

Into the Photo Box: An alternative way of approaching the Aboriginal family

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Abstract: Since colonization, Aboriginal families have been externally deemed to be in need of transformation under the gaze of a “civilising” state presence. Such is the pervasiveness of the demonisation of Aboriginal masculinity coupled with conceptions of flawed Aboriginal motherhood that the alternative discourses of the lived experience of Aboriginal families are ignored. This paper suggests that the current depictions of Aboriginal families must be contextualised within an understanding of the complex historical relationships that continue to be marked by both a culture of fear and also a failure to appreciate the alternative narratives on Aboriginal families that are extant with Aboriginal communities themselves. It uses the family photo box as a means of providing an alternative lens through which Aboriginal families can be viewed and juxtaposes this to the external negative discursive hegemony that has and remains a foundation for state intervention.

Keywords: Aboriginal family photographs, Bundjalung, Worimi

Introduction—the Aboriginal family and state intervention

In 2007, the Australian Prime Minister John Howard declared a state of emergency in the Northern Territory supposedly as a response to the “Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: ‘Little Children are Sacred’” report which made claims of serious child sexual abuse in many Aboriginal communities. Announcing a series of interventions by health and welfare professionals in concert with police and armed forces, the Federal government’s responses were constituted on enforcing state power, while significantly marginalizing the input of Aboriginal communities to participate in a dialogue for future community initiatives (MacDonald 118).

For Aboriginal families across Australia these measures have reinforced long-standing fears of state intervention that date from the imposition of the colonial regime to the present day. To say that the Australian federal government’s declaration of a state of emergency and suggested interventions in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory was met with concern among sections of the broader Australian Aboriginal population is an understatement (Kelada 1-11). This is not because we were unaware of the seriousness of child sex abuse in many of our communities. Indeed, this has been so well documented in the last decade and debated within our own forums that it is doubtful anyone within Aboriginal academia, politics or service provision was surprised

by the revelations of the *Little Children are Sacred* Report. What was palpable in many Aboriginal responses, apart from anger, was fear: of losing children; of ceding community autonomy; and of a new wave of public discourse constituting us and our cultures as inherently “savage” and incapable of managing our own lives. Underlying all of this was fear of the state—a deep fear commonly held by many Aboriginal families including my own.

After having lived with this fear, I first came to critically consider it in my early twenties, becoming aware of the depth of government interventions and their impacts on my own family. Much of this history is not documented but lives on in the lives and memories of the people themselves. For example, while Briscoe has detailed the practices of quarantining carried out in Queensland during the pneumonic plague pandemic that occurred after World War I, I am now aware of these segregationist measure in NSW from members of my own family. While comparing rates of infection and death Briscoe notes that:

[t]he difference for the Aboriginal victims of influenza was that, unlike the whites, they were taken to disease compounds on the government depots, fenced areas resembling huge wire cages built with 9-metre high wire mesh fence and topped with barbed wire to prevent entry and escape ... These compounds, constructed earlier as places for punishing people infected with venereal disease, were now utilised to isolate the influenza victims from the other relief depot inmates (Briscoe 271).

While I was impacted by the horror of this image in general, it occurred to me that similar efforts at containment may have occurred for Bundjalung peoples in northern New South Wales. I had noted in a number of areas that Bundjalung experiences often mirrored Queensland models rather than conforming to New South Wales directives. When in 1994 I spent time with my elderly great-Aunts in Casino, my mother and I were sitting at the kitchen table talking over family history with Auntie Gertie and Auntie Esther, born in 1911 and 1921 respectively. As Auntie Gertie talked over memories of her childhood I was prompted to ask her if she remembered the “big flu” after World War 1. “Yes”, she said, “that was the pneumonic flu”. The use of this specific terminology alerted me that she was probably referring to the pandemic identified by Briscoe. She stared down at her clasped hands for a moment and then began to tell her story:

When that flu came they rounded up all the Aboriginal people and put them in the [Casino] showground. On one side was the healthy people and on the other side was the sick ones. Every day the doctor would come round and look at everyone and decide who had to go. If you went over to the other side you didn't come back. One day the doctor looked at Pete [my grandfather], he was only a little fella then, and said he had to go. Our Auntie, Auntie Bella Walker stood up to that doctor and said “No you're not takin' him” and he went away. That saved his life you know because he would have died if that doctor took him. Mum lost a baby—that was our little brother (Butler 203).

I was twenty-two when I heard that story, but it has taken until now for me to clearly

articulate the ramifications of it for me in both a personal and professional sense. Initially, the emotion was too raw to express, a lost child, brother and uncle, but also trying to place the piece of a puzzle. It is important therefore to acknowledge that emotion plays a part in my research (Strestha 1-9). There is no doubt in my mind that the experience of the pneumonic flu was a major factor in the inculcation of terror that the older members of my family exhibited in relation to hospitals and doctors specifically and state intervention in general. The government and professionals considered its agents such as doctors were rendered with so much power as to sometimes be considered almost omniscient. For my grandparents' generation this was expressed in a mantra that "you never know what the government is going to do. They can do anything to us". I had thought I understood the genesis of this belief; however, I am aware that when we hear oral family histories they are incomplete. We cannot know every experience of our Old People, even where we know their actions. We may not know their motivation. Indeed they may not have consciously comprehended their motivation either. What comes to us is a refined notion—a "truth" for us to internalize.

Aunty Gertie lived to ninety, and for eight decades she carried with her the sure and certain knowledge that when, not if, governments chose to reassert their control of Aboriginal lives we would be powerless to stop them. Many of the "truths" she told me have been beautiful and empowering. This one is the saddest. So I shall leave objectifying the Aboriginal situation to others who can label and statistically quantify the extent of our dysfunction for the army of professionals waiting to intervene. In contrast, my perspective will be with other Aboriginal academics and like-minded scholars who see that "figures are not just numbers; they reflect the lives and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people" (Behrendt 3).

This paper is by way of talking back to this ongoing state intervention from within my own family and community knowledges. It is divided into three sections. Initially, it provides a reflective consideration of my own position as I am vitally aware that being from an Aboriginal family living within a colonial regime impacts on my wellbeing and my consciousness. I have deliberately centralized this reflexivity rather than censor myself and move it to the periphery. The second part of the paper briefly sketches a number of historical contexts to provide the public context that my discussion of the private can be juxtaposed. Finally, the paper shifts back to the reflexive, providing the alternative ways that my family perceived masculinity, femininity and "violence". As an Aboriginal academic I make it a practice to provide a personal anecdote as a means of contextualizing my approach to Aboriginal issues. This position is consistent with many other Aboriginal intellectuals who seek to honor our elders and oral history traditions (Dei 6). It does not reflect a self-obsession, but rather is an important expression of our right to self-determination and expression from within an Aboriginal epistemology. This is an approach that is unapologetically subjective, where "Aboriginal people are neither victims nor problems" (D'Souza 44), but social and political actors struggling against material, philosophical disadvantage and epistemological violence.

The public historical perspective—what they think of us

Since 1788, the Aboriginal family has been seen as a site to be transformed into the image of White civility, where assistance is conditional on conformity. This perspective was true of many of the Christian missionaries who distributed goods and offered shelter on the condition of the surrender of the soul, claimed for God and sovereign

from the depths of depravity. As the nineteenth century progressed Christian missionary initiatives received more power as an apparatus of state controlled infrastructure (Gray 58). The linkage of church and state institutionalized not only Christian morality but led to the panoptic usage of techniques to reform Aboriginal cultures at macro-social levels as well as acting on individual bodies. While it would be possible to theorize on the ways in which these practices developed exclusively on the Australian continent, they are in fact part of the broader processes of Western governmentality that have been examined by Western scholarship (Kelada 5). It is therefore possible to engage with wider intellectual traditions, while still providing the specificity of our particular experiences. For example, Foucault writes:

[t]ake the example of philanthropy in the early nineteenth century: people appear who make it their business to involve themselves in other people's lives, health, nutrition, housing; then, out of this confused set of functions there emerge certain personages, institutions, forms of knowledge: public hygiene, inspectors, social workers, psychologists. And we are now seeing a whole proliferation of different categories of social work. Naturally it's medicine which has played the basic role as the common denominator. Its discourse circulated from one instance to the next. It was in the name of medicine both that people came to inspect the layout of houses and, equally, that they classified individuals as insane, criminal, or sick (Foucault 62).

This reflects the Aboriginal Australian experience. Even a cursory examination of the missions and reserves developed under various Protection legislations reveals an underlying medical model as the professional justification for intervention into family life, from the dispersal of town camps to the inspection of homes on the grounds of hygiene; the monitoring of sexuality; and the pathologizing of Aboriginal cultures. When linked to the Christian moral imperative, the Aboriginal body became defined as a site of physical and spiritual malaise that necessitates external regulation for transformation to health and order. Indeed, following Foucault's template, Beckett has argued that the extent of attempts to regulate the Aboriginal body reflects a level of control that only the orphan and insane are subject to (7). Note however, that the other two categories are not essentialised from birth, but emerge through time and supposed behavioral offence against either the ordered normality or morality. In contrast, for Aboriginal Australians the panoptic gaze is activated by the mere identification of the Aboriginal subject, who by virtue of their racial (read biological) type is deemed intrinsically in need of intervention, surveillance and control (Kelada 5).

Of the sexual abuse of Aboriginal children, there have been undeniably dire reports. One documented endemic child abuse to impoverished and disempowered girls, a shocking incidence of underage girls infected with sexually transmitted disease, and high levels of teen pregnancy. Despite the haunting similarity to the current situation these are the findings of a Queensland Inquiry over one hundred years ago! These historical reports found, however, that the abusers of these Aboriginal girls were not from their own culture and kin networks, but rather White men, in positions of power through the placement of Aboriginal girls as domestic labor. The female witnesses to their subjugation were not the Aboriginal mothers and grandmothers, but their White mistresses (Kidd 99-128). I make this point, not to indulge in a simplistic shift of blame, but rather to problematise the Black/White dichotomy that is demonizing Aboriginal

families as intrinsically abusive and empowering White authority as the objective arbiters for change. The realities are far more complex.

Differing forms of violence within Aboriginal families are multi-generational, as is government knowledge of its occurrence. The current situation is not a failure specific to the Howard or Gillard Federal governments, but a long-standing issue that has been poorly addressed across federal and state domains by all political parties. Aboriginal concerns that no positive action will be taken in response to this particular cycle of reportage cannot therefore be viewed as unfounded. Given that the historical legacy of child abuse is well documented, the multi-generational cycles must be recognized. Further, these must be viewed through the lens of both micro and macro analysis. For many Aboriginal people, fear, powerlessness and shame associated with the individual experience of abuse are mirrored in the macro relations with the state. Some Aboriginal peoples are not simply fearful of perpetrators and reprisals (Summers 108-9), but of the processes of reportage to police or welfare authorities and the actions that they might take. Powerlessness to stop abuse, to protect children, to leave violent and violating situations, is increased when the mainstream society is also perceived as threatening. Shame too is multifaceted—whether linked to the abuse itself, to doubts one will be believed or to the negative perceptions that will accrue against Aboriginal communities and families (Stanley 5).

With these dilemmas in mind, my task here is to challenge the tendency in the historical and contemporary media representations of Aboriginal families (Anderson and Perrin 150) where the savagery of Aboriginal communities is constructed to reinforce the Hobbesian dogma that their lives will be “nasty, brutish and short”. In a 2007 interview Prime Minister John Howard reinforced this view, saying:

What we have got to do is confront the fact that these communities have broken down. The basic elements of a civilised society don't exist. What civilised society would allow children from a tender age to become objects of sexual abuse? (qtd in Dawson 8).

The alarming trends of domestic violence and sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities that have emerged within the last decade are often assigned as predicating the need for Aboriginal culture to subside, harking back to the colonial tropes that decried the need for Aboriginal women and children to be emancipated from the savagery of Aboriginal masculinity (Lake 86-7). That domestic violence and sexual abuse occur across every sector of mainstream society and are widely regarded as under-reported goes unnoticed in this discourse. Moreover, that issues of alienation and dispossession act as strong causal factors in substance abuse and all forms of violence is virtually ignored despite being supported in the findings of Wild and Anderson's *Little Children are Sacred* report.

In a climate of Aboriginal denigration, how does one present alternatives? We are consistently placed in positions of significant tension where Aboriginal disadvantage is juxtaposed with stereotypes of “welfare bludging” (Behrendt 6). The common sense wisdom that the extended family is important to Aboriginal people is undermined as elders, particularly men, are seen as either weak or predatory. In the early twentieth century, the feminist Bessie Rischbieth suggested that the “system should be improved

in order that [Aboriginal parents] might keep their children” (Paisley), yet the removal of Aboriginal children to boarding school and care is (re)presented as being in the “best interests of the child”. Adherence to Aboriginal culture is seen as central to “authenticity”, but culture is seen as a drawback from full economic citizenship.

It is important to recognise that for many people Aboriginal families continue to provide culturally stable frameworks from which individuals are emerging to positions of leadership within their families and communities. It is moreover important to tell the stories of elders who have nurtured and continue to nurture the youth of their communities (Collard and Palmer 27). Thus, without denying the presence of unacceptable forms of violence within some Aboriginal families and communities, this paper now turns to a very different way that the Aboriginal family can be explored—the artifact of the family photo box.

The Photo Box—what we know about ourselves

As a student, I remember being perplexed at the representation of Aboriginal family lives, the complex diagrams charting kinship and the generally sterile analysis of familial social relations. These bore no resemblance to my lived experience as an Aboriginal person, nor to my family and communities. Many of the academic works I was reading represent urban identity as undifferentiated, homogenized under the subsuming category of “Aborigine” (Anderson and Jacobs 150; Rowse 180). In my grandparents’ lives nothing could have been further from the truth. In fact, my grandparents can be seen to have a highly developed multilayered consciousness in terms of their place in their Aboriginal community. These layers began with family or kin-based sociality and expanded to specific place of origin (Casino for my grandfather and Karuah/Soldiers Point for my grandmother); membership of the same “tribe” or nation; peoples from coastal New South Wales and then moving out to eventually encompass a national Aboriginality.

The use of photographs of Aboriginal Australians by academics has historically tended to focus predominantly on images taken by mainstream photographers which generally have one of two aims, to make the subject appear more different/exotic, or to record the success of the colonial “civilising” imperative (Lidichi 156). It is analyses such as these that have contributed strongly to the development of public discourse on the constitution of Aboriginality (Russell 1-26).

More recently these depictions have been challenged by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics, clearly naming them as intimately linked to legitimizing the colonising process and the disempowerment of Aboriginal peoples (Maxwell 10; Russell 125-130). For instance, in her article, “Photos in Wiradjuri Biscuit Tins: Negotiating Relatedness and Validating Colonial Histories” Gaynor McDonald introduces a number of relevant issues in the consideration of the importance of family photographs to Aboriginal families, claiming:

[t]ins, cardboard boxes and albums hold one of the most prized and jealously guarded of all Wiradjuri Aboriginal “material” possessions, the family photos. They are used to tell and recall stories, introduce people to kin, as items of exchange and as important statements of identity and belonging in the spatial and temporal politics of kinship (McDonald 225).

Prior to reading McDonald's analysis I had already commenced my own study of the family photographs my mother inherited from her parents. It is not a coincidence that these were stored in a cardboard box! Indeed each feature, which McDonald identifies as salient to her analysis of the Wiradjuri photographs, was applicable to my study as well. It is interesting to note that this analysis has a pan-Aboriginal relevance as well as representing a specific Aboriginal cohort. Beyond this, however, is a cross-cultural similarity, where women's function as family archivists has in many cases been expanded to the ritualized guardianship of the family photographs and other "domestic" artefacts. These are however often dismissed as trivial, but are in fact a rich source of ethnographic data, particularly if they remain linked to an oral tradition (Nugent 145-6). The power contained within these artefacts is noted by the granddaughter of Manning and Dymphna Clark. In a public lecture dedicated to her grandmother, Anna Clark likens ways of valuing national narratives to Dymphna's family box and notes:

The box makes me think of series of lives: ... Partly these women's lives were lived in the background, but they left traces visible enough if you look for them. This isn't a relic from the past. It is the past—just as it will go on and take bits and pieces from me and then from my descendents (2).

I make the claim therefore that the artefact of the family photograph should be recognized as a legitimate site of intellectual consideration. In particular, I believe photographs are useful to illuminate my kinship sociality, support claims of cultural continuity and evidence the pan-Aboriginal networks that had emerged. It is an approach that is also useful in contextualising the major source of literature on inner city life in Sydney, the work of Ruby Langford Ginibi. An example of this can be seen in the following short analysis of *Don't Take Your Love To Town*.

After Ruby's father, moved the family to Sydney, Ruby began work as a machinist in a clothing factory. With her growing economic independence came the ability to participate in Aboriginal social functions, and Ruby recounts incidents of Aboriginal Balls, picnics to the national park, dances, night meetings at the AIM (Aboriginal Inland Mission) and others. It is at one of these functions that she sees her mother again "looking dressed up and very beautiful as she was then" (48). Several months later, she sees her mother on the street "[s]he was on her own, and loaded up with shopping in string bags. I stopped and watched her. She was a solid-built tall woman, and she had waist-length black hair tied back in a ribbon. Everything matched, she was stylishly dressed" (52).

This reminds me of a photograph of Ruby's mother, Evelyn Webb, with her sister in law, my Grandmother, Beryl Webb. It is contemporaneous to the period of which Ruby is writing and challenges many of the dominant understandings of the urban Aboriginal situation. Yet this sense of fashion and style is missing from the majority of the dominant representations of urban Aborigines. Images such as this do not depict Aboriginal women as the impoverished, in need of welfare intervention. Nor should they be read as sanitized assimilationist representations trumpeting the success of welfare intervention. The photographs provide evidence that many Aboriginal women were influenced by and modified the fashion trends of their day. Contemporaneously, there is still a strong sense of fashion evident in the inner city Aboriginal community.

This includes the youth fashion drawn from the United States, which is sports label conscious, and the sharply dressed members of Aboriginal broadcasting and arts (Mudrooroo 146-7). Ignoring these forms of identity expression in favour of the “culture of poverty” explanations denies a rich and vibrant tradition (Walter 7).

Many of the photos taken vary in quality from small somewhat blurred images taken in private, to professional photographs from weddings and studio stills of Aboriginal sportsmen. All of these are important to record, not simply because of the value attached to them by the individual who collected them but because they form artefacts in the recitation of her oral history (see McDonald 225-8; McKenzie 865-6). As I am writing this I can picture my Grandmother and her sisters-in law as they looked at these photographs. It is not possible for words to capture all of the nuances of this process for an outsider but it is necessary to try because they are an integral part of how these stories were told to me and of how I will tell them to my children. As Fleming suggests “the evocation of memory is a performative act” (16). Am I objective in the telling? Absolutely not, nor do I wish to be. The emotion, the connectedness, and the ownership of the author add richness and a texture the narrative. To choose to omit these aspects would amount to a self-regulation of the colonised. Instead, what we need to do is:

to write our stories in our own voices and to create our own images of ourselves. When we do not, others write our stories for us, and we are in danger of accepting the images others have painted of us (Chiu 43).

Of these types of photographs, one that stands out most in my memory is a small photograph of my grandmother herself at Soldiers Point, around the time she met my grandfather. Dressed in a long white gown, her black hair reaches to her waist and she has a flower tucked behind one ear. Long after Nan had died, my grandfather came to live with us. In going through the photos he was moved to discover this image of so long ago and began carrying it in his wallet. As he slowly descended to dementia he confided to my future husband, showing this photo, that he had “a little girl from Karuah waiting for him”. When he died several years later, recalling his reaction to that photo I mentioned it in his eulogy. In this way movement from the private appreciation of the family photograph to the public affirmation of the lives of our Old People is illustrated, as is the link between the temporal and the sacred.

Just as the photographs of well-dressed Aboriginal women challenge the perception of Aboriginal femininity, others form the rare positive depiction of Aboriginal masculinity. For the working class men of my Grandfather’s generation, the ability to fight was one of the most significant aspects in the construction of Aboriginal masculinity. My grandfather had done some boxing in the army and was considered with his brothers to be a good fighter. The three Webb brothers (Rube, Eddie and Peter) drank at the pub called the “leven” (Eleven). On one occasion when there was brawl, my mother remembers her father running home to tape his hands then running back to join the fight. On another occasion, the Webb brothers were cornered in a pub when a group of men locked the doors to challenge them to a fight. Coming home victorious, but confident that their fight would be undiscovered by the women, my Grandfather was caught out by two things: he couldn’t stop giggling and there was a button missing from his shirt.

In contrast to the stereotype of unrestrained violence, the “fight” within many Aboriginal societies is an integral aspect of the performance of Aboriginal Identity, drawing on kinship networks, often marginally related to specific incidents but rather an amalgamation of long standing tensions (McDonald 230). In another incident recounted in my family’s oral history, one Bundjalung man called “All in, all in” as an exhortation to other Bundjalung men to participate in what was seen as a righteous dispute between two different “tribal” groups. As noted by a number of authors, the fight is only legitimate if it occurs in public, preferably with an audience (Langton 212; McDonald 230-2). As also noted by Langton, the public nature of the fight often places it within a different gaze, that of the predominantly non-Aboriginal police who rupture the ritualised nature of the fight “at various stages in the process of conflict resolution between two individual or between two groups, treating a legal process of one society as an illegal process in their own society” (212). As such, the police gaze recognises the Aboriginal fight as a site to which they must restore order, rather than a structured response to conflict where their intervention is perceived as a wrong. Both their intervention and their moral authority to do so are often challenged either through physical or verbal retaliations, where although Aboriginal people know themselves to be legally disempowered it may be viewed amongst the group as a “field of moral critique and honour” (Cowlshaw 67).

That police may use excessive force when arresting Aboriginal people, or swear themselves while charging Aboriginal people for the same, are seen as a further justification of the perception that they lack moral authority. One means of circumventing police interference is through the formalisation of the fight in boxing. As with many marginalised peoples, although endowed with many of the same attributes of the community-based fight, boxing was also perceived a means through which poverty could be transcended (Broome and Jackomos 171). In the academy, however, white writing often derides boxing using terms laden with racist undertones such as “primitive” and “savage”. Fanon comments that in this way Black men elicit the following: “biology, penis, strong athletic, potent, boxer ... savage, animal, devil, sin (Mohanram 54).

Like many Aboriginal people of their generation, my grandparents avidly followed the boxing, ranging from tent boxing to amateur and professional bouts. While they generally supported all Aboriginal boxers, those to whom they had a connection, through either kin or country, were regarded with particular favour. Two of these were Dave Sands and Tony Mundine. Tony Mundine was a Bundjalung man like my Grandfather, and Dave Sands was a member of the Ritchie family and cousin to my grandmother’s family the Russells (Ramsland and Mooney Chapter 4; Tatz 51). My grandmother’s brothers and my grandfather were mates of Dave too. One of the studio stills in Nan’s box shows Dave Sands in boxing pose.

On the back is written, “Admit one, Saturday 10am”. This was used for free entry to the boxing and then was filed away at home. However, not all memories evoked in the photo box were happy. With this picture, my Grandmother had saved a page of an old *Dawn* magazine that showed a picture of the memorial to Dave at Stockton under the heading “They did not forget”. When she would smooth out the folds of this page, her hands would tremble a little and she would always tell the story of his death in an accident the same way, how one of her brothers and two other men walked away from

the truck unscathed while Dave was killed instantly. A breath, a sigh and then the comment “It must have been meant to be”. The paper would then be refolded and placed gently away.

As an adult I read the repetition of actions, voice and emotion in the way she did this as “ritual” and it is in part because of its consistency and rhythm that I can clearly remember the story. The image and its connected narrative show that “the structure of knowledge is part of the message, and indeed may be a significant and enduring aspect of the knowledge system” (Bird Rose 96). For Aboriginal people or for non-Aboriginal academics such as Stephen Muecke these narrative forms and as such the knowledge that they contain are more often dismissed as “trivial or superficial” (Muecke 42). With regard to the Dave Sands article, it is not in pristine condition, yet it physically embodies over fifty years of viewing. It is a testament to remembrance of a family’s Dreaming in which the dead are structurally reconstituted as part of the present, and of how oral history enfranchises itself across generations.

What should be taken from these examples is the understanding that there are a myriad of ways in which Aboriginal people ascribe different meanings and values that are not visible generally to the White gaze. In contrast, this White gaze is conditioned to notice only those socio-cultural features conditioned by an externally ascribed Aboriginalism (Anderson and Perrin 149). These illustrations of my own family history are not unique, but rather mirror many Aboriginal families and research with or by them (Nugent 45). They involve the minutiae of Aboriginal family life, a life haunted by a spectre of an intervening state, but in many ways still happy, fulfilled and structured according to hybrid cultural traditions. We continue to live with the debilitating effects of the state assuming responsibility for fixing the “Aboriginal problem” while attempting to silence Aboriginal voices. Part of the struggle in which we are engaged is to self-determine whose standards of Aboriginality we are living up to. Is it that of our elders or that of an external state/media coalition that perceives and represents it via deficit models alone? Further, we remain within a “raced” framework that inculcates fear, needing to provide discourses that will strengthen our communities and provide safe environments for children without ceding our cultural integrity. It is important that we do not allow ourselves to be spoken of and not with.

The achievement of economic independence, cultural autonomy and healthy families need not be seen as mutually exclusive. It is not possible for this to occur without a clear recognition of the past in contributing to the present and of the failure of both Black and White responses to address inequality. The remembrance of history remains central to Aboriginal Australian families and to shaping responses to external relations with the Australian nation state. The late Oodgeroo Noonucal appreciated the centrality of the historical experiences of Aboriginal people in our contemporary lives. She wrote:

Let no one say the past is dead.
The past is all about us and within.
Haunted by tribal memories, I know
This little now, this accidental present
Is not the all of me, whose long making
Is so much of the past...
Let none tell me the past is wholly gone.

Now is so small a part of time, so small a part
Of all the race years that have moulded me (Noonucal 256-7).

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