

Introduction

We are survivors: the persistence of life and hope in Aboriginal marriage, family and kinship practices

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This selection of writing about the Aboriginal family opens with *We are Survivors*, the play by Tasmanian Aboriginal poet and playwright Puralia Jim Everett, written on or about 1984 when it was first performed. It is a charming and illuminating vignette of Tasmanian Aboriginal family dynamics that are modern as well as being inextricably a part of cultural continuity. One is left with the overwhelming impression of *persistence* in the face of nihilism and genocidal practices. The trope of survival emerged in the activism of the 1970s and 1980s, a mantra for Aboriginal people across Australia, and it is a very fitting way to introduce this selection of writing.

Fitting too, but in contrast, the photograph of the Governor family that appears on the front cover of this edition, a snapshot in time that we are very privileged to see, is taken at the point of imminent family tragedy. This family was doomed not to survive, the work ethic of the father Tommy Governor was entirely out of step with the dominant culture's construction of what Aboriginal people should be, how and where they should live and the nature of their family formations. Tommy, the father of the erstwhile infamous Jimmy and Joe (who are not present in this photo, no doubt they were away working) resisted the pressure to live on a reserve with rations. He sought independence and was able to continue to work in agricultural labouring jobs and support his growing family (Moore and Williams 2001: 18). This photograph shows the daughters of the family with fair children and no husbands, not uncommon for the time. What was uncommon was Jimmy's marriage to a white woman, Ethel Page, a marriage that had her constantly ridiculed.

With so many young children in the Governor family, was it the case that the adult family members had an increasing number of mouths to feed and so immense pressures to find work, in a situation of deep segregation and ostracism by the settler colonial society? This is a story representative of the situation of Aboriginal families over space and over time. Tommy Governor did not want to give up his independence and continued to fight for it. The Governor boys followed their father, had pride in their

independent working life and struggled to stay out of detention on reserves. This was in a time of high racism in Australia, in the decade preceding Federation, when any person of colour was seen to be too competitive to the white workers who, through trade unions such as the AWU, sought to keep Australian workers “white”. What is for sure is the stresses placed on Aboriginal people of colour were such as to have Jimmy believe that the settler colonials were “killing us every day” (Moore and Williams).

This photograph too introduces the article by Clare Britton of the Sydney-based theatre group *My Lovely Patricia* and their production of *Posts in a Paddock* that was performed at the Carriageworks Theatre in Redfern in 2011. The development of this moving theatrical production from research and scriptwriting through to performance, also functioned to reconcile descendents of the families caught up in the most tragic events surrounding the historic and controversial Jimmy Governor (who was hanged in Darlinghurst Gaol in the year of Federation 1901). While the O’Brien family suffered deeply through the massacre of members of their family by the Governors, descendents of both the Governor and O’Brien families have come together in surprising and meaningful ways to reconcile the tragedies of the past. Thus this becomes too a story of family survival. The Governor family reconstituted itself and continues. In fact the grandson of Jimmy Governor played the part of Jimmy in this play.

Thus it is that *surviving* is the theme of this edition of JEASA that foregrounds the voices of Aboriginal people, some of whom are early career and emerging scholars, and our allies who write in such a way as to engage with Aboriginal people and their culture both respectfully and meaningfully. Some are so involved that they are invited to become part of the kinship system and accept roles and responsibilities within Aboriginal family formations. In this edition Karen Hughes and John Boulton are representative of such people. As Aboriginal people we have many reasons to be grateful for the support of allies via various stages of engagement in Australia and Europe (VG).

Contributions to this volume focussing on and illuminating the Aboriginal family make this a truly stellar volume that we have been most privileged to put together for publication. Geographically these articles engage with various families, their knowledges and cultural practices from New South Wales, Tasmania, the Kimberley, southeast Queensland, Arnhemland, the Torres Strait, Central Australia and even South Africa! Aboriginal people and their families are foregrounded in the articles here, including the reconciliation of the Governor and O’Brien families in Clare Britton’s article, as already mentioned; Estelle Castro’s study of Warwick Thornton’s *Samson and Delilah* and the universality of its themes, from interesting and innovative research on how this film was received in France; Martina Horakova’s fine tribute to the complexity and importance of Stephen Kinnane’s *Shadowlines*, a marvellous evocation of Aboriginal family and survival in the face of unrelenting and punishing authority and its relationship to the movement of history; Karen Hughes’s reflection on her family connection and obligation through becoming Rosalind’s daughter, the distinctive Aboriginal ethics and philosophy of intercultural relatedness that informs such innovations and developments by *Wandarrang* in response to history; and Pauline Marsh’s wonderful account of the complexities and intricacies of the family in the real-life situation portrayed in the autobiographical film *Call me Mum* and how this very human and somehow “imperfect” family formation actually works for the people in it!

As well as Puralia Jim Everett we have the Aboriginal voice of Aunty June Barker in the transcription of an edition of BlakChat from Koori Radio in Sydney, when Paulette Whitton was the broadcaster. Dear Aunty June Barker has sadly passed on. She and her husband Roy were stalwarts of the Aboriginal community in the northwest of New South Wales and much further afield. They became cultural custodians of the material culture and the history of these peoples and assisted many people with their genealogies, this central preoccupation of our people. The interest in family history and genealogy amongst Aboriginal people in Australia is culture in action, and it is immense. As representatives of the Redfern community informed me in 2006:

Knowing family history is important to wellbeing as it allows for proper marriage by knowing the bloodlines, who you are related to. It can stop the breaking down of kinship, knowing connection to land and family who were sent away. It allows fulfilment through knowledge of one's "roots", the experiences of ancestors and their stories of survival against the odds and so engenders a sense of understanding and of pride. It is an important part of existence that allows a grounding, self-esteem and belonging and so allow positive things like work, living skills to develop. It is also an important cultural commitment. "Looking back to know the importance of my family, this is who I am also" (Grieves 2007: 56).

Similarly, the Redfern focus group understand the importance of knowing Aboriginal peoples' history and culture more generally. It is summarised in this way:

Knowing about your peoples' history and culture enhances identity, gives strength and pride, a sense of belonging, it gives more grounding in life, a connection to the knowledge of ancestors and cultural activity including language, art, law/lore and dance. It allows a way of sharing, connection to land, survival, bush tucker and medicines. It also allows empowerment, for a person to move on in life in a positive way; it increases all aspects of one's wellbeing as it enhances their life in every way - physical, emotional, spiritual, economic (Grieves 2007: 53).

In however small a way we hope that this online edition of JEASA will contribute to Aboriginal wellbeing through the accessibility of these voices and stories. In one case there is one man in the Kimberley whose story is now available for others to read, at his request, and for the first time. The voice of Coolibah as he prefers to be called, in his story told to his brother by custom, the specialist paediatrician for the Kimberley, John Boulton, is a standout article in this journal amongst many other standout articles. This is a moving tale of a friendship that is recognised as deeper over time and that eventually moves Coolibah to take on his friend the doctor as kin in a formal way as a good friend of the same age. In recognition of this he entrusts his life story to him and charges him with the responsibility to have it heard. We are privileged indeed to have the opportunity to publish Coolibah's story. It is a candid and matter of fact account of the system that held Aboriginal people as captive slaves on the cattle stations of the north of Australia. The beatings that these small boys endured at the hands of their master "bosses" is truly arresting and heart-rendering.

Once again the theme of survival in the face of adversity looms above all else. The ease with which Coolibah lives and survives in his own country, surrounded by family and

within the Law is another demonstration of *persistence* in the face of nihilistic and genocidal practices. However, this survival comes at a price as John Boulton explains: the myriad and compounded factors of disadvantage are the causal factors that have created the great gap between Aboriginal and Mainstream health indicators,

As well as the voices of Coolibah, Aunty June Barker and Puralia Jim Everett, we also have in this edition the voices of Jeannie Bell, Kim Burke, Kathleen Butler, Marcus Woolombi Waters, and Paulette Whitton. These are Aboriginal intellectuals from various parts of the country, from differing families and kin groups, who are at a range of stages of their academic careers. These important scholars also privilege family and the importance of family in knowledge production in diverse ways. For example, Jeannie Bell, who already has a formidable reputation as an Aboriginal linguist, now draws on her immense knowledge of Aboriginal families in southeast Queensland to reflect and speculate on the changing patterns of Aboriginal marriages over time. This is part of a much larger work that we can now await with great anticipation. In her contribution Kim Burke finds that researching her family history allows her to re-examine not only identity and racism, but also the impacts of Australia's immigration policies of the emerging twentieth century on Aboriginal families. The restrictions based on immigration of people of colour to Australia in 1904 also impacted on Aboriginal men and their families in South Africa following their service in the Boer War. This leads to a fascinating and intriguing story of her great-grandfather's adaptability and capacity to manoeuvre his way through the racist policies of the settler colonial state that was responsible for his dispossession. And then his life's quest to reunite his family after his desperate attempts did not succeed. Important in this story is that he too had allies amongst the local white community at Warialda, people who supported him in his attempts to be able to keep his children after the death of his wife.

Paulette Whitton, from the Muruwari people of the northwest of New South Wales, is one of those people in our community who seems to have a natural ability to recollect and reproduce Aboriginal genealogies, enjoying immensely the opportunity to engage in discussions about family history with Aboriginal people on Koori Radio. The interview with the much loved and important elder Aunty June Barker is reproduced here as an indication of the rich lode in the uncollected interviews yet to be published. Kathleen Butler, Worimi from the midnorth coast of New South Wales, has made her mark as a sociologist, and in this contribution she draws on her life experience as well as the family history held in the box of photographs. We are able to understand how family histories are retained in the memories of elders who are prompted to remember by images and keepsakes – and how these histories are of functioning, connected and viable families. Similarly, Marcus Woolombi Waters lives and works from within Kamillaroi family and kin, arguing for the viability of Kamillaroi epistemology as a basis for new knowledge production in the academy. Marcus is actively involved with men from his *nyiyani* in ceremony, language education and cultural retrieval. This is but one part of a movement amongst men in NSW and Queensland, and even further afield, to return to living the practices of the ancestors. Alongside this deep customary development, Marcus's fledgling engagement with scholars of the west is intriguing and holds much promise.

In closing, I am most grateful to Martina Horáková who has been a wonderful co-editor. Martina and I managed the majority of the peer reviews together, seeking reviewers from both Australia and Europe for each article. Martina proved to be a most valuable sounding board and I am most grateful for her assistance. It is very gratifying to work

with a scholar who has such a high level engagement with Australian literature as Martina has. Maria Elena Indelicato took on the formatting of the articles while Tilsa Guima Chinen carried out the immense task of copy-editor. Maria Elena and Tilsa, valuable researchers on the *More than family history: Race, gender and the Aboriginal family in Australian History* project, have also worked beyond the call of duty to get all the papers to the standard required for this journal. What a great effort has been put in to get this volume over the line! We hope that you the reader appreciate the freshness of these works, the innovation of the volume and the scholarship of the contributors as we do.

Works cited:

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General Editor's Note: The typescript of Jim Everett's play "We Are Survivors" is included in its original form, paginated 1-25. For the purposes of this issue of *JEASA*, these pages are considered to be pp. 9-34. Naturally, scholars may cite the typescript as they see fit.