

Stolen Children, Invisible Mothers and Unspeakable Stories: The Experiences of Non-Aboriginal Adoptive and Foster Mothers of Aboriginal Children

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One of the measures of the cultural, if not political, success of sustained Aboriginal activism on the issue of the forced removal of children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, leading up to the instigation of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's inquiry into the issue and the widely disseminated publication of its findings in 1997, is that it now appears nearly impossible to tell the story of indigenous child removal in terms other than those provided by the powerful Aboriginalised tropes and narrative modes that have come to shape both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal understandings of issue.

I do not wish to take issue with the long-overdue emergence of Aboriginal voices and an Aboriginal discourse on this issue. However, as the older ways of understanding the meaning of removing indigenous children from their communities 'for their own good' (Link-Up & Wilson 1997) have lost their provenance and are replaced by Aboriginal stories with the critically revised meanings of cultural loss, ethnocide, grief and harm, which are expressed in a wide range of discourses (see, for example, Ward 1988; Edwards & Read 1989; Roach 1990; Huggins & Huggins 1994; Smallacombe 1996; Harrison 1997), it becomes apparent that there are still more stories to be told about how Australian's high assimilationist policies of forced child removal and placement played out on the lives of the men, women and children of the nation. From a (non-Aboriginal) feminist perspective, a particular case in point is the stories of the non-Aboriginal women who, both knowingly and unknowingly, came to adopt and foster these children, raising them as their own—a task in which many have been engaged for upwards of 30 or 40 years. These women, who must on any estimate number in their thousands across the nation, remain all but invisible in both the former and now discredited accounts of indigenous child removal and placement, and in more recent Aboriginal revisions of this appalling history. This paper presents preliminary analysis of research undertaken with a small group of these women in 1997 and 1998.

Stolen Children, Invisible Mothers

Stories of the personal experiences of stolen children and the families from whom they were taken were instrumental in bringing this issue onto the political stage, as with, for example, the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia's (1995)

publication *Telling Our Story*, and remained an important part of the methodology of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1997) inquiry and its final report (Frow 1998). The emotional efficacy of Aboriginal rhetoric (of stolen children, of linking up, of coming home) and of incontrovertible personal testimonial has been such that other ways of telling this story, as John Herron discovered when he suggested that some Aboriginal children may have benefited educationally and socially from being removed from their parents (Rose 1996), have been virtually invalidated. This is as it should be, the pity being that satisfactory political restitution of this issue has not yet been achieved.

I do not wish to take issue with the long overdue emergence of Aboriginal voices and an Aboriginal discourse on this issue. However, as the older ways of understanding the meaning of removing indigenous children from their communities 'for their own good' have lost their provenance and are replaced by Aboriginal stories with the critically revised meanings of cultural loss, ethnocide, grief and harm which are expressed in a wide range of discourses (see for example Roach 1990; Smallacombe 1996; Harrison 1998; Ward 1988; Huggins & Huggins 1994; and Edwards & Read 1989); it becomes apparent that there are still more stories to be told about how Australian's high assimilationist policies of forced child removal and placement played out on the lives of the men, women and children of the nation. From a (non-Aboriginal) feminist perspective, a particular case in point are the stories of the non-Aboriginal women who, both knowingly and unknowingly, came to adopt and foster these children, raising them as their own—as task in which many have been engaged for upwards of thirty and forty years. These women, who must on any estimate number in their thousands across the nation, remain all but invisible in both the former and now discredited accounts of indigenous child removal and placement, and in more recent Aboriginal revisions of this appalling history. This essay presents preliminary analysis of research undertaken with a small group of these women in 1997 and 1998.

Where any reference to these women is made, they remain little more than shadowy figures in the background. They are spoken about by their Aboriginal adoptive children, frequently in less than favourable terms (Wesche 1988), but have not had the opportunity to speak for themselves. Nor do they appear in the archival material, including government documents, despite the fact that the child-rearing labour of these women and its capacity to de-Aboriginalise the indigenous children placed in their care was, arguably, a linch-pin in this aspect of the implementation of the assimilation project. Arguably, an implicit recognition of the culturally reproductive capacity of mothers—whether these be the Aboriginal mothers from whom children were removed or the non-Aboriginal women with whom they were placed in large numbers—is at work in the indigenous child removal and child placement policies and practices that dominated Australia's management of Aboriginal affairs in the post-war period, but this has received scant critical attention to date (Goodall 1990; Pettman 1992). The virtual invisibility of non-Aboriginal adoptive and foster mothers from discussions of the stolen children issue, like the parallel occlusion of the specifically gendered nature of the impact of the assimilation policies of which they formed a part, raises very interesting questions for under-

standing the intersecting but also competing dynamics of race and gender in a settler colonial context such as Australia; and also for understanding the ways in which women's roles as mothers are subject to manipulation, intervention and even co-option by the state for its own purposes.

However, for a number of complex reasons, some of which I have discussed elsewhere (Cuthbert forthcoming, 2001), finding a language to talk about the experiences of these women and developing an analytical framework sufficient to deal with the political and cultural complexities of their situation has proved a surprisingly difficult task. In addition to the historical reasons for their invisibility, which can be countered by feminist salvage research of the kind I have undertaken that seeks to uncover these experiences and add the voices of these women to the record of this phase of Australian social and political history, there are further and more current factors that render these women invisible, or—and this proved just as significant—once visible, difficult to look at. This difficulty highlights the degree to which, both in contemporary discussions of adoption generally and in the more specific context of the adoption of Aboriginal children by non-Aboriginal mothers, the role of the adoptive mother is a highly problematic one for which there exists, neither at the academic nor at the popular level, an adequate vocabulary in which to talk about their significance and their experience. Older ways of talking about and understanding adoption, which privileged the interests and the position of adoptive parents, even over those of the adoptive child, have given way in the past 20 years to a new set of understandings that now place much more importance on the interests of both relinquishing mother and adoptive child, frequently ignoring completely the interests and experiences of the adoptive parents whose role has been slighted and by-passed by shifts in contemporary attitudes and practices in adoption in general (Harper 1992; Swain & Howe 1995; Williams 1997). As one of my interviewees put it, 'adoption is now a dirty word, but it was different [when she and her husband adopted in the 1960s]' (Beth 19 December 1997).¹ In contemporary academic and popular discourses on adoption, the role of the adoptive mother receives little attention, and when it does the role is seen as vexed and problematic, as something of a corollary to the stepmother role in popular narratives.

In considerations of the triad of adopted child, birth mother and adoptive mother, attention and sympathy now go first to the adopted children, whose search for knowledge of their birth mothers and genetic and cultural heritage is cast romantically as the quest for origins and identity. Sympathy is accorded next to the relinquishing mother, who is frequently seen as the powerless victim of pernicious sexual double standards. Although it must be added that the role of the birth mother in adoption scenarios is seldom straightforward as she is frequently also judged by the impossibly high standards of maternalist ideology to have somehow failed her child in being neither strong nor protective enough; in other words, not a sufficiently 'good mother', irrespective of her actual circumstances, to have kept her baby with her (Harper 1992; Swain & Howe 1995; Wegar 1997). In contemporary cultural narratives of adoption, the role of the adoptive mother is the least attractive of the three. As recently as the 1950s and 1960s, the respectability and material advantages possessed by the adoptive mother were contrasted favourably with the dubious

sexual morality and lack of material resources, particularly in the pre-1972 Australian context, of the birth mother, and were judged more than sufficient to qualify the adoptive mother as the fittest of the two to take possession of and raise the child. Shifts in public attitude and in the policy and practice of child placement have now left the figure of the adoptive mother in a far less sympathetic position.

The considerations that apply generally to shifts in attitude on adoption are compounded in the specific context of the adopting out of Aboriginal children into non-Aboriginal families, where the emotionally (and politically) persuasive force of narratives of the quest for identity have the additional element of the discovery of, and return to, cultural origins, which has been powerfully foregrounded by means of the trope of 'coming home'. Like adoptive mothers generally in the context of changing ideologies and practices of child placement, the non-Aboriginal adoptive and foster mothers of Aboriginal children have been rendered invisible and silent in the process of coming to terms with this assimilationist history. For these women, their experiences have gone from being not spoken about to being not able to be spoken about; i.e. from the 'unspoken' to the 'unspeakable'

While not in any way wishing to diminish the particular, indeed incomparable, suffering of the thousands of Aboriginal mothers whose children were forcibly removed by this comparison, it is instructive to consider the parallels between the situations of the two sets of women in the context of the ways in which the state polices, intervenes in and co-opts the maternal role to suit its interests, not infrequently privileging the interests of one group of mothers over another as part of this process. Just as Aboriginal mothers, who endured the tragic loss of their children, were rendered silent and invisible by the processes of child removal, the role of the non-Aboriginal women who raised these children, either directly or indirectly, in response to the assimilationist imperatives of governments and the part they played in this historical process have now also been occluded. A perspective that allows us to consider such parallels may provide a way of seeing the experiences of both sets of women in terms other than those offered by the prevailing discourses, both those pertaining to adoption generally and those dealing with the forced removal of Aboriginal children specifically. As one of the social workers at VANISH (Victorian Adoption Network Information and Self-Help) put it in a telephone conversation with me at the outset of this research, the adoption story for both adoptive and relinquishing mothers is most often one of fear of failure, anxiety and jealousy—with each woman frequently feeling threatened and jealous at the very idea of the other. This comment, which suggests the existence of parallels between the roles and experiences of women as mothers, whether biological or adoptive, provides a further impetus to the task of disaggregating the experiences of these women from the conventional grids that balance nature against nurture, and that square women off against each other and against invidious models of good and ideal motherhood that do not adequately take into account the social, political and material contexts of their mothering—whether biological or adoptive. Clearly, a feminist intervention is called for that is able to accommodate the political necessity and emotional validity of the essentialism implicit in the struggles of adoptees and birth mothers to re-unite with each other without alienating or demonising the adoptive mother in the

process. Critical recognition of the ways in which modes of mothering are manipulated by the state, which also entails recognition of the degree to which individual experiences of child rearing are frequently shaped and determined by public imperatives, is crucial to this process.

Similarly, in considering the specificities of the position of the non-Aboriginal adoptive mothers of Aboriginal children, some interrogation of prevailing narrativisations is required. I wish carefully to delineate my position here. I do not mean to criticise the mobilisation by the Aboriginal community of the trope of the 'stolen child' to account for forced Aboriginal child removal. It describes an historical fact, children were and continue to be 'stolen' by the state and its agencies from Aboriginal mothers; and Aboriginal families continue to endure levels of state intervention and control well beyond those experienced by the non-Aboriginal population (Pettman 1992). However, one of the consequences of this particular narrative is that it risks placing the non-Aboriginal adoptive mothers of these children in the position of complicity in the crime of child stealing, of effectively receiving stolen goods. While in some cases this may be accurate, in other cases it is far from accurate in accounting for the processes by which Aboriginal children ended up in non-Aboriginal homes where, arguably, some of the non-Aboriginal mothers who adopted these children were rendered relatively powerless—although not as powerless as the Aboriginal women whose children they raised—in relation to these processes. For example, two women in my interview group adopted children whom they did not know to be Aboriginal until many years after the adoption. The child-raising labour of these women was co-opted to the assimilation project with neither their knowledge nor consent. For all its political necessity, the stolen child narrative does not take us far enough in analysing and understanding the complex politics of race and gender by which children from one group of mothers were systematically removed and placed with mothers from another group. What is necessary to account for this is a model of analysis that is sensitive to the complex and intersecting politics of race, culture and gender as they play out in the experiences of the women who adopted and fostered Aboriginal children, just as we are coming to understand how they played out in the experiences of those Aboriginal women from whom children were taken. Such an analytical model will also need to be sensitive to the changing and ideologically charged history of the politics of the family, including child-raising and child-placement policy and practices, and their deployment by the state as instruments to control certain social groups (Aboriginal people, single mothers) and engineer particular social outcomes (management of the half-caste 'problem', assimilation and augmentation of the 'white' population).

An important consideration in this respect is the particular role accorded to motherhood, specifically white motherhood, in imperialist and colonial ideology. The position and role of white women in the imperial and colonial projects of European nations in Africa, Asia and Australasia has received growing attention from feminist researchers in recent years (Knapman 1986; Strobel 1991; Jolly 1993; McClintock 1995; Shaw 1995; Stoler 1995; Threadgold 1997). White women were charged with the task, cast as a duty, of populating the settled domains. Their presence was also held to have the moral force, as well as the practical advantage,

of circumventing the risk of sexual relations between European men and native women. In settler contexts, the role and value of white women were seen to be linked to their reproductive capacities; that is, their capacity to reproduce white children who would take their place as citizens and, closely related to this, their role in reproducing European cultural values in the colonial setting through their maintenance of the haven of the domestic realm that would serve as a foil and antidote to the harshness and incivility of the frontier. In some instances, the inculcation of European values with which white women, and in particular white mothers, were charged extended beyond their own children to the native population with whom they enjoyed close contact, especially in contexts where the labour of natives was employed in pastoral or plantation industries. One comment that may be made here is that the raising of Aboriginal children by white mothers represents a significant inversion of the usual disposition of the labour of child-rearing in the colonial setting where, in settler cultures, native women frequently performed this labour and were removed from their own communities and their own children in order to perform domestic labour, including child-rearing in white households. Another point that needs to be taken into consideration is that the Aboriginal children particularly at risk of being removed under these policies were frequently, but not exclusively, those with lighter skins—the brown-skinned babies—as these were considered to have greater potential for assimilation and also to be more deserving of being included within white society. Borne by Aboriginal mothers and in many cases raised by non-Aboriginal women, these children frequently had white fathers who are directly ‘spared’ the consequences and the labour that should entail on their paternity by policies and practices of child removal and placement that by-pass them completely. While occupying quite different positions of power and privilege in relation to each other and the state, the labour and the pain of both black and white women were subordinated to and used to advance the interests of the state that frequently coincided with and served the interests of many individual white males.

Arguably, the historical contexts of the economic and social reconstruction that followed the conclusion of the Second World War and the emergence of assimilation as the key policy objective of the states and territories in the management of the Aboriginal—and particularly the half-caste—‘problem’ in the post-war years combined to revivify aspects of the earlier colonial ideology of white motherhood. As in the earlier colonial period, white women were exhorted to embrace the domestic life, which many had departed during the war years, and the reproductive role of motherhood for the good of the nation (Grimshaw *et al.* 1994). The thorough re-domestication of women and the celebration of maternity within the context of the nuclear family was further aided by the emergence in disciplines such as child psychology and psychiatry of theorisations of the crucial importance of close, bonded relationships between mother and child to the normal development of the child (Sanger 1995: 31–32). These views were also influential on trends in the placement of Aboriginal children although, significantly, not to the extent that they caused authorities to consider the damage caused by wresting children from bonded relationships with their Aboriginal mothers. Those Aboriginal children who could be, i.e. who were light enough to be acceptable to non-Aboriginal adoptive families, were adopted out

rather than placed in institutions as it was thought that 'normal' family life would offer them a greater chance of well-adjusted development than life in an institution.

In placing Aboriginal children in non-Aboriginal homes, the state sought to counter the culturally reproductive powers of the Aboriginal mothers from whom children were taken and relied implicitly on the same culturally reproductive capacities of non-Aboriginal women—on whom the major part of the domestic burden, particularly that of child-rearing, then fell—to further the project of Aboriginal assimilation. Whether they were aware of it or not, these mothers were given Aboriginal babies and charged with the task of de-Aboriginalising them. Whether they were aware of it or not, the child-rearing labour they performed in the 'private' sphere of their homes was co-opted by the state to the management of the 'Aboriginal problem'.

The predicament of these women—experienced differently and with differing consequences for themselves, their adopted children and the other members of their families—poses a particular set of challenges for feminist analysis. As Ann Curthoys writes, white feminists everywhere 'have extreme difficulty placing themselves on the side of the oppressors rather than the oppressed' (1993: 173). In confronting gender in the history of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal relations in Australia, it is necessary to premise analysis on the principle given as axiomatic by Curthoys: 'white women were ... always already in situations of power in relation to Aboriginal people. White women inherit "agency" and "empowerment" as part of a triumphant colonial process of historic dispossession' (174). So while it may be necessary, as Curthoys suggests, to revise Ann Summers' notion that nation building in Australia entailed the 'colonisation of women' with the exception that white women were frequently complicit in the process of colonising itself, it is also necessary to acknowledge that the impact of colonisation is sharply gendered affecting women, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in ways that are quite different from the way in which men were affected. And, just as it is necessary not to apply gender analysis as a blunt instrument that flattens out the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women, it is also necessary to differentiate between different levels of access to 'agency' and 'empowerment' among white women themselves. Teasing out the relative positions of white men, white women, Aboriginal men and Aboriginal women in the complex dynamics of colonial power relations remains an ongoing challenge for feminist scholarship. While researchers such as Fiona Paisley (1997) have shown that some white women were foremost among critics of the child removal policies of the States and Territories in managing the half-caste problem, other women maintained positions on Aboriginality that were vociferously racist, and turned on highly colonialist ideals of white womanhood as the bastion of racial purity and European cultural integrity (McGregor 1997: 197).

For Deborah Bird Rose, one measure of the gender differentiation of the colonisation of Australia lies in the treatment accorded to the Aboriginal mothers of children fathered by white men and the children who were removed from them, frequently with great brutality:

... the policy [of child removal] quite precisely punished Aboriginal children, women and families for the actions of white men. The position of white men in these practices and policies exemplifies my proposition

concerning power. It mattered not whether the sexual act that brought the child into being was an act of intimacy or of brutality. If it was between white and black it was a matter of law: without an exemption, liaisons were illegal, and were tolerated as long as men did not seek to transform a liaison into a familial relationship. Thus, liaisons were separated from kinship, and the offspring were removed from all systems of kinship.

The genitors of the children who would be removed did not bear the consequences of their actions. The men who made the policies and the men who put them into practice likewise did not bear the consequences. That pain was borne by others, and at the time it was covered by a blanket of silence propped up by a discourse of denial. (Rose 1997: 111)

Rose's insight that the removal of Aboriginal children who were the products of cross-racial unions effected a removal of these children from kinship systems, both black and white, while extremely valuable in accounting for the situation of children removed and placed in institutions, is less applicable to the situation of Aboriginal children who went on to be placed with white families and were thereby inserted into the kinship and other cultural systems inhering in their adoptive situations. As I show in the discussion that follows, the insertion of Aboriginal children via adoption and fostering arrangements into white families perpetuated the dynamics of power and pain described by Rose and extended them into the non-Aboriginal population. In distancing themselves from the consequences of their actions, powerful white men, whether the genitors of mixed race children or the policy-makers who ordained their removal, also found non-Aboriginal people to bear the consequences of, and perform the labour required by, their actions. In particular, the non-Aboriginal adoptive and foster mothers of Aboriginal children, while structurally in positions of greater power than their Aboriginal mothers, were made to bear the painful burden of those more powerful than themselves. And, the same blanket of silence and discourse of denial that Rose describes as attending the removal of these children frequently attended their placement in non-Aboriginal homes.

Unspeakable Stories

In 1997 and 1998, I conducted a series of interviews with non-Aboriginal women who had, from as early as 1956 and as late as 1972, adopted or fostered Aboriginal children and raised them as their own. The interviews conducted with this small group of non-Aboriginal adoptive and foster mothers of Aboriginal children have elicited very rich and, in many cases, troubling material that has the potential to reveal a great deal about the ways in which ideas of Aboriginality, whiteness and race, the family and motherhood—including the under-examined category of adoptive motherhood—operate and circulate in Australian culture, and the ways in which unreflective non-Aboriginal standards of family and culture, success and well-being have been, and continue to be, used against Aboriginal people. The experiences of these women represent an important, largely unexamined and extraordinarily intimate 'contact zone' (Pratt 1992) between Aboriginality and non-Aboriginality in which certain colonialist ideologies and structures—pertaining to Aboriginality, the

role of white women in the colonial project, and the culturally reproductive role of motherhood—persist into the second half of this century, being played out in the private sphere of the homes and families of these women. While substantial work remains to be carried out in developing analyses of these interviews and the narratives of motherhood, whiteness and Aboriginality they contain, which are sensitive to the complex intersections of race, culture and gender that shaped—and continue to shape—the experiences of these women, I present here a provisional analysis of one woman's story.²

Since then [learning that her adopted son is Aboriginal] I think I've cried for six months. I go to bed at night thinking about it crying, I wake up in the morning, crying. I just wish I could stop crying. Really, I don't know where it all comes from. (Interview with Faye, 25 February 1998)

Like this giant crying business, it never stops. (Interview with Faye, 25 February 1998)

Faye is one of two women interviewed who had only recently discovered that her adopted son—a young man called Michael, who was in his late twenties at the time of the interview—is Aboriginal. At the time of the interview, Faye had had this knowledge for only 6 months.³ The interview with Faye was one of the most emotionally fraught in the series: at several points in the discussion, Faye broke into sobs; at others, we stopped completely to give her time to compose herself. Several parts of the discussion that continued for over 2 hours, especially those pertaining to the circumstances of Michael's Aboriginal birth mother and her family, were conducted off the record. At all times, however, Faye insisted that we continue, expressing the view that the process of the interview and talking was 'helpful' to her. She recognised, as I had been at pains to emphasise from the outset, I was not a 'counsellor' but she 'sort of felt like today you have been like [one]' (Interview with Faye, 25 February 1998: 23). It is clear that for Faye, as for a number of other women in the group, the opportunity provided by the interview to talk specifically and in a sustained way about their experiences was extremely valuable. Like a number of the other interviewees, Faye expressed great relief at being able to talk about these issues, many of which had remained hitherto largely unspoken.

The circumstances of Faye's belated discovery of her adopted child's Aboriginality are not substantially different from those of the other woman in this situation. Maureen, for example, discovered her adopted daughter's Aboriginality when the girl was 18 and contact was made with the birth mother. However, the nature of Faye's reaction to this news and the impact that it has had on her were markedly different and of great interest with respect to the question of what Aboriginality means for non-Aboriginal people and how Aboriginality is known and distinguished from non-Aboriginality. For Faye and her husband Tom, the news that their only child was Aboriginal came 'like a bolt out of the blue'. They had, she claimed, no idea that Michael was, nor even that he might have been, Aboriginal. Although, since Michael's discovery of the circumstances of his birth and the revelation of this news within their circle of family and close friends, a number of people have registered surprise at the shock of Faye and Tom at this news, indicating that for

them Michael's Aboriginality was always considered a possibility. As Faye explains:

I couldn't see any Aboriginal in him. It's only since I've found out that I've gone through the albums and photos I've got and I've been looking for it. Some people have told me since that they've often suspected it but they never said anything to me. But as a baby he was just your normal ... in fact, he was a very good baby. (Interview with Faye, 25 February 1998)

A lot of people have said to me, why was I so upset? I've always thought he was Aboriginal and I thought you knew when you adopted him that he was Aboriginal, which shocked me because I didn't know that they thought that. Even my brother, he has remarried and his wife, when they came to Michael's wedding—they hadn't been married long before, I think she'd only met Michael once before then—and when I told her what [Michael] had told us, she said, 'I always thought he was, especially on his wedding day'. She said 'I noticed it very much, I thought'. And yet, I still couldn't see it. (Interview with Faye, 25 February 1998)

For Faye, these non-plussed admissions from family and friends that they 'always' suspected Michael's Aboriginality and the fact that they did not share their suspicions with Faye go to compound her significant and general sense of having been betrayed and deceived, as also indicated by her resentment towards the adoption service at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne for withholding information about Michael's identity from her. I will leave aside for the moment Faye's problematic assumption that Aboriginality necessarily manifests itself visually, which underlies the constructions of Aboriginality in virtually all of the interviews conducted and which was dramatically performed in the inevitable ritual of the viewing of the family photo albums. For Faye, the shock of the news of Michael's Aboriginality is compounded by the realisation that she was unable to 'see' something that was, it has now been revealed to her, for others who knew her family plain to see. The poring over photos in an effort to 'see' the Aboriginality that everyone else could see is a poignant indication of this feeling of being excluded from a knowledge or a perception available to others. The sense of threat and insecurity embedded in these comments becomes clear in Faye's contrasting of the perceptions of her new sister-in-law, who had only met Michael once before ('I noticed it very much, I thought') and her own ('And yet, I still couldn't see it').

While a 'bolt out of the blue' for Faye and Tom, the discovery of his Aboriginality appears to have been, for Michael, the confirmation of his own long-held suspicions; suspicions that, like those of extended family and friends, he did not share with his adopted parents. According to Faye, Michael first became aware of the possibility that he might be Aboriginal after comments made by a dermatologist to whom he was referred to investigate the growth of keloid tissue after a minor surgical procedure. In reassuring Michael that the keloid was of no concern, the doctor commented that such scarring was very common in people of 'Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal' descent, clearly assuming that his patient was aware that this was his heritage. Some unspecified period of time after this, Michael visited Link-Up in order to begin the search for his birth mother. According to his adoptive mother, Michael went to this agency first because it happened to be located across the road

from where he was then working and *not* because he believed himself to be of Aboriginal descent. In any case, after this first consultation with staff at Link-Up, which lasted several hours, Michael became convinced of his Aboriginality, which was finally confirmed when he accessed his birth and adoption papers. No aspect of this process was revealed to his parents until the afternoon in which he announced to them that his birth mother was Aboriginal. Considerable time in the interview with Faye was devoted to the events of this afternoon in which their son announced his Aboriginality to her and her husband.

In Faye's repeated attempts to narrate the sequence of events leading up to her son's revelation of his Aboriginality and the emotional aftermath of this announcement, it is possible to discern the investments she has made in being able clearly to mark the *difference* between Aboriginality and whiteness, a point that relates closely to the widely held view that Aboriginality, whatever else it might be, is something that can be seen. In one of several attempts to narrate the events of this afternoon, Faye prefaced her comments with anecdotes drawn from the past. First, from her childhood, during which she had some limited contact with Aboriginal children—maybe 'one or two kids'—at school in metropolitan Melbourne. Faye told me:

He [Michael] said he's got used to the fact that he is indigenous and he said he could live with it. But when I was growing up, Aboriginals ... when we were going to school we used to call them 'Abos' you know, and here I am sitting and looking at this boy, thinking 'Well, my son's Aboriginal'. [Sobbing] And where it used to be a joke and it's not such a big joke anymore and I've become so aware of everything that's happening along the lines of the Aboriginal now. Every bit of news, everything I read, where at one time I probably would have just leafed over that and not taken any notice. But now, I'm very acute on what's happening ... (Interview with Faye, 25 February 1998)

The second of Faye's reminiscences relates to a trip made quite recently (but before hearing Michael's news) with her husband to Mildura, in which she recalled to me her reactions to the sight of the Aboriginal 'humpies' on the city fringes:

I never really had no certain idea of Aboriginals. Never gave them ... I shouldn't say, ... a second thought, you know ... I'd never had any contact with them. They were doing their things, I was doing mine. But prior to me finding out about Michael being Aboriginal, Tom and I went up to Mildura and going along in the bus we see these Aboriginals living in their little humpies along the road and I said to Tom, 'God, look at them ... !' They were so dirty, never dreaming ... and then when Michael said to me that he's Aboriginal, the first thing I thought was, you know, 'Oh God, I hope his mother doesn't live like I've seen these people living'. Because, I'm sure Michael was expecting something different, you know, and that was sort of my idea of how they would be, that they were all like this ...

Which Michael's mother, believe me, is far from what I imagined Aboriginals to be. She's a very clever woman in her own right and in the position she holds in the Aboriginal community [tape stopped at Faye's request as

details of Michael's Aboriginal birth mother, her employment and family circumstances are described]. Back to, you know, how I felt about Aboriginals and that, sort of my way of seeing them was they all lived in humpies, but of course I know they don't. (Interview with Faye, 25 February 1998)

As unpleasant as the vision of Aboriginal living conditions outside Mildura may have been to Faye, there is nonetheless something in this sight that confirms her sense then of being able to identify and mark Aboriginality as signifying a people, a community and a way of life unquestionably different from her own experiences. This differentiation is, I would suggest, far more comforting than it is unsettling. It also underlies Faye's remark that she never gave Aboriginal people a 'second thought': they were doing their thing in their part of the world, and she was doing hers in a distinct and different sphere. Her reported exclamation to her husband on the bus trip—'God, look at them!'—marks this contact with Aboriginality outside Mildura as spectacle and as extraordinary, not something of which she has had experience and not something that she would be likely to experience within her own milieu. Aboriginality in this anecdote is produced explicitly as an extreme alterity; a category of experience and identity highly differentiated from her own experience that is, here and elsewhere in the interview, normalised, as in Faye's telling comment that Michael was just a 'normal' baby.

Similarly, with regard to her recollections of the 'Abo' jokes at school, Faye speaks comfortably within a non-differentiated non-Aboriginal identity, easily using the first person plural pronoun as if to suggest that the 'Abo' jokes were generally shared by all non-Aboriginal children. Of course, the presence of Aboriginal children at her primary school gives the lie to Faye's insistence that Aboriginal people lived in a completely separate sphere from her: as a poor white on the fringes of Melbourne, Faye has frequently lived alongside Aboriginal people, rendering all the more important her discursive strategies of differentiation and separation. Her discourse works to minimise any real acknowledgment of the harm such jokes in all probability produced. The 'Abo' jokes of the schoolyard become, in this expression, the by-products of children's play in which, it seems, any (or all?) non-Aboriginal children may have participated. The sense of harmlessness, however, utterly disappears with her tearful outburst that 'and it's not such a big joke any more'. It is worth considering to what specifically Faye's 'it's' in this sentence refers. *What* is it, exactly, that is no longer a joke? Is it that the ingrained racism that produced the then apparently harmless bit of joking at the expense of Aboriginal children is no longer considered funny? Or, is it that the targets of the pejorative term 'Abo' who had once appeared so easy to recognise in the schoolyard or on the road to Mildura are now, she realises, less easy to pick? Or, is it that the 'joke' is no longer funny because now the joke is on her son and, more to the point, on her in discovering that her beloved only child is himself one of the group that had been the butt of these childhood jokes: that the very alterity in contradistinction to which she has lived her life resides within her own family circle.

I would suggest that a great part of Faye's pain and confusion in the aftermath of learning about Michael's Aboriginal heritage derives from the inadequacy of the set

of discourses on Aboriginality available to her to account for the predicament of her family in which issue of class are as important as issues of race. That is, that of poor white parents for whom Aboriginality is marked as an extreme alterity finding that a member of the group that they constitute imaginatively and precisely in terms of having nothing in common with them should turn out to be their son, around whom Faye admits her whole life has revolved for nearly 30 years. Faye's conception of what Aboriginality is and what it means is predicated on it being a category of identity that is entirely different from non-Aboriginality. It becomes, then, literally inconceivable for her that her son should turn out to be a member of this group. The revelation of Michael's Aboriginality shakes conceptions that are fundamental to Faye's own sense of self. One of the consequences of this, I would suggest, is the 'giant crying business' she has endured for past 6 months, which Faye herself confesses she is unable fully to understand. Her conceptions of the necessary and essential differences between Aboriginality and non-Aboriginality that have allowed her to live a 'decent' life in frequently straightened circumstances do not allow her adequately to process the fact that Michael's Aboriginality could have remained invisible, to her at least, for so long. Arguably, too, her conceptions of these differences do not allow her to easily reconcile the fact of Michael's Aboriginality with the very powerful bond of love she feels for him.

In this respect, it is significant perhaps to note that Faye narrativises the arrival of Michael in their family in terms of him literally taking the place of the child, stillborn, she had lost some years earlier. After a period of 13 years trying to conceive a child, Faye became pregnant and carried to full term a stillborn male infant. For her, it is as if Michael is actually the product of that pregnancy and that labour. As she explains, it is as if 'I actually gave birth to him myself'. This emotional conviction, which was very strongly expressed at several points in the interview, is compounded by the fact that both the ill-fated labour and delivery and the later adoption took place at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne. She went into the Women's Hospital one day to deliver a baby, and left another—albeit 3 years later—with an infant son who then became her whole life, to the extent that she did not even think about having or adopting another child.

With the news of Michael's Aboriginality, Faye's world and her sense of her self and of her family has been rocked to its foundations. Central to this, I would argue, is a sense of herself and of her family as white, i.e. as distinctly and distinctively *not* Aboriginal. This distinction becomes all the more important when in other respects—economic hardship, unemployment, life in the outer suburban fringe—there are commonalities between whites in the lower socio-economic groups and Aboriginal people. The worlds, that of the Aborigine and the *not*-Aborigine, which were for Faye once so distinctly (albeit discursively) separated, have collided. She is now daily bombarded with news and issues about Aboriginal people that she finds she is unable, as earlier, to ignore. She now lives in a world in which her son is Aboriginal and in which Aboriginal issues appear to dominate news and politics. Furthermore, there is a strong class inflection to Faye's narrative. Not only has she been rocked by the news that Michael is Aboriginal, but she has been rocked by the discovery that his Aboriginal mother is a tertiary-educated professional and that his part-

brothers are also tertiary educated. Far from fringe-dwelling in humpies as her earlier conceptions of Aboriginal life would suggest, Michael's birth mother and her subsequent children are socially mobile, middle-class professionals. The Aboriginal boy adopted out to the white family in 1972 in order to access greater opportunities than his single Aboriginal mother was thought capable of providing was forced to leave school at 15 because of the economic circumstances of his non-Aboriginal parents and take an apprenticeship. Not only are the Aboriginal and *not*-Aboriginal worlds not clearly distinct, but they appear in certain particulars to be confused or inverted. Faye expressed bewilderment at the realisation that some Aboriginal families appear to be able to provide their children with more benefits than she and her husband could provide their son: her confusion betrays anxiety not only about Aboriginality, but about the status and entitlements accruing to non-Aboriginality as well.⁴ Michael's 'going home' and his re-union with his Aboriginal birth mother has had a profound impact on Faye and her family, causing her also to confront very fundamental questions of identity and identification. The discovery of Michael's Aboriginality has also—and very painfully—forced Faye to address, recognise and attempt to revise the racism that enabled her sense of herself as a white woman. At various points in the interview, she struggled to express what was to her a new sense of the injustices done to Aboriginal people: explaining carefully to me why Aboriginal people preferred to be called indigenous and asking why John Howard had found an apology to the stolen children so difficult.

Faye, also, is owed an apology. Desperate for a child to raise as her own, she was given a baby boy who had been taken by stealth from his Aboriginal mother who awoke after being heavily sedated some 3 days after the delivery to be told that her infant son, whom she had not even seen, had died. Nor was Faye apprised of the Aboriginality of the child she took home that afternoon in 1972. In the case of the stealing of Michael, the transaction that saw an Aboriginal child removed from his birth mother and placed in the care of a non-Aboriginal mother took place without the full knowledge and consent of either woman: the political potential of their motherhood being simultaneously acknowledged, manipulated and abused by the state and its agents. Faye did her job well, although not knowing that her son was Aboriginal prevented her accessing benefits that might, for example, have allowed Michael to continue his education. Now Michael, his mothers and their families are living through the consequences of these actions. In this small and very specific example of an important contact zone between Aboriginality and non-Aboriginality, it is possible to see quite clearly how, in the context of settler colonialism, the uneven politics of gender, race and class continue to be played out with particular viciousness on the lives of women and their children.

As Deborah Bird Rose (1996) has argued persuasively in another context, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians live in a space that has been ruptured by the violence of dispossession. We cannot undo the past, but we can attempt to heal the damage. Listening to the voices of those who have been damaged by this history is part of this process. Many of these voices are indigenous. Some, like Faye's, are not. Through talking and having her voice heard, hopefully Faye will find an end to the 'giant crying business'. And, spurred on by her love for her Aboriginal son, she

may learn to speak articulately of things that have been for her until recently unspeakable. In the process, she may also realise a further political potential in her role as mother, finding new and more productive ways of thinking about herself, her family and her whiteness in relation to the Aboriginality with which her son has connected her.

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Notes

- [1] The names of all interviewees and members of their families have been changed to protect privacy and ensure anonymity.
- [2] Analyses of other interviews conducted as part of this research may be found in Cuthbert (1997).
- [3] Faye originally came forward to participate in the project 3 months after the discovery, but at that stage, after speaking with her on the telephone for some time, I suggested that she seek counselling with one of the several organisations dealing with post-adoption situations and provided her with the relevant contact details. She took my advice, but contacted me again 3 months later, at which time we conducted the interview.
- [4] For an insightful analysis of this beleaguered sense of entitlement in white Australia and the impetus it has provided reactionary politics, see Barcan (1998).

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