

# the white father

*Denial, Paternalism and Community*

FIONA PROBYN

My father was jailed for 18 months for breaching the Native Administration Act 1905–1941 of Western Australia in that he was ‘co-habiting’ with my mother. I will never understand a social political and legal system that could jail my father for loving my mother. What sort of system is it that condemns love as a crime? As required by law, when he was released from prison, he managed to secure the permission of the Chief Protector of Natives to marry my mother.

Mick Dodson<sup>1</sup>

The call to forget the past is accompanied by practices that perpetuate the past.

Deborah Bird Rose<sup>2</sup>

*Bringing Them Home: The Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, tabled before federal parliament in May 1997, found that between 1 in 3 and 1 in 10 Aboriginal children had been forcibly removed from their families between 1910 and 1970.<sup>3</sup> The report also found that the actions of both Commonwealth and state governments were genocidal,<sup>4</sup> a fact evidenced by the policies of Dr Cecil Cook, Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory (1927–1939) whose plans to ‘breed out the colour’ were known (and implicitly endorsed) by the Commonwealth government<sup>5</sup> which stepped in to take charge of Aboriginal affairs in the interwar period.

The project to bring the stories of those forcibly removed to the attention of the government and broader public relied on the willingness and courage of the 535 Aboriginal people who spoke openly about their lives to the inquiry. The report framed their testimonies with the hope that the Australian public would listen to these voices with a view to ‘healing and

reconciliation for the benefit of all Australians'.<sup>6</sup> John Frow argues that part of the reason why the federal government's refusal to apologise to the stolen generations was so shameful is that the report is based on the principle that the testimonials be given in order that they may be heard, that the '[l]istening' be then seen as 'a form of ethical responsiveness which recognizes a duty to the story of the other'.<sup>7</sup> Taking up Frow's point about the ethics of listening, I argue that one of the reasons why the federal government did not listen is that to listen to these stories necessitates coming to an appreciation of how much the concept of 'whiteness' was/ is linked to the genocidal effects and paternalistic rhetoric of government policies regarding Aboriginal people. As I will go on to argue, in its refusal to apologise and in its casting of 'mistakes' into a dissociable past, the federal government seeks to maintain a particular view of whiteness that makes it possible to continue with an untroubled investment in it, illustrated by Prime Minister John Howard's deployment of the term 'community' (eleven times) in his 'Motion for Reconciliation' speech presented to federal parliament in August 1999. In reaction to *Bringing Them Home*, the federal government and various right-wing commentators seemed to express surprise that there could be anything problematic about this paternalistic kind of whiteness.<sup>8</sup> Common reactions to the stolen generations stories included the claim that 'it was in their best interests to be taken away and assimilated', that the players were 'doing what they thought was best' and underscoring both, 'how could they/we whites have been bad *really*?' Consequently, I would like to revisit the archives and other texts in order to examine the story of the stolen generations from the perspective of an interrogation of whiteness. In particular, I would like to look at the role of the white fathers, both literally and figuratively in the form of government paternalism, with a view to counteracting the ongoing argument that it had 'nothing to do with us or our parent's generations'. I argue that *dissociation* from 'bad white fathers' and *assimilation* of 'fellow Australians who are indigenous' now forms the very conditions for Howard's 'community'. I return later to Howard's speech in order to argue that this paternalistic position in regards to 'fellow Australians who are indigenous' is predicated on the exclusion of the 'real' white fathers from his 'good' white community; they are repressed/ dissociated in order that they may return in the form of the 'good' white paternal figure of his imaginary 'Australian community'.

With good reason, many of the first hand accounts collected in *Bringing Them Home* focus on the mother-child dyad, as did the original policies of removal. Carmel Bird's edited collection and the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* continue to prioritise the mother-child relationship.<sup>9</sup> While a focus on maternal loss has opened up space for understanding the profound losses endured by Aboriginal communities, such an emphasis has also, according to Brigitta Olubas and Lisa Greenwell, been coopted by mainstream representations which universalise and privilege white maternity (sameness) over an 'ethics of listening' to and through difference.<sup>10</sup> While white maternity has served a convenient doubling for empathetic imaginings, white

paternity has not. The centralising of white maternity in this presentation to the 'broader community' is not only problematic in its appropriation of the experiences of the Aboriginal people involved, but it also obscures the issue of white paternity.<sup>11</sup> I do not wish to suggest that this deserves more attention than that granted the Aboriginal mother/child. What I do want to suggest is that the denial of the stolen generations history is inextricably linked to the silence surrounding white fathers.

While stolen generations history is partly 'a story of men'<sup>12</sup> (to borrow Kim Scott's phrase), and a story of *white* men, it is important to note that the issue of white fathers has been taken up by some commentators as a means of undermining the veracity of this history. An example of this is *Herald Sun* journalist Andrew Bolt's treatment of Lowitja O'Donoghue's story of her white father who 'relinquished his five children'<sup>13</sup> against the wishes of their mother. Bolt made much of the white father's 'relinquishment' in an attempt to discredit the stolen generations history as a whole, highlighting the historical valence of disputes over the white father. Moreover, writing about the white fathers of Aboriginal children who were stolen, I am venturing into the words of Aboriginal people who have given readers access to some of the intimate details of their lives. It cannot be assumed that paternity is a topic that Aboriginal people who were stolen can talk freely about. For one particular contributor to *Bringing Them Home*, it provokes feelings of shame<sup>14</sup> and loathing:

It was a shock to find out my father wasn't Aboriginal. I didn't like it at all. It didn't seem right ... I thought it was the same father that we'd all have as well. It makes me angry, very angry. If I met him, I don't think I could be very nice to him. I don't know anything about it, but I feel he didn't care. He just got her pregnant and left her. I don't want any of his blood in my body.<sup>15</sup>

Ella Simon talks openly about her white father in her life history but because of the treatment that she received at the hands of his family, she is unwilling to either take on or divulge his name: 'I just couldn't bring myself to like my father's name. I won't disclose what it was, because of his relatives and because I loved my father.'<sup>16</sup> While I am focussing on the white fathers in order to interrogate whiteness, this does not draw me away from questions of cultural trespass; indeed that is one of the dominant themes in relation to the white fathers and cannot be bypassed. Therefore I offer this argument as a partial account of what I have seen and heard in the words of those who offered their stories to the inquiry, and from what I have seen and heard in the silences of those who chose not to listen.

#### — INVISIBLE WHITE FATHERS

For all sorts of reasons, the stories of white men/white fathers are quite difficult to locate in the records. On one level the figure of the white father gains significance not necessarily

through the community ties that he built up with his Aboriginal family, but through the substitution of familial ties with 'blood ties', where his contribution of 'blood' to those categorised in the racist terminology of the day as 'half-caste' and 'quadroon' (those who were most often stolen) determined the children's visibility under the bureaucratic gaze. The blood tie, at least in this respect, was not something that was necessarily going to engender a sense of community between father and child, but was something that rendered the child *visible* to white paternalistic, bureaucratic control, while the actual white father often remained relatively *invisible*.

Doreen Mellor, Project Manager for the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project<sup>17</sup> (with its collection of over 2000 accounts) was unable to arrange interviews with any white fathers as part of the project, which includes the stories of Indigenous people, missionaries, police officers and administrators. In correspondence about the project and the scant mention of white fathers in the (very substantial) archives, Mellor told me:

Parents in general were hard to locate and interview (age is a factor; the experience is too painful for many to revisit; and many were made to feel, by the system, that it was their fault). White fathers' deaths were often the signal for removal. Another lot were unknown or not owning up. Some conspired with authorities to send their children away from mothers and others remained in touch or reconnected.<sup>18</sup>

The project to think about the role of the white fathers is therefore archivally challenging but their relative absence in the records is itself telling. In the segregationist and the assimilationist rhetoric of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they are disavowed, often the subject of public and legal censure, while at the same time they were in a sense protected, monitored and sponsored by government policies which formed around them. In this way, the white fathers were both agents of assimilation (providing opportunity for state control over Aboriginal people) and irritants to segregationist belief (flouting attempts to outlaw 'miscegenation'). The white fathers who appear in the following discussion can be grouped according to the categories that Mellor maps out in her description above: those who did not own up, those who were unknown, those who conspired with authorities, and those who maintained family connections despite the illegalities of their relationships.<sup>19</sup>

In secondary sources, the dominant view of the role of white fathers is, not surprisingly, negative. As shown by the following reference to them in *Bringing Them Home*, the white fathers have been read largely in terms of their abuse of Aboriginal women:

Especially during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries relationships between European men and Aboriginal women were often abusive and exploitative. Many children were the products of rape. The European biological fathers denied their responsibility and the authorities regarded the children with embarrassment and shame.<sup>20</sup>

The growing population of Aboriginal people of mixed descent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was, according to Anna Haebich, ‘a visible reminder of the patterns of “outright capture and rape, prostitution and concubinage” into which Aboriginal women had been drawn by the sexual desires of white men’.<sup>21</sup> Writing in 1934, Mary Bennett described Cecil Cook’s plan to ‘breed out the colour’ in terms which also positioned Aboriginal women as victims of white male lust, arguing that behind Cook’s policy was a plan for the ‘extermination of the unhappy native race ... and the leaving of the unfortunate native women at the disposal of lustful white men’.<sup>22</sup> But there are also other stories and alternative models which do not position the Aboriginal woman’s children as evidence of her sexual oppression at the hands of white men. Ann McGrath’s research on the Northern Territory suggests that in sexual relationships between white men and Aboriginal women, the women asserted their agency.<sup>23</sup> Such a view is also explored in Tracey Moffatt’s film *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987). But while the relationships in some contexts may have afforded Aboriginal women a degree of autonomy, the removal of any children conceived with a white man stripped her of all parental rights.

#### — THE ‘HALF-CASTE PROBLEM’

The policy of the Commonwealth is to do everything possible to convert the half caste into a white citizen ... unless the black population is speedily absorbed into the white, the process will soon be reversed, and in 50 years, or a little later, the white population of the Northern Territory will be absorbed into the black.

Cecil Cook, Chief Protector of Aborigines, NT, 1927–1939<sup>24</sup>

Russell McGregor notes that between 1880 and 1939 the growing number of so-called ‘half castes’ in the Australian population was perceived as a ‘threat’ to plans for a White Australia (and also to the Aboriginal population, narrowly defined as only ‘full bloods’) for a variety of reasons. These included propositions such as: they bred faster than the white population and therefore threatened to outnumber whites; they were unable to adapt to a ‘civilised’ lifestyle; they were rejected by both whites and blacks; the half-caste represented the ‘dying of the race’; they inherited the worst traits of both races and they were (according to Daisy Bates) part of a Roman Catholic plan to dominate Australia.<sup>25</sup> The ‘half-caste’ also challenged the very definitions of white and black, rendering them porous, ambiguous and *already* hybrid.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, assimilation was seen as the most logical solution to the ‘half-caste problem’; such persons were deemed assimilable into the population on the basis of improving their opportunities (employment, education). This ‘opportunity’ was often couched in terms that emphasised the privileges attached to their white heritage. McGregor quotes Reverend T.T. Webb arguing in 1923 that despite the fact that the ‘half-castes’ have Aboriginal mothers, they have also ‘inherited something of the character and outlook

of their white fathers, and so are, in some measure, fitted for inclusion in our communities'.<sup>26</sup> This did not mean that the 'half-castes' were 'fitted for inclusion' into their own family networks if their white father was present; it meant that they were 'fitted for inclusion' into the exclusively white community. Thus the agencies took the white father's blood as invitation to invoke white government paternalism—a point to which I will return.

Government bureaucracies across the states, territories (and the Commonwealth) had an inordinate interest in and disproportionate level of control (Rosalind Kidd describes the control as 'complete')<sup>27</sup> over the lives of Aboriginal people. Each government body had different Aboriginal policies and differing 'definitions' of what constituted an Aboriginal person. At the same time that the 'half-caste problem' was being addressed through removal policies and plans for biological assimilation, laws were introduced to prevent further intercourse between blacks and whites. The law did not prevent Aboriginal and white relations; in fact, it appears to have been ambivalently received and enforced. In regards to Western Australia, Anna Haebich has written that '[i]n contrast to attitudes to Asian men, there was considerable acceptance of white men's casual sexual contacts ... evident during debate on the 1905 Act when pastoralists successfully moved to reduce the minimum fine for cohabitation from fifty pounds to five'.<sup>28</sup> Under the terms of WA's *Aborigines Protection Act 1905* (repealed in the 1960s), the fictional Hugh Watt of Katharine Susannah Prichard's novel *Coonardoo* (1929) might have found himself fined five pounds for cohabiting with Coonardoo, the mother of his only son Winni. Had he admitted paternity, 'owned'<sup>29</sup> Winni, he may well have been sued for maintenance. But perhaps he would have stepped in and tried to prevent his removal had it been threatened?

Hugh would have liked nothing better than to claim the youngster, treat him as his son, make a fuss of him, give him clothes, have him taught to read and write as he would in any other circumstances. But there was Warieda, his pride in the boy. Were his love and pride greater than Warieda's, Hugh asked himself? He was fond of the kid; but could he do for Winni what Warieda was doing, teaching him to handle horses, fit him for an independent life in his natural surroundings? Warieda was on his own with horses. And how would Warieda take shattering of the belief that Winning-Arra was his own son. Hugh did not know whether the belief could be shattered; but he determined that never in any way would he allow it to be tampered with, if he could help it.<sup>30</sup>

Here Hugh's refusal to acknowledge Winni is couched in terms of what is in the 'best interests of the child' and his Aboriginal (step) father Warieda, while Hugh remains apparently self-sacrificing. Hugh measures his own fatherly desire and skill up against Warieda and finds his own desires and whiteness to be an obstacle. There is doubt in Hugh's mind that Warieda would even accept the wisdom of white biology and its version of paternity. Consequently,

Winni inherits nothing of the property, is not claimed and eventually loses his mother to Hugh's jealous sexual rage. While Prichard appears approving of the relationship between Hugh and Coonardoo, it is explored with reference to Jung rather than the Aborigines Protection Act. Not that she is entirely unaware of the Act. Prichard assures the reader that Hugh's settler neighbour and advocate of cohabitation, Sam Geary, 'exists, although the Aborigines Department has dealt with him lately'<sup>31</sup>—we might guess that this means that either he has been fined five pounds for cohabitation or that his eleven 'illegitimate' children have been removed. It is likely that the effect of such dealings would have fallen upon the women and children, rather than Geary himself.

The legislation against intercourse between Aboriginal women and white men was seen as largely ineffective, as Geary's own sentiments attests: 'Gins work out better in this country'.<sup>32</sup> Cecil Cook expressed a similar sentiment. He was sceptical about plans to lure more white women into the Territory to prevent further intercourse between Aboriginal women and white men.<sup>33</sup> In 1936, when he increased the penalties for intercourse, he still believed that such a measure was no deterrent given the 'remote localities' where white men are 'deprived of all female society, other than Aboriginal'.<sup>34</sup> During this time, marriage between Aboriginal women and white men was illegal in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia unless the Aboriginal woman was 'exempted' from Aboriginality, which had the insidious proviso that she no longer fraternise with Aboriginal people. But there were some exceptions. While only one marriage between a 'full-blood' Aboriginal woman and a white man was approved in 1938, between 1932 and 1938 Cook granted permission for thirty-seven marriages between Aboriginal women of mixed descent and white men.<sup>35</sup> This apparent relaxation in the attitude prohibiting 'miscegenation' was brought about as part of Cook's plans for biological assimilation. A.O. Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia from 1915 to 1940, also supported Cook's policy. According to Anna Haebich, the plan to introduce policies to guide biological assimilation had to overcome the 'public horror of sexual contact between white and black' but it was a policy which was 'shared by several prominent physical anthropologists, natural scientists, medical practitioners and administrators of the day, including Dr N.B. Tindale of the South Australian Museum, Dr Ralph Cilento, Director of Health in Queensland,<sup>36</sup> and scientist Dr J.B. Cleland who argued at the 1937 Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities that the 'satisfactory solution to the half caste problem ... [was] the ultimate absorption of these persons in the white population'.<sup>37</sup>

#### — CHILD REMOVAL

'Absorption' meant child removal. The policy of removal was active in all states and territories and particularly so during the heyday of assimilation between the 1930s and 1960s (earlier in the Northern Territory and Western Australia). Government authorities known as

Aboriginal Protection Boards or Aboriginal Welfare Boards were able to take Aboriginal children from their parents using very different reasons to those given in the removal of white children. The NSW *Aborigines Protection Amending Act 1915* gave the board ‘total power to separate children from their families without having to establish in court that they were neglected’. *Bringing Them Home* cites the reasons given for removal as “being Aboriginal” ... “To send to service”, “Being 14 years”, “At risk of immorality”, “Neglected”, “To get her away from surroundings of Aboriginal station/Removal from idle reserve life” and “Orphan”.<sup>38</sup> It was also the case that Aboriginal children with white fathers were explicitly targeted, as Sarah’s testimony attests:

[w]hen I accessed my file, I found out that the police and the station people at B—— Station felt that my mother was looking after me. And they were unsure of why I was being taken away. They actually asked if I could stay there. But because I was light-skinned with a white father, their policy was that I had to be taken away. I was the third child in a family of, as it turned out to be, 13. I was the only one taken away from the area [at the age of 4 in 1947] ...<sup>39</sup>

*Bringing Them Home* makes the point that the number of children forcibly removed between 1910 and 1970 was not a testament to the idea that the authorities really believed that they could successfully assimilate Aboriginal people into white society as whites, but rather that assimilation removed them from Aboriginality: ‘Aboriginal children were not removed because their “white blood” made them “white children” and part of the “white community”. They were removed because their Aboriginality was “a problem”.’<sup>40</sup>

The plan for biological assimilation was gender specific and involved what Cook referred to as the ‘elevation’ of the ‘female half caste’ so as to make her marriageable to whites. This plan consequently gave extra vigour to plans to separate Aboriginals of mixed descent from their communities, in order that they could be educated and trained for a life of service in the white community. Assimilation to the white community did not mean assimilation to white equity, but assimilation to the service of whites. For Aboriginal women, this most often meant ‘training’ for domestic work in white homes, reconfigured as ‘as a kind of apprenticeship to Australian citizenship’,<sup>41</sup> as Francesca Bartlett has put it. As shown by the accounts in *Bringing Them Home*, and in numerous life histories, it was while Aboriginal women were under the ‘protection’ of government-run institutions (homes) that many suffered sexual abuse, alongside the severe trauma of loss of family and cultural dislocation. When the women were sent out to white families to work as domestic servants, sexual abuse at the hands of white men<sup>42</sup> led to an increasing population of those who were also to come under the command of the Aboriginal Protectors. In her article on the domestic labour of her own female relatives in Western Australia, ‘I hate working for white people’, Jennifer Sabbioni describes the experience



of Aboriginal women in domestic service as exploitation 'emotionally, physically, sexually'.<sup>43</sup> Such a view is supported by the stories of many Aboriginal women. Daisy Corunna, in Sally Morgan's *My Place*, warns her not to let her own daughter be 'treated like a black woman'.<sup>44</sup> Daisy Corunna's own story is one of domestic servitude, denial of paternity and incest. The book implies that Daisy's father Howden Drake-Brockman is also the father of Daisy's daughter Gladys. According to Daisy, the Drake-Brockmans 'all pretended they didn't know. Aah, they knew, they knew. You didn't talk 'bout things then. You hid the truth.'<sup>45</sup>

— DIS-CLAIMING PATERNITY

In response to Sally Morgan's *My Place*, Judith Drake-Brockman produced *Wongi-Wongi: To Speak*, an account of her white family history in which Aboriginal children (and siblings) do not appear.<sup>46</sup> Arguing that Sally Morgan's book 'discredits her family and casts serious aspersions on father', she does not explicitly address the issue of whether or not her 'family' includes Gladys and Daisy, reinforcing the idea that such children were/are an occasion for white shame.<sup>47</sup> While leaving the substantive issues largely hidden (one has to read *My Place* to know what these 'aspersions' are), Drake-Brockman instead chooses to emphasise the history of her white family's benevolence towards Aboriginal workers on Corunna Downs. Under the title 'Howden's strict code', Drake-Brockman positions her father as an active agent working against 'fraternisation'. She writes: 'Father made a very strict ruling about fraternisation on Corunna Downs. The Aboriginal camp was, for their own welfare, out of bounds to all hands ... he was not going to have the Aborigines taken advantage of.'<sup>48</sup> Drake-Brockman's desire to present her own father as a guardian/protector of Aboriginal people finds echo in federal government rhetoric which re-imagines itself as the 'good father'. This paternity dispute is indicative of a wider denial of miscegenation, desire and abuse, crucial aspects in the history of the stolen generations. Howden Drake-Brockman's paternity (viewed as impossible by his white daughter and well known by his Aboriginal daughter Daisy Corunna and son Albert) signals a dispute over history itself. The white father is a key term in unpacking the history of miscegenation fears (and fears of desire) and is a key term in challenging the present practice of denying the past—where the federal government (by analogy) takes the Drake-Brockman side in the paternity dispute, substituting the miscegenator, rapist, abuser, lover, husband/father with the image of benevolent protector.

Around the same time that Howden Drake-Brockman was apparently doing his best to 'protect' the Aboriginal people on Corunna Downs, many Aboriginal women in service were being returned to the Moore River Native Settlement pregnant. Jennifer Sabbioni quotes A.O. Neville complaining of the women's 'downfall by irresponsible whites ... their employers, married men with families—even their mentors'.<sup>49</sup> As Sabbioni suggests, A.O. Neville's complaint about this behaviour must be weighed alongside his inaction over such exploitation,

and perhaps brings further support to the notion that although such exploitation was frowned upon very little was done to assist the plight of these women, probably because these women's 'downfall' (to use Neville's phrase) came under the grand plan of 'elevating' the 'race' by biological assimilation.<sup>50</sup> Thus the white fathers were, whether they consented or not to the official policy, instruments of assimilation.

While it appears that most white fathers were unwilling to 'own' their children (like Howden Drake-Brockman), there were some who did so proudly. Daryl Tonkin, father of nine, recalls that Welfare 'could steal children from you' so that '[w]henver a whitefella stranger came, the place [Jackson's Track] closed up behind a steel wall impossible to penetrate'.<sup>51</sup> A more ambiguous statement of paternal feeling appears in the following letter from a white father held in the Queensland State Archives (1903):

I am ashamed to say I am the father of the children ... I wish to keep the children, and am in a position to educate them ... I am willing to make an affidavit that I am their father, but do not wish to further disgrace myself and relations by marrying the Gin, but should all else fail than have my children taken will do so.<sup>52</sup>

Jennifer (Confidential Submission 437) from New South Wales relates the story of when she was taken in 1952; the policeman answered her father's objection by saying that he 'had a bad character', which Jennifer interpreted as reference to the fact that her 'father associated with Aboriginal people'.<sup>53</sup> Daryl Tonkin, self-described 'villain in the eyes of most'<sup>54</sup> was also, on the grounds of 'throwing his lot in with the blacks', a 'bad character'. On setting up house with his Aboriginal wife Euphie (with whom he had nine children), Daryl is told by his sister Mavis and brother Harry that 'a white man cannot live with a native woman ... It's against our religion. It's against God ... It's unnatural ... You'll be an outcast with your people, with your family, with all white people! ... it is against the law to live with them ... it's not our way'.<sup>55</sup> While reminding him of his treachery, his sister asks "What if there are children?" said Mavis with a look of horror on her drained, by now almost blue, face'.<sup>56</sup> Here Mavis displays a characteristic role ascribed to white women in colonial societies as monitors of the racial divide, and her condemnation of her brother and his Aboriginal family suggests a belief that he has committed an act of race treachery and compromised his whiteness by 'throwing in his lot with the blackfellas' becoming, as he puts it, 'a kind of outlaw'.<sup>57</sup> While close neighbours, neither Harry nor Mavis acknowledged their nieces or nephews.

Ann McGrath notes that in the Northern Territory (1910–1940), a white father would be presented with a 'burnt cork' on the birth of his first child with an Aboriginal woman, symbolising his 'charred character'.<sup>58</sup> Such descriptions of white men among the blacks draws attention to the instabilities of 'whiteness' itself. Where their actions are interpreted as race treachery, these white fathers can be seen to function as agents of the troubling of the term

'whiteness'. The 'Aboriginal problem' became theirs as removal policies rendered them unable to protect their own children: cohabitation meant that white fathers lost whatever privileges were associated with whiteness. In her submission to the inquiry, Joanne Selfe from the NSW Aboriginal Women's Legal Resource Centre points out that the losses experienced by the non-Aboriginal parent were often couched in terms of a belief that their whiteness and maleness should have given them greater powers over their children's safety. She asks:

How do you tell your father that it's okay; that it wasn't their fault; and that his whiteness and maleness in a patriarchal society that should have been enough to protect any person's family did no good because of the nature of the relationship with his partner?<sup>59</sup>

The kinds of relationships that the white fathers might have had with their children were pre-empted by acts of law. Deborah Bird Rose points out that:

It mattered not whether the sexual act that brought a child into being was an act of intimacy or of brutality. If it was between white and black it was a matter of law: without exemption, liaisons were illegal, and were tolerated as long as men did not seek to transform a liaison into a familial relationship.<sup>60</sup>

#### WHITE FATHERS AND THE 'GOOD' COMMUNITY

In 1904, Dr W.E. Roth, Chief Protector of Aborigines in Queensland, led an inquiry into the treatment of Aboriginal children in Western Australia and found that the increasing numbers of 'half-castes' were the outcome of the actions of irresponsible white men. Indeed, the irresponsibility of these white fathers is used as justification for taking control of the lives of all 'half-caste' children, which, as we have seen, was enforced regardless of whether or not the actual white father took responsibility or not. The 'bad white father' trope thus introduced the 'good white father' government into the lives of *all* Aboriginal people. *Bringing Them Home* recounts Roth's report thus:

... pastoralists who fathered 'half-caste' children made little attempt to educate or support them. The appropriate course, according to Roth, was for the Chief Protector to assume guardianship of these children, to remove them from their Aboriginal families and place them in institutions. To prevent the problem arising again in the future there should be prohibitions against 'mixed marriages' and 'miscegenation'.<sup>61</sup>

Roth's recommendations against miscegenation were implemented from 1901, and the later amendment to the Aborigines Act (1905) affected the issue of legal guardianship, reasserting the trope of 'State as Father', as Ann McGrath notes in her chapter of the same name.<sup>62</sup> Whether the white father was on the scene or not, the consequences of their actions (a child) were

interpreted by Government agencies as requiring their paternal intervention. Denise Cuthbert writes: 'the interests of the state ... frequently coincided with and served the interests of many individual white males'.<sup>63</sup> While the actions of the state can be seen as sparing the white men their responsibilities, it is also true that where these responsibilities were met, it simply did not count in terms of preventing removal. Anna Haebich notes that the activities of the boards often had the effect of keeping white fathers from claiming their children. She notes that in 1909 Travelling Inspector Isdell in Western Australia recommended that the board:

identify putative fathers to sue them for maintenance of children in institutions ... this had the effect of alienating some who refused to acknowledge paternity. At the same time he objected to their involvement in the children's lives ... Isdell in fact advised the Chief Protector not to recognise any white man's claims over 'half caste' boys, claiming it was a ruse to secure the boys' services and to prevent their removal to missions.<sup>64</sup>

Thus the figure of the 'bad white father' gave grounds for further state intervention into the lives of Aboriginal people more generally.

The imaginary substitution of the 'bad parent' for the 'good parent' of government and Church agencies during the assimilationist phase finds more recent expression in the form of John Howard's 'Motion for Reconciliation', as mentioned in the introduction. This attitude of good white father paternalism is seen in the form of Howard's use of 'community' to suggest that the constituency he represents coincides with the inherently 'good': those free of all responsibility for 'past' wrongs and those who worked honourably and in the 'best interests of the child'.<sup>65</sup> Such a community must continue to disavow the white father from the historical scene and substitute him with state paternalism.

Howard's Motion for Reconciliation presented to parliament on 26 August 1999 was made largely in response to pressure over the government's lack of formal response to the *Bringing Them Home* report.<sup>66</sup> In his attempt to contextualise the motion, Howard refers to 'community' eleven times, three in reference to an 'indigenous community' (signalled only by having 'leaders' which, as Frances Peters-Little<sup>67</sup> argues, is problematic) and the other eight in reference to a totality of 'the Australian community', 'our community', 'a community'. While the motion seeks to state the government's commitment to the process of reconciliation and assert the 'need to acknowledge openly the wrongs and injustices of Australia's past', it is a speech characterised by ambivalence and dissociation, not least indicated by his use of the term 'community'.

According to Jacques Derrida 'community' is a problematic term because it is most often deployed in order to exclude the other, to distinguish a group from the foreigner, the stranger. While it suggests an idealised 'unity' marked as the capacity to tolerate plurality, it is also inherently hostile to whatever the community defines itself in opposition to: 'community' is

thus an unstable category with shifting boundaries.<sup>68</sup> This is demonstrated by Howard's speech. Howard, now quite famously, holds to the notion that 'present generations cannot be held accountable ... for the errors and misdeeds of earlier generations' because 'for the overwhelming majority of the current generations of Australians, there was no personal involvement of them or their parents'. Here, at the mention of responsibility and accountability, Howard's representative community appears to shrink to the 'good' majority of Howard's generation, his children's generation and his parent's generation. Howard's community, a select group for which he claims to speak, is made up of those who had no 'personal involvement' in the injustices of the past.

This shrinking community of implicitly 'good' people knows itself to be good because '[t]he Australian people know that mistakes were made in the past. The Australian people know that wrongs were committed.' But here we see two kinds of 'knowing' that determine membership into Howard's community: first-hand and second-hand knowledge. A member of Howard's implicitly good community knows about these so called 'mistakes', 'injustices' and 'wrongs' *second-hand*, without 'personal involvement', and it is these people who he is interested in. Those with 'personal involvement', who know *first-hand* about the 'mistakes', 'injustices' and 'wrongs' of the past, are not part of the Australian community for which Howard speaks. This suggests that 'the white fathers' do not make it into Howard's 'Australian community' of the unaccountably good. The silence and denial that still surrounds them suggests that these white fathers might 'know' *first-hand* the kinds of 'mistakes', 'injustices' and 'wrongs' that were 'committed in the past'. Because of this first-hand knowledge, they are too close to the 'wrongs' to allow the distance required for Howard's historical blankness. These white fathers are agents of knowledge that problematise any injunction to forget the past and therefore they cannot fit into Howard's community—a community based on an awareness of these wrongs, but not a first-hand awareness of them. Thus, like Judith Drake-Brockman's defence of her father from the 'aspersions' of Sally Morgan's *My Place*, white paternity becomes a dispute over history and community. The white fathers feature as a persistent, unassimilable irritant to the imagined unity of Howard's 'Australian community', related to the 'good' community and yet cast outside of it because of what they might know first-hand. Just as they were irritants and agents in the nineteenth century to miscegenation fears and assimilationist programs, so are they irritants to and agents of Howard's 'good community', allowing him to enact state paternalism in the name of the Father yet again. While he rhetorically effaces them from the 'good' white community, he steps into their newly polished shoes in the form of an (imaginary) good paternal authority who wishes to assimilate 'fellow Australians who are Indigenous' into the 'family'.

Howard's argument that present generations cannot be held responsible for the actions of those in the past divorces his community of fellow Australians from an earlier generation,

suggesting a peculiar belief that generational and family relationships cannot and do not transmit either cultural capital, memory or meaning. Denying the relationship to the past and to the people in the past who enacted the government policies is a rhetorical manoeuvre that severs the present from the past, mothers and fathers from their children. It is a manoeuvre akin to the policy of removal itself—remove all relationship to the family and remove the cultural group itself (or so they thought); thus Howard inadvertently reveals his proximity to the very thinking that he claims to be generationally free from. His call to dissociate from the past is unsuccessful because it reproduces and so continues the politics of segregation of children from their families and assimilation into the whiter/wider community; thus Howard makes *dissociation* the condition of his community with those whose actions he seeks difference from.

In a more positive elaboration of the term, Derrida argues that ‘dissociation is the condition of community’ because the ability to dissociate from the other is what allows the other to speak, to be heard and be present as different from the self.<sup>69</sup> Dissociation allows one to take up a position of ‘ethical listening’ like that which the report (as Frow argues) calls for. But in Howard’s community, it is not the Aboriginal other who is rhetorically dissociated from and therefore allowed to speak—it is the white father who is dissociated from. Moreover, in Howard’s community, when the ‘white father’ speaks, it is not as an other, but in the form of his substitute, the state as good White Father.

Derrida points out that the inability to dissociate from the other leads to assimilation of it. While Howard calls for dissociation from the past and those personally involved in its ‘wrongs’, he calls for Indigenous people to assimilate: ‘we want you in every way to be totally part of our community’. In effect he attempts to recolonise Indigenous Australians under the banner of a totalising unity, suggesting a belief that he can ‘know the other from the inside’, thereby foreclosing any need for ‘ethical listening’ to the voice of the other.<sup>70</sup> This also suggests a refusal to acknowledge cultural difference, and a refusal to acknowledge the failure and destructive nature of assimilationist policies—assimilation forming the antithesis of Derrida’s dissociating community.

Howard’s notion of community is paternalistic, imploring Indigenous Australians to submit to the ‘good’ white surrogate father’s care: ‘We want to understand you. We want to care for you where appropriate.’ This rhetoric represents a continuation of assimilationist practices (predicated as the state as father) that we have already seen. The irony is, of course, that he seeks to dissociate himself and his government, community, generation, from this history. But Howard channels the rhetoric of those government policies he seeks to dissociate from<sup>71</sup> and this dissociation allows us to hear their ‘old’ ideas returning.

In conclusion, I hope to have demonstrated that Howard’s refusal to listen and apologise to the stolen generations and his deployment of paternalistic and assimilationist rhetoric

regarding Aboriginal people has a history marked by the sublimation of the role of white fathers. Howard's call to dissociate from the past and those responsible for 'wrongs' against Aboriginal people echoes the dissociation (voluntary or forced) of white fathers from their children—a relationship that then bears the legal, ethical, moral and psychological burdens of a repressed history. In the context of Howard's calls for dissociation from this history, dissociation has, as Derrida points out, become the 'very condition' of Howard's 'Australian community', a community in which the (Aboriginal) other is assimilated and the white father is turned into a more convenient other. In less subtle terms, Howard's community of the good excommunicates the white father with a 'burnt cork' while 'rescuing' his kids and their Aboriginal mother from his 'charred character'.<sup>72</sup> Such a community represents a continued, unproblematised investment in whiteness itself.

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Thanks to Ann McGrath, Elizabeth McMahon, Elspeth Probyn, Brian Rapsey and Margaret Somerville for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

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1. Mick Dodson, Corroborree Speech, 2000 <<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/orgs/car/media/Dr%20Mick%20Dodson.htm>>
  2. Deborah Bird Rose, 'Dark Times and Excluded Bodies in the Colonisation of Australia', in Geoffrey Gray and Christine Winter (eds), *The Resurgence of Racism: Howard, Hanson and the Race Debate*, Monash Publications in History, Clayton, 1997, p. 98.
  3. *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 1997.
  4. 'This Inquiry concludes with certainty on the evidence that while child removal policies were often concerned to protect and "preserve" individual children, a principal aim was to eliminate Indigenous cultures as distinct entities.' *Bringing Them Home*, p. 273.
  5. Tony Austin argues that 'They [the Commonwealth Government] implicitly supported Cook's attempts at social, economic and biological assimilation ... They remained hushed about the more extreme elements of Cook's plans, content to simply let him try to get on with it.' *Never Trust a Government Man: Northern Territory Aboriginal Policy 1911–1939*, NTU Press, Darwin, 1997, p. 211.
  6. *Bringing Them Home*, p. 4.
  7. John Frow, 'The Politics of Stolen Time', *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 9, February–April 1998. <<http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-February-1998/frow1.html>>
  8. See Robert Manne, *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2001.
  9. Carmel Bird (ed.), *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, Random House, Sydney, 1998. Philip Noyce, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, 2002. See also Tony Birch "'This is a True Story": *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, "Mr Devil" and the Desire to Forget', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2001.
  10. Brigitta Olubas and Lisa Greenwell, 'Re-membering and Taking up an Ethics of Listening: A Response



- to Loss and the Maternal in “the Stolen Children”, *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 15, 1999. <<http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-July-1999/olubas.html>>
11. It is also worth considering how these two are related to each other—white maternity providing the trope for understanding as well as palliating the history of the stolen generations.
  12. Kim Scott, *Benang: From the Heart*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1999.
  13. Lowitja O’Donoghue, media release, 28 February, 2001, as seen in *Australian Humanities Review*. <<http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/issue-March-2001/odonoghue.html>>
  14. See Rosamund Dalziell’s *Shameful Autobiographies: Shame in Contemporary Australian Autobiographies and Culture*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1999, pp. 138–49.
  15. *Bringing Them Home*, p. 240.
  16. Ella Simon, *Through My Eyes*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1978, p. 32.
  17. At the time of writing, the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project is yet to be published in book form (November 2002 expected date). See the National Library web page for information on the project and collection. <<http://www.nla.gov.au/oh/bth>>
  18. Personal communication from Doreen Mellor, Project Manager, Bringing Them Home Oral History Project, National Library of Australia, 22 August 2002. Mellor is co-editor (with Anna Haebich) of the project in book form.
  19. In the last category see Daryl Tonkin and Carolyn Landon, *Jackson’s Track: Memoir of a Dreamtime Place*, Viking, Melbourne, 1999. See Probyn, forthcoming 2003.
  20. *Bringing Them Home*, p. 272.
  21. Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 2000, p. 134. Haebich cites R. Evans, “Don’t you remember Black Alice, Sam Holt?” Aboriginal Women in Queensland History’, *Hecate*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1982.
  22. Mary Bennett (1934) quoted in Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880–1939*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1997, p. 177.
  23. Ann McGrath, *Born in the Cattle’: Aborigines in Cattle Country*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1987, pp. 89–90.
  24. Cook, quoted in McGregor, pp. 177–78.
  25. McGregor, pp. 138–40.
  26. Reverend T.T. Webb, 1923, quoted in McGregor, p. 140.
  27. Rosalind Kidd, *Black Lives, Government Lies*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2000, p. 6.
  28. Haebich, p. 239.
  29. The connection between paternity, government paternalism and slavery is made clear by the use of the term ‘owned’ to describe the relationship between Aboriginal people and their fathers, the government and employers. Daisy Corunna uses the word ‘owned’ to refer to the admission of paternity as in ‘Nellie was from Lyndon Station. She was the daughter of the station manager, Mr Hack, but he never owned her’ (416) and also to government paternalism, ‘[a]t least, we not owned anymore. I was owned by the Drake-Brockmans and the government and anyone who wanted to pay five shillings a year to Mr Neville to have me.’ Daisy Corunna also tells her grand-daughter, ‘Aah, you see, that’s the trouble with us blackfellas, we don’t know who we belong to, no one’ll own up’. (403) Sally Morgan, *My Place*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1987, p. 429.
  30. Prichard, pp. 138–39.
  31. Prichard, foreword.
  32. Prichard, p. 109.
  33. McGregor, p. 142. See also Lyn Riddett, ‘Watch the White Women Fade: Aboriginal and White Women in the Northern Territory 1870–1940’, *Hecate*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1993.
  34. Cecil Cook, quoted in Austin, p. 271.
  35. Austin, p. 198.
  36. Haebich, p. 274.
  37. Dr J.B. Cleland 1937, quoted in McGregor, p. 158.
  38. *Bringing Them Home*, p. 42.
  39. *Bringing Them Home*, p. 173.
  40. *Bringing Them Home*, p. 272.
  41. Francesca Bartlett, ‘Clean, White Girls: Assimilation and Women’s Work’, *Hecate*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1999.
  42. ‘It is not an exaggeration to say that the half-caste girl of Alice Springs is at the mercy of the white men who make up their minds to use them,’ (letter from 1936, quoted in Austin, p. 207). *Bringing Them Home* quotes Archbishop Donaldson, visiting Barambah (later Cherbourg) Queensland in 1915, as saying that of those Aboriginal girls sent to work as domestics ‘over 90% come back pregnant to a white man’. *Bringing Them Home*, p. 75.
  43. Jennifer Sabbioni, “I Hate Working for White People”: Investigation of the Effects of the White Australia Policy 1901 on Aboriginal Women’, *Hecate*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1993, p. 8.
  44. Morgan, p. 417.
  45. Morgan, p. 419.
  46. Judith Drake-Brockman, *Wongi-Wongi: To Speak*, Hesperian Press, Carlisle WA, 2001.
  47. Drake-Brockman, p. 138.
  48. Drake-Brockman, p. 9.
  49. Sabbioni quotes from A.O. Neville’s *Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in our Community*, Currawong Publishing, 1947, p. 183.



50. Haebich notes that in New South Wales between 1910 and 1930s the 'frequent pregnancies to white men, although not officially condoned, "whitened" the Aboriginal population and continued the cycle of removal and loss', p. 184.
51. Tonkin and Landon, p. 214.
52. Haebich, p. 290.
53. *Bringing Them Home*, p. 53.
54. Tonkin and Landon, p. xiv.
55. Tonkin and Landon, pp. 96–7.
56. Tonkin and Landon, p. 97.
57. Tonkin and Landon, p. 256.
58. McGrath, p. 70.
59. *Bringing Them Home*, p. 215.
60. Bird Rose, p. 111.
61. *Bringing Them Home*, p. 103.
62. Ann McGrath, 'The State as Father: 1910–1960', in Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quartly (eds), *Creating a Nation*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 279–96.
63. Denise Cuthbert, 'Holding the Baby: Questions Arising from Research into the Experiences of Non-Aboriginal Adoptive and Foster Mothers of Aboriginal Children', *Journal of Australian Studies*, December, 1998.
64. Haebich, p. 239.
65. Robert van Krieken includes this statement from (former prime minister) John Gorton: '[o]n the whole I take the view the churches took at the time. It was the right thing for them to do, to try and look after Aboriginal children', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 May 1998. From Robert van Krieken's 'The "Stolen Generations" and Cultural Genocide: The Forced Removal of Australian Indigenous Children from their Families and its Implications for the Sociology of Childhood', *Childhood*, vol. 6, no. 3, August 1999. See <<http://www.usyd.edu.au/su/social/robert/arc/arcframe.htm>>.
66. John Howard, Motion for Reconciliation, Parliament, 26 August, 1999.
67. In an important discussion paper on the use of 'community' in/by Aboriginal people, Frances Peters-Little notes that the concept of 'leadership', like 'community', has brought with it a whole array of problems relating to the management of Aboriginal affairs by government agencies and bureaucracy. On the subject of community she also notes that the term has been most often imposed from without and deployed as a means of rendering Aboriginal people objects of bureaucratic control. She points out that:  
The use of the term community without Aboriginal consultation, self-analysis and definition has in fact acted as a barrier to their own self-determination, setting communities up for administrative failure, thus denying Aboriginal people the opportunity to work through the development process, with specialised professional support, and in their own time.
68. Frances Peters-Little, 'The Community Game: Aboriginal Self-Definition at the Local level', AIATSIS Discussion Paper No. 10, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, 1999, p. 15. <[http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/rsrch/rsrch\\_dp/community.htm#1](http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/rsrch/rsrch_dp/community.htm#1)> Howard uses the term 'community' with regards to Aboriginal leaders precisely in the way that Peters-Little critiques—to minimise the heterogeneity of Aboriginal people.
69. Jacques Derrida, 'The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida', in John D. Caputo (ed.), *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, Fordham University Press, New York, 1997, p. 107.
70. Derrida, p. 15.
71. Derrida, p. 14.
72. Howard's arguments are reflected in those of Abbott, one time Minister for Home Affairs during the Bruce–Page government: 'There are, in the pages of the history of Australia, episodes which reflect credit on nobody. But we cannot erase the past so we must look to the future with hopeful aspirations of better things to come ... We are not concerned with what has happened in the past; what we want to do is to make things better for the future.' Abbott, quoted in Austin, p. 150.