

# An Anthropological and Literary Study of Two Australian Aboriginal Women's Life Histories: The Impacts of Enforced Child Removal and Policies of Assimilation

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This book provides important analysis of the crucial role of Aboriginal women's storytelling in the process of decolonisation in Australia. Westphalen has carefully studied the autobiographical work of two Aboriginal women, Alice Nannup and Ruby Langford Ginibi. These works are explored in close detail, drawing on the insights of other works by scholars and storytellers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Westphalen sketches a broader context for these life-stories and examines how they fit within debates about colonisation and Indigenous culture taking place in academic disciplines such as history, anthropology and literary criticism.

Nannup is a Yinjibarndi Elder from the Pilbara region of Western Australia who published a life history, *When the Pelican Laughed*, in 1992. Langford Ginibi, a Bundjalung Elder born on the North Coast of New South Wales, has written a number of autobiographical works, including *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988), *My Bundjalung People* (1994) and *Haunted by the Past* (1999).

Westphalen argues that the storytelling practised by these women binds their lives and experiences directly to their country, their people and their Dreaming:

*Indigenous women's life-history writing is a converging discourse, genealogically part of the ongoing Dreaming, but harnessing the structures of the western institutions of publication in order to reinscribe both identity and history.*

The dynamics of resistance and survival in the face of multifaceted attempts to annihilate Indigenous culture and connection to land throughout the 20th century are core themes of the work of both Langford and Nannup. Westphalen explores some of the important differences in how these dynamics played out for both women, growing up in very different geographical locations and under different regimes.

Nannup was exposed to the direct control of Western Australia's Chief Protector and sent off her country in the Pilbara to the draconian Moore River welfare settlement in the south-west of Western Australia. She worked as a domestic servant for the Chief Protector himself, AO Neville ('The Devil'), notorious for his comments about

the need to forcibly remove Aboriginal children in an attempt to 'breed out the black'. For Langford, assimilation was enforced not by explicit policies of forced removal, but through economic and other institutional pressures that forced many Aboriginal families to leave their lands.

Westphalen's book provides insights into the devastating effects of the forced removal of children. Through their autobiographies, the authors have brought the pain of dispossession, language and country loss to the attention of mainstream Australia. Westphalen, by revisiting their works, has again brought these issues to the foreground.

Westphalen attempts in a number of places to discuss the meaning of Nannup and Langford Ginibi's work in the contemporary world of Indigenous politics. For us, this analysis is not clear enough about the continuing, destructive, colonial nature of the regime Aboriginal people live under today. Particularly given the focus of the book on child removal and assimilation, we believe that an important opportunity was missed to link these histories to the urgent crisis of the continuing mass removal of Indigenous children from their families. Indeed, in a book that provides strong insights into the suppression of Indigenous experiences of colonisation in the mainstream discourse of settler-colonial society, the failure to acknowledge the escalating contemporary assault on Aboriginal family life in a book about forced removal of children seems remiss.

More than 15,000 Aboriginal children are now living in 'out of home care' on any given night, following removal by Child Protection departments. This means that far greater numbers of Aboriginal children are being forcibly separated from their families today than at any time in Australian history (Gibson, 2013). In the Northern Territory, where we have worked together, more than 90% of children in 'out of home care' are Aboriginal. Child Protection agencies in every state focus their activities heavily on Aboriginal families, and Aboriginal children are more than ten times more likely to face removal than non-Aboriginal children Australia wide (Productivity

Commission, 2015). We believe that properly understanding these forced removals requires analysis that locates them within the broader process of colonisation in Australia and the life-stories of women such as Nannup and Langford.

Despite the lack of commentary on contemporary removals, the book contains plenty of historical information that can help to enhance our understanding of the continuities between present and past. Westphalen describes how the protection regimes of the 1930s operated to remove children 'if they were perceived to be neglected'; a fundamentally subjective judgment. In contemporary Australia, 'neglect' remains the primary reason for forced removal of Aboriginal children (Productivity Commission, 2015).

Westphalen provides a careful analysis of Aboriginal child-rearing practices, such as the large degree of freedom enjoyed by Alice Nannup as a child before she left her lands: 'Aboriginal children's pre-puberty life ... is characterised by considerable autonomy and independence' (p. 277). The landmark *Bringing Them Home* report (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, 1997) into the experience of the Stolen Generation argued that the contemporary operations of the 'child protection' system discriminate against these Aboriginal practices, with welfare officials equating the granting of autonomy with 'neglect'. This insight was made back in 1997, when far fewer children were being removed than today.

In the course of our current work, we have been involved in assisting women attempting to challenge decisions to remove their children on grounds of 'neglect' and can see the way these decisions continue to be informed by discriminatory views about Aboriginal culture (Gibson, 2015). We have seen first hand how non-Indigenous case workers will argue in court documents that the freedoms afforded to Aboriginal children are evidence of a lower standard of care on the part of Aboriginal parents. This is compounded by structural neglect — the position of extreme poverty that many Aboriginal families are forced to endure.

Westphalen locates through the author's accounts of their lives the forces at play against Aboriginal families as part of a struggle continuum. The strength of 'life-storytelling as resistance' is beautifully exemplified by these two aunties' stories, and Westphalen provides an important platform for deeper exploration of this strength. Again, bringing this analysis to the contemporary situation, it is the 'life-storytelling' of Aboriginal grandmothers today that has been at the cutting edge of resistance to contemporary child removal. The advocacy group 'Grandmothers Against Removals', formed in Gunnedah in 2014 and networking with similar groups across the continent to form a national movement, has been a prominent voice pushing this issue to the forefront

of public attention. These Aboriginal women have drawn together testimony of their experiences of past practices of forced removal and the contemporary loss of their grandchildren into foster care. They have done this in settings as varied as Parliamentary inquiries (Parliament of Australia, 2015), speaking at public protest rallies, and being interviewed for current affairs programs (Living Black, 2014).

It is through their stories that we come to understand the injustice of contemporary policies of forced removal. We have seen determined, older, seasoned warrior women fighting a system to keep their grandchildren out of harm's way, to keep their grandchildren safe by their side, in a bed full of family and not crying alone in a strange bedroom of a foster family or in a bunk in a 'group home'; grandmothers who quietly speak their grandmother's tongue to their grandchildren during visits from foster care so they will not forget who they are within a system that does not know them or care; grandmothers who patiently refute the ill-informed testimony of case-workers judging them for their Aboriginality.

This context provides an interesting one for further exploring Westphalen's analysis about the relationship between the telling of Aboriginal life-story and resistance to colonisation. She argues that the writing of Aboriginal women, 'is a discursive manifestation of a politics of resistance, no less active, forceful or difficult to discount as any street march' (p. 29).

While we agree wholeheartedly with the potential power of these stories, sadly, they are in fact very consistently discounted by the colonial state. This point seems to be acknowledged by Westphalen, who concludes her book lamenting the introduction of the NT Intervention, with it's 'unjustifiable racism':

*If Indigenous voices, in whatever form, are denied currency, then we risk recreating the same context that enabled policies of absorption, assimilation, exclusion and control to exist in the past ... we threaten reconciliation.*

This is a drastic understatement. We took particular exception to the mention that the NT intervention was launched in response to the *Little Children Are Sacred Report*. While this report may have been used opportunistically by the Howard Government in 2007, we believe there had long been an underlying agenda to introduce explicitly racialised forms of control, closely resembling that of the Protection Boards of the 20th Century, justified by using a discourse of assimilation (Gibson, 2012). As Westphalen argues, these policies do not in any way square up with the content of *Little Children are Sacred Report*, and the legislation does not reference children once.

Many Aboriginal women in the Northern Territory immediately integrated the experience of the Intervention into their broader life-stories of colonisation and

resistance and fought to have this perspective heard in a hostile media environment. Aboriginal activists such as Barbara Shaw spoke about a 'return to the mission days', while leading protest rallies in response to the Intervention. Aboriginal politician Marion Scrymgour gave a powerful oration in October 2007 in which she weaved the life-story of her father, who was forcibly removed from his family, into the story of the Intervention: 'Aboriginal Territorians are being herded back to the primitivism of assimilation and the days of native welfare' (Scrymgour, 2007). There are many Aboriginal voices critiquing the Intervention readily available in publications released soon after its inception (Altman & Hinkson, 2007) or throughout the roll-out period of the policy, such as *This is What We Said* (Adam, 2010). Given Westphalen's focus on the perspective of Aboriginal women who live and survive through colonisation, it is strange that these accounts were not considered by Westphalen in her analysis of the Intervention, who quoted instead from human rights lawyers.

Tragically, the dynamics of forced assimilation so vividly described by Alice Nannup and Ruby Langford Ginibi are in many ways as fierce today as they have ever been. Westphalen's analysis of their life-stories provides a wealth of information about how these dynamics operated in the 20th century, and provides an important reminder of the need to struggle to ensure the rich life-stories of Aboriginal women, which for most people in settler society remain hidden in Westphalen's 'palimpsests', are brought to the surface and forced into the national debate.

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