Re-membering and taking up an ethics of listening: a response to loss and the maternal in “the stolen children”

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In 1999, the continuing commemoration of the handing down of the 1997 Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families registered shifts in the public understanding and representation of reconciliation; specifically from 1998’s “National Sorry Day” to 1999’s “The Journey of Healing: The Next Step”. A perusal of the official “Sorry Day” website details the move from national to more local events, and away from the public affect of the signing of “Sorry Books” to community and individually monitored events performing other levels and modes of commemoration.

In light of this movement within the field of response to the Report over the past two years, it is useful to reflect on the ways it structured these processes of reconciliation together with and in terms of relations and dialogues between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in and across the nation. This essay invites a return to the Report in terms of two other texts whose stories and interests overlap with its own: Carmel Bird’s The Stolen Children: Their Stories and Gordon Matthews’ An Australian Son.

In its opening paragraphs, the President of the Commission, Sir Ronald Wilson established the Report’s affective core and outlined the work it would be required to do in the national project of reconciliation:

“Grief and loss are the predominant themes of this report. Tenacity and survival are also acknowledged. It is no ordinary report. Much of its subject matter is so personal and intimate that ordinarily it would not be discussed. These matters have only been discussed with the Inquiry with great difficulty and much personal distress. The suffering and the courage of those who have told their stories inspires sensitivity and respect…In no sense has the Inquiry been ‘raking over the past’ for its own sake. The truth is that the past is very much with us today, in the continuing devastation of the lives of Indigenous Australians. That devastation cannot be addressed unless the whole community listens with an open heart and mind to the stories of what has happened in the past and, having listened and understood, commits itself to reconciliation…” (1997: 3).

The Report includes over five hundred first-hand accounts from Indigenous Australians forcibly removed from their families and cultural heritage, from their languages, social knowledges and inter-cultural relations and connections as a direct result of Australian government laws, policies and practices. In making his response to the report, John Frow clarifies for us that:

“The almost unspeakable word here is ‘genocide’. While seeking to remain strictly within the legal framework of the time and to avoid a retrospective moralism, the report nevertheless concludes that a principal aim of the child removal policies was the elimination of indigenous cultures, and that in the sense given by the word the relevant international convention this aim constitutes genocide” (Meanjin98: 364).

Whilst Bringing Them Home is not the first collection of personal stories of separation and loss by Indigenous Australian writers made available for public dissemination, it does offer something completely different. Firstly, as a public document so generously proportioned with first hand accounts by the witnesses themselves, in this case Aboriginal voices, accounts that are, as Sir Ronald Wilson attests, “subject matter” of the most “intimate and personal” kind. Exceptionally, these stories are specifically directed towards a process for investing an ethic of response from non-Aboriginal people. The Report thus inaugurates the release of these memories into the public sphere of the nation through the act of “listening” by “the whole community” with “an open heart and mind to the stories of what has happened in the past”. This community, “having listened and understood, commits itself to reconciliation” (1997: 3).

Further, the Report is distinguished by the wide media engagement through which most Australians were made aware of its presence and general meaning; in particular, the broad public dissemination and attention via television. As a consequence the Report works uniquely within the space of the nation to intervene in the continuity of those Australian laws, policies and practices through advocating material, discursive and ethical reparation by bringing memories into the public sphere to become, in John Frow’s terms, a performative act:

“The Report balances a language of lies and blame, not with praise but with release; it breaks the hold of a false language, indeed a false reality, a reality which ‘should not have happened’. Its function is thus performative as well as descriptive, or rather it uses description as the basis for a performative act” (AHR, 5).

For Frow the core work of the Report is its significance as “an attempted enactment of discursive justice…not being done for the sake of shaming; it is done as a claim that a kind of listening – a response, a taking on of responsibility – must take place” (Meanjin98: 355). Thus, whilst Frow’s emphasis is on reading the Report for historiographic politics – his “politics of time” – his essay also offers a claim for an ethics of listening, the taking on of responsibility by non-Aboriginal Australians in relation to the stories presented in the Report. Homi Bhabha opens a way to understand such a responsibility in his response to the writing of Frantz Fanon:

“Remembering Fanon is a process of intense discovery and disorientation. Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present. It is such a memory of the history of race and racism, colonialism and the question of cultural identity, that Fanon reveals… He offers the master and slave a deeper reflection of their interpositions, as well as the hope of a difficult, even dangerous freedom…. This leads to a meditation on the experience of dispossession and dislocation – psychic and social – which speaks to the condition of the marginalized, the alienated, those who live under the surveillance of a sign of identity and fantasy that denies their difference (1994: 63).

By specifying an ethics of listening, Frow is asking us, as is Sir Ronald Wilson in introducing his Report and Homi Bhabha in his response to Fanon, to be open to what has previously not been listened to, a difference denied. This ethic of listening works to suggest possibilities for figuring desire differently by proposing a public sphere that responds to the authorising voice of the other in articulating their difference and thus opening possibilities for living our difference in the public sphere.

The re-publication the following year of several of the stories from the Report as “extracts” provides an occasion to take up the sense of this project of an ethics of listening, a radically different relation for the management of authority and desire between the self and the other in the
public sphere. Listening might be understood as an activity which maintains the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ whilst simultaneously opening between these a space for the movement of sound waves washing across and up onto the shores of the receiver’s ear. This ear, awaiting reception, is one desiring to become sensitive to the sensation of the waves as they break and run up upon its membrane. These waves, touching and soaking into the nerve endings in the process pass the reverberations through into the intricacies of the interstitial connections and onto the larger organising system of the recipient’s body. This body is a desiring one, yearning to be touched by hearing from an other and in that desire, yearning also to reciprocate the touch by taking on a form of responsibility to ‘remember’.

The relay of sound is not, of course, uninterrupted. John Frow locates the terms of a particular discursive tension between authority and desire arising from the attempt to bring about such an ethical response. This is the tension between “the political need to speak on behalf of indigenous people, to lend the authority of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to those who are unauthorised in the public sphere” and “the desire to restore a voice to them within and as a part of the report” (Meejin 354). At the heart of the Report, then, is the desire to advocate, that is, to speak on behalf of an “unauthorised” other in order to redress the inequality within the current system of relations as an imperative to creating a place of address for the previously silenced other.

Here however a double bind arises: asymmetrical access to speaking positions, determined and secured in historical terms, seems only to be extended or perpetuated by speaking in established or identified positions: speech seems only to amplify the already privileged and authorising voice. The problem then resists its resolution, and listening returns us to the question: how to speak without effacing the other’s difference? It is as an effect of this double bind, between desire and authority, that the political and ethical imperatives brought about by the Report become entangled in the arena of what Linda Alcoff calls the “crisis of representation” (1991: 9). The crisis to which Alcoff refers is that which has arisen across the West in response to critiques of universalism, that is, in terms of the particularities of minority differences and their authorisation of those differences, where speaking about others accommodates a desire to negate, such as is offered in the Hegelian dialectic.

Alcoff offers a detailed consideration of the political complexities for the enunciating position of speaking through her close attendance to the tensions between “intent” and “effect”. She proposes a process that operates similarly whether speaking for the self or for others:

Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result as well as an act, of political struggle. Simply put, the discursive context is a political arena…. We certainly want to encourage a more receptive listening in the part of the discursively privileged and discourage oppressive practices of speaking for (1991: 17).

Here the possibilities for difference are addressed at the site of the authorising enunciation, “the discursively privileged”, involving a responsibility for listening as well as a self-reflective responsibility on the part of the speaker who chooses to speak for the other.

From here, Marcia Langton’s well-known discussion of Aboriginality as a field of intersubjective relations offers a critical means to engage with the seamless exclusion of Aboriginal voices and responses as a structural commonplace in Australian society. Langton shows us how inextricably linked ‘our’ stories are to the social world we inhabit, to our sense of ‘self’, to our sense of the ‘other’, and to our ways of moving and engaging between ourselves and about each other.

Langton reminds us how dramatically identity is structured through differential access to enunciative positions in any account of Australian society:

For Aboriginal people, resolving who is Aboriginal and who is not is an uneasy issue, located somewhere between the individual and the State. They find white perceptions of ‘Aboriginality’ are disturbing because of the history of forced removal of children, denial of civil rights and dispossession of land (1993: 28).

Further, Langton argues that reciprocity is the imperative at stake in the struggle for the Aboriginal subject against the non-Aboriginal subject’s failure “to allow Aboriginal people to articulate their own models of what they perceive ‘Europeans’ to be” (1993: 37).

Langton’s well-known account of discursive community formation around the subject provides for a reciprocal model of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, and imagines collaboration (rather than consultation) at the intimate level of co-production between subjects separated by their differently constituted communities. This model: “generated when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage in actual dialogue, where the individuals test and adapt imagined models of each other to find satisfactory forms of mutual comprehension” (1993: 81) opens us possibilities for radically different ways of being in the nation; an alternative to the continuities of ‘tterra nullius’, ‘Aboriginal Deaths in Custody’ and the ‘Stolen Generations’.

It is towards this radical category of subject relations that the Report moves in its offer of deep and sensitive ethical engagements – listening and responding – from within the Australian community with the release of memories of Aboriginal people. The problem remains – and is at the heart of Langton’s model – of how to restore a voice to those whose voices have been denied; the tension Frow articulates between authority and desire.

At this point it is useful to consider the Report’s recommendation that ATSIC together with the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, arrange for a national ‘Sorry Day’ to be celebrated each year to commemorate the telling of this history of forcible removal and its effects. The Report added to this the recommendation:

ATSIC in consultation with the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation seek proposals for further commemorating the individuals, families and communities affected by forcible removal at the local and regional levels [with these proposals being implemented] when a widespread consensus within the Indigenous community has been reached (1997: 652).

The advocacy function of the Report here requires a response from non-Aboriginal participants, a giving-over of the time and space of address to the previously silenced other.

In contrast to this, Bird’s text articulates a different mode of intimacy, a different commemoration of the national domestic space of the family. This publication of the first person narratives as “extracts” from the Report severs the stories from the public context of representation and engagement opened up by the Report, and restores them to a narrative of unending maternal loss. While the attempts to specify and differentiate race relations in this country in terms of gendered identities are useful; in this text they work to restore these memories to a succession of white mothers, with the Aboriginal speakers thus positioned as children.

Bird’s role as white editor is central to this text, representing the work of its production as a moment in the flow of events from the 1938 Aboriginal Day of Mourning through to the 1998 National Sorry Day. Within this national story, the editor hopes she might

contribute to the revelation of the meanings of our past, and to make the stories of Indigenous Australians more accessible to everyone and to inspire more among us to read and consider the entire text and the full implications of Bringing Them Home (1998: 2).

In this account of editorial responsibility and engagement, and in the tracing of public and private effect in the face of the stories that follows, the field of speech is once again taken up with the voices of those already privileged, thus overdetermining modes of listening.

The stories of the ‘stolen children’ are here framed with introductory comments, perspectives from a range of prominent Anglo-Australians, the official recommendations of the Inquiry and historical commentary, within a structure that works to authorise them through appropriative formal processes. As texts of affect, the stories are opposed to the depthless complexity of legal and political discourse, and as such the texts operate in a field of particular differences, rather than in a context of dialogue. Langton’s “satisfactory forms of mutual comprehension” (1993: 81) are foreclosed in place of the pleasure of intense loss, “repressive” in place of the pleasure of mutual comprehension, “privilege” in Biird’s text as the means of the pleasure of the other. That is to say, through the specific affect of Bird’s text the role of listener is abnegated and the position of the white mother reinvigorated through the editorial pleasure of memory. In this way the text’s affect works as a form of imaginative capture, re-figure the tellers of the stories for all time as children.

Bird takes a newspaper photograph of Aboriginal children being offered to white families for adoption from the original Report (1997: 90), and reproduces it, with its caption partially excised, on the cover of her book. She then supplies the full caption in her Introductory essay, which develops as a meditation on the metaphors of that captioned photograph, in an unexpected appropriation of the logic and structure of supplementarity. The handwritten caption to the photo reads: “I like the little girl in centre... she might be the child from the middle of the photo, and links this desire to the marking of the photograph with an ‘x’, demanding that this child stand in (again) for an unspecified maternal loss. Bird’s essay speaks eloquently of the pleasures of guilt as a return to the white mother. In place of Frow’s ethics of listening, Bird’s text returns us to a specific history of ‘stolen children’ to which the stories of the “stolen children” are here framed with introductory comments, perspectives from a range of prominent Anglo-Australians, the official recommendations of the Inquiry and historical commentary, within a structure that works to authorise them through appropriative formal processes. As texts of affect, the stories are opposed to the depthless complexity of legal and political discourse, and as such the texts operate in a field of particular differences, rather than in a context of dialogue. Langton’s “satisfactory forms of mutual comprehension” (1993: 81) are foreclosed in place of the pleasure of intense loss, “repressive” in place of the pleasure of mutual comprehension, “privilege” in Bird’s text as the means of the pleasure of the other. That is to say, through the specific affect of Bird’s text the role of listener is abnegated and the position of the white mother reinvigorated through the editorial pleasure of memory. In this way the text’s affect works as a form of imaginative capture, re-figure the tellers of the stories for all time as children.

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No specificity – and no Aboriginal family – is acceded this child, nor any of the others in the photograph. In the reproduction of this image on the cover, there seems to be no imagined Aboriginal reader for the text, no sense that those photographed might have names, families, memories in excess of the stories told within. And in the shift of
It is a haunting picture, an image of the saddest and most tender vulnerability, already damaged, about to be further violated and sacrificed. This picture is an emblem of stolen children and it rouses pity, outrage, grief and mourning (1998: 2).

Through the work of metaphor is proposed a point of continuity for all Australians; we are carried across a shared history of loss and myth:

No two words strike deeper into the human heart than the words ‘stolen children’. Nothing is more valuable to us than our children, nothing so irreplaceable, so precious, so beloved. The history of white Australians is marred by children lost in the bush, children spirited away by unknown agents. The stories of these children have become the stuff of myth, icons of horror, and they ring with the notes of darkest nightmare (1998:10).

The speakers from the Report are figured first as ‘stolen children’, iconic images of speechless loss, thence becoming a point of interchange, of cross-cultural similarity. Bird’s metaphors of loss thus work to deny historical differences between the experiences of white and Aboriginal Australians, and in the process to re-institute the asymmetry of access to public speech that had been challenged by the versions of the stories in the original HREOC Report. And this “redeemptive” (1998: 5) enunciation is secured through reference to a specific colonial history: “the paternalism of the old Empire has not entirely disappeared in Australia in the 1990s” (1998: 4). The gendering of this familiar figure of colonial authority works to reassure us of maternity as an alternative colonial site.3

This edition of the stories of “the stolen children” is thus confined to an enunciative space carved out by an identity politics that it eschews. Criticising the choice of a white editor for these stories is not an appeal to what Gay Hawkins has called the “current left critique of reconciliation”. Rather it is a remembering of Fanon, in Bhabha’s terms from which ethnically to respond to Langton’s argument for reciprocity in face of the differential access to enunciative positions in Australian society. It is making a point about the relations of “telling” and “listening” raised both in the Report and in Bird’s own Introduction (1998: 9) that have not here been heeded.

In order to take up questions of reciprocity, self-reflectivity and receptivity in the public (national) field, questions overlooked by Bird’s text, we might rather return to another story told by a non-Aboriginal Australian about grief and loss, Gordon Matthews’ An Australian Son. This is another story of unspeakable identity, of maternity as a site of national division that in many ways anticipated the HREOC Report’s articulation of the ramifications, the shockwaves of Australia’s policies on race, immigration and difference right at the heart of the Australian family. Matthews’s story of his own adoption, his assumption of Aboriginal identity through ignorance and to explain his racial difference, and his subsequent uncovering of the ‘real’ story of his paternity, provides an unwavering account of identities formed at the intersection of discourses around parenting and race. This book’s cover image juxtaposes olive skin and bright blue eyes, an iconic confusion of identity, right in the Anglo-Celtic heartland of establishment Melbourne.

Instead of remembering the identifications of Bird’s white mothers, a return to Gordon Matthews’ narrative of unforgiveness and of an uncomprehending assimilation can provide another way into the Report’s numbing detail. What persists in Matthews’s story is the conviction that we still have no way of approaching the specific loss of identity carried by these stories, and that reconciliation must somehow accommodate (and, indeed, remember) this. When Matthews tells his Aboriginal colleagues and friends his continuing story of identity, that is, that he has discovered his father was Sri Lankan, not Aboriginal, he meets a mixture of welcome “If that’s what you’ve always thought you were then that’s what you are. Your identity doesn’t suddenly change” (1996: 210), as well as loss – another friend says she felt “a bit like we’ve lost a member of the family” (1996: 207). In other words, the complexities of families and communities demand and determine a sense of individual identity that can accommodate both loss and difference.

Matthews’s story reminds us of the failures of maternity as a narrative device linking Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stories and lives, and of the ways that forgiveness does not flow ‘naturally’. Like Bird’s text, Matthew’s story asks us to imagine the white mother, but here it is in terms of the anguish of a child who cannot forgive:

At journey’s end, what preoccupies me is Colette. She has been the true loser in my story, surrendering a child she never wanted to relinquish, grieving constantly for thirty-four years before his reappearance, only to have her dreams dashed when he is unable to give his heart and the forgiveness she deserves. For now, the status of that so often glorified relationship between mother and child in our case remains unclear. Colette and I have not completed our journey (1996: 229).

It does however, remain open to the voice of the other; in its account of the fearsome intersections between Australian adoption narratives and discourses of race and reconciliation, it reminds us of Langton’s imperative for dialogue and reciprocity in mutual comprehension. Towards this we cannot deny being reminded of the pungency in Bhabha’s “painful re-membering, [the] putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (1994: 63). Such a re-membering can help us read and commemorate these stories across the space and time of the nation and in terms of the differences articulated there.

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1 http://www.acn.net.au/articles/1999/05/sorry.htm

2 In 1982 a Report containing first hand stories from Aboriginal people was published in book form for general release by the then Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and edited by Peter Read: The Stolen Generations; the removal of Aboriginal children in NSW 1883-1969/Sydney: Government Printer, 1982 In 1989 a privately published book containing first-hand stories from Aboriginal people forcibly removed from their families by New South Wales Government authorities, edited by Coral Edwards and Peter Read, was released into general circulation: The Lost Children: thirteen Australians taken from their Aboriginal families tell of their struggle to find their natural parents Sydney: Doubleday, 1989.


4 The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation is a broad representative body working to develop “the growing people’s movement for reconciliation” and comprising a majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members. For further information see their website: http://www.austlii.edu.au/car/.

5 One of the essays included in Bird’s text to frame the Stolen Children’s stories is by Marilyn Lake: “Lessons From the Stolen Children” (originally published Age 17 Jan 98: 9). Lake’s essay provides an important historical account of white women’s resistances to the officially sanctioned removal of Aboriginal children. Her interest, however, in...
charting a feminist continuity between the maternalism of the 1930s activists and white Australians engaged in reconciliation in the 1990s is a concern, particularly in light of the maternal metaphors of Bird’s text.

6 According to Hawkins: “This critique goes something like this: reconciliation is just another form of assimilation because it implies that black and white should resemble each other. This denies incommensurable difference and effaces the fundamental politics of black and white relations.” (1998: 352).

In the Australian Humanities Review, see also: Greenwell, Lisa, Indigenous Issues, Issue 15, October 1999. Olubas, Brigitta, Target Essay

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Try the online quiz, reading, listening, and activities on grammar, spelling and vocabulary for this lesson on Accidents. Click on the links above or see the activities below this article: Your browser does not support this audio player. READ. I wonder how many accidents I’ve had in my life. I’ve had a few serious ones where I’ve ended up in hospital. Traffic accidents are the worst. They’re always painful. I haven’t had too many work-related accidents. I suppose that’s because I do office work and that’s not so dangerous. Most of my accidents are those around the house. I’ve lost count of the...