



SLAUGHTERING WITHOUT MURDER: "AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL ASSIMILATION POLICY AS GENOCIDE"

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ABSTRACT



Article Info:

Article Received: 18/1/2015

Revised on: 25/1/2015

Accepted on: 30/1/2015

The Aboriginal experience – a hallmark of cultural, psychological, physical, intellectual and legal perseverance – has always inspired Australian psycho-socio-literary thinkers. The social power ethos and individual identity are governing facets of Aboriginals' life, living and literary representations. This paper studies the heroic, tragic and disturbing dimensions of Australian Aboriginal history. The prime focus is to put introspective insight on "historicist" belief that all experience of identity is determined by autonomous and historically unique cultural processes. The problems of genocide, ethnocide, racial prejudices and intolerance shape the elemental structure of Aboriginal concerns. The article provides psychological functions, genealogical access, legal overviews, historical episodes and represented content of Aboriginal literature.

Keywords: *Aboriginal, Genocide, Australian Culture, Cultural Assimilation, Identity Quest*

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Aboriginal (indigenous) Australians were the first people on the Australian continent. They arrived in Australia from Asia more than 40,000 years ago. Although there are many Aboriginal groups, with their own languages, customs and cultures, they have some practices in common, including a close relationship with the earth and a rich tradition of oral story telling. Aboriginal Australians were traditionally

hunter-gatherers. The British set up their first official camp in Eastern Australia in 1788. Soon after, British colonial officers travelled to Western Australia (WA) and began to claim Aboriginal lands as their own. Fighting broke out as Aboriginal Australians resisted European control. This resistance was violently repressed and many Aboriginal Australians were imprisoned or exploited for their labour.



The first European government of Western Australia saw the Aboriginal Australians as a problem that needed to be controlled. Colonial officials introduced policies that oppressed and harmed Aboriginal communities for many years. One of these policies - the 1905 Aborigines Act - granted the government legal control of all Aboriginal people living in its territory. The colonial government appointed a 'chief protector' to oversee all Aboriginal affairs. In 1911, the WA Chief Protector, A.O. Neville, introduced a policy to remove all part Aboriginal children from their families. Neville was worried about the creation of a 'third race' - people of mixed Aboriginal and European descent. Under his policy, mixed descent Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to government or church-run institutions such as missions, orphanages and reserves. Some were also adopted or housed temporarily with foster families. They were taught to forget their culture so that they could, in time, be assimilated into the white population. Many of these children never saw their birth parents again. While Aboriginal Australians were formally recognized as citizens of Australia in 1967, it was not until 2008 that the Australian government officially apologized for the policies that created the *Stolen Generations*. While Aboriginal Australians continue to struggle with the impacts of colonization on their society and culture, many have achieved success in different areas, and Aboriginal Australian art and music is now celebrated all over the world. The Whites categorize the aboriginal into different classifications to remove them from the main stream of the literature. Their assimilative methods are intolerable. For instance, a 'half-caste' was the name for someone who had 100% Aboriginal Australian blood. When people adopt another culture and lose part of their own, we say they have 'assimilated'. Discrimination is when people treat other people unfairly based on their age, sex, skin colour or nationality; Indigenous people are people who move to a country to take control of it. This kind of discrimination is very much explored in the novel *Rabbit -Proof Fence*.

Rabbit-Proof Fence tells the story of three Australian Aboriginal girls- Molly Craig, Gracie Fields

and Daisy Karnpill Craig- and their dramatic escape and walk home from the Moore River Native Settlement in the year 1931. At the start of the film, we see Molly, Gracie and Daisy hunting with their mothers in Jigalong, the remote area in which they live. We then see A.O Neville, the Chief Protector of the Aboriginals in Western Australia. He believes that removing children of mixed European or Aboriginal heritage from their families is good for them. A.O. Neville orders the local policeman, Constable Riggs, to capture Molly, Gracie and Daisy, who have European fathers. Riggs captures the girls one afternoon and sends them to the Moore River Native Settlement. At Moore River, the girls are trained to talk and act like white Australians. Children at Moore River are not allowed to speak their language or practice their customs and culture. Instead they must speak English, learn Christianity and other European practices. Molly, Gracie and Daisy enter a scary new world. They are unsure of how to behave and face severe punishment for breaking the rules.

Molly, the oldest of the three girls, organizes to escape from Moore River with her sister and cousin. The girls head north and, after getting some information from a woman who feeds them, are able to find the rabbit-proof fence which Molly knows will lead them home. The girls must walk 1,500 miles (2414km) through difficult conditions. The girls are chased by Modoo, an Aboriginal Australian tracker, and by Constable Riggs. The girls meet a collection of strangers along the way who provide food as well as advice- both good and bad. Some of this advice convinces Gracie to stop walking and results in her re-capture. As Molly and Daisy near home, the rabbit-proof fence stops and they find themselves in the extreme desert and they collapse from exhaustion. At the same time, women in their community in Jigalong are chanting and sending them strength. When the girls wake up in the desert, the spirit bird appears, and they find the strength to walk the rest of the way home. When they arrive, they must immediately hide so that they are not recaptured. The film ends with images of the real-life Molly and Daisy walking in Jigalong. They say they will never go back to 'that place'- Moore River.



History is written by the victorious, the saying goes. This is a case of history being rewritten by the victims. Since 1814 and until as recently as 1980, Australian state governments were forcibly removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities with the intention of remolding those children to become part of the white, European society. Couched in the Social Darwinism and eugenics theories that were so popular at the time, the forced assimilation into European culture was seen to be for the benefit of all involved. Regardless of whether their intentions were benevolent or malicious, the perpetrators of these acts aimed to eliminate the Indigenous people of Australia through these Stolen Generations.¹ Simply put, Australia's indigenous assimilation policy in the twentieth century -as embodied by the Stolen Generations - constituted biological and socio-cultural genocide. We may go home, but we cannot relive our childhoods. We may reunite with our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunties, uncles, communities, but we cannot relive the 20, 30, 40 years that we spent without their love and care, and they cannot undo the grief and mourning we felt when we were separated from them. We can go home to ourselves as Aboriginals, but this does not erase the attacks inflicted on our hearts, minds, bodies and souls by caretakers who thought their mission was to eliminate us as Aboriginals.

Words have immense power, the power to do harm when wielded incorrectly. Because of this it is necessary to make clear from the outset what certain terms refer to in this essay. Genocide is a compelling, often misunderstood word. It was coined by a Polish jurist named Raphael Lemkin in the wake of the German Holocaust. In 1944, he used the Greek root "genos," meaning race or tribe, and the Latin root "cide," meaning killing to create a word for an action which was hardly new.

Genocide is 'the coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of the essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be the disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion and

the economic existence of the national groups, and the destruction of personal security, liberty, health, dignity and even the lives of individuals belonging to such groups.'³ Genocide is most often understood to mean the brazen and deliberate murder of a group of people. Sometimes it is more sophisticated than gas chambers, starvation tactics, machetes and guns. Lemkin's definition formed the foundation for the United Nations Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted in 1948. Article II of that Convention states that "genocide means any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

Here it is clearly apparent that "the Stolen Generations and the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities into institutions or foster care (most often with a non-Aboriginal family) fall under Article II (e) of the Genocide Convention. It could also be argued that the Australian governments are guilty of clauses (b), (c) and (d). Article III also made conspiracy and attempt to commit genocide punishable offences. Included in that definition will be an understanding that genocide is an umbrella term encompassing "ethnocide," that is, the attempt to destroy the culture of a people without necessarily killing the members of that group"(22).

The next important idea that must be defined is what constitutes an Indigenous identity. During the time period in question the definition of a "native" was drawn by administrators from Western Australia's Native Administration Act of 1936, which included "any person of full-blood descended from the original inhabitants of Australia," unless they were "a quadroon under 21 years of age who neither associates with or lives substantially after the manner of the class of persons mentioned, a quadroon over



21 years old, or any person of less than quadron blood who was born prior to the 31st day of December, 1936." Many Australians believed that Social Darwinism placed Northern Europeans at the height of the "survival of the fittest" ladder. Social Darwinist theories were used to vilify and dehumanize the Indigenous people of Australia. Finally, the modern definition of Aboriginality is ambiguous at best. A person must be of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, self-identify as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and be accepted as such by the community in which that person is living.

It is easy to judge these acts by contemporary values. It is important to remember that the ideology, language and value system of the Stolen Generations time period was very different from today. In 1937 at the first ever meeting of the state's leaders in Aboriginal Affairs a resolution passed that became known as the Destiny of the Race: "this conference believes that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end."⁶ The subsequent policies and practices were meant to fulfill this resolution.

Genocidal atrocities cannot be forgotten. Post-dated criticism is the only way to move forward. The claim of genocide is relatively new in the Australian context. Yet the UN's Genocide Convention is applicable after 1948 and was ratified by Australia in 1949. It came into force on January 12, 1951. This essay demonstrates that a case can be made that genocide occurred; it is not a persecution thereof because it was not a legal offense until after 1948. Regardless of the legal status before 1948, the international body politic always considered genocide a breach of human rights. The legality of actions taken before 1948 is often used as a front by the government to hide from the truth. Until Reconciliation is achieved, in a way that is acceptable to all involved, the criticism will continue, as will the denial.

Australian race relations can best be understood within a historical context. Australia, as a

nation, has never been at peace. The Aboriginal people believe they are spiritually and physically tied to that land, and have been there since "time immemorial." On January 20, 1788, the Captain Arthur Phillip and the convict-loaded First Fleet landed in Botany Bay, near modern day Sydney. The most detrimental occurrence in race relation history took place that day when Phillip declared the land "terra nullius" Latin for "empty land." Because of conflicting definitions of ownership, the British declared that the land had no previous occupants and was therefore settled, rather than conquered. From this time on an undeclared warfare raged. The Aboriginal population was decimated by diseases, such as smallpox, against which their immune system had no defense. Smallpox, in fact, killed nearly 50 percent of the Aboriginal population in the Sydney area.⁷ Frontier violence was the defining aspect of the 18th and 19th century forms of genocide. Aboriginals were shot for encroaching on British land, taking stock, or just out of fear. The violence was so extreme in some places, such as Tasmania, that the Aboriginal people there were nearly exterminated.

Concurrent with this period of frontier violence the policies of protection or segregation were put into force. This was supposed to protect the Aboriginal peoples from the harmful effects of white settlement, but in practice only meant isolating Aboriginal peoples on missions and stations where the British could be unmolested. At the time of British arrival in 1788, the best estimates show that there were approximately 300,000 Aboriginal people in Australia. (Estimates range much higher, but 300,000 as an estimate has proven to be a happy medium with sound statistical backing. ⁸) At Federation in 1901, the state censuses, although inherently flawed because of inconsistency and racism, estimate there were 40,000 Aboriginal people in Australia.⁹ The protectionism period is best described as a less advanced form of genocide.

By 1951, assimilation was the official policy of every state and territory in Australia. In 1967, the Australian Constitution first became inclusive of Aboriginal people by referendum. At this point in time, the states switched their official policies from that of assimilation to "integration." A disturbing



trend has permeated the final decades of the twentieth century and continues today, however. A sort of historical amnesia exists that shows the pioneer legend in only the most positive light and ignores as much Aboriginal history as possible. This is beginning to reverse itself, but without acknowledgement of race relations in the past, there is no hope for the future.

The ultimate disappearance of the Aboriginal race was to be realized in two ways: biological absorption and socio-cultural assimilation. The first was through attempted control of their birth and death rates along with genetically engineering their reproduction by state governments. This policy of absorption of the race falls under Article II, parts (c) and (d) of the Genocide Convention, "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part," and "imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group." First, the native population was divided into those who could be saved according to the prevailing thought of the day – that is anyone with any proportion of white inheritance – and those who could not. **It was commonly assumed that the full-blooded natives were a dying race because their culture was not civilized enough to survive in the face of British culture.** By separating the dying race from those who would continue to carry the standard of Aboriginality if left alone and allowed to practice their culture, the governments used a multi-layered attack to eliminate Aboriginality. Dr. Cecil Cook, the Chief Protector of the Northern Territory from 1927 to 1938, made clear the first part of the plan – the full-blooded Aboriginal peoples would ultimately disappear – at the Canberra Conference on Aboriginal Welfare of 1937 by saying: "Were a policy of laissez faire followed, the aborigines would probably be extinct in Australia within 50 years."¹³The most that could be done for these natives, according to prevailing thought, was to "smooth the pillow of a dying race," which in practice meant the creation of reserves of land where the natives could live unmolested in order to wait out the extinction of their race. This was not active pursuit of genocide on the part of the Australian governments; however, the practices that pre-date assimilation in

regard to the natives were genocidal and reduced the number of remaining full-blooded people dramatically; this created the belief they were a dying race. Today it is accepted that the dramatic reduction in the numbers of Aboriginal peoples circa the first point of contact is a bi-product of history. It defies logic that a civilization that has survived for more than 50,000 years would cease to exist by natural means in the first century after contact with a foreign dispossessor.

The early twentieth century was the zenith of racial and ethnic cleansing in Europe. Cook, Neville and J.W. Bleakley of Queensland, especially, were enthusiasts of the new science of eugenics. Couched in the institutionalized racism of the day, they created a hierarchy of Aboriginality. Half-caste children were the progeny of a full blooded native and a white person (usually a white man and an Indigenous woman). As white inheritance continued to be intermingled with the Aboriginal, quadroons, people who were considered one-quarter Aboriginal and three-quarters white, and octoroons, people with one-eighth Aboriginal decendency, were classified. After the generation of octoroon, the children were considered to be white by legal standards. These men believed they could force a breeding program that would lead to the disappearance of all Aboriginal people.

Neville introduced a three-point plan at the Canberra Conference. First, he argued, the full-blooded natives would die out; secondly the half-caste children were to be removed from their families; and finally, intermarriage was to be encouraged. 'Are we going to have a population of 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth, or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there ever were any aborigines in Australia?' This clearly indicates the intention of destroying the Indigenous people as a group, an important prerequisite to the claim of genocide. European imperialism has long created problems for native peoples worldwide. As the vanguard pushed the frontier toward the center of Australia there were instances of sexual contact -rape, sexual assault and some meaningful relationships -which resulted in the birth of half-caste children. That these children



were considered a problematic third race by the settlers is an example of the implicit racism of the day. In order to maintain the imperialistic hold over the native peoples, that is to say the degraded and inferior race, there could be no grey area. The University of Sydney scholar Robert von Krieken wrote: "The target of these policies and practices was not simply Aboriginality itself, because that was more or less acceptable to European Australians in its traditional, 'full-blood' form, albeit quarantined in the desert regions of the continent. What was so problematic and dangerous was the *hybridity* [his emphasis] of the mixed-bloods, their threat to the boundaries between the civilized and the savage" (66). This was exactly the fear that fueled the racism, which led to the policies and practices of genocide. The need for racial purity in Australia was only half the battle. South Australia's Chief Protector of Aboriginals Charles McLean expressed his belief at the Canberra Conference in 1937 that "Colour is lost fairly rapidly when there is a mixture of white blood with the aboriginal, but unfortunately racial characteristics and habits are not so easily laid aside."¹⁷ The eugenics movement represented a conscious effort to bring every inhabitant of Australia not of pure European blood into the white fold. Using Mendelian genetics of crossbreeding, with the assumption that whiteness was the dominant trait or stronger gene, the aim of these policies was to rid Australia of people with dark skin. An article in the *Western Australian* in 1933 left no room to the imagination. "The application of Mendelianism is the only solution and that urges the mating of the half-caste with the quadroon and the octoroon, so that the confirmed infiltration of white blood will finally stamp out the black colour which, when all is said and done, is what we really object to" (89). Skin color is not equivalent to race, however, by mingling the blood of different ethnic groups, these chief protectors and other eugenicists believed they were eliminating a race. The disappearance of a "racial group" is clearly a form of genocide as enumerated by the UN Genocide Convention. It was publicly assumed that these Mendelian genetic crosses would work because, as Neville speculated, the Aboriginal natives derived from Caucasian blood lines, not a

"Negroid" strain. Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland's Chief Protectors strictly monitored the marriage and sexual relations of those people considered half-caste or of less Aboriginal blood. "In the Territory the mating of an Aboriginal with any person other than an Aboriginal is prohibited.... Every endeavour is being made to breed out the colour by elevating female half-castes to the white standard with a view to their absorption by mating into the white population" (20). In 1936 the State Parliament of Western Australia went so far as to pass legislation that required Neville and any future Chief Protector of Aboriginals to grant permission for any half-caste person to marry.

This same legislation gave Neville guardianship over all Aboriginal people under the age of twenty-one allowing him to remove them from their families and implement his plans for absorption and assimilation. Neville promoted miscegenation (intercourse between races) as means of "breeding" out Aboriginality. "It seems apparent with these people of European-Aboriginal origin that like breeds like -two half-bloods will produce children of similar blood and not of quarter-blood as many people think -and that therefore requires the admixture of further white blood to alter the ratio and produce a quadroon" (123). Neville was blatant in his drive to absorb people of part-Aboriginal descent into the white mainstream community with aims of destroying the biological group of the Indigenous peoples. His insensitivity was draconian: "...the children would be lighter than the mother, and if later they married whites and had children these would be lighter still, and that in the third or fourth generation no sign of native origin whatever would be apparent. Subject to this process a half-blood mother is unmistakable as to origin, her quarter-caste or quadroon offspring almost like a white, and an octoroon entirely indistinguishable from one. A quadroon child may become darker by the time adolescence is reached, but even then would pass as a Southern European" (45). These theories, while not entirely genetically correct, were successful in bringing about a change in the appearance of those people who by rights could identify as Aboriginal. The physical and biological absorption of the Indigenous



peoples was only part of the genocide against the Stolen Generations. Rosemary Neill makes the argument that this segment the pre-World War II policy of segregation and absorption was genocide, but the assimilation policies that followed World War II were not genocidal and in fact constituted simply a "crude forerunner to equal opportunity"(23). This argument is flawed because the biological absorption was actually of secondary importance to the policy makers whose intent was to assimilate Aboriginal children into white society there by destroying their cultural unit in an act of quiet, less obtrusive genocide. Another important matter to settle in the question of genocide is intent. The Convention declares that genocide can only be 'committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group'. The language used in policies, Hansard (parliamentary and Canberra Conference transcripts) of proceedings and contemporary discourse on the matter of "breeding out the colour" could not have been more clear. The intent was to destroy the race as a whole. The crime need not be measured by its success. It was not until after World War II that genocide was defined and made punishable by international law. Making retroactive claims is difficult, but an important part of the Reconciliation process is the general acceptance that there were acts of genocide perpetrated against Aboriginal people simply because they were Aboriginal.

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