

*Family tremors: Margot Nash's Call Me Mum*

**Pauline Marsh**

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**Abstract:** *Call Me Mum* is an unconventional Stolen Generations film that premiered at the Sydney Film Festival in 2006 and won several Australian Film Institute awards in the following year. This highly stylised, theatrical film explores the experiences of mothers and children involved in the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their birth families. Originally envisioned as a four part series of monologues, it is loosely based on writer Katherine Mary Fallon's experiences as a white foster mother of a disabled indigenous child.

*Call Me Mum* adds to a growing collective of films that depict indigenous women, cross-cultural relations and family dynamics in interesting and complex ways. This article uses the idea of a "genderslide" (a misquotation of genocide by one of the main characters) to explain the influence that the three strong but deeply flawed lead female characters in this film have on their son/grandson, as well as the impact of *Call Me Mum* on viewers. It is the conceptual spaces that constitute the idea of family that I argue are re-shaped by this conflicted depiction of intimate black/white, mother/child relations in Australia.

**Keywords:** Margot Nash; *Call Me Mum*; Australian cinema; stolen generations; cross-cultural relations.

He was really interested when I told him she used to try and make me wash myself everyday, and use deodorant. Do I stink or what? Anyway, he said it's a similar relationship as "genderslide," he's got a name there.  
Warren, in *Call Me Mum*.

Warren's (Dayne Christian) "genderslide" in Margot Nash's *Call Me Mum* is both a misquotation (of genocide) and a reference to the unsettling shake-up that this film gives both Warren and viewers through its portrayal of three strong, but deeply flawed, mothers. *Call Me Mum* is an unconventional Stolen Generations film that premiered at the Sydney Film Festival in 2006 and won several Australian Film Institute awards in the following year.<sup>1</sup> This highly stylised, theatrical film is less interested in debates

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<sup>1</sup> Best guest or supporting actress in a Television Drama was awarded to Vicki Saylor, and Outstanding Achievement in Television Craft to Paddy Reardon. In addition,

about Government sanctioned genocide than it is in exploring the depth and complexities of the experiences of mothers and children who were involved in the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their birth families. Adding to a collection of cinematic fictions that draw upon actual accounts of indigenous children being placed into either institutional or foster care, as a result of official Government policy (*Rabbit-Proof Fence*; *Blessed*; and *Australia*), *Call Me Mum* focuses on the experiences of three women in Warren's life—his birth mother, foster mother and foster grandmother.

Warren and his foster mum, non-indigenous Kate (Catherine McClements) are flying to see Warren's unwell Torres Strait Islander birth-mother Flo (Vicki Saylor) on his eighteenth birthday. Due to his multiple disabilities, at 18 years of age Warren is being returned to institutional care against Kate's wishes, and she is hoping to enlist Flo's help to prevent this from occurring. They are also on route to Kate's deeply conservative and disapproving parents, Dellmay (Lynette Curran) and Keith (Ross Thompson) at the family home, "DellKeith". The film is an interweaving of monologues, loosely based on writer Katherine Mary Fallon's experiences as a white foster mother of a disabled indigenous child (Collins *Proper* 47). The characters speak directly to camera from three different locations: an aeroplane interior; a stylised 1950s living room; and a hospital bed. Each character tells a part of their story intermittently, and slowly builds the background to the plane trip as well as an intriguing picture of an extended family under great strain. Just as a landslide might create a geological reconfiguration of the natural space, these three very different mothers trigger a genderslide that dramatically shapes Warren's life, and the extra-textual ideological, personal and emotional landscapes in which this film is located. Particularly vulnerable are the conceptual spaces that constitute the idea of family, spaces that are re-imagined through this depiction of intimate, conflicted black/white, mother/child relations.

In one of a small handful of texts on the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women on screen—a fact indicative of perhaps both a minimal screen presence of these women and limited scholarly interest—Karen Jennings in her book *Sites of Difference: Cinematic Representations of Aboriginality and Gender* identifies a tendency within Australian cinema to represent women as either conflated with nature (24), as "other" and "different" (24) and/or with no sense of a "lived culture" (24). That is to say, cinema has frequently conflated indigenous, woman and nature, which has resulted in a recognisable cinematic trope of the female primitive Other, one that I call the "daughter of mother earth". An exemplar "daughter" includes Jedda (Ngarla Kunoth/Rosalie Monks), from Chauvel's 1955 film of the same name (*Jedda*). Jedda is torn between the teachings of her adopted white Christian family and her Aboriginality. She meets a tragic death when she succumbs to her "natural" desires to be with the wild, dark-skinned Marbuk (Robert Tudawali). The lone surviving Tasmanian Aboriginal woman, Manganninie, from John Honey's 1980 *Manganninie*, is another of the trope. She yearns for a child to care for as she survives alone in the bush. Another incarnation of the daughter motif is Jila, the highly exoticised lead character in the perhaps lesser-known film *Serenades*, by Morghan Khadem, who flees her abusive Muslim husband (to dance alone in the desert).

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Catherine McClements was nominated for Best Lead in a Television Drama and Lynette Curran for Best Guest or Supporting Actress.

These stereotypical daughters have particular narrative and allegorical functions. The calm, wise indigenous women represent what Jackie Huggins describes as the ancient dignity and strength that was characteristic of pre-contact Aboriginal women, and that continues in post-contact Australia despite the victimisation and oppression of women throughout colonisation (9). The daughters periodically assert a moral righteousness, and often counterbalance misplaced or futile anger displayed by other (male) characters. To borrow *Jedda's* tag line, they are "Eve in Ebony". Occasionally they are lead characters, but just as often they are present only in crucial, redemptive scenes (such as funerals) as, for example, in the closing scenes of *Jindabyne* and *Australian Rules*. Their putatively innate earth-based spirituality and sexuality and endless capacity for forgiveness and tolerance means, however, that these on-screen women can only be implausible.

Notwithstanding the endurance of primitivist tropes vis-à-vis Aboriginal women on-screen, there has been an increased incidence of richer and more nuanced representations of Aboriginal women since the 1970s. Representations of contemporary, urban Aboriginal women were scarce in films until the 1970s (Jennings 44), a time when cinema began foregrounding female political discourses (Jennings 57) and feminism began to engage with race debates (Saunders 157). Common to the more modern-day urban portrayals that emerged from this period is a "feminist attention to the mother/daughter dyad" (Jayamanne 8) which functions as platform for engagement with wider issues. Two exemplars include Rachel Perkins's *Radiance* and Tracy Moffatt's *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy*. *Radiance* is a story of three estranged Aboriginal sisters who come together in their family home after their mother dies to confront past demons. This film explores some nasty social and psychological problems that are lurking in the domestic sphere, including incest and rape. *Night Cries*, a much more stylised piece of cinema, is a short film that foregrounds dysfunctional mother/daughter relations of a different nature. In this film Moffatt responds to *Jedda* with a critique of assimilation policy and cross-cultural adoption, and depicts a tortuous relationship between a foster mother and her adult daughter.

While the increased screen presence of dynamic Aboriginal women is attributed by some in part to a rise in the numbers of indigenous filmmakers, particularly women working in documentary (see Langton 44; Hickling-Hudson 271; and Jennings 76), a diverse collection of directors have been the contributors to this collection. Films that tell stories from Aboriginal women's perspectives and/or depict more complex female subjectivities have been made by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women and men: including Bruce Beresford's *The Fringe Dwellers*, *Jindalee Lady* by Brian Syron, *Jindabyne* by Ray Lawrence, Nash's earlier nuanced critique of the interplay between gender and settler-indigenous race relations, *Vacant Possession*, and Beck Cole's first feature film *Here I Am*. *Call Me Mum* adds to this growing collective of films that depict the mother/daughter dyad and broader family relationships in unique, complex and often confronting ways. The dysfunctional family in this film alerts viewers to broader discourses of issues pertaining to indigenous notions of family: in particular the personal impacts of indigenous child removal policies and of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations.

### ***Call Me (a terrible) Mum***

Warren's disabilities (he is blind and mildly brain damaged) result from an injury sustained as a baby when his drunken father Albert "chucked him away" off the veranda. Soon after the incident Flo placed Warren into an institution for disabled

children, “Cherrymead”, and then moved away. Warren remained there until the age of five at which time he was fostered by Kate, then a Cherrymead nurse, just before he was due to be transferred to “Woodbrooke” institution (also called “the state loony bin” or “the tip” by Kate) and has lived with her and her female partner ever since. Both Flo and Kate have been, by their own admission, terrible mothers.

Bad mothering is a key motif of Stolen Generations narratives. Although there are stories of love amongst accounts, of caring homes and institutions, these are not the stories that have formed the metanarrative of the history of forced removals of children. Rather, what has emerged as popular understanding of the national Stolen Generations narrative is a shameful tale of widespread abuse, neglect and poor parenting (see for example, Attwood). Indeed, the perception that Aboriginal women were incapable of being loving, nurturing parents was an ideological force behind policy decisions of the time (Jacobs 121-125). Humanitarian logic claimed that Aboriginal children needed to be “rescued” from their dire situation (Jacobs 40). A pivotal Stolen Generations text is the *Bringing Them Home Report* that documents the experiences of 535 indigenous people who were raised in institutions or white foster homes (Wilson). The *Report* describes how many children were told that their parents did not love them or want them (Wilson 134), that many of the letters by parents to their children were not passed on (Wilson 133) or were censored (Wilson 134), and that children were told that their parents were of undesirable character, in some cases a prostitute, an alcoholic (Wilson 136) or just stupid (Wilson 135). Terrible black mothers are only some of the players that constitute the Stolen Generations narrative; there are also dreadful white mothers and their institutional substitutes, equally cruel. Non-Aboriginal parenting is frequently recalled as being at best unloving and at worst abusive. For example, one entry in *Bringing Them Home* states: “There was no food, nothing. We was all huddled up in a room ... like a little puppy-dog ... on the floor ... Sometimes at night time we’d cry with hunger, no food” (Wilson 138). Many entries in the *Report* are characterised by neglect, severely violent punishments and of sexual abuse by staff and foster parents.

In *Call Me Mum* Flo, Kate and Dellmay each represent those complicit in the nation’s mistreatment of Aboriginal children. For the entire film Flo lies in her hospital bed (Figure 1), oscillating between dread and excitement about Warren and Kate’s imminent visit, and filled with regret and a sense of failure for not being able to raise her son. Flo paints a very unflattering picture of her younger self: she admits she drank a lot, was very promiscuous, ran away from her family and, more critically, lied about how Warren sustained his injuries. The events leading to his brain damage she has kept secret for life. The cinema becomes the site of Flo’s confession:

I can’t tell [Warren] what really happened, I’ve never told anyone ... that awful night ... Albert was out the front of the pub watching me drinking and flirting with those whitefellas ... that manager, he hit Albert with a stick he always carried, and down Albert went and knocked him right out.



Figure 1: Flo. Image reproduced with permission from Matchbox Pictures.

She then describes how Albert was carried home, by his children, but she “stayed on drinking” and when she arrived home it was in time to see Albert throw Warren off the veranda in a rage. She heard a crack, and saw Warren was lying still and quiet on the ground. She recalls in tears:

I didn't call the police, I didn't call the doctor. I didn't want Albert to go to gaol, he's never done anything like this before. Later on I picked him up but still no noise, no sound. So I think he's asleep so I just put him on his bed and he just lay there for a couple of days.

While alerting viewers to a range of compounding social factors that contributed to the traumatic event—chiefly poverty and racism—Flo's tearful admission that her drunkenness and neglect contributed to Warren's long term disabilities is a deeply ambivalent moment: moving yet confronting. This is not the behavior of a cinematic daughter of mother earth, but a woman living a highly dysfunctional life; a very bad mother, indeed.

Kate, once a nurse, is by no means Florence Nightingale. When she and Warren walk onto the plane she is obviously extremely angry and disgusted with him: “Oh Jesus, look at him. He looks like shit and he pongs like it too”, she complains, before ordering a whisky to calm herself down (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Kate. Image reproduced with permission from Matchbox Pictures.

A heavy drinker, disillusioned and foul mouthed, Kate is as harshly self-critical as Flo. She refers to herself as a “psycho bitch” and periodically chastises herself for sounding

“white” and “so violent”. In her eyes, raising Warren has not been an act of angelic self-sacrifice, but an emotional nightmare. Later, speaking to herself, she reveals it is a loveless relationship: “You hate him, and he does not love you”, then sneers to camera, “Oh yes, Warren hates me, and he’s ashamed of me in front of his mates ... He looks at me and he sees the enemy”.

Dellmay, the third shocking mother in the film, is a highly clichéd symbol of 1950s gendered domesticity, and is an unashamed racist and homophobe (Figure 3). Dellmay is bitterly disappointed in Kate and disapproves of her sexuality and of her fostering Warren. Apart from a brief admission that she felt a surge of love at birth, she recalls a cold relationship between the two of them from then on. Instead of having a friend for life, in Kate she had a “fiend for life”. Anticipating Kate’s return she makes clear her sense of Anglo-superiority when she states coldly, “If she thinks she can just waltz back in here, limping for sympathy, dragging that coloured lad along and with him all the misery, ugliness and filth of the world”. For Warren, she has prepared a camp bed under the house, as she is horrified by the thought of getting too close to him, and wishes instead that Kate had left him at Woodbrooke.

Just prior to the trip Warren has been the subject of a television documentary in which he has told a fictional and unflattering story of his life with Kate, “similar as gunderslide”. To the interviewer he has described a life of Western imposition and culturally insensitive mistreatment. As well as claiming he was forced into cleanliness and to use deodorant, he adds that they had no food or money. Dellmay has seen the documentary and, unbeknown to Kate, Warren or Flo, has made arrangements for Warren to be re-institutionalised on their arrival. She sees herself upholding the dying values of civilisation, and expresses attitudes that are, for contemporary audiences, overtly naïve and inhumane. There will be no help offered to Kate by her mother to keep Warren; Dellmay is intent on causing more destruction to her and Kate’s family.



Figure 3: Dellmay. Image reproduced with permission from Matchbox Pictures.

Dellmay’s character is not developed far beyond an extreme caricature, and throughout the film she remains essentially a one-dimensional exemplar of ignorance and intolerance. Flo and Kate, however, both reveal much more nuanced subjectivities, and their characters become highly conflicted women with both a deep love for Warren and respect for and fear of each other.

### **Call Me (a loving) Mum**

Despite Kate's insistence that she is a failed mother, she counters this image with stories that signal a less straightforward reality. For instance Kate was determined to foster Warren because she was horrified of the treatment he received in Cherrymead—"He just screamed and screamed when he first arrived at Cherrymead ... clinically blind, profoundly retarded, brain damaged, dangerous, 'wild man of Borneo' Matron said"—and she is certain that life will be even worse for him at Woodbrooke. Convinced that "even a fuck up like me is better than the tip", she went to great lengths to make the fostering of Warren happen. She married her gay flatmate, and periodically pretended to be a happy, domestic, heterosexual family for Tiffany, the visiting bureaucrat with the power to make the decision. Her memories of Warren as a young child show Kate to be a loving, caring mother. She recalls fondly how she massaged his legs and took him to heated baths so he could swim around in his rubber ducky until he was able to walk; a feat considered "a miracle". She tells the story of their trip to the Easter Show where Warren enjoyed the Dodgem Cars so much so that he laughed until he wet himself. The experience has had a lasting positive effect on her that she has not forgotten. In between her rants about the lack of love between them Kate muses, "I've never laughed like that in my life. He taught me joy, I owe him big time". Although on the one hand she feels that she has become cold and unfeeling, on the other she acknowledges the deep emotional connection she feels with her son: "I feel what Warren is feeling like a phantom limb". Despite the initial angry moments suggesting otherwise, Kate reveals herself to be a deeply complex parent who has been both terrible and brilliant at raising a challenging child.

In her first monologue, Flo remembers the affection she felt for Warren the last time she saw him; how he stopped crying and moaning when he heard her do the "family whistle" and smelt her hand. This stands out as a peaceful moment in what has otherwise been a life of hardship. Adopted out as a child, Flo struggled to be accepted because of her mixed Torres Strait Islander and white heritage. As an adult she has lived in poverty and endured poor health. In a gentle, almost resigned voice, she tells of the time she witnessed her husband being bashed for breaking the Protection Act, and of how some of her babies died due to the racist neglect of medical staff, but there is no bitterness in her accounts. Nonetheless (with a hint of the daughter of mother earth trope) she remains forgiving and understanding towards others. She is especially sympathetic toward Kate, whom she considers came to her child's aid with the strength and capabilities to raise him well. Flo might easily consider Kate a thoughtless white woman, blindly carrying out discriminatory Government policy as do the white women in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* or *Australia*. However, to the contrary, Flo plans to adopt Kate into her family as a sister, "Islander-style", and to share her son with her in traditional Torres Strait fashion.

Warren's voice further ensures that the film is not a simple tale of a wicked foster mother. Rather than hearing horror stories about his birth mother, as did many of the *Bringing them Home* contributors, Warren was told that he was loved but was sent away for health reasons. The viewer is led to believe that the traumatic life that he relates for the documentary journalist is not the reality ("Kate makes really good spaghetti Bolognese") but is instead a case of Warren responding to the romantic ideals of the interviewer. He tells him he can recall an idyllic Rousseau-inspired childhood prior to his removal—of hula-hula performances around the campfire—which was outrageously interrupted by Kate, who he states chased him ferociously in a Dodgem Car when he tried to escape. The scenario is ludicrous, but nonetheless contributes to the complexity

of his cross-cultural family life, as well as flagging the problem of media-fuelled perceptions about the fostering of indigenous children.

Nash points out in more than one interview that the film's multifarious voices, subject positions and truths—which are often in contestation with each other—are what differentiate this film from typical Stolen Generations testimony and fiction (Barber n. pag.; and Collins "Transforming" 52). For example, she states:

Different and conflicting voices get a space to speak in this film ... everybody is flawed in this film ... it isn't about good white people and bad black people or bad white people and good black people. (Barber n. pag.)

In Flo and Kate's convoluted interplay of contesting emotions there is a resistance to stereotypical notions of white and black mothers, and a challenge to simplistic cinematic, and other, representations of family life.

*Call Me Mum* further distances itself from typical Stolen Generations testimony through the inversion of a scene from the quintessential cinematic film text of this genre, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. As Warren is being driven away from Dellkeith in the back of the car by Tiffany, he calls through the back window "Mummy, Mummy, Mummy", as do the three young girls in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* as they are driven away from Jigalong. Whereas the young girls are calling to their distraught birth mothers, Warren is calling out to his foster mother. In *Rabbit-Proof Fence* there is no moral dilemma for the viewers as the film's message is clear—the young girls should be able to stay with their loving biological mothers. Moral meanings are more ambivalent in *Call Me Mum*, however, because Warren is being taken not from his birth family, but from the woman who has already replaced his biological mother.

*Call Me Mum* is not an isolated cinematic voice on this topic. Other recent cinema also insists on a complex reading of parent/child relations at the time of Aboriginal child removal policies. In Warwick Thornton's 2009 documentary *Rosalie's Journey*, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks (who when younger played Jedda) recalls the kindness she felt during her childhood at St Theresa's Christian mission. One of the five concurrent stories in Ana Kokkinos's 2009 feature *Blessed* also depicts a cross-cultural foster/adoption in a way that complicates the foster mother/child relationship. It is the story of an indigenous boy James Parker (Wayne Blair) told retrospectively from the perspectives of both James as an adult and his dead non-indigenous foster mother (Monica Maughan). With sensitivity to the multiple interpretations of childhood events that subjective memory generates, the film shows that James and his foster mother have been unable to express their love for each other, which has resulted in a lonely and unhappy adult existence for them both.

### **A Sorry Situation**

An integral part of the Stolen Generations narrative is the call for and delivery of a formal national apology to those taken from their birth families, delivered in Federal Parliament on February 13, 2008. The apology was recommended in the *Bringing Them Home Report* but resisted by key political representatives throughout the life of the Howard Government. In keeping with its approach of building complexity around issues of family relations, *Call Me Mum* poses questions to viewers about what such an apology might entail. It queries who should apologise to whom, and for what, and ultimately creates a murky dilemma. For example, Flo's confession makes it impossible

for the viewer to lay blame at her feet, nor at Kate's or even Albert's, for Warren's injuries and subsequent institutionalisation. The inconsistent picture of family life drawn by Kate—her deep love and burning hatred for Warren; her respect for Flo and anger at her for leaving Warren at Cherrymead; her disbelief that at the age of 19 she had the capacity to take on Warren's care; and her determination not to see him back in an institution—means that she is not an easy scapegoat for the reason behind Warren's removal either.

The final section of *Call Me Mum* is entirely dedicated to exploring what it means to apologise in such a situation when families have been seemingly irreparably fractured and damaged. Each character gives voice to the multifarious constituting elements of the broader debates around a national apology. The range of voices and subject positions represent not only the mothers and children involved in the Stolen Generations, but also the gamut of public reactions to the *Bringing Them Home Report* on its release and during the Howard Government's long-running refusal to formally apologise. Kate's parents predictably align with the protesting voices of the time. Keith (Ross Thompson), Kate's (returned-servicemen and slightly insane) father dons his army hat, calls upon the spirit of "Aussie Aussie Aussie Oi Oi Oi", and delivers a very sarcastic pro-assimilationist rant. With tongue-firmly-in-cheek he apologises for the fact that so many people died "stopping the Japanese from liberating the Indigenous people of Australia"; that "we" came instead of the Dutch, French or Portuguese, and that:

decent middleclass families committed wholesale assimilationist genocide by adopting indigenous kiddies rather than spending their money on household appliances and leaving them to die of syphilis and leprosy in some outback hovel; that we put darkies in custody when all they ever did was murder, rape assault, sell drugs, starve their children ... ; that we embarked on culturally automotive [sic] policies like immunisation, free schooling ... free petrol sniffing, free airfares, 3 free jap-built cars per humpy per grog-soaked person per grog-soaked year; ... that the Prime Minister will not apologise for something we never did – and if we did we'd do it again.

After Keith's list of what doubles for an absurdist neo-colonial statement of beliefs, Dellmay then explains why she refuses to apologise. "No, no, I'm not going to apologise" she states, for holding onto old values, or for contacting children's services about having Warren re-institutionalised, because "this is unauthorised reconciliation across state lines". Keith and Dellmay's irrational and ill-informed reasonings are the dialogue of anti-apologist caricatures. Nonetheless, their ranting captures the "active resistance" (Collins *Proper* 51) to a formal apology, and the extremist sense of the argument.

Kate does not state the case in favour of an apology per se, but instead offers her own that is wholly heartfelt and personal. She directs her statement to Flo and Warren, and she apologises for her inadequate mothering, of being afraid of Flo, for not understanding "islander adoption" and for not being able to let Warren go with Flo "just yet". She apologises for many well-intentioned but badly executed mistakes that she has made whilst raising Warren. She insists, however (with reference to a long-lasting battery brand) that "I am still his guardian and I will never leave my post. I am the ever ready, Eveready." She makes no apology for being a white parent raising a black child and, in her words, for striving for the best possible life for Warren. Warren's apology is

equally personal, and includes being sorry for a range of things from the profound to the mundane. He is sorry for missing the years with Flo, for not remembering what her cooking is like, that she is sick, that he did not speak to his Dad, and for the poor quality of his tape recording that he is making to give to her. Overwhelmed by the enormity of possible reasons to be sorry, in the end he states he is “just sorry”. Evident in Kate and Warren is a confusion that stems from the emotions associated with their sorry situation.

When Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered the formal Apology to the Stolen Generations it was a momentous occasion in the Australian Parliament, and heralded as a milestone for a politically-stalled reconciliation process. It was also greeted enthusiastically by members of the Australian public (see, for example, Sharkey<sup>2</sup>). Although the Apology has also been considered to have delivered little in terms of practical improvements for indigenous people (see, for example, the arguments of Morton; Gordon; Dodson), Isabelle August points out that: “The Apology was nonetheless significant—if not for everyone, it was at least, and importantly, meaningful for those Stolen Children and the families who were waiting for some acknowledgement of what had occurred” (321). *Call Me Mum*’s scrutinising of the complexities of cross-cultural fostering highlights the inadequacy of the national apology to function as any other than a symbolic act, and that it cannot be a panacea for the enormous impact that child-removal has had on those involved. In the light of this film, a formal statement cannot hope to encompass the breadth and variety of causes, events and outcomes that constitute Australia’s Stolen Generations experiences.

### **Familial Fault Lines**

Kate’s and Warren’s apologies bring to attention the enormous extent of the traumas and losses felt by disrupted families, and echo the impacts that are documented in *Bringing Them Home*, essentially, in Jane Lydon’s words, a “multitude of sad stories about wrecked lives” (147). In one of Kate’s more prosaic outbursts she captures the hopelessness of her situation; speaking about Warren she states emphatically: “All I know is he was fucked over then and he is being fucked over now and I’m still trying to fix the fuck up and I’m still fucked up myself”. However, more than simply reflecting the negative outcome of child removal policies, the film draws attention to the widespread instances of family breakdown across a range of cultures. The dysfunctional family lives of all of the characters in *Call Me Mum* is the film’s strong indictment of idyllic notions of family, both non-indigenous and indigenous.

Flo’s family life has been a series of disruptions and rejections. She was born a Torres Strait Islander; her mother was from Mer and her father was a white man. She was adopted by a Malayan family as a child, when her mother gave someone a Wauri shell, as is cultural practice in the Torres Strait. This symbolic act means the receiver becomes the giver’s “Wauri Tebud”. This is, as Flo explains, “like you become family”. However, Flo felt neither Islander nor Malay, as the Malays called her a dirty Islander and the Islanders call her an outcast. When she later married Albert, a “full Islander”,

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<sup>2</sup> Reporter Ronan Sharkey collected responses to the National Apology as he interviewed members of the crowd gathered outside Parliament House at the time of the Apology, all of which were positive.

she claims it was considered she married beneath her social status. She tells the viewer that Albert felt inferior to her because, unlike Flo, he was subject to the Protection Act that, amongst other things, legislated that he had to ask permission to marry; an act that shamed him. The film paints a grim picture of Flo and Albert's life at the time of Warren's injury, and soon after the family broke up: "Took off down South and went our separate ways. The boys joined the navy and the girls got married". Flo made a new life there for herself. The extent of the family fracturing culminates in Flo's story of Albert's death and funeral. Albert died an alcoholic in Port Hedland, but there was not enough money to take him home to be buried in the Torres Strait.

A year after *Call Me Mum* was released a report of an Australian Government inquiry into the sexual abuse of Aboriginal children, *Ampe Akelyernaemane Meke Mekarle: "Little Children are Sacred"* also entered the public domain. It arrived with a bang. The report concluded that many indigenous people in remote areas of Australia were being badly affected by poverty and alcoholism, echoing Flo's accounts. It found that child abuse was widespread, and most likely caused by the "breakdown of Aboriginal culture", and closely related to the cumulative effect of "poor health, alcohol, drug abuse, gambling, pornography, unemployment, poor education and housing, and a general disempowerment" (12, 6). Partly enabled by the disturbing image of the suffering Aboriginal child (Hinkson 230) *Little Children* triggered a dramatic and controversial political reaction, which involved the then Howard federal Government declaring a National Emergency and introducing a raft of measures known as the Northern Territory Emergency Response, or the NT Intervention. Interventions were widespread, and included: providing more police to remote communities; bans on alcohol and pornography; additional child-protection workers; compulsory income management of Government Support incomes; childhood health checks; school breakfasts; and the introduction of 5-year leases on Aboriginal townships. Because the target group for the Interventions were specifically, and only, indigenous Australians the Emergency Response required the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975). Subsequent Labor federal governments, elected since 2007, have continued with many of the controversial intervention measures under the new policy label, Stronger Futures, but with modifications that allowed the Racial Discrimination Act to be reinstated in 2010. Consequently, the release of *Call Me Mum* came at the beginning of what was to become a period of heightened public awareness of and sensitivity to indigenous poverty and its destructive effects on family.

*Call Me Mum*, however, does not suggest that indigenous family breakdown is a National Emergency, and just as the film is an unconventional Stolen Generations tale it is an equally unconventional story of indigenous family dysfunction. It insists that relationship dysfunction is something experienced by indigenous and non-indigenous Australians alike. For instance, just as Flo feels rejected from her own scattered family, so too does Kate: Kate has not been home to her parents for many years. Warren also feels some ambivalence about Kate's capacity to be a mother; he does not know how Flo can start calling Kate mum, as she has started to, or how Kate can really be considered his mum, when she stole him. Dellmay, the quintessential Anglo-settler in the film, also recalls an unhappy childhood as an Irish child—the black Irish, she states, were the "niggers of Europe"—and a miserable marriage, which has left her feeling "frozen inside". By drawing on the likenesses of circumstance and of emotional trauma across the characters, Nash brings to mind the work of Jackie Huggins, Kay Saunders and Isabel Tarrago, who examine their own mothers' lives in rural Australia in the

1930s and 40s and demonstrate the shared commonalities between these black and white women in times of hardship.

*Call Me Mum* is deeply cynical of any idealised notions of family resilience in the face of trauma. At its close, happy families are relegated to the realm of fantasy while fractured families take the central place in the film's reality. As she nears death, Flo's dreams of re-uniting with Warren and of cementing family bonds with Kate become almost hallucinatory. Her hospital room becomes progressively more like a tropical paradise, as the light turns to muted pinks and purples, and she is surrounded by lush plants and is dressed in a floral Islander Mary dress with a frangipani in her hair. She plans a romantic meeting: "I'll give her this [shell] and make her my Wauri Tebud. We'll be sisters then and I'll give her my boy properly after all these years. And we will both be called Mum. She'll call me Mum and I'll call her Mum". Her final monologue ends as she stares out the window and visualises the sea, full of boats and people fishing, while she sings an Islander song. Like Flo, Warren has an underlying positive sense of his Islander heritage. He has recently re-named himself AAD, "Albert after Dad", and talks about his "happy-go-lucky" Islander "blood memory". However, his and Flo's Islander sensitivities are not enough to ensure they will be able to live together in a happy family unit. While Flo and Warren dream, the decidedly pragmatic Dellmay makes a phone call to Tiffany and shortly after Warren is whisked away in the back of a car against his, Kate's and Flo's desires.

Unlike in the moral tale *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, in which the young girls make their way back to Jigalong, in *Call Me Mum* there is no just triumph of indigenous family values over the heartlessness of non-indigenous bureaucracy. At the narrative level this film delivers a very unhappy ever-after. However, the film does much more besides. Via the three troubled mothers this film subverts the cinematic daughter of mother earth trope and unsettles conventional Stolen Generations narratives. Along the way it deconstructs the nature of what it means to apologise, and demonstrates how the filmic reality of a traumatised cross-cultural family is an affective insight into the personal and emotional impacts of policies and politics. This cinematic genderslide boldly shifts the metaphorical ground that idyllic notions of the family rest upon, and challenges viewers to find hope instead in the exposé of imperfect alternatives.

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**Pauline Marsh** is an Honorary Research Associate at the University of Tasmania and Research Assistant at the Australian Catholic University. She completed her PhD "Cinematic Campfires: Australian Reconciliation Cinema, 2000-2010" in 2012.