

Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition

*"Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition is an extraordinary book, for many reasons. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela has brought together authors from diverse countries and disciplines to provide an informed dialogue, albeit through text. Their dialogues opens the agency for thinking and acting in different ways to generational violence/trauma. Around the world our response to violence has been to pathologise people we call perpetrator, and people we call victim. However, our broader focus must be on the bigger picture, social and political systems of continuing power abuse, on people already traumatised. The conversation in *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition* provides insight into how Stories can be transmitted across generations. The healing arts, the body therapies, the stories and the insight they bring as we work together to heal the pain of the past, and here now, in our present transform the future. There is no other way. This book will become essential reading for all who work in this field."*

Judy Atkinson, author of *Trauma Truth: Retracing Song Lines, The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma on Indigenous Australia*

The authors in this volume explore the interconnected issues of inter-generational trauma and traumatic memory in societies with a history of collective violence across the globe. Each chapter's discussion offers a critical reflection on historical trauma and its repercussions, and how memory can be used as a basis for dialogue and transformation. The perspectives include, among others: the healing journey of three generations of a family of Holocaust survivors and their dialogue with third generation German students over time; traumatic memories of the British concentration camps in South Africa; reparations and reconciliation in the context of the historical trauma of Aboriginal Australians; and the use of the arts as a strategy of dialogue and transformation.

Editor: Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela is Senior Research Professor at the University of the Free State and South African National Research Foundation Chair for Historical Trauma and Memory.



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Edited by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

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A Global Dialogue on
Historical Trauma and Memory

Barbara Budrich Publishers



Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (ed.)

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A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma
and Memory

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of Nelson Mandela.

Chapter 10

Reflections on Post-Apology Australia: From a Poetics of Reparation to a Poetics of Survival

Rosanne Kennedy

Australian National University

Introduction

In the Australia of the 1990s, the idea of reconciliation, backed by government initiatives, enjoyed popular support. Reconciliation was concerned with acknowledging and redressing the wrongs of the past in relation to Australia's treatment of its Indigenous people. In 1991 the Federal government launched the Council for Reconciliation, with the expectation that reconciliation would be achieved by 2001. Perhaps the most iconic event of the reconciliation era was the national inquiry into the Stolen Generations, conducted in the mid-1990s by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). This inquiry investigated the policies, practices and effects of separating children of mixed Indigenous descent from their families and communities during much of the twentieth century. Its landmark report, *Bringing Them Home*, recommended that the Federal Parliament, State parliaments, and churches offer an apology to the Stolen Generations (HREOC, 1997). Fearing litigation and compensation, John Howard, then Prime Minister, refused to offer a parliamentary apology, and the Stolen Generations and the Australian public had to wait until 2008, when Kevin Rudd, newly elected Prime Minister, made the long-awaited apology.

Although the apology was apparently well-received by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Moses, 2010), even before it was offered the discourse of reconciliation was being superseded by a discourse of 'crisis' in Aboriginal Australia. In this era of crisis, the Stolen Generations paradigm, characterized by a compassionate politics of testimony and witnessing, has lost much of its moral and political purchase. The reasons for the shift from a discourse of reconciliation to crisis are complex, and here I can only sketch what have been divisive and contested issues (see Altman & Hinkson, 2007; Altman & Hinkson, 2010). This shift, however, provides the context for my consideration of a parallel shift, from an aesthetics of reparation that

flourished during the reconciliation era, to an aesthetics of survival which mediates an era of 'crisis ordinariness' (Berlant, 2011).

The waning of the era of reconciliation was hastened by the publication of *Little Children are Sacred*, the Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse (Wild & Anderson, 2007). The report, which detailed cases of child sexual abuse in remote Indigenous communities, prompted sensationalizing media accounts on high levels of crime, sexual assault, violence, substance abuse and sub-standard living conditions in central and northern Australia. In response to the report the federal government, at the time led by John Howard, declared a state of national emergency and devised a controversial plan known as the Northern Territory Intervention. Taking a 'muscular humanitarian' approach (Orford, 1999), the government spent millions, bringing in the army, police, bureaucrats and teams of medical personnel to conduct child health checks and to police communities.

Shortly after the intervention, anthropologist Peter Sutton published *The Politics of Suffering* (2009), which intensified public and scholarly debate on issues facing remote Aboriginal communities. He controversially proposed that the negative outcomes Indigenous people were experiencing today could not all be traced back to colonialism; some outcomes stemmed from the internal dynamics of Aboriginal culture (7). Improving health, education and life expectancy would require a change in Indigenous behavior, and particularly in child socialization. He singled out the politics of *Bringing Them Home* as problematic, arguing that while it "vital[ly] raise[d] awareness of a relatively unknown negativity in Australia's past," it also "enhanced victimhood as a basis of positive regard for Indigenous people, and polarizes opinion about the state or other collective historical guilt" (p. 210). He contends that the national project of reconciliation, with its grand symbolic gestures such as apology, divisively entrenches the notion of two separate peoples, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, in one nation (203). Sutton's effort to articulate a "contemporary moment from within that moment" is an example of the present as a "mediated affect", which Lauren Berlant describes as "a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now whose very parameters...are also always there for debate" (2011, p. 4). Discussions about the shared historical present are "always profoundly political" and "under constant revision" because they are about "what forces should be considered responsible and what crises [require] urgent attention" (Berlant 2011, p. 4). While Sutton is only one of many contributors to the debate about how the government, anthropologists and the

public should respond to Aboriginal disadvantage in the present and prepare for the future, his book has ignited significant debate (see Altman & Hinkson, 2010; Lattas & Morris, 2010).

Like Sutton, Indigenous commentator and anthropologist Marcia Langton (2010) agreed that the conditions in Aboriginal Australia constitute a crisis and require urgent attention. Lamenting "how much worse [Aboriginal] suffering has become in the last forty years," she argues that "an older, gerontocratic view of Aboriginal culture" has occluded "the new reality" that has taken hold in Aboriginal Australia (Langton 2010, pp. 95-96). Radical changes include the growing number of children, many of whom are at risk: children under 14, she reports, constitute 38% of the indigenous population, and are eight times more likely to be subject to care and protection orders than non-Aboriginal children. She contends that there has not been enough attention to alcohol-fuelled violence, nor public debate about Aboriginal customs and their role in contributing to the crisis in the Aboriginal world. She describes what she calls the "the shock of the new" in Aboriginal Australia:

The overwhelmingly young Aboriginal population, along with the poor outcomes in Aboriginal health, education and employment, demonstrate that the Indigenous Australian population has altered fundamentally from one typical of the former hunter-gather way of life to one that is very poor, marginalized, powerless and sedentarised, much like the billion or so people living in poverty in the developing world. The future for those young Indigenous people...will be one of accelerating poverty and exclusion (112).

The Northern Territory Intervention and the commentary and media reporting brought the 'shock of the new' to the Australian public. While non-indigenous Australians could identify with children who had been wrongfully removed and the suffering of their mothers, articulated by *Bringing Them Home*, and mediated in films such as *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), many Australians were shamed by the media reports and images of poverty and extreme violence in remote indigenous communities. The government's heavy-handed intervention created uncertainty and fragmented the public, most of whom thought something needed to be done, but did not agree with the government's militaristic or racially-targeted tactics.

New social and material conditions call for new genres. The shift I have been tracing, from a discourse of reconciliation to one of crisis, has been accompanied in the cultural domain by a shift from a poetics of reparation to a poetics of survival. In this chapter, I identify features of what I call the Stolen Generations paradigm, which conceives of child removal as a traumatic event, and imagines reconciliation as a process of national and

personal healing, facilitated by a dialogic model of testimony and witnessing. I explore this paradigm as it is articulated in the genre of the human rights report, in this case, *Bringing Them Home*, and in fiction. Specifically, I read Gail Jones' novel *Sorry* (2007) as an example of a poetics of reparation for the Stolen Generations, which is grounded in a model of trauma, recovery and compassionate witnessing. In contrast to a poetics of reparation, Warwick Thornton's compelling film, *Samson and Delilah* (2009), produced during the Northern Territory Intervention, exemplifies a poetics of survival, and demands a different kind of response from non-Indigenous audiences. *Samson and Delilah* is a rare film which uses cinematic language to convey the unfolding present, on terms neither of melodrama nor sentimentality. It conveys something of "the new reality" of Aboriginal Australia that Langton has described, but nonetheless retains a degree of optimism.

The Stolen Generations Paradigm: Trauma, Testimony and Witnessing

The 1990s was a decade in which the concept of trauma moved out of the clinical domain of psychiatry and into culture more broadly (Farrell 1998. ?). In *The Empire of Trauma*, anthropologists Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman argue that it has only been within the last twenty-five years that trauma, and with it the figure of the victim, has been legitimated; previously "the victim was tarred as illegitimate" and "trauma was a suspect condition" (2009, 5). Indeed, trauma has become the dominant moral discourse for understanding and interpreting violence in our time. They propose that "trauma...has created a new language of the event" (Fassin & Rechtman 2009, 6), and a new way of understanding the effects of war, colonialism and violent conflict, which has replaced an older language of oppression and liberation struggles. Adopting a Foucauldian approach, they seek "to understand how the contemporary moral economy has been reshaped" by the now "global idea of trauma...which designat[es] an irrefutable reality linked to a feeling of empathy" (6). Their analysis is grounded in ethnographic observations of humanitarian psychiatry, which produces new knowledges, new subjectivities and a "new condition of victimhood" (5). In conflict zones, humanitarian psychiatrists do not simply diagnose and treat, they make moral judgments, and testify and advocate on behalf of victims, thereby engaging in a "politics of trauma" (9). In the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, for instance, "recourse to the concept of trauma...expands the range of victims considerably," (Fassin 2008, 550) and enables people on both sides of the conflict, and potentially the entire

population of Israel, to identify as victims of posttraumatic stress, and to appeal to the public for support and empathic understanding. Although based on fieldwork in conflict zones, Fassin and Rechtman's (2009) analysis of trauma discourse helps to explain how Indigenous suffering has been legitimated and become a moral touchstone in the Australian public sphere since the 1990s.

In *Post-Traumatic Culture*, Kirby Farrell (1998) also adopted a Foucauldian approach, but with particular attention to the implications of trauma discourse for literature and film. He argued that people not only suffer trauma; the concept of trauma is used for all kinds of ends (Farrell 1998, 21). Trauma is not only a diagnostic category. Rather, when trauma moves from the clinic into the domain of culture, its explanatory powers come to the fore: "whatever the physical distress...trauma is also psychocultural, because the injury entails interpretation of the injury" (7). He adds that "Cultures not only report but classify traumatic events: a train wreck may be a 'catastrophe' or a 'tragedy' or merely an 'accident'" (16). At stake in this cultural shift is how authoritative institutions and discourses interpret an event or injury. When an event is described as 'traumatic', rather than simply as an 'accident', claims are being made about the deep and ongoing psychological impact on the affected population, including future generations, which raise issues of responsibility and reparation. In the Australian public sphere, the language of trauma has produced new understandings of the long-term psychological and social effects of settler colonialism, with its practices of violence, dispossession, assimilation and child removal, on Indigenous people and communities. This language has changed understandings of the political struggle in which Indigenous people are engaged. Today, in government discourse, the political language of Aboriginal self-determination has been replaced by a bureaucratic language of 'closing the gap' in health and education outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the struggle for Aboriginal rights was framed in terms of a national discourse of land rights, sovereignty and self-determination, as well as a transnational discourse of liberation, equality and black power. With the emergence of the reconciliation movement in the 1990s, and especially, the publication of *Bringing Them Home*, the discourse of trauma, suffering and compassion provided a new idiom through which Australians could understand the harmful legacy of settler colonialism. This moral idiom, which can be traced through several key statements of the reconciliation movement in the 1990s, required non-Indigenous Australians to recognize and acknowledge the pain and suffering caused to Indigenous Australians by colonization, dispossession and child removal. For instance, in a widely-quoted speech delivered in Redfern, an Aboriginal neighborhood in Sydney,

the Prime Minister at the time, Paul Keating, exhorted white Australians to recognize our role in contributing to Indigenous suffering:

We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us. With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and mind. We failed to ask how would I feel if this were done to me (as quoted in HREOC 1997, 286).

Keating urged his fellow Australians to respond compassionately—to imagine "how would I feel if this were done to me". Compassion—"to feel the pain of another"—became a moral foundation of reconciliation. This understanding of reconciliation as requiring acknowledgement of past wrongs, and recognition of the ongoing effects on Indigenous people and communities in the present, was expressed by Chief Justice Brennan in his opinion in the 1992 Mabo case. It also underpinned HREOC's approach to the national inquiry into the Stolen Generations.

Bringing Them Home used both legal and moral discourses to assess the policies, practices and effects of Indigenous child removal. Applying the 1948 UN genocide convention to the circumstances of Indigenous child removal in Australia, *Bringing Them Home* controversially interpreted forcible child removal as constituting 'genocide' and as a breach of human rights (HREOC 1997, 266-275). Less widely recognized, it interpreted forcible child removal as constituting individual and collective trauma, which had impacts both on Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (HREOC 1997, 196). The commissioners recognized that children, their mothers, and their communities were often traumatized by the circumstances and the aftermath of child removal, family separation and cultural dispossession. The report explicitly drew on a psychocultural and, at times, a clinical discourse of trauma to interpret child removal as traumatic: "Separation and institutionalisation can amount to traumas. Almost invariably they were traumatically carried out with force, lies, regimentation and an absence of comfort and affection. All too often they also involved brutality and abuses. Trauma compounded trauma" (HREOC, 1997, 196). Citing evidence from numerous psychiatrists and psychologists, the report linked the intergenerational legacy of trauma to a range of conditions that continued to afflict individuals who had experienced child removal, including high levels of violence, alcohol and drug dependency, family breakdown, self-harm and suicide. In interpreting child removal as a traumatic event, the national inquiry legitimated the physical, emotional and psychological suffering experienced by individuals who had been removed and their mothers and communities. In identifying the legacy of suffering and harm caused by policies

and practices of removal, it implicated white Australians, who inherited the task of acknowledging and atoning for the harms of colonialism.

Unlike a truth commission or legal trial, the national inquiry did not aim to identify specific crimes or individual perpetrators. Rather, Sir Ronald Wilson, who chaired the national inquiry, conceptualized it in therapeutic terms, as participating in “healing the nation” and in “prepar[ing] the way for reconciliation.” “What this inquiry provides,” he stated, “is an option to bring to light the anguish and suffering associated with being a victim of the actions of past governments, and to engage present governments in addressing the issues and suffering which affects peoples today” (as quoted in Devitt 2009, 54). Listening to the stories of survivors of removal was considered to be essential for promoting healing and for the reconciliation process. Rather than using forensic methods of proof that would hold up in court, the national inquiry adopted testimonial methods aimed at promoting healing and reconciliation. Commissioners travelled around the nation to listen to members of the Stolen Generations tell their stories, thereby facilitating the production and reception of testimony. Unlike a truth commission, the testimonial process was not open to the public, and fragments of the testimonies were published anonymously in *Bringing Them Home* to protect the identities of survivors.

In the 1990s, the Australian Stolen Generations inquiry was one of many such efforts that nations were making to respond to histories of violence, colonialism, genocide and dispossession. The testimonial approach had its roots in the 1961 Holocaust trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. Historian Annette Wieviorka (2006) contends that whenever testimony is collected and archived today, including in trials and truth and reconciliation commissions, it bears the trace of a paradigm that gained legitimacy in the Eichmann trial (89). The Eichmann trial, and the testimonial methods it initiated, had profound implications for collective memory. Rather than the past being regarded as distant and inaccessible, “... [w]ith the Eichmann trial, the witness became an embodiment of memory, attesting to the past and to the continuing presence of the past” (Wieviorka 2006, 88). As a public record, the historic significance of the Australian inquiry resides, in large part, in the credibility and publicity it granted to Stolen Generations testimony. The testimonies made public those feelings and emotions that were previously experienced as private and individual. *Bringing Them Home* opens by acknowledging that it contains material that ‘is so personal and intimate that ordinarily it would not be discussed’ in the public sphere (HREOC 1997, 3). This archive of Indigenous testimony brought the Stolen Generations into a ‘global archive of suffering’ (Sarkar and Walker 2010), and constituted a

collective emotional and moral truth that supported a demand for national recognition and justice.

Constituting Australians as a Witnessing Public

Testimony is widely understood not simply as a statement about past events or ‘what happened’. It is understood, rhetorically, as an address to an audience, an actual or implied listener, which optimistically hopes for a response. Anthropologist Meg McLagan argues that testimony functions as an “intercultural technology, connecting individuals together from different worlds through the medium of pain, creating solidarity out of difference” (2003, 607). She proposes that “[a]s narratives and images of suffering travel, they have the potential to construct audiences as virtual witnesses, a subject position that implies responsibility for the suffering of others” (608-609). The publication of anonymous testimonies from members of the Stolen Generations served not only to inform the Australian public about the harm done by government policies aimed at eradicating Aboriginal culture; it also made “ethical claims on viewers and cultivate[d] potential actors”, and thereby engaged the public in the process (608-609). As Geoffrey Hartman (1995) observes in the context of Holocaust testimonies, however, we have to “enable reception, it isn’t simply there” (220). Reception, he explains, “has to do with a specific concept of the communal” (220). During the reconciliation era, the Australian community was taught to become compassionate witnesses to Indigenous suffering (Kennedy 2011a). For instance, Governor General William Deane, who mediated the reception of *Bringing Them Home*, played a key role in enabling reception by hailing Australians as a witnessing public. He cautioned that the legacy of child removal ‘cannot be addressed unless the whole community listens with an open heart and mind to the stories of what happened in the past and, having listened and understood, commits itself to reconciliation’ (HREOC 1997, 3). Deane’s appeal to the public to respond from ‘the heart’ was crucial for soliciting a compassionate response, and positioning Australians as an ‘affective community’ for the Stolen Generations (Kennedy 2011a).

Many Australians responded to Deane’s solicitation. For instance, the Sorry Books campaign provided Australians with the opportunity to respond compassionately to the Stolen Generations and commit to reconciliation (Kennedy, 2011a). The Sorry Books campaign, organized by Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, was a grass roots movement which developed in the wake of Howard’s refusal to offer an official apology. Sorry

Books, which opened with a pledge in which the signatory committed to reconciliation, circulated in communities around the nation and enabled ordinary Australians to say 'sorry' to the Stolen Generations. Community events were organized in schools, workplaces, churches and community centres at which members of the Stolen Generations told their stories, and the public listened. Novelists have also pursued the work of reconciliation by revisioning the past and mourning Indigenous losses in fictions that revisit frontier violence, dispossession and child removal. Such work has been particularly important in the Australian context, in which federal governments have, since 1996, progressively backed away from what has been called 'symbolic reconciliation' in favour of a 'practical' focus on health, education and housing.

A Poetics of Reparation: Trauma and Compassion in Gail Jones's *Sorry*

Gail Jones's novel, *Sorry*, published in 2007, provides an opportunity to examine the cultural reach of the trauma paradigm as a model for national healing and reconciliation.¹ *Bringing Them Home* positioned white Australians as belated witnesses to the ongoing effects of traumatic practices such as child removal and forced assimilation. By contrast, *Sorry* is told from the perspective of the child of a perpetrator who is both complicit in the injustice and a beneficiary of it. Offered as an act of literary reparation, the novel tells the story of a lonely white Australian child, Perdita, the daughter of eccentric, alienated British migrants. Perdita struggles to remember and atone for her unwitting complicity in a crime that results in the wrongful incarceration of an Indigenous girl, Mary, who has befriended her. Sixteen-year old Mary has come from a convent to help Perdita's family after her chronically depressed mother, Stella, has become incapacitated. Ten-year-old Perdita impulsively stabs her father, Nicholas, when she witnesses him raping Mary. As her father's blood spurts on the girls, Perdita represses the horrifying knowledge of what she has done; Mary confesses and is incarcerated. Perdita spontaneously develops a debilitating stutter, and the events that took Mary and her father from her become literally unspeakable. The novel narrates the story of Perdita's recovery of her memory and her speech under the guidance of a gifted Russian doctor, Dr. Oblov. The novel may be read as an allegory of the inability of white Australians to confront

¹ The following five paragraphs draw on material from Kennedy (2011b).

their own complicity in acts of violence against Indigenous people. Perdita benefits from Mary's sacrifice, but she also inherits—like Australians today—the responsibility of atoning for her father's crime, and her own unwitting crime against Mary.

In *Sorry* complicity is explored in relation to the larger ethical issue of compassion—of recognizing and responding with "appropriate distress" to the suffering of others, both proximate and distant (Jones 2007, 185). The novel is set in and around Broome, a small town populated by Japanese and Malay pearl divers and Aborigines, with a minority of whites, in the remote northwest of Western Australia in the early 1940s. In February, 1942, thousands of Dutch refugees from Indonesia were passing through Broome to Perth, seeking shelter from the Japanese. On March 3, 1942, Japanese pilots based in East Timor attacked Broome, killing scores of Dutch refugees crammed into flying boats on the harbour. This scene, which Perdita witnesses from the safe distance of the beach, forms an important historic context for the novel's exploration of trauma and witnessing. Observing that "war may destroy scale altogether," *Sorry* juxtaposes the intimate gendered and racialized trauma of sexual assault and child removal with the historic, public trauma of WWII, and of the Spanish influenza which kills Dr. Oblov's two sisters when he is a boy.

The point of departure for *Sorry*, never directly stated, is the issue of justice for the Stolen Generations, and John Howard's refusal to apologize.² Readers are told that Mary, of mixed descent, is taken from her Aboriginal mother when she is six years old and raised in a convent. Mary later learns that her mother, tortured by grief for the loss of her stolen child, rolls into a campfire and allows herself to be consumed by flames. Mary's removal and her mother's tragic death are only mentioned in passing. The novel approaches the Stolen Generations indirectly, through the broader theme of "damaged childhoods" (see Felman 2002, 43). In *Sorry*, damaged childhoods, racial violence, and trauma are condensed onto the figure of the vulnerable and traumatized child. Perdita, Mary, and Billy, a deaf-mute, all suffer from damaged childhoods. What are the effects of representing white Australian complicity in colonial violence and racist injustice on the model of trauma and recovery?

Trauma discourse has become a favored idiom for exploring experiences of and responses to individual and collective violence and injustice. As a psychocultural trope, trauma conveys the collective cultural and psychological obstacles that prevent British settlers from witnessing

² Jones discusses the issue of apology in an afterward to the novel.

indigenous suffering. In *Sorry*, a clinical understanding of trauma and its aftermath provides the narrative frame for Perdita's personal journey of recovery. For instance, Dr Oblov tells Perdita that the aim of the therapy is "that she should one day tell her own story with simplicity and lucidity" (Jones 2007, 174). Perdita does recover her memory, but her mother's refusal to corroborate her story to the police prevents her from securing justice for Mary. The narrative describes Perdita's anguish when she realizes that Mary, who is paying for her crime, is suffering an injustice: "She sobbed uncontrollably for what she believed was her heartless forgetting. She sobbed for her mother's deception and her own self-delusion and . . . for Mary's extraordinary sacrifice" (Jones 2007, 195). Read as an allegory of national contrition for the harms perpetrated against the Stolen Generations, this scene exemplifies a politics of "true feeling", grounded in "a popular belief . . . that a nation can be built across fields of social difference through channels of affective identification and empathy" (Berlant 2000, 128). "Sentimentality," Berlant argues, "is the means by which mass subaltern pain is advanced in the dominant public sphere, as the true core of national collectivity. It operates when the pain of intimate others burs into the consciousness of classically privileged national subjects, in such a fashion that they feel the pain of flawed or denied citizenship as their pain" (Berlant 2000, 129). Perdita's psychological suffering is her means of atoning for the injustice that Mary experiences. As a narrative of national atonement, the novel values compassion and recognition of the other's pain as a basis for reconciliation.

As in *Bringing Them Home*, in *Sorry* redress for historical injustice is conceived on a model of reconciliation grounded in compassionate recognition and empathic feeling. When Perdita confronts Mary about her sacrifice, Mary responds by insisting on her agency to act: "Deeta, I chose. I chose to help you eh?" (Jones 2007, 203). Perdita later realizes "this was the point at which she should have said 'sorry.'" Perdita deeply regrets her failure to apologize to Mary. Perdita imagines her failure to apologize as a failure of "affective identification and empathy" (Berlant 2000, 128). Reflecting on Mary's incarceration, Perdita thinks she "should have imagined what kind of imprisonment this was, to be closed against the rustle of leaves and the feel of wind and of rain, to be taken from her place, her own place where her mother had died, to be sealed in the forgetfulness of someone else's crime" (Jones 2007, 204). It's not only Mary's lack of freedom that Perdita tasks herself with imagining; it is also Mary's removal from "her place" and, ultimately, from her mother. This scene of regret for an apology not offered can be described as a "fantasy reparation," which involves a "therapeutic conversion of the scene of pain and its eradication to the scene

of the political itself" (Berlant 2000, 132). In the context of a public debate about the prime minister's refusal to apologize to the Stolen Generations, the title of the novel, *Sorry*, completes the logic of "fantasy reparation": it connects the scene of suffering conveyed in the narrative to the external scene of the political—and offers itself as an act of reparation for all of those people who had been removed from their families and their place. Fantasy reparation is achieved here through what memory critic Alison Landsberg (2004) calls "prosthetic memory", the ability to imagine oneself, through the vehicle of a film or a cultural text, in the place of the other, without confusing the other's experience as one's own.

A Poetics of Survival: *Samson and Delilah*

Cultural memory scholar Andreas Huyssen (2003) has argued that the paradigm of traumatic memory is focused too exclusively on the past, at the expense of the future. The national inquiry into the Stolen Generations investigated practices of removal from the 1930s to the 1970s. The cultural texts that have brought Stolen Generations into cultural memory, such as *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), Baz Lurhmann's melodrama, *Australia* (2008), and *Sorry* (2007), are set in the past, often during the era of World War II. By contrast, the significance of Warwick Thornton's 2009 film, *Samson and Delilah*, is its mode of conveying an unfolding situation in the present. Berlant argues that it is important to theorize the present event as it unfolds; she is concerned with fantasies of "the good life" that have become unsustainable as a result of deteriorating economic, environmental and social conditions (2011, 2). She is interested in how people maintain an attachment to each other, to ideals, to habits, and to the political in such circumstances. Of course, fantasies of "the good life" vary and her archive consists of American and European texts. Nonetheless, there is much in her thinking about attachment that is usefully applied to an Australian film about the precarious conditions of life for young people in an impoverished Indigenous community.

Samson and Delilah, which tells a love story focused on two marginalized teenagers living in a remote community in Central Australia, was released in the wake of the Northern Territory Intervention. While the film brings what *Bringing Them Home* refers to as the "appalling living conditions" of a remote indigenous community onto the big screen, it also tells a personal story, which conveys something of the everyday texture of life, and the challenges that the young characters face simply to survive. Samson, around

fourteen years old, loves music and dancing, and would play in his older brother's band if allowed. Excluded, he takes comfort in petrol sniffing, the drug of choice for Indigenous youngsters seeking escape from the pain and monotony of their lives. Delilah, about the same age, is the responsible granddaughter of an elderly artist, who teaches her to paint, but things turn sour for her when her grandmother dies. In a customary ritual following the death of her grandmother, Delilah is severely beaten by a group of Aboriginal women who blame her for the death. She chops off her hair with a carving knife as a sign of her grief. She, like Samson, is left to fend for herself. In one scene, Samson, who lives with his brother, opens the door of the refrigerator, only to find it empty, flies buzzing around. He retreats to a bedroom with a mattress on the floor, soiled clothes piled around, and inhales petrol fumes. Abandoned wheelchairs take the place of a skateboard, as kids take turns racing them. A caravan serves as the clinic, on those days when a visiting nurse comes to the community. The pair head to Alice Springs, the only sizeable town in the region, to try their luck at making a life, but end up living on the fringe. Delilah tries to sell her grandmother's paintings, but without a white intermediary she is unsuccessful. There is little dialogue; in contrast to the testimonial paradigm that characterized *Bringing Them Home*, the story of *Samson and Delilah* is conveyed almost entirely through visual language and the soundtrack. The cinematography, and particularly Thornton's hand-held camera work, images a visually stark and stunning landscape that appears endless.

The narrative merges love story and road trip, but to call it a love story is to defy the usual sexually and verbally explicit expectations of the genre. Love is conveyed only through sly glances, subtle gestures, and primarily through Delilah's actions. In Alice Springs, the pair is subjected to racist slurs, and Delilah is abducted and presumably raped by a group of white youths, who later throw her out of the car. She joins Samson, living under a bridge, and takes up petrol sniffing. Stoned, she is hit by a car, and ends up in hospital. After recovering in hospital, Delilah returns to the bridge under which Sansom lives, to find him sitting cross-legged under a tent-like blanket, sniffing petrol and slowly killing himself. With the help of Samson's brother, the pair return to their community, load up the car, and Delilah takes Samson to her grandmother's country to live remotely in what is known as an "outstation". There she sets up a home in a tin shed to care for him while he withdraws from petrol sniffing.

Susan Ryan-Fazileau views *Samson and Delilah* through the lens of trauma theory. She argues that the film, through its representation of the lives of two teens, invites viewers to "reflect on the legacy of trauma in an

Indigenous community in today's Australia" (2011, 1). To facilitate this reading, she draws on Indigenous researcher Judy Atkinson's understanding of the intergenerational transmission of trauma in Indigenous communities as "chronic, cumulative and ongoing" (Ryan-Fazileau 2011, 1). Trauma was originally produced by colonial dispossession and structural violence, and compounded in later generations through ongoing racism, exclusion, alcohol and drug dependency and violence (Ryan-Fazileau 2011, 2). Atkinson contends that narrating stories of trauma in a community context is an important step in the recovery process, as it enables Indigenous people to gain an understanding of the structural conditions that produce trauma (as cited in Ryan Fazileau). Ryan-Fazileau reads the film as "a trauma story narrated to a caring group-the spectators, who identify with the protagonists thanks to the way the filmmaker presents their plight" (Ryan-Fazileau 2011, 2). While this analysis is compelling, it reads the film through the familiar interpretive frame of trauma and recovery. When and if the protagonists recover, however, the conditions of 'ordinary crisis' - the violence, drug addiction, welfare dependency and the like - will still be present. Recovering from trauma does not extinguish the intensifying conditions of precarity produced by racism, neoliberalism and globalisation, and for Samson and Delilah, exacerbating their already marginal position. In fact, the film's aesthetics, and the almost complete lack of dialogue, suggest an emergent genre of the historical present (Berlant 2011). Taking this into consideration, I suggest that the film can be productively read as initiating a shift from the exceptional logic of trauma, organized often around a spectacular 'event', to what Berlant calls "crisis ordinariness" (2011, 10). This shift is accompanied by another, from a poetics of recovery to a poetics of survival or living on.

Berlant advocates a shift from the language of trauma, which tends to focus on a singular extraordinary or catastrophic event. She proposes, instead, the concept of "crisis ordinariness" as a means of registering the entrenched conditions of precariousness and vulnerability that are present in ordinary life (2011, 10). Crisis ordinariness, which seeks to capture the "intensities of a situation that spreads into modes, habits and genres of being" is a particularly apt term for identifying the precarious conditions of ordinary life for Samson and Delilah in a remote community (Berlant 2011, 82). Whereas *Rabbit-Proof Fence* focused on the theft of the children as a traumatic event in their lives and the lives of their mothers and community, *Samson and Delilah* depicts the perilous conditions of ordinary life in a remote community shaped by decades of structural economic and social inequality and isolation. Even when violent or extreme events occur—when Delilah is abducted, raped and hit by a car—these events are not singled out

as 'exceptional', but rather, as 'normal' in her everyday life. Samson's addiction to petrol sniffing is a response to the conditions in which he lives, conditions of disenfranchisement from the social and economic world. In contrast to the genre of melodrama, "whose depictions for the good life now appear to mark archaic expectations about having and building a life" (Berlant 2011, 6), *Samson and Delilah*, unlike *Rabbit Proof Fence* and *The Sapphires* (2012), is relentlessly based in the present. It can be described as a "situation tragedy"—the narrative of an unfolding "situation" the contours of which are not yet clear. In a situation tragedy "the subject's world is fragile beyond repair, one gesture away from losing all access to sustain its fantasies: the situation threatens utter, abject unraveling" (Berlant 2011, 6). It takes the form of a "menacing new realism" (Berlant 2011, 6), which is precisely the aesthetic mode of *Samson and Delilah*.

The film, billed with the slogan "love never judges," was well-received both in Australia and at Cannes Film Festival, where it was selected for Un Certain Regard. Margaret Pomerantz and David Stratton, host of the weekly Australian television show, "At the Movies," give the film a coveted 5 star rating—the only film they both rated "5" in 2009 (Pomerantz & Stratton). Many non-Indigenous audiences experience the film, which depicts extreme poverty, social isolation, repeated violence, racism and the lack of the material goods that many Australians identify with "the good life," as confronting. Audiences have described their reaction in visceral terms, saying the film left them feeling as if they had been punched. Indeed, in describing the affective experience of watching the film, Pomerantz uses precisely that term: "The emotional punch that *Samson and Delilah* delivers is one of those rare things in cinema which doesn't come along very often. And when it does you feel like falling down on your knees in gratitude. And it's not because Thornton has gone for sentimentality. It's the reverse." What impresses Stratton, however, is the film's optimism and hope, in bleak circumstances. He comments that "it's a film that, while you're watching it, you feel that it's a tragedy.... It's a very sad story. But the way it concludes with such optimism, I think it really soars and I think every Australian should see this film." Like William Deane's appeal to Australians in the wake of *Bringing Them Home*, Stratton's review of the film exhorts "all Australians" to see it; through this address, he appeals to viewers as a witnessing public to the lives of Aboriginal teens living in circumstances of extreme poverty, deprivation and social isolation. I want to pursue Stratton's observation about the film's optimism. What kind of future does the film permit us to envision for these two characters? Berlant's concepts of "crisis ordinariness" and "cruel optimism" provide a useful analytic lens for considering the affects and

relationships depicted in the film, and for considering how the scene it describes and the affects it produces differ from Stolen Generations melodramas such as *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002) and *Australia* (2008).

Delilah's attachment to Samson, her love for him and desire to be with him, despite the fact that he thwarts her efforts by stealing petrol from their truck and leaving them stranded, could be described as having the affective structure of "cruel optimism". Berlant introduces the concept of "cruel optimism" to describe the nature of our attachments, and particularly, perverse attachments. "A relation of cruel optimism exists," she proposes, "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (2011, 1). It is not the "experience of optimism," but rather its "affective structure" that is especially important for explicating the nature of our attachments to fantasies of the "good life". Optimism becomes cruel when "the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation" (Berlant 2011, 2). Delilah hopes that Samson will quit petrol sniffing, and she aims to support him. The film brilliantly succeeds in transmitting what Langton (2010) has called "the shock of the new"—the violence, poverty, isolation and monotony in some remote communities—and its effects on children and young people. Delilah attempts to give Samson the care and space to recover by taking him to a remote outstation on her grandmother's land—a move which also enables her to reconnect to her "country" and to her grandmother, and recover a sense of purpose. They will live in a shed, hunt for food, and be self-sustaining. This fresh start is possibly what Stratton has in mind when he refers to the film's optimism. The film leaves open their future, and the question of whether moving to remote country will facilitate their flourishing. It is a risk Delilah is willing to take.

Made shortly after the Northern Territory Intervention was initiated, *Samson and Delilah* introduces a new aesthetic, which conveys the conditions of the unfolding present as experienced by young people growing up in remote Aboriginal Australia. What most Australians know about life in remote Indigenous communities they learn through sensationalist media reports, which inevitably position children and teens as victims of neglect and alcohol-related violence. The Intervention enraged Warwick Thornton, who felt that as an Aboriginal male, he and others like him were under suspicion of being paedophiles. He originally considered referencing it but instead decided not to, as it would date the film. While *Samson and Delilah* does show the teens as subjected to violence both from white and Aboriginal communities, and surviving without adult help, Thornton conveys this reality without sensationalising or sentimentalising it.

The film refuses to render life in this Indigenous community totally intelligible to outsiders; rather, it engages viewers by making us work to make sense of what we see. Nor does it provide the comfort for viewers that comes from compassionate recognition and fantasies of rescue; rather, we have to find another way of engaging and relating to it. On this issue, anthropologist Stewart's (2007) work on "ordinary affects" provides a lead. Referring to herself in the third person, Stewart distances the authorial voice in order to foreground the provisional status of narrative and identity. In her role as an anthropologist of "the ordinary," sensitive to the affects of everyday life, she writes of herself: "She is not so much a subject position or an agent in hot pursuit of something definitive as a point of contact; instead she gazes, imagines, senses, takes on, performs, and asserts not a flat and finished truth but some possibilities (and threats) that have come into view in the effort to become attuned to what a particular scene might offer" (p. 5). Thus, Stewart is able to create the distance that critical thinking requires. I suggest that *Samson and Delilah* offers one such space of affective encounter where we may engage the other not through familiar notions of victimhood and rescue, but through potentialities that are not yet entirely obvious. *Samson and Delilah*, through its menacing realism, denies the possibility of a sentimental response; it doesn't allow us to sustain the fantasy of a nation forged out of pain, across boundaries of difference. Instead, it brings us face to face with entrenched precarity in Australia, and challenges Australian fantasies of a "fair go" for all, and of ourselves as "good" people.

Conclusion

The Stolen Generations paradigm was based on a therapeutic model of testimony and witnessing, reconciliation and recovery, which is conveyed through the narrative structure of cultural texts. For instance, *Rabbit Proof Fence* and *Australia* are film melodramas that brought the Stolen Generations into national and international visibility, travelling on a global vernacular of trauma, suffering and disrupted family bonds. *Rabbit Proof Fence* has a double ending—the diegetic ending tells of two of the girls' triumphant return home, and the non-diegetic ending grimly reports that the practice of child removal continued into the next generation, bringing more grief and loss to the girls who returned. *Australia*, by contrast, optimistically imagines reconciliation as a path to national redemption. Gail Jones' novel, *Sorry*, does not take the form of melodrama, but the novel's narrative trajectory is modeled on a paradigm of trauma as an exceptional event. Compassionate feeling and imaginative

identification with the pain of the other is vital to its conception of atoning for past wrongs. These Stolen Generations texts all, to some degree, focus on relations between black and white, and in that sense they can be considered to be within the discursive framework of reconciliation.

Samson and Delilah initiates a shift from a sentimental poetics of reparation grounded in "true feeling" to a poetics of survival. An Aboriginal film which depicts ordinary life in an Aboriginal community, *Samson and Delilah* focuses the viewer's attention on the teens' struggle for survival both within the impoverished community in which they live, and in town, where they experience white racism and violence. The white viewer is peripheral, a positioning that provides the possibility to move away from the presumption of white authority. *Samson and Delilah*, through its visual language and soundtrack, manages to convey what Marcia Langton has identified as the "shock of the new." In contrast to the optimism associated with "going home" and reconciliation, it transmits something of the cruel optimism that stems both from the struggle for survival in conditions of entrenched poverty and disadvantage, and from the deep attachment to ideals of self-determination and sovereignty under ongoing conditions of settler colonial neo-liberalism.

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Chapter 11

Ending the Haunting, Halting Whisperings of the Unspoken: Confronting the Haitian Past in the Literary Works of Agnant, Danticat, and Trouillot

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There was no way to escape this dread anymore, this pendulum between regret and forgiveness (*The Dew Breaker*, p. 242).

Introduction

A 2010 painting by the Haitian painter Frantz Zéphirin, entitled “il était une fois le 12 janvier” (once upon a time on the 12th of January), foregrounds, before a deep dark blue-black background, two light azure rimmed single lapis eyes that are surrounded by roughly strung pairs of smaller, seemingly blinking eyes that cover the canvas like beads and whose pupils’ shades run from blue to purple. The haunting piece captures the fear, the eyes, the looking for dear ones, of the after moments to 4:53 pm when the 2010 January earthquake struck in and around the Haitian capital city as the darkness that envelops Port-au-Prince on any given evening transfixed the peering of the citizenry into staring human twinkling lights. But the speechless painting also represents for me a darkened other “once upon a time” which continues to haunt Haitians still living both at home and dispersed abroad and which after the earthquake, took on a sharpened *vérité* with the return of the deposed dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier, alias Baby Doc as the son of Papa Doc, François Duvalier, both of whom instigated the tonton macoutes’ deeds. As the regime’s death squads, the tonton macoutes petrified the Haitian public into silencing the disappearances, torture, and mass murders that they perpetrated and that constitute the charges of crimes against humanity that lie in waiting for the Duvaliers and their henchmen. The forced silence that haunted and still contains the era of the Duvalier dictatorship let fall a few whisperings, and it is these barely audible snatches that the women authors, who dialogue here through their novelistic fiction, try to tender and fill in through their writing.

Third, the devastating history of colonialism and apartheid demands social justice especially in a white-exclusive university that was central to the maintenance of white supremacy over a century. This means being clear, from the top down, about what the university stands for in terms of social justice and institutional reparation. The employment of senior black professors and administrators is not simply a matter of compliance with government legislation but communicated through the logic of social justice. The same applies to acts of symbolic reparation and social responsibility towards disadvantaged communities. Community outreach, always done in the ideological framework of religious upliftment of the uncivilized is now done in the political context of social justice for the oppressed; this is a significant shift in institutional motivation and requires further elaboration in another place.

Conclusion

The challenges for leadership in the aftermath of conflict are many, such as how to manage the lingering claims to martyr memories on both sides of a conflict (chapter 3) or how to conduct "second generation" journeys into the past in ways that create more promising futures (chapter 5) or how to build shared spaces out of volatile segregated ones (chapter 8). The question these chapters pose, in various ways, is whether there is a future, and if so what kind of future, after traumatic conflict?

South Africa has not yet escaped inclusion in the lament of Leon Uris (1976: p. 751) in *Trinity*—"Ireland has no future only the past happening over and over." This book, on the other hand, offers a wealth of comparative research and knowledge on how post-conflict states everywhere can yet build promising futures out of broken pasts.

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