giving you a good white home. Load of bullshit. I loved my mother.

They gave me a hell of a life, a lonely, horrible life.'

Apologies

In April 1997, the *Bringing Them Home* report recommended that the Australian and all State governments apologise to the Stolen Generations, guarantee against the repetition of the policy of removing Aboriginal children, take measures towards rehabilitation and begin a process of monetary



Figure 5.4 Nancy de Vries addressing the New South Wales Parliament and receiving the New South Wales Government Apology to Aboriginal People, 1997. Premier Bob Carr is visible in the bottom left corner. This photo appeared on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Fairfax Photos/Nick Moir

compensation. First to take up the challenge of the first recommendation – an apology – was the New South Wales State Government, which, only two months later, invited Auntie Nancy to address the State parliament. On 18 June 1997, Premier Bob Carr apologised to the Stolen Generations of New South Wales. Nancy de Vries received this apology on behalf of the many thousands who had suffered like her. Afterwards she commented:

They can't give me back my mother, my lost childhood ... but when Bob Carr gave his apology it was a removal of all my mother's guilt, the secret she bore alone ... the apology set her free.

De Vries quoted in Nichol 2006

The Australian government was slower to respond. However, in 2007, Kevin Rudd promised to apologise on behalf of the nation if elected as Prime Minister of a new Labor Government.

This is part of Prime Minister Rudd's Apology to the Stolen Generations, 13 February 2008:

We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were stolen generations – this blemished chapter in our nation's history.

The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.





We apologise for the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.

We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.

For the pain, suffering and hurt of these stolen generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.

To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry.

And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.

Commonwealth of Australia 2008

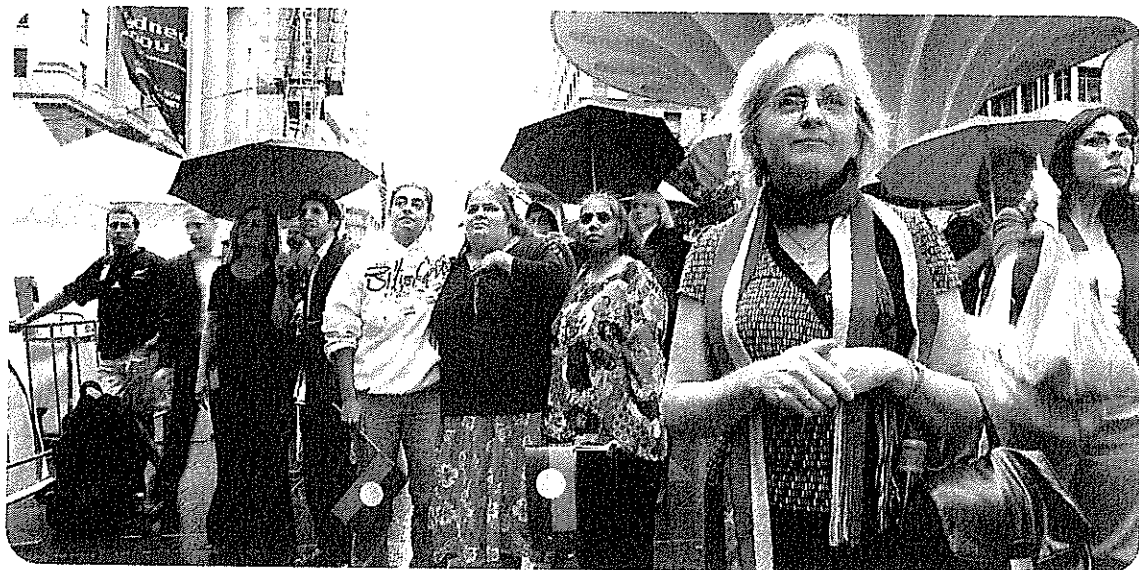


Figure 5.5 A crowd in Martin Place, Sydney, watching a live broadcast of the Apology to the victims of the Stolen Generations delivered by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 13 February 2008. Other live sites were set up in Canberra and across the country, and gatherings were held in schools, universities, organisations and offices across Australia.

National Library of Australia

Questions

- 1 Discuss and evaluate the content of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's speech. You might compare it with Paul Keating's Redfern Park Speech of 1992. Which do you find most powerful and why?
- 2 What do you remember about the Apology, the lead up to it and campaigns for it?
- 3 How did the Apology affect communities in your local area?

In 2004 the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs published a report called *The Forgotten Australians* (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). The report dealt with the experiences of children held in the many hundreds of homes and institutions not specifically run for Aboriginal children. In 2009, Prime

Minister Rudd formally apologised to the Forgotten Australians. Two of the startling features of the report were descriptions of the appalling lives many of the children had endured, often as bad as Auntie Nancy's. Another surprise was the number of Aboriginal children held in these homes.

Questions

- 1 Were non-Aboriginal children removed like the Aboriginal children were?
- 2 Why was the Apology issued to the Forgotten Australians with much less public controversy than the *Bringing Them Home* report?
- 3 Why did it take five years after the publication of the report before an Apology was issued to the Forgotten Australians?
- 4 What ongoing effects and legacies has the removal of Aboriginal children had in New South Wales especially?
- 5 What can Nancy's account and those of other stolen children reveal to us about some of the ongoing impacts?
- 6 Why do you think Aboriginal children were subjected to the kinds of treatment discussed in this chapter?
- 7 Discuss the arguments and debates concerning compensation of Stolen Generations as a class.

Soundtrack/music resources

Brown Skin Baby – Bob Randall (1970s)
Took the Children Away – Archie Roach (1990)
Ngarrindjeri Woman – Ruby Hunter (2000)
Stolen Children – Kerri Ann Cox (2004)
On the Way – Last Kinection (2008)

FOOTNOTE

- 1 This sentence was not in the original interview conducted by Edwards and Read. It is taken from the transcription of a later interview, in N. de Vries et al. 2005, p. 147.

