‘Between knowing and not knowing’¹: Public knowledge of the Stolen Generations

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*‘Let no one say the past is dead
The past is all about us and within’.*²

Following the publication of the *Bringing Them Home* report in 1997, the Stolen Generations has emerged as one of the most emotional and hotly debated public issues in contemporary Australia. Personal stories of removal and loss have been recounted across the country like a tragic chorus and Australians have been exhorted to join in a national process of ‘remembering’ as a symbolic way of sharing in the pain, acknowledging past wrongs and signalling ‘hope for a different and renewed future’.³ However, few Australians seem to have any memories of these past events to recollect. ‘I’m sorry I just didn’t know’, sobbed a woman at the 1997 National Adoption Conference in Perth. Her cry was echoed around the country. Historian Inga Clendinnen, speaking of policies of Aboriginal child removal in her Boyer Lectures 1999 *True Stories*, claimed ‘As for the rest of us — I didn’t know anything about the policy’.⁴

This apparent collective amnesia has left the burden of public recall to the surviving members of the Stolen Generations. Many Australians have listened sympathetically to their accounts and have earnestly sought to learn more about their experiences. However, others have been quick to question the accuracy of their memories. Some right-wing journalists, intellectuals and political leaders have claimed that removals were carried out for the children’s ‘own good’ and have denied the widespread punitive nature of official policies and practices of removal.⁵ This has served to create ‘an atmosphere of disbelief in the idea that many Aboriginal children had been

1. Visser ‘T Hooft 1973 cited in Sereny 1995: np.

2. Oodgeroo Noonuccal cited in Tatz 1997: 315.

3. Human Rights Equal Opportunity Commission press release cited in the *Times Literary Supplement* 1997, October: 5.

4. Clendinnen 1999: 68.

5. The main intellectual critics are Ron Brunton, Paddy McGuinness and Keith Windschuttle. For critical analysis of their arguments see Tatz 1999; Gould 2000; Manne 2001; Evans and Thorpe 2001.

treated unjustly'.⁶ However, few Australians have stopped to examine their own fallible memories of this past. It was a lone voice with a distinctly European accent that called out following the tearful apology at the Perth Adoption Conference, 'But how could you not know? I only came to this country in the 1970s but I knew'.

The extent and systematic nature of the practice may not have been widely understood until recent decades, however, as this retort suggests, and as this paper will demonstrate, fragmentary evidence of Aboriginal child removal has been circulating in the public arena from early colonial times to the present. Over the years this evidence has met with a peculiar kind of public blindness and practised forgetfulness that requires explanation. In his 1969 Boyer Lectures, anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner spoke of a national 'cult of forgetfulness or disremembering' and 'inattention on such a scale' that could not be explained by 'absent-mindedness':

It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple matter of forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. We have been able for so long to disremember the aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so.⁷

More recently, Raimond Gaita has argued that in the past Australians were 'often culpably ignorant of the wrong done to Aborigines because, in racist ways, they were blind to their full humanity'.⁸ The Australian public's past blindness and present amnesia concerning evidence of Aboriginal child removal are the focus of this paper. Explanations for this apparent state of 'knowing and not knowing'⁹ will be sought from studies of the Holocaust, genocide and collective historical memory. The paper does not enter into current debates over whether the forcible removal of Aboriginal children in Australia constituted genocide. Nor does it set out to draw simplistic conclusions about similarities and differences with events of the Holocaust — an endeavour that Marcia Langton recently described as 'a mistake and we urgently need to clear this up'. Langton argues:

Crimes of such enormity are not comparable in some essential ways, surely. Can't we say what these are? I am sure that at least one of them is that there are always original and special taboos. The taboo on permitting any decency towards Aboriginal people in Australia has a different psychological trajectory and historical origin from the taboo on permitting full citizenship and humanity to Jews.¹⁰

The veracity of this statement and the claim to irreducible differences in intentions, practices and outcomes are incontestable. However, this paper looks to the field of Holocaust studies for the insights generated by its long struggle with the profound question, 'But how could you not know?' These are of significance for us all.

6. Craven 2001: v.

7. Stanner 1969: 24-5.

8. Gaita 1999: 129.

9. Visser 'T Hooft 1973 cited in Sereny 1995: np.

10. Langton 2001: 1.

Seeking explanations

Historians and other researchers endeavouring to come to grips with the Stolen Generations issue have looked to various international examples and frameworks. They have made comparisons with the treatment and experiences of Indigenous children removed from their families in other settler societies, of British children sent by their governments to work in overseas colonies and of children responding to the break up of family and community during times of war.¹¹ The present vigorous debate over the finding of the *Bringing Them Home Report* 'that systems of removal of Aboriginal children in Australia constituted a form of genocide under the *Genocide Convention 1948*' has drawn on international studies of genocide.¹² Much of this research has focused on the experiences of 'victims', the nature of official policy and practice and, to a lesser extent, on the role of individual 'perpetrators'.¹³ The attitudes and actions of the 'bystanders' — the Australian public — have not yet been analysed. The linked fields of collective historical memory, genocide and political trauma can provide useful insights into this neglected area of research. Holocaust studies, in particular, yields rich insights into the issues addressed by this paper — the responses of blind acceptance, forgetting and denial demonstrated by 'bystanders'.

In Germany in the immediate post war period, allied nations intent on exposing the horrors of Jewish extermination, faced a 'blanket denial' by 'ordinary' Germans of any knowledge of the Final Solution. Even high-ranking officials such as Hitler's principal architect, Albert Speer, made this astonishing claim.¹⁴ This position solidified over the next two decades as the 'older generation [of Germans] spiritually and defensively clos[ed] ranks and feign[ed] knowing little'.¹⁵ However, their claims of ignorance were increasingly challenged during the 1960s by accumulating evidence from memories of Holocaust survivors, emerging international historical research and urgent questioning by younger generations of Germans. Nevertheless, it was not until 1983 that the Nazi extermination of the Jews was formally addressed at a meeting of international historians in Germany. From this time German governments initiated a series of programs of memorialisation in an effort to come to terms with this past. A counter campaign of carefully crafted denial had also emerged in Europe and Northern America from the 1960s. This challenged the basic tenets of the Holocaust by questioning the reliability of survivor testimonies, the stated causes for and numbers of the dead, the existence of death camps and the use of gas chambers. Shermer and Grobman note that Holocaust deniers practised a form of 'pseudohistory' — selectively picking out what suited their theories and divorcing 'their chosen details from the overall context'.¹⁶ By presenting their arguments as legitimate alternative historical interpretations they sought to make the Holocaust a 'debatable issue' and to 'sow confusion and create dissent'.¹⁷ Their aims ranged from a minimalist intention to deflate the enormity of the Holocaust and render

11. See Haebich 2000.

12. See Bradfield 1997; Tatz 1999; Gaita 1999; Manne 2001.

13. The use of the terms 'victims', 'perpetrators' and 'bystanders' reflects the terminology of genocide studies.

14. See Sereny 1995.

15. Huttenbach 2000: 216

16. Shermer and Grobman 2000: 34.

17. Huttenbach 2000: 220.

it a 'typical tragedy' of the war, to erasing it from the historical record and from human memory.¹⁸

In seeking explanations for these varied responses, Holocaust analysts have addressed the following questions. What could bystanders have known at the time? What prompted their general unquestioning acceptance of and blindness to what was going on around them? How can the processes of national forgetting and of crafted denial of these events be explained? Markusen and Charny classify all these responses as denials.¹⁹ They range them on a continuum from 'innocent denial' during and after the events based on genuine ignorance of the facts to increasing and full knowledge with deliberate denial to the 'last stage of genocide' — orchestrated campaigns of denial and even celebration and endorsement of the original violence. They argue that 'innocent denial' was more common than has been generally assumed and that this:

reflects the readiness of large numbers of people to acquiesce to and or play facilitating roles in genocide when they take place in their society, without realising or acknowledging the full meaning of the genocidal process they are tacitly or actively supporting.

Gordon Horwitz states that 'genocide cannot happen without a majority of passive bystanders'.²⁰ These denials are not merely a 'peripheral, discreditable event', but are an 'integral part of genocide'. Jean Baudrillard writes that 'forgetting the extermination is part of the extermination itself'.²¹

In his book, *Hitler's willing executioners*, Daniel Goldhagen argues that:

the vast majority of the German people ... were aware of what their government and their countrymen were doing to the Jews, assented to the measures, and, when the opportunity presented itself, lent their active support to them.²²

This extreme view has been 'roundly rejected' by other writers as having 'little resemblance to the facts of life'.²³ Public knowledge of official treatment of the Jews during the war was never complete but was obfuscated by official mechanisms of concealment and repression that glossed over the truth, prohibited discussion and criticism and concealed the more extreme actions of extermination.²⁴ Nevertheless, while most bystanders only had glimpses of the overall process, there was sufficient evidence before them of brutal and discriminatory treatment, eviction and transportation of Jewish people and even the existence of concentration camps. In *The Informed Heart* Bruno Bettelheim asserts that any German who claimed not to know about the camps also had to claim not to have read German newspapers as they were reported in propagandist terms from 1938. Horwitz points to the 'emptiness' of claims of ignorance of the camps and their deadly purpose.²⁵ Mauthausen concentration camp, for example, was adjacent to major population centres and was not only a visible part of the landscape, but

18. Huttenbach 2000: 221.

19. Markusen and Charny 1999: 159-60.

20. Horwitz 2000: 205, 216.

21. Baudrillard cited in Minow 1998: 118.

22. Goldhagen 1997 cited in Clendinnen 1998: 135.

23. Craig, G 1996 cited in Clendinnen 1998: 136.

24. Hildberg 1980: 19.

25. Horwitz 2000: 204.

was linked to local towns through its need for supplies and staff housing and entertainment. Townspeople benefited economically and were 'an active part of the camps' operation'.²⁶ Drawing on Horwitz's research, Jonathan Glover claims that local residents 'could not escape knowing'.²⁷ He provides instances of complaints about the smell, the smoke, dumps of bones, of hair escaping from chimneys and of seeing people being shot. Most were made, not out of concern for the victims, but because of the unpleasantness for local residents. Glover also describes how residents expressed their support for the cruel treatment of Jewish people through public ridiculing, attacks and even unsolicited killings of prisoners moving through their midst.

German bystanders became trapped in a spiralling process of dehumanisation of Jewish people, of distancing from them and of normalisation of this discriminatory treatment to the point where it became unremarkable and increasingly invisible to them. Some individuals and communities did speak out and refused to participate and many were arrested and executed for their actions. However, 'most people kept quiet' about the escalating violence.²⁸ They also cooperated by, for example, terminating personal relationships with Jewish friends and neighbours and boycotting Jewish businesses. Through their tacit support they affirmed and encouraged the 'perpetrators'. Staub describes how 'bystanders' became 'witnesses to events and chose to ignore them' and how their passivity was transformed into complicity.²⁹ Some remained passive out of the fear of ostracism and of official punishment, including imprisonment and execution, for failure to conform. Their responses also reflected a long-standing tradition of anti-Semitism buttressed by scientific racism and modern political anti-Semitism.³⁰ This shaped German attitudes to a group of people devalued and dehumanised by their society, historically and ever more vehemently in the present.

Goldhagen reflects on the power of this 'unique and deeply rooted German anti-Semitism' that predisposed German people to accept such discriminatory treatment:

During the Nazi period, and even long before, most Germans could no more emerge with cognitive models foreign to their society ... than they could speak fluent Romanian without ever having been exposed to it.³¹

Other writers point to more dynamic interactions between cultural and racial myths and psychological and political conditions that complicated events, responses and outcomes that predisposed individuals and groups to acceptance, non-action and ignoring the treatment of 'victims'.³² Racist propaganda endorsed by leading authority figures served to dehumanise the Jewish people and acted as a call to discriminatory action that propelled them into situations that reinforced views of their lack of humanity and justified and normalised their treatment. Socialisation and educational systems encouraged obedience and conformity and racist beliefs and behaviour. Scientific theo-

^{26.} Horwitz 2000: 205.

^{27.} Glover 1999: 379-80.

^{28.} Glover 1999: 380.

^{29.} Staub 1999: 127-8.

^{30.} Bartov 2000: 1-2.

^{31.} Goldhagen 1997: 34.

^{32.} Hirsch 1998: 132. See also Staub (1989) and Christopher Browning's (1992) detailed studies of perpetrator responses and motivations.

ries of race hygiene and eugenics provided a final rationale for a sliding scale of solutions from institutionalisation to sterilisation to extermination.³³

German denial of knowledge of the Final Solution following the war is hardly surprising. To some extent the initial collective suppression and denial reflected the fear of exposing one's self, family and friends to incrimination and prosecution.³⁴ Confronted by the horrors of what had seemed normal at the time and knowledge of the full extent of the Final Solution, individuals responded in predictable ways. They denied what had happened, sought to find 'safe' explanations and tried to push it out of their minds in a 'kind of voluntary forgetting'.³⁵ The German nation responded in similar ways. Steering a path between self-interest and reclamation and profound shock and shame, it sought to avoid responsibility and to make the nation look 'good, honest and honourable'³⁶ by embarking on a process of institutionalised forgetting. Studies of collective memory demonstrate that this process is never total in its effect. Traumatic national events may be 'silenced' but they persist in a multitude of forms and continue to re-emerge in the collective memory.³⁷ Diverse, dissenting accounts based on 'shifting histories and memories that exist between a sanctioned narrative of history and personal memory' continue to circulate 'simultaneously on varying scales and levels'.³⁸ Present concerns also shape what is remembered of the past: "remembering" is not a steady state, but rather, as Roland Barthes puts it, a "frequent waking out of forgetfulness". The past stands still, but the present moves and every generation must discover the history of its parents' generation for itself'.³⁹

Forgetting the Stolen Generations

This research sheds light on claims by the Australian public not to have known about the removal of Aboriginal children and provides insights into what they could have known at the time as well as their apparent blindness to what was happening around them. It also links this seemingly innocent state of mind to the current of denialism circulating in the public arena at present, described by Colin Tatz as 'that major tributary of forgetting, which claim[s] that there was nothing to remember in the first place'.⁴⁰

Australia has a long history of racist discriminatory treatment of Aboriginal people, buttressed by a complex set of attitudes based on scientific racism and economic self-interest that was integral to the colonial enterprise. Aboriginal cultural life was widely devalued and rejected as primitive and barbaric and irrelevant to the modern settler nation, a view that contrasted with begrudging German admiration for Jewish cultural attainment. Nevertheless, the general racist 'mind-set' in both nations promoted acceptance, tolerance and active encouragement of actions that dehumanised and distanced the Other. Aboriginal people were left to survive in conditions of abject poverty that threatened their survival and they were subjected to official policies of pro-

33. Hirsch 1998: 118.

34. Huttenbach 2000: 216.

35. Andrea Barnes cited in Minow 1998: 120.

36. Pennebaker 1997: x.

37. Marques, Paez and Serra 1997: 255.

38. Sturken 1991 cited in Darian-Smith and Hamilton 1994: 20.

39. Clendinnen 1998: 203.

40. Tatz 1997: 130.

tection, segregation, assimilation and absorption embodied in systems of punitive legislative and administrative control that would never have been tolerated for other Australians.⁴¹ In the process their unequal treatment not only became accepted as normal but also became normalised to the extent that it was rendered unremarkable, increasingly invisible and largely irrelevant to non-Aboriginal Australians. Events in Australia did not culminate in the horrors of the mass extermination camps of Nazi Germany during years of the Second World War. However, Aboriginal people in Australia's refugee camps and gulags faced for a far longer period the daily reality of starvation, disease, chronic ill health and often early death.

Public responses to the removal and institutionalisation of Aboriginal children reflect the extent to which discriminatory treatment of their communities had become unremarkable and, indeed, irrelevant to most white Australians. Australia has a long tradition of breaking up Aboriginal families through the removal of their children, stretching from earliest colonial times into the mid-twentieth century and, some would argue, into the new millennium. A combination of ruthless economic interest, assimilatory intent, racist fears and forced 'rescue' of the children drove these practices. Aboriginal families were denigrated and deemed to be 'bad environments' characterised by unhealthy living conditions and neglect of children's welfare — factors that were actually the consequences of processes of colonisation. It was widely believed that Aboriginal parents taught their children nothing useful and provided only models of immoral and destructive behaviour for their adult life.⁴² Most white Australians would have endorsed the following statement by a colonist writing to the New South Wales Board of Education in 1852:

unless the connection between the old and young is completely severed — an act repugnant at first view to all — there is, I am convinced, no human power of civilising or even perpetuating the race.⁴³

Removal of children from these environments was embedded in a system of punitive legislation, networks of institutions and rigid state control. The entrenched assumption was that the care, education and training of Aboriginal children was synonymous with taking them from their families and subjecting them to 'civilising' regimes in institutions or white homes. This was widely accepted as the norm and, indeed, as unremarkable, in official practice and in the public mind.⁴⁴ Most Australians persisted in a state of 'knowing and not knowing' or of 'innocent denial', in the face of circulating knowledge of removals and institutionalisation, of evidence in their own communities, personal encounters with removed children or their families and even protests against the system in the public arena. Indeed, while some sympathised with the grief of the mothers, most — if they thought of it at all — accepted that separation from their families was in the children's best interests. It also served the interests of the wider

⁴¹. Haebich 2000 provides detailed analysis of these processes and outcomes in all Australian states and territories.

⁴². Haebich 2000 provides a national overview of rationales for the establishment of systems of Indigenous child removal.

⁴³. Cited in Haebich 2000: 134.

⁴⁴. Haebich 2000 contains a detailed analysis of the nature and operation of systems of removal and institutionalisation of Indigenous children in all Australian states and territories.

community by removing a perceived future menace to local law and order, racial purity and economic progress.

On colonial frontiers into the early twentieth century, children were abducted from their families to become workers for colonists. In a few cases, they were 'rescued' out of paternalistic concern for their survival in harsh and often brutal frontier conditions. This practice was publicly known and unofficially condoned by colonial governments. Valued for their skills by some colonists, the children were more often exploited for their labour and treated with extreme cruelty. Public endorsement of such arrangements can be inferred from the condemnation of those few colonists who spoke out against it. Reverend John Gribble publicly accused employers in the Carnarvon district of northern Western Australia in the mid 1880s of kidnapping Aboriginal children and treating them like slaves. He was subsequently driven out of town, physically assaulted, vilified in the Perth press, rejected by his own church and finally bundled out of the colony by police under the cover of darkness.⁴⁵

Colonial governments also removed children from their families to institutions to be trained to become Christian and 'civilised'; in essence they were to become menial labourers and domestic servants for colonists or permanent residents of segregated mission settlements. Again, this practice was publicly known and was frequently discussed in the colonial press. This sometimes erupted into acrimonious debate. The Queensland government's plans, announced in 1897, to halt the unsupervised private employment of Aboriginal children in the north and to transfer the children to missions instead led to a public outcry that contributed to the forced resignation of the Chief Protector of Aborigines in 1905. Public debates at the turn of the century over the 'duty' of colonists to 'rescue' the growing number of 'near white' 'half-caste' children were less contentious but equally widely canvassed.

In most states and territories during the early decades of the twentieth century, these practices solidified into rigid systems of removal and institutionalisation of children from mixed-race families. Wide-ranging powers of removal were introduced that erased the normally sacred rights of parents and children to remain together. Further institutions were set up, most providing distinctly inferior living conditions, education and training for their young inmates. From the age of twelve or fourteen these children were sent out to work under state supervision. Policy and practice were enmeshed in a morass of principles of rescue, reform and eugenic intent so that it is difficult, even in hindsight, to infer 'intention' from what authorities said and did. Policies of 'protection' enshrined:

... contradictory but intersecting sets of philanthropic, ameliorative, punitive and even genocidal rationales ... which resulted in a convenient 'double speak' of stated humanitarian concern and agendas of segregation, assimilation, genocide and profound neglect. This mix seemed to enable everyone, from city humanitarian to brutal frontiersman, to feel comfortable with their stance and convinced that right was being done.⁴⁶

⁴⁵. Haebich 2000: 211-2.

⁴⁶. Haebich 2000: 143.

Early administrators publicly proclaimed that over 'two or three generations' the 'Aboriginal problem' would disappear, as the older generations died out and the young people were absorbed into the wider community. This took on more sinister tones in the 1920s and 30s when administrators in Western Australia and the Northern Territory adopted the policy of biological absorption, intended to erase Aboriginal physical characteristics as well as cultural practices, promising an 'ultimate solution' to the problem. This was adopted as national policy by a meeting of state and Commonwealth administrators in 1937. More enlightened policies advocating equal citizenship through social assimilation introduced in the 1950s promised an end to removals, however, they continued and indeed increased. Aggressive programs of assimilation through education, adoption and fostering of Aboriginal children by white families and the mainstreaming of child welfare failed to break the cycle. It seemed that Australians were unable to abandon the practice despite ample evidence that it did not work. In 1957 a member of the Western Australia parliament repeated the old adage:

The native problem would be solved in twenty years if young children were separated from their parents and taught the white man's way of life in mission institutions.⁴⁷

A wide range of personnel were involved in this system, including policy makers and legislators, planners and decision makers in government departments, police officers responsible for removing children and staff caring for children in institutions. While few understood the full extent and systematic nature of the processes in which they were involved, they could not have failed to perceive the discriminatory ways in which Aboriginal families and children were treated and their terrible pain at being separated. Officials frequently received emotional letters from parents begging to keep their children. An Aboriginal mother wrote the following heartfelt plea to the Protector of Aborigines in Brisbane in 1903:

I am writing to you about my little boy he has been taken away from me ... I would like to know if you would let him come back for he is only 3 year and ten months old and is too young to be taken from me if you would let me have him till his is 8 years old I am quite able to look after him respectable and send him to school when he is old enough.⁴⁸

Others witnessed the painful removals first hand. Margaret Tucker describes how the white manager and his wife responded to her removal from Moonahculla reserve school:

Mr Hill was in a situation he had never experienced before. He did not take into account that Aboriginal hearts could break with despair and helplessness, the same as any other hearts. Mrs Hill, the tears running down her cheek, made a valiant attempt to prolong our stay. ... She stood her ground, against her husband, the police and the driver of the car.⁴⁹

Following a trip by plane to remove children from Wave Hill Station in 1949, Northern Territory patrol officer, Ted Evans, wrote to his superiors complaining of the 'distressing scenes the like of which I wish never to experience again.'⁵⁰ Staff in

^{47.} Cited in Haebich 2000: 438.

^{48.} QSA A58750, 6/11/1902.

^{49.} Tucker 1977: 91-2.

institutions also witnessed the often terrible conditions in which the children were forced to live. A female worker at Carrolup Native Settlement in the southwest of Western Australia described how:

[The children] are locked up like fowls after an early tea every night, winter and summer – no light, no fire, no recreation at all – just an animal existence ... I have never seen kiddies with such dull, unhappy eyes, hang-dog expressions and surly looks. It is a veritable prison to them.⁵¹

It is true that compelling forces operated to maintain social distance between Aboriginal and other Australians. In most states and territories legislation prohibited white entry to Aboriginal camps and reserves and inter-racial sexual contacts and strictly controlled Aboriginal entry to towns and where they could camp. There were also ingrained informal mechanisms for enforcing separation and for silencing critics so that they kept 'their dinkum opinions to themselves'.⁵² While a far cry from the imprisonment and even execution that faced critics in Nazi Germany, the threats of social ostracism and even violent retaliation were powerful forces for conformity. Aboriginal administrators controlled information about their activities by monitoring press reports, enforcing rules controlling public statements by staff and screening of visitors to institutions. They reacted defensively and punitively to any outside criticism. The question that hovers in the air is not 'Why weren't we told?' — the title of a recent publication by Henry Reynolds — but 'Why didn't we know?' Processes of removal were reported and discussed in a range of public domains and were observable in the wider community for those who cared to look.

Aboriginal child removal was frequently mentioned in government documents, parliamentary debates, official reports, newspaper reports and church and mission bulletins. There is an understated normalcy in the language of these documents and debates that suggests a high level of acceptance of these practices. Child removal was linked in a seemingly casual manner to Aboriginal extinction in the following remark from the correspondence of the Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines in 1902:

As the blacks are dying out, and the Board removes the half-caste boys and girls by handing them over to the Industrials Schools Department, finality is greatly facilitated, and will, doubtless, be attained within a few years.⁵³

During the early 1900s, Queensland's Northern Protector of Aborigines, Walter Edmund Roth, listed details concerning child removals in matter of fact language in his Annual Reports:

Half-caste, about ten years, amongst the McIvor blacks. 'It is a pity to see her grow up in a camp. Could you not have her removed? I think it would be good for her if she could be taken away soon'.⁵⁴

The Chief Protector of Aborigines in South Australia, WG South, provided the following, devastating in hindsight, reply to a question in Parliament during the debate on the *Aborigines Bill 1911*:

50. Cited in Haebich 2000: 469.

51. Western Australian State Archives 752/743/1922.

52. Rose 1991: 22.

53. Cited in Chesterman and Galligan 1997: 26.

54. Queensland Government Northern Protector of Aborigines Annual Report: 11-12.

In my opinion, all half-caste and quarter-caste children, especially girls, should be considered wards of the state, and should not be left in the blacks camps after they reach the age of six years.⁵⁵

The 1929 Bleakley Report to the Federal government on the conditions of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory recommended the immediate removal of all 'mixed-race' children from Central Australia to institutions in Adelaide to be absorbed into the 'white community to which they rightly belong'.⁵⁶ In the 1930s the Commonwealth government published the following impersonal report on its treatment of 'half-caste' girls:

[They] are brought into the homes as soon as possible after reaching an age when they can be separated from their native mothers. They are reared and educated under constant medical supervision. After completion of schooling, the girls are taught domestic work, sewing and making of clothes for themselves and trousers for men. When proficient, these girls are released for employment in approved homes under strict conditions regarding general treatment, preservation of morality and general training as citizens.⁵⁷

Western Australia's Chief Protector of Aborigines blandly made the following heartless statement to the 1937 federal meeting of state and Commonwealth administrators:

Our policy is to send [the girls] out into the white community, and if the girl comes back pregnant, our rule is to keep her for two years. The child is then taken away from the mother and sometimes never sees her again. ... At the expiration of the period of two years the mother goes back to service. So that it doesn't really matter if she has half a dozen children.⁵⁸

Thirty years later the Matron of Cootamundra Aboriginal Girls Home unselfconsciously repeated well-worn stereotypes of Aboriginal families to a New South Wales government joint parliamentary committee:

... these children are not getting a natural home life, because dark people naturally only live unto the day; they do not look after tomorrow even, and very often they would be hungry and they would not get a natural life in that respect. I think they are very much better off in an institution than they would be in some of their home lives.⁵⁹

Newspaper reports also reflected this normalcy of language. During the 1960s images of Aboriginal children separated from their families became a common sight in the southern press. They included children from northern Australia sent south to boarding schools and for holidays under the Harold Blair Aboriginal Children's Project.⁶⁰ There were also reports appealing to white families to adopt or foster Aboriginal children and celebrating successful placements under headlines such as:

Susanna thrives on love

Four white children, one half caste — all happy

55. South Australian State Archives GRG 52/7.

56. Commonwealth Government 1929: 21.

57. Australian Archives (ACT) A1 1937/70.

58. Cited in Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia 1995: 173.

59. Cited in Link-Up and Wilson 1997: 76.

60. For background on the Harold Blair Project see Haebich 2000: 441-3.

She's one of the family⁶¹

The children were presented to readers in white domains with white people, with no hint of their own families or homes, apart from inferences that these were emotionally and materially barren. The message that these smiling children were available for the taking and would indeed be happier and better off living in a white world was not questioned; rather, white families responded positively to calls to billet, foster or even adopt the children.

Churches and missions were also instrumental in presenting information about removed children to the public. Their commitment to the separation of 'mixed-race' children from their families in order to transform them into Christian, 'civilised' young men and women was openly expressed in mission literature such as the *United Aborigines Messenger*:

It may be hopeless to prevent the evil of a half-caste race, but there is no need to leave the little ones without a hand held out to help and save them. They should not be allowed to remain with the camp natives. Much as we may sympathise with the mother-love of the lubras, we say that the half-caste children should be segregated from the natives before the age of five.⁶²

These appeals to save the children were closely linked to calls for donations of money, labour and prayers. Accounts of the 'rescue' and conversion of these 'tiny bits of human salvage'⁶³ gave a compelling persuasive power to mission appeals in newsletters and magazines, public lectures, addresses to mission conferences, lantern slide evenings, concerts, visits to congregations accompanied by Aboriginal children and exhibitions of their handiwork. The United Aborigines Mission also developed ideas such as the 'support system' where 'Christian friends' sent financial support and 'prayed personally for a special child'.⁶⁴

Aboriginal child removal was not a practice hidden from the wider community. It *should* have been observable to rural communities with significant Aboriginal populations in their midst. Employers of Aboriginal young people and those families who adopted and fostered Aboriginal children and their networks of family, friends and neighbours must have pondered how these children came to be in their care. Again, it seems that the practice was so 'unremarkable' that it failed to attract public attention or inquiry, unless it impacted in some way on the self-interest of local communities.

Segregation of white and black was the norm in rural communities during the first half of last century. Outside government institutions and reserves, Aboriginal people lived in camps on the outskirts of towns and were denied access to most local services, including schools and hospitals. Informal rules backed up by laws and curfews enforced by the police maintained social distance. However, these barriers were not impermeable. Employers looked to the camps for casual workers, shopkeepers sold goods to Aboriginal customers and there were covert sexual contacts with women from the camps. White townspeople may have remained largely ignorant of daily events in the camps, but they had a strong prurient interest in what happened there⁶⁵ and they

61. *Weekend Mail* (Perth), 1/2/1956.

62. *United Aborigines Messenger* 1936 cited in Rintoul 2001: 15.

63. Young 1989: 89.

64. Morgan 1985: 106.

responded quickly to any activities they saw as threatening law and order or their own health and safety.

In rural and remote areas some fathers of 'mixed-race' children were instrumental in sending their own children away.⁶⁶ There were also employers and townspeople who responded to requests by Aboriginal parents seeking their intervention to save their children from removal. In 1903 the shire clerk of Cardwell in north Queensland wrote to the Chief Protector of Aborigines on behalf of a local Aboriginal woman whose twelve year-old son had been removed to Yarrabah on the grounds of neglect:

It is an act of impossibility to prove ill treatment in this or any similar case ... [she] has raised this child as her ancestors reared children for untold centuries.⁶⁷

The editor of the *Renmark Pioneer* complained to the South Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines in 1910 that the removal of the two young sons of a local Aboriginal woman was 'an outrage' and 'a grave miscarriage of the intentions of provisions made for the protection of the aborigines of this State'.⁶⁸

However, it was more often the case that local residents were instrumental in having entire Aboriginal families and communities removed from their district, often resulting in the permanent separation of parents and children. In 1915, residents of Katanning in the southwest of Western Australia, objecting to the presence of Aboriginal children at the local state school and to Aboriginal camps on the outskirts of the town, forcibly moved the entire local Aboriginal population to a remote camping site on the Carrolup River. The government responded by setting up the Carrolup Native Settlement, an institution for the forcible segregation of Aboriginal people that was still operating in the 1960s. Like the concentration camps in Germany, the settlement became part of the local landscape, linked to the town through its reliance on the services of police, doctors, employers and businesses and the townspeople's prurient interest in events there. Town residents also had some awareness that Aboriginal children were kept in dormitories away from their parents. A local newspaper, the *Great Southern Herald*, reported in 1920:

The children numbering about 85 on the Settlement are accommodated in the compound, where buildings have been erected, including staff quarters, hospital, schoolroom, a temporary dining room of bush timber and a girls' dormitory. A boys' dormitory is now in the course of erection and when this is completed a dining room will be built.⁶⁹

The local press also reported on the temporary closure of Carrolup in 1922 due, in part, to local pressure to resume the land for farming, and the relocation of residents to Moore River Native Settlement north of Perth so that many children were further distanced from their families. If the townspeople thought much about it at all, they accepted such as best for the children, forming part of their training for life as workers

^{65.} See Scott 2001: 6-7.

^{66.} Recorded in various government files and publications, most notably Morgan (1987) and press coverage in March-April 2001 of events surrounding the removal of Lowitja O'Donoghue (see Rintoul et al 2001).

^{67.} QSA A58751.

^{68.} Cited in Mattingley and Hampton 1988: 159.

^{69.} *Great Southern Herald*, 12/6/1920.

rather than vagabonds. They also tolerated substandard treatment of children in the institutions. There were no complaints in response to Aboriginal eyewitness accounts in the local press in 1922 that at Moore River there was 'no school for children, no nothing. Little girls from Carrolup never undress from time they leave here till I come away'⁷⁰ and that 'little boys and girls' spent their days 'humpin' sugar bags full of gravel for long distances from the pits to the camps to make footpaths, instead of bein' at school'.⁷¹

The thousands of employers of young people in rural areas and cities across the continent should have had some curiosity or awareness about how their young charges came to be in their employ. After the initial conflict between private employers and the state in northern Australia, state arranged employment of Aboriginal youth became widely accepted by employers seeking cheap and dependable domestic and farm workers. Most pastoralists and administrators reached agreements that 'mixed-race' children could be removed to institutions as long as 'full-blood' children were left behind to become station workers. Between 1910 and the 1930s the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board apprenticed out 570 girls to more than 1200 employers in city and country areas.⁷² In his 1936 Annual Report, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia insisted that 'more of these young people be taken in hand by the department ... they could be readily placed after a period of training'.⁷³ The employment of Aboriginal 'maids' was openly promoted in women's magazines such as the *Australian Women's Mirror* which ran an article in 1940 with the headline, 'Try An Abo Apprentice', and included an employer's testimonial that her maid had become 'one of the family and [was] worth three of the white maids we have employed'.⁷⁴ Records of the Aborigines Department of Western Australia provide no examples of employers questioning the system or inquiring after the families of young people in their employ, rather they seemed to look on the young people's labour as an unquestioned right.⁷⁵ Research analysing the case of an employer in Sydney who endeavoured to stand up for the rights of young Aboriginal women in her employ, reached the tragic conclusion that such intervention only served to generate punitive responses from administrators determined to maintain rigid control over their young charges.⁷⁶

The official promotion in the press from the 1950s of fostering and adoption programs for Aboriginal children as the optimum way to achieve their assimilation into mainstream society also failed to raise questions in public debate. Press reports made no reference to the children's own families or why they were not with them and presented the isolation and loneliness of institutional life as the children's only alternative to acceptance into a white family. The reports attracted a flurry of applications motivated by a mix of 'religious inspired or secular philanthropy'.⁷⁷ Most were heart felt and well meaning but deeply assimilatory and paternalistic in intent:

^{70.} *Great Southern Herald*, 22/7/1922.

^{71.} *Southern Districts Advocate*, 4/9/1922.

^{72.} Walden 1995: 12.

^{73.} Aborigines Department Annual Report 1936: 18.

^{74.} Goodall 1990: 7.

^{75.} Haebich, unpublished research.

^{76.} Rose 1998.

^{77.} Cuthbert 1998: 44.

We can promise this child the love of a happy home and the understanding that he will need as he grows up. It is our belief that an aboriginal brought up in a white home is a further step towards total acceptance of the aborigines of our community.⁷⁸

None raised questions about the children's own families. In the case of preliminary arrangements for adoptions, some applicants were informed that the baby had been abandoned and that they were saving it from certain death — claims they later found to be untrue.⁷⁹ Some white parents acted outside legal channels to obtain Aboriginal children. The Director of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Victoria claimed in the Melbourne press in 1968 that there was widespread 'trafficking' of Aboriginal children in the state with over three hundred children 'illegally adopted' into white families. Many had been passed between several families so that they had lost contact with their parents. The Director observed that the 'idea of taking away from Aboriginal women the responsibility of caring for their own children [was] unbelievably prevalent in Victoria' and that some pregnant Aboriginal women had even been approached in the street by white women seeking to adopt their babies.⁸⁰

There were some dissenters in the press of the day who were openly critical of the system of removal and institutionalisation of Aboriginal children, thereby providing alternative perspectives on the practice to the Australian public. These criticisms were usually directed at particular cases of removal or conditions in institutions rather than the system as a whole. While they often caused a flurry in the press, with defensive responses from Aboriginal administrators and letters to the editors, these protests failed to arouse general public interest or to significantly influence official practice. Nevertheless, action by some Adelaide residents and Aboriginal parents in 1923 to protest against legislation to expedite the removal of Aboriginal children to state care did prompt the administration to shelve the legislation temporarily, although child removals continued.⁸¹

During the 1920s and 30s Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal leaders and organisations also made concerted attacks on the system that should have alerted the public to the extent and systematic nature of removals.⁸² In the mid 1920s the Aborigines Protection League in South Australia circulated the following statement in support of a self-governing Aboriginal state in northern Australia:

When it is realised what the removal of these young children means, we shall find further argument for the creation of the proposed aboriginal state. They are taken from their country, their home, their parents, from environments where they should have an opportunity of settling down and marrying and they are placed in strange surroundings with white children, shut off from the hospitality of white children generally and not permitted to marry and unable to share in the national traditions which are held to be most powerful factors in creating character. Even with the greatest kindness from those in whose charge they are placed, what sense of loneliness, of exile, even of slavery must they not constantly feel? And what

⁷⁸. QSA 1A/451.

⁷⁹. Haebich 2000: 48-50, 557.

⁸⁰. Cited in Haebich 2000: 576.

⁸¹. Haebich 2000: 315-20.

⁸². See Paisley 2000 and Haebich 2000 for a more detailed discussion of these movements.

temptations must beset them? What is to become of them if, under these conditions, they live until they are 21 and regain their liberty?⁸³

In 1927 League representatives presented a petition for 'A Model Aboriginal State' with seven thousand signatures to the House of Representatives in Canberra but nothing came of their proposal. At the same time women's organisations were criticising Aboriginal child removals in national and international forums, drawing on international standards of rights for women and children to support their cause. Mary Montgomery Bennett was one of their most vociferous campaigners. During the 1934 Moseley Royal Commission in Western Australia, she publicly attacked the Aborigines Department for its 'official smashing up of native family and community life' and denounced the Minister's claim that 'the removal of half-caste children is a necessity for so many reasons that it seems futile to mention them'.⁸⁴ Linking removals to genocidal outcomes she quoted a woman social worker writing in the *Australian Board of Missions Review* in 1933:

deportation by the Govt is one of the chief factors in causing the sure extinction of our native race ... Family life to the aborigines is everything ... Such interference is fatal.⁸⁵

Feminist campaigner, Bessie Rischbieth, who also appeared before the Royal Commission, called for an immediate investigation into the system of removal and institutionalisation of Aboriginal children. She also urged the government to adopt mainstream child welfare practices and to 'improve the system of dealing with parents and their economic conditions ... in order that they might keep their children'.⁸⁶ Despite these arguments and the concerns expressed by Commissioner Moseley in his final report about the cruelty inflicted on Aboriginal mothers and children through forcible removal,⁸⁷ the Western Australia government passed legislation in 1936 that enshrined the policy of biological assimilation and granted powers to remove virtually any children of Aboriginal descent from their parents.

The drive for fundamental changes to the system came as a response by federal and state governments to both international pressures during the 1950s to abandon race-based discriminatory practices, and to mounting political action by Aboriginal people and their supporters demanding citizenship rights. New directions in policy and the protesters' demands and actions were widely reported in the press. In Western Australia in 1957, a plan to permanently relocate all school-age children from their families at Warburton Mission⁸⁸ to a distant institution was attacked in parliament for contravening the *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1947*. The controversy was reported in the local and national press and led to two government inquiries. At its inaugural meeting in 1958 the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines demanded an end to forcible removals and that Aboriginal children be treated 'in accordance with existing Children's Welfare legislation'.⁸⁹ In 1973 the system of foster-

83. South Australian State Archives GRG 52/32/5.

84. Western Australia Government 1934, 'Minutes of Evidence, Submissions, Diary of Sitzings from the Royal Commission on the Treatment of Aborigines 1934': 225.

85. Western Australia Government 1934.

86. Western Australia Government 1934: 266.

87. Paisley 2000: 128.

88. For background on the Warburton Controversy see Haebich 2000: 430-9.

ing of Aboriginal children came under national scrutiny in the context of widespread public controversy following the return of a young girl to her parents by social workers in the Northern Territory without prior departmental approval. This culminated in 1974 in a strike by Territory government social workers protesting at the 'generally unsatisfactory situation' in the handling of Aboriginal fostering and adoption services and demands by the newly created National Aboriginal Consultative Committee for a federal inquiry into the system of fostering of Aboriginal children by white families.⁹⁰

In the mid 1970s Aboriginal people began a concerted national political campaign for the return of control of Aboriginal children to Aboriginal families using the emerging national network of Aboriginal Child Care Agencies to lobby for the introduction of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. The opportunity to meet together in national and international forums prompted the growing realisation of the extent and systematic nature of Indigenous child removal in Australia and other settler nations such as Canada and the USA. Margaret Tucker's aptly named autobiography, *If everyone cared* (1977), marked the beginning of an outpouring of painful personal experiences of removal in Aboriginal autobiographies, oral histories, songs by Aboriginal writers such as Archie Roach, art works and videos. Peter Read's pioneering history, *The stolen generations* (1981), laid the foundation for a series of histories defining the nature and extent of the system of removals across Australia. In 1988 the trial of Russell Moore/James Savage in the USA exposed Australians to the sorry experiences of some removed children.⁹¹ The 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody⁹² exposed the tragic link between deaths in custody and Aboriginal child removal. It is astonishing that, surrounded with this wealth of evidence, Australians in 1997 could say to Aboriginal people 'I'm sorry. I just didn't know'.

Conclusion

Holocaust and other genocide theorists have argued that the 'innocent denials' of bystanders are not inconsequential peripheral events, but that along with other more deliberate forms of denial, they constitute an 'integral part of genocide'. This may seem too harsh a judgement of the generally bland and indifferent Australian responses to removal of Aboriginal children discussed above, especially when the majority of Australians remain unconvinced that what happened here constituted genocide. Nevertheless, while acknowledging the significant differences and unique features of the Holocaust and the Aboriginal experience — whether or not one accepts the proposition of genocide — there are important insights and lessons to be gained from examining the Australian situation in the context of Holocaust and genocide studies.

We are drawn to reflect on the easy slippage between a mind set that promotes the distancing and dehumanising of targeted out-groups and the acceptance and normalising of their unequal treatment to the extent that it becomes unremarkable and virtually invisible, even as it assumes increasingly cruel and barbaric forms. Thus, large numbers

⁸⁹. Cited in Attwood and Markus 1999: 176.

⁹⁰. See Haebich 2000: 592-600.

⁹¹. Read 1990a, 1990b.

⁹². Commonwealth Government, Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1991a and 1991b.

of people can acquiesce to or play facilitating roles in horrific processes without realising or acknowledging the full meaning of what they are tacitly or actively supporting. This state of 'knowing and not knowing' is powerful and obstinate, persisting in the face of circulating knowledges, observable evidence, personal encounters and even protests in the public arena.

The linkage of the various forms of denial into a single continuum forcibly reminds us that the claim not to have known is never completely innocent. There are many cross-overs and linkages between innocent and deliberate denial that can culminate in orchestrated campaigns by nations intent on erasing unpalatable aspects of their past from official histories and avoiding responsibility for this past. This directs our attention to the many shades in current debate on the Stolen Generations. Many members of the public claim not to have known and to have no responsibility for what happened in the past. Right wing intellectuals and journalists have attacked the Stolen Generations case and have endeavoured to create disbelief and confusion in the minds of the Australian public. The Prime Minister, John Howard, has denied the enormity of what happened and urged the nation to forget this unpalatable aspect of our past while his government has mounted vigorous legal campaigns to quash Aboriginal calls for recognition and remedy.⁹³ We are reminded that this is not just a quirky parochial process. Rather, it is an integral response when nations are brought face to face with traumatic events that reflect negatively on what is central to their collective identity and past and that belie their vision of themselves as moral communities. Denial and 'voluntary forgetting' are surely part of Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil'.⁹⁴

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⁹³. Robert Manne argues in his recent essay, *In denial*, that the Howard government has been 'collusive' with the 'Quadrant-led campaign' against the Stolen Generations, citing the government's defence in the Cubillo-Gunner test case, which, he claims, 'exceeded normal bounds' (Craven 2001: v).

⁹⁴. Arendt 1965.

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