

Stories from the Aboriginal Women of the Yarning Circle: When Cultures Collide

For me and many of the women in my family, our mothers and grandmothers, sisters and aunties, I often think of them and what history has done to them. Despite all of their efforts to give us a good life, they were forced into positions and subjected to great inhumanities. The greatest inhumanity that I know the women in my family experienced, was the way they were treated as mothers, *Bessie*.

In recent times, a number of women's groups have invited us to speak about our experiences in relation to *the family*. Interestingly, one of the most prominent topics on which we have been encouraged to speak has been that of the *dysfunction* of Aboriginal families. While to some extent this might be justified, given some of the content and findings in our report, 'Young Aboriginal Females reported Missing to Police: Which Way for Service and Prevention',¹ it appears that this call to name Aboriginal families as *dysfunctional* arises out of a need, by some, to disavow the real life experiences of Aboriginal families following colonisation. It may be a response to the *Bringing Them Home* Report, which saw a political shift within the white patriarchal state whereby the emphasis on injustice towards Aboriginal Australians gave way to a focus on what is wrong with Aboriginal families and culture.² It might also be an attempt, on the part of some, to reiterate the (early second-wave) notion that women share a common identity and experience arising out of their positioning in society — as sisters and, in the family, as mothers.

It is our understanding that, traditionally, white women's groups have fought against patriarchy's oppression and the constraints of the state, for women's right to vote; women's right to education; women's right to own property; women's right to the public sphere; women's right to sexual freedoms; women's right to contraception; women's right to abortion; women's right to... However, the ideological underpinnings of feminism's championing of women's right to challenge men's wrongs, failed to acknowledge that their use of the term *women* did not, and does not, speak to, or for, the experiences of all women. Such acknowledgment would recognise that the feminist agenda, perhaps inadvertently, excused, as it subsumed, the real life experiences of Aboriginal women, such as *Bessie*.

This article comes out of, and is based on, stories shared at a recent yarning circle. In developing this paper, the authors acknowledge that the issues raised might not apply to all Aboriginal women. We acknowledge that there are many Aboriginal women who have shared loving relationships with non-Aboriginal men and given birth as a result of those relationships. However, it is critical to raise for discussion issues that have been prevalent in the lives of many of our women, who have had their children removed and who have been denied their right to be mothers. We acknowledge those women and our mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunties, and daughters — those that have gone before us, those that are present, and those yet to come — to focus this paper on how *mother* is articulated, constructed and made meaningful by, and for, the Aboriginal women of the yarning circle. We recognise that each Aboriginal woman has her own experience of what *mother* might mean, and we understand that there may be elements or aspects within these stories that have meaning for *others*.

The yarning circle

The yarning circle, as it is referred to, was made up of a group of Aboriginal women, and includes the voices of Aboriginal stolen-women and those finding their way home — those who continue to search for their mothers and a land that is theirs. We have found that, quite often, when Aboriginal women come together to share, they disclose experiences and knowledges that speak to, and of, the secret, the spiritual, and the sacred. We acknowledge the cultural mores, lores, and spiritual essence governing the ownership and protection of certain private information and, with respect and humility, present only that which is able to be shared publicly.

In this written work, we take guidance and direction from the Aboriginal women of the yarning circle. We acknowledge their stories to be the point of reference for our written work and understanding of *Aboriginal mother*, including who gets to be an *Aboriginal mother*, and in what ways, and what that might mean at different points in different histories. We interweave the stories of the Aboriginal women of the yarning circle with existing Aboriginal women's and other's writings. In doing so, we seek to understand what it might mean when cultures collide as a means by which we move beyond the plight of the many Aboriginal women who continue to ask, *Why can't I be a mother?*

Stories of the yarnning circle

According to the women of the yarnning circle, family framed Aboriginal life. The family comprised a(ny) number of members, whose nature determined the core of women as mothers and men as fathers, all of whom were of significance in the lives of their children — the nucleus of the family — as the women of the yarnning circle reminisce:

When I was young I used to go with mum, grannie and aunties hunting. They would teach us how to pick the right foods: lily roots, wild plums and other fruits. Sometimes we used to go with dad too, and sometimes my uncle and mum's dad would come along. We didn't do everything together, but when we were little we felt happy and loved — all the family together, *Aunty Beryl*.

I always remember mum chasing us up to get us ready for bed. Every night, dad will tell us a story, about his dad or why we wasn't to go down to the waterhole in the dark. The way he used to tell us those stories was like it was real, happening; he was a real good storyteller. It'd be mum who'd tell us to get to sleep. She told us what to do, not dad, *Liz*.

As Aunty Beryl and Liz indicate, families provided security, protection, love and discipline to members, contributing to the cohesion of the group as an entity, and to the community as a whole.

In their stories, the women of the yarnning circle explain that there are differences between women and men, which are determined by the body. These differences inscribe spiritual and social meaning into, onto, and unto the body, producing the social relations between women and men — the spiritual and social roles ascribed to women and men in the social order. While women's and men's roles were different, they were of equal significance, importance, value, and worth to nature, society, and the sacred elements of The Dreaming. Within that social order, there was no concept or notion of hierarchising of the sexes, no privileging of one sex over the other. Rather, there are sets of descriptions that can be applied to the roles of women and men and the integral positions that they hold, as *Shirl* explains:

Some think that our women are bossed by our men, but being a mother and grandmother is very important in our communities. Men don't have babies and they need women to take care of them, and grow them strong. Our men have their own ways in The Dreaming, different to us. They have corroboree and ceremonies, and ways we don't know; men's business. We know

what we have to do, we have our women ways. We never speak their business. That'd be shame, *Shirl*.

So, it is by virtue of the specificities of the body that a woman's body bestows certain privileges upon her; privileges that could only ever be known or experienced by other women. Women's privileges were secret, spiritual and sacred, and taboo to men. They incorporated daily, cyclical, and ritual experiences that were articulated, owned, and shared as the private business of women and, as such, practised and passed on, and down, from woman to woman. The role of mothers in this process was critical, while the passing on, and down, of traditional knowledges sees senior women elected to the role of Elder, which brings with it specific responsibilities for care of country, the protection of knowledge, and the provision of guidance and direction on matters pertaining to one's particular clan. Although women's business cannot be explicitly discussed, what can be said is that it provides a cultural, social and spiritual haven for women, one that embraces and valorises women as mothers.

According to the women of the yarnning circle, mothers are held in esteem and reverence in their communities. The mother is not necessarily the biological mother, but grandmothers, aunties, sisters, cousins, nieces, all women assume the role and responsibilities of mothering a child of their community.³ All mothers are the carers of children, regardless of whether or not they have been the bearers of children, as Bessie explains:

In our communities, all women are mothers. You take care of your sister's babies. I did the same. I grew up my sister's babies, and my sister grew up two of our cousins' babies. That's what it means to be kin and community, *Bessie*.

In these Aboriginal families, mothers are teachers, nurturers, and are integral to the kinship system that binds communities, and culturally and spiritually links individual, environment, and land. In Ruby Langford Ginibi's travels back to her Bundjalung country, she writes:

I attended an Indigenous women's conference in Adelaide recently and I've also been to America and spent time with various native American Indian communities including the Navajo, Hopi and Denit. I talked to the women and learned that the American Indians and Aboriginal people share one thing in common: we come from the earth and will always have close links with it. The land which looks after us is our mother, is central to our spirituality, culture and survival. In the old ways there was no such thing as male oppression of women because

that would have hindered survival — there was no profit in it because you couldn't own your mother earth.⁴

More than 500 linguistically, culturally, and spiritually diverse Aboriginal groups had lived on the continent for approximately 60,000 years, with political, legal, economic, and social infrastructure in place. But, then, the colonisers came, armed with the most oppressive of ways. Guided and motivated by imperialist (ir)rationality for the acquisition of land to expand *mother* England, the colonisers reported that the continent was unoccupied; an expanse of territory without settled inhabitants or settled law. And, in colonising mode, they declared the country *no man's land*.

In the words of Justice Michael Kirby:

A charitable interpretation of the relationship between the Australian system post-1788 and the Indigenous Aboriginal people of the continent is that it is a tale of indifference and neglect. A less charitable interpretation is that it represents a cruel assertion of power: sometimes deliberate, sometimes mindless, resulting in the destruction of Aboriginal culture, unparallel rates of criminal conviction and imprisonment and massive deprivation of property and land.⁵

This is because, in the years that followed invasion, government rhetoric promoted nation-building — the business of white men. Nation-building led to laws, policies, and practices that subjected Aboriginal people to the most atrocious policing, regulating, and surveilling practices in an all-out attempt to eradicate the Indigenous races.⁶ As Jackie Huggins and Thom Blake state:

Remnants of tribes and clans were forcibly removed and placed under the control of either colonial governments or missionary organisations. Aborigines were deliberately and systematically cut off from their traditional way of life and forced to conform to a dependant European lifestyle. Traditional customs and practices such as languages, corroborees, ceremonies, religious beliefs and marriage laws were regarded as 'heathen' or 'primitive' and were strongly discouraged or condemned.⁷

As Judy Atkinson states:

...the invaders saw two things of value — the land and the women. One was seized for permanent possession; the other was used and discarded. One was not negotiable, the other was.⁸

While 'it is undisputable that Aboriginal women's role in the post-frontier has been ignored by histories',⁹ there are many examples of the ways in which Aboriginal women were conceptualised and sexualised. For instance, in a 1934 report to

the South Australian Royal Commission, a pastoralist from the edge of the Nullabor Plains stated that he knew of stations 'where every hand on the place had a *gin*, even down to boys of 15 years of age...'¹⁰

It goes without saying that the statement above reveals much about the social categories constructed and imposed on Aboriginal women by white men in the culture of colonisation. While we acknowledge that some Aboriginal women experienced loving, caring, ongoing relationships with white men, we understand that the pastoralist's use of the pejorative term '*gin*' to refer to, and objectify, Aboriginal women shows that within and through those discursive meaning systems many Aboriginal women were disempowered, denigrated, and deprecated by white men, who felt it their legitimate right to possess, rape, and abuse Aboriginal women. Used and discarded, Aboriginal women were further subjected to the advances and abuses of any and every white man, who desired a piece of 'black velvet'; a term that Langford Ginibi explains was used to sexualise and fetishise Aboriginal women's private bodies.¹¹ As *Ruth* explains:

There are too many stories about rape and abuse of our women by white fellas. Those dirty rotten dogs would take the young girls and do terrible things to them — some of them never recovered, other ones would be pregnant, some only 12 year old. And, those rotten dogs, they'd go off and get another young girl — some poor young one, *Ruth*.

As Behrendt puts it,

[w]hen the British invaded Australia, they murdered and mutilated the Aboriginal people. The rape of Aboriginal women, as in any war, was part of the conquest.¹²

Many Aboriginal women and young Aboriginal girls were subjected to unimaginable physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse. High numbers of Aboriginal women and girls were preyed upon, and suffered 'those dirty rotten dogs'. They were exploited by, and through a dominant rhetoric that championed, as it rationalised, the national call for white middle-class moral codes to be imposed on all women; a call for the right type of woman to reproduce the nation.

While we acknowledge that there were some white women who challenged dominant views about Aboriginal women,¹³ there were many others who ignored their plight and nurtured, instead, the development of policies that represented their own interests. In the rhetoric surrounding the debates on reproduction and the national future, we understand that middle-class morality called

for the right 'white' to reproduce; and questioned the capacity of poor, white women to mother in the way required in the national interest. We also acknowledge that there was no question concerning Aboriginal women's right to reproduce and mother their children and the children of their communities; it was completely out of the question.

While Iris Marion Young explains that 'in this society, which still often narrows women's possibilities to motherhood, the pregnant woman often finds herself looked at with approval',¹⁴ her use of the term *woman* did not, and does not, speak about the ways in which pregnant Aboriginal women would have been looked at in Australia. When Grace was little, she says that she never understood why things happened in her family and other Aboriginal families. She says:

You can't forget it — government lookin' to take us away, and no one stoppin' 'em. The parents'd be trying to 'old the kids back, and the police'd be there 'elping 'em. I saw me sister and brother taken. I'd be lying there, of a night, wonderin' when my turn'd come, *Grace*.

And Grace's turn did come; as revealed below:

I still remember, jus' like it was yesterday. My mum was good, an' I tried to tell 'em that, but they wouldn't listen. She threw 'erself in front of the car and all I could 'ear was 'er wailing, as we took off. What they did, it's with me all me life, *Grace*.

The forcible theft of Indigenous children, in the Queensland context (and in other states and territories), was enshrined in legislation that determined 'any child born of an Aboriginal or half-cast mother' to be 'a neglected child',¹⁵ and *any* child born of a woman of Aboriginal descent to be *every* child born of *every* woman of Aboriginal descent. Any person 'of Aboriginal descent' (except mixed-race males over 16 years and living as Europeans) became a ward of the state and was exiled onto a reserve. And so it is that we have stories like those above, where so many Aboriginal children were heartlessly stolen away and placed in the dormitory system on mission stations, reserves, homes and reformatories.

According to the collective conscience of the time, Aboriginality epitomised 'a rejection of people so classified as black', as Pat O'Shane has explained.¹⁶ Aboriginality epitomised neglect. Aboriginality provided legal justification for the denial of Aboriginal women's right to nurture and grow her own children and those of her community: 'The rule was that anyone at that time with white blood had to be taken away from full-blood' women.¹⁷ Yet many Aboriginal women used to perform childcare

and domestic tasks for, often, the same people who declared them unfit as mothers in their own right: 'We was allowed to take care of their kids but we wasn't allowed to keep our own', *Connie*.

Whereas Aboriginal women were seen as fit to care for and rear the children of white women, ironically they were not seen as fit to mother their own. Whereas all white women had the inherent capacity and right to be(come) mothers, this privilege was denied to Aboriginal women. It continues to be denied, as the women of the yarning circle explain:

I live in constant fear that one day it will happen to me. I fear that I might make the most innocent mistake. But it will be enough for them to justify taking my babies, simply because I made a mistake. They will put me under notification without telling me first. That is happening to our young mothers these days. It seems our women and families have had little let up from the injustices that they have experienced across generations, *Charlene*.

People seem to talk without interest about the number of our kids that were taken away and the number of our children that continue to be taken by Governments and their representatives, even today. We need to reflect on what has happened to our families and our parents whose children were forcibly taken away and we need to remember that they often did so because of sentiments that served a social purpose for others at the time. What has changed? *Nadia*.

Some thoughts

The challenges that have been taken up by advocates with a social conscience over the past thirty or forty years seemed to have ignored what happened to so many Aboriginal families when they were fighting for women's rights to... Somehow they ignored what happened to so many Aboriginal families, women and children under a system that condoned the removal of Aboriginal children, condoned the physical and sexual assault of Aboriginal women and children and ignored the genocide of Aboriginal people. They seemed to have ignored the fact that while *others* had a choice to reproduce and mother their own children, Aboriginal people were being controlled by the state and told what to do as women and as mothers.

We understand that at different points in the history of this country, a number of white women's groups have disavowed what they see as patriarchy's dichotomising of women as either good woman (asexual woman) versus bad woman (sexual woman). We

understand that a number of white women have fought for the right to challenge what they see as patriarchy's reduction of women's worth to that of their wombs, as child bearers and carers. Some have gone so far as to call on women to stop having babies as a means of disrupting the traditional, sexist roles constructed for women, by men. We understand that these women took mothering out of a private, domestic space and placed it as a key agenda item in a public debate; calling to attention white men and the State.

While we understand that some believe that women share a common identity and experience arising out of their positioning in society — as sisters and, in the family, as mothers, daughters and wives — Aileen Moreton-Robinson has explained the characteristic themes dominant in an Indigenous woman's standpoint:

sharing the legacy of dispossession, racism and sexism; resisting and replacing disparaging images of ourselves with self defined images; continuing our activism as mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters, grandmothers and community leaders...¹⁸

It is our understanding that the agendas of so many white women's groups failed to speak to, or of, the real, everyday abuses perpetrated against many Aboriginal women by large numbers of white men and the state: the genocide of Aboriginal families and communities; the rape and abuse of Aboriginal women and children; the theft of Aboriginal women and children; and the denial of Aboriginal woman's right to be mothers.

In 2005, we have the current generation stories of the Aboriginal women of the yarning circle — stories that acknowledge that the practice of punishing Aboriginal families, and particularly children and mothers, is not in the past, but is a continuum that links colonisation with that which happens to many Aboriginal families today — the continuation of a socio-political legal system that continues to police Aboriginal women and men, and to remove children, as evidenced in the high number of child protection notifications which deem Aboriginal children to be *at risk*.¹⁹ While it could be argued that many of the achievements of various white women's groups have been beneficial to all women, the dominant perceptions that are socially nurtured and politically upheld have been largely incongruent with the issues that the Aboriginal women of the yarning circle have spoken about.

The Aboriginal women of the yarning circle maintain that legal and social sanctions imposed on these Aboriginal families — women, men, and children — reveal the collisions of cultures, as

they are articulated from a position of cultural arrogance — a position which is constructed and reconstructed in legislation, policies, and practices of institutionalisation, from contemporary policing through to everyday life, and the whole gamut in between.

They talk about the stolen generation and they talk about the effects that it had on the kids, but I think about what it meant also for my mother and her mother and more recently, my sister who lost her kids to child welfare. It is every woman's right to be a mother if that is what they choose and I think that is the challenge before us, to protect our rights to be mothers, to be sisters, to be who and what we want to be, whatever that may be. I think of the common factors that may have justified the removal of our children and I can't think of anything other than prejudice and the statement that 'it is in the best interest of the children'. How can it be in their best interest, when there was nothing wrong in the way they were loved, in the way they were cared for? I am tired of hearing our women saying the same thing over and over: Why can't I be a mother? Why can't I be a mother?

And we are reminded of Nadia's words, *what has changed?*

**Boni Robertson, Catherine Demosthenous and
Hellene Demosthenous**

*We acknowledge the Aboriginal women of the yarning circle, and
thank them for sharing with us their stories from the heart.*

Notes

¹ The authors worked in collaboration to research issues in relation to the over-representation of young Aboriginal females reported missing to police. While the study found that a number of the young girls had voluntarily separated from their families due to pressures at home, we also identified a number of historic and systemic factors that contributed to the numbers of young, missing Aboriginal females. See Boni Robertson and Catherine Demosthenous, 'Young Aboriginal Females Reported Missing to Police: Which Way for Prevention and Service', *NSW Attorney General's Department*, NSW, 2004, <<http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/vs>>.

² See: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Sydney, Sterling Press, 1997.

³ Sue Atkinson and Shurlee Swain, 'A Network of Support: Mothering Across the Koorie Community in Victoria, Australia', *Women's History Review*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1999, p.220.

⁴ Ruby Langford Ginibi, *My Bundjalung People*, St. Lucia, Qld, University of Queensland Press, 1994, pp. 50–55.

⁵ Kayleen M. Hazelhurst (ed.), *Ivory Scales: Black Australia and the Law*, Sydney, New South Wales University Press, 1987, p. 15.

- ⁶ See Robertson and Demosthenous, 'Young Aboriginal Females Reported Missing', 2004.
- ⁷ Jackie Huggins and Thom Blake, 'Protection or Persecution? Gender Relations in the Era of Racial Segregation', in K. Saunders and R. Evans (eds.), *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination or Negotiation*, Sydney, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992, p. 43.
- ⁸ Judy Atkinson, 'Violence in Aboriginal Australia: Colonisation and its Impact on Gender', *Refractory Girl*, vol. 39, no. 21, 1990, p. 22.
- ⁹ J. Huggins and T. Blake, 'Protection or Persecution?' 1992, pp. 42–58.
- ¹⁰ *Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Investigate, Report, and Advise on Matters in Relation to the Condition and Treatment of Aborigines, 1934*, Transcripts of Evidence, State Archives of Western Australia, AN 537, Acc. 2922, p. 553.
- ¹¹ See Langford Ginibi, *My Bundjalung People*, 1994, p. 213.
- ¹² Larissa Behrendt, 'Aboriginal Women and the White Lies of the Feminist Movement: Implications for Aboriginal Women in Rights Discourse', *The Australian Feminist Law Journal*, vol. 1, 1993, p. 29.
- ¹³ See, for example, Gillian Cowlishaw, 'Studying Aborigines: Changing Canons in Anthropology and History', in B. Attwood and J. Arnold, *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines: Special Edition of Journal of Australian Studies*, 35, 1993, pp. 20–31.
- ¹⁴ Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991.
- ¹⁵ See the Queensland Industrial and Reformatory Schools Act and the Queensland Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, as cited in the Crime and Misconduct Commission, *Protecting Children: An Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Foster Care*, Queensland, Queensland Government, 2004, p. 226. URL: <www.cmc.qld.gov.au>.
- ¹⁶ Pat O'Shane, 'Is there any Relevance in the Women's Movement for Aboriginal Women?', *Refractory Girl*, September, 1976, p. 34.
- ¹⁷ See Oodgeroo Noonuccal (sometimes referred to as Kath Walker) in D. Poad, A. West and R. Miller, *Contact: An Australian History*, National Library of Australia, 1976, p. 139.
- ¹⁸ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Researching Whiteness: Some Reflections from an Indigenous Woman's Standpoint', *Hecate*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2003, p. 75.
- ¹⁹ Information relating to child protection notifications may be sourced from the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP), *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2003*, Canberra, Productivity Division, 2003, pp. 3.44–3.45. For an understanding of issues relating to the disadvantaged position of Aboriginal peoples in Australia, refer to our earlier work, Boni Robertson, Catherine Demosthenous and Hellene Demosthenous, 'On the Contemporary Position of Indigenous Peoples of Australia', *Electronic Journal of Sociology*, 2005, URL: <http://www.sociology.org>.