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CULTURE REVIEW

## Landscape

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On the smooth pale boards were smeared patches of blue, red, purple and yellow, and my heart ached. The artist was wispy, with anxiety of movement and murmurs of kindness. It was a long time ago; recently I met her by chance at the train station .<sup>1</sup> I sense those shapes since, and on many occasions, the bruises in paint filling the room. I think about what I have heard and seen.

I damaged my new trousers before the interview when I was rushing to leave home, tearing the weft of the fabric with the iron. I tell my young neighbour about my job as a public servant, and she thinks I am joking—‘really a servant?’ the job title too ridiculous for her to comprehend. I am assessed for security and am a servant of the state. To continue the joke, I always sign off any of our communications as ‘your humble and devoted’. I serve the state listening to and reading experiences of abuse.

Royal Commissions shock and dismay us. Stories of trauma, violence, and power unchecked, seep into public consciousness exposed by these temporary large inquiries. People’s experiences of unrelenting, unthinkable cruelty, the colonial hand and paternalist structures of occupied land.

The emotional landscape of the country shifts and recalibrates, shaken momentarily; and before much time has passed, public outrage is replaced by new headlines and new horror. People retreat to their political corners, the church protects its own, and governments resist challenges to political agendas that may result in real change and any semblance of care. The findings and subsequent recommendations move between departments, shifting blame and accountability.

*‘Complaint is heard as a tantrum’ says Sarah Ahmed, ‘grievance is heard as a grudge’ – ‘a secret and a source of shame’.*<sup>1</sup>

Royal commissions are public airings of complaints and grudges built up over time, until tipping point, when too much is known and must be officially investigated. Shaped through legal apparatus outside government institutions, and at the same time looking into them, the public make effort to speak aloud their grievances through these inquiries. People tell their

experiences of abuse, sadness and pain to these temporary listeners. The state purports to listen, take note and make change or repair.

My desk used to be at the end of the open plan office, near the window, not quite close enough to experience the falling sensation of vertigo that follows me when I cross a pedestrian overpass, or drive across the Anzac Bridge. I walked to work through the park, and if it were the right time, I would see the water dragons basking in the sun on the rocks. The job was to witness people's memories of child sexual abuse, imagine the cruelty described in words, and make sense of that which is without sense, and embedded in sadness.

Inquiries into children and institutions in Australia began not long after the colony was established.<sup>2</sup> Swain writes that historically overlooking the abuse of children of:

*... may well have served the interests of the government and non-government institutions that provided child welfare services, but did little to protect the children entrusted to the children's 'care'.*

The royal commission performed its task of listening, recording and making recommendations. The subsequent criminal conviction of senior public figures, many from religious organisations, reconfigures what constitutes the landscape of the Australian community. People with memories of abuse, people who have lost friends and family from the trauma of the abuse and their supporters are vindicated. The stain of memories remains.

People, who refuse to believe the verdicts, retreat momentarily, and return, white, angry, fighting.

This year, to get to work I walk along the flat street in the wind and past the empty and overgrown block. Again I am on the sixteenth floor, in a smaller city, and this time hemmed in by glass offices that are frequently empty. Often I walk through the market. Now, like then, I am prone to swearing, sometimes I stand, exclaim and sit down to continue writing and reading accounts of abuse, of people, of power and of lack, lack of feeling and lack of integrity. At the end of the week, on what my colleague describes as 'filter-free Friday', in our casual clothes, we express ourselves more freely about the transgressions of institutions supposedly set up to protect and care.

Sadness is replaced by fear as the abiding sensation when listening to and reading about experiences of ageing. Fear for the people who are telling their experience, fear for their future and fear for my own. The future is not one of possibility and hope. Ageing a gradual demise. We do not see care and kindness. There have been twenty reviews into the treatment of older people in the last ten years,<sup>3</sup> most calling for change and public attention.

Abuse, abuse of First Nations people, abuse of children, older people, people of colour, women, people living in poverty, people living with disabilities, people marginalised, people who are homeless. Memories spoken and written, institutions devoid of care, children raped, people shaken, drugged and restrained, government institutions targeting the poor, strangers seeking asylum isolated by bureaucratic decision making, out of sight. A community marked by sadness and fear, damaged, bruised, a haunted community, a nation shaped and built on the deaths of others.<sup>4</sup>

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## Endnotes

1. Tring, Valerie. 1996. *Earliest Morning*. Mori Gallery, Sydney.
2. Ahmed, Sarah. On Complaint, <https://www.wheelercentre.com/broadcasts/sara-ahmed-on-complaint> accessed October 30, 2019.
3. Swain, Shurlee. 2013, History of Australian inquiries reviewing institutions providing care for children p 4 <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/file-list/Research%20Report%20-%20History%20of%20Australian%20inquiries%20reviewing%20institutions%20providing%20care%20for%20children%20-%20Institutional%20responses.pdf>
4. Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, 2019 A history of Aged Care Reviews, background paper p51 <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/Documents/background-paper-8.pdf>
5. L Secomb, L. 2002, 'Haunted Community', in M Stryck (ed.), *The Politics of Community*, The Davies Group, Aurora, pp. 131–150.