Memory, Testimony, and Trauma

The silence surrounding the physical and emotional harm Aboriginal people have suffered since the colonization of Australia has been broken. However, recognizing the obligation to remember the past does not make remembrance a straightforward process: form can be as important as content in deciding whether we perpetuate legends or myths or preserve the material trace, or whether we remember the events that shaped our culture and those who came before us and in a variety of methods and from a range of perspectives. How we remember also influences how we incorporate those recalled events and people into cultural memory.

In this chapter, I consider the problems associated with positioning the biographies and life stories of Aboriginal people as testimonies and Stolen-Generations narratives, which are now inextricably aligned with “Bringing Them Home.” I also question the value of using trauma as the primary concept for understanding the personal experiences of Aboriginal people and the place of such experience in cultural memory.\(^1\) Testimony and trauma literature are particular memory genres that are regarded as separate from other forms of remembering. However, in many respects they are similar to Lachmann’s notion of classical literature and the texts I designate as traditional historical fiction. Each genre supports a particular cultural position or cultural identity, and the process determining inclusion in the genre is linked to politics, ideology, and power-structures.\(^2\)

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2 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. 
“Bringing Them Home”

Following the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families and the subsequent publication of the report “Bringing Them Home: ‘The Stolen Children’” in 1997, there emerged a new narrative genre in Australia: Stolen-Generations narratives. The new genre serves the political and ideological purpose of making all Australians aware of the policies relating to the forced separation of Aboriginal children from their families, the physical and emotional cruelty of those policies, and their ongoing effects on Aboriginal people.

The report provides much of the rhetoric for Stolen-Generations narratives, and the title, “Bringing Them Home,” has become synonymous with displaced Aboriginal children. The report also helped to politicize the issue, an essential aspect of bringing the practice and its consequences into the consciousness of the Australian people. However, the same politicizing process has defined and limited the terms of reference of the debate. The authors of the report subscribe to the belief in the 1990s that, as assimilationist policies faded and understanding of history and Aboriginal culture increased, interest in Aboriginal people would grow and attitudes would become more tolerant of difference.3 However, as important as the document is to Aboriginal politics, it remains peripheral to mainstream politics and cultural memory. The Stolen-Generations narrative is about and for Aboriginal people, except where it is used to point out white guilt. Rosanne Kennedy argues for the testimonies of the Stolen Generations to be considered as contributing to historiography, neither as evidence nor as a means of evoking empathy but as a means of forcing white Australian listeners or readers to examine their role in racism.4

“Bringing Them Home” is essentially a collection of memories and testimonies from the victims of the removal policy; there is no evidence from other witnesses or people who were involved in the process of removing or caring for these children. All those interviewed for the report testify to violence and atrocity, as though there were only one type of story

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