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Through the Archives*

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A Her-Storical Biography and Finding Family History Through the Archives

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Two hundred years of constant and deliberate disruption, dislocation and mistreatment of First Peoples has not just been experienced individually but collectively between generations and across communities. The legacy of discriminatory treatment continues for many First Peoples in archives where their stories are still locked in police files, exemption files, child welfare reports and in some instances privately owned records, meaning they are not always able to locate their story or own their identity. People whose family members were impacted by government policies (such as exemption) need to undertake extensive archival research in order to know their family history. This paper describes how the author combined auto-ethnographic description of her personal experience of archival research with documentary evidence to create a personal and historical narrative. This narrative has been captured in a “her-storical biography”, a cultural artefact meant for family. This paper argues that the First Nations re-authoring of colonial narratives described here might work as a model for people looking for family her-stories of exemption in the written archive.

Dr. Basedow, ADELAIDE.

I am Charlie “Apma” proper Father alonga Minnie — my girl you been taken from New Crown. His mother Yulda sit down alonga Horseshoe Bend. All about me — mother — sister and brother sorry alonga Minnie, you send em back quick please. Send em letter Horseshoe Bend Mr Elliot — what time Minnie come Back.

(Alice Springs, 17 February 1920, Horseshoe Bend)¹

Amongst the files of the Advisory Council of Aborigines held at the Mortlock Library in South Australia is a copy of a telegram message written and sent for *Charlie Apma* to Dr Herbert Basedow, the anthropologist, geologist, medical practitioner, and the so-called “authority” on First Nations people dated 17 February 1928, from Alice

In this document, I respectfully borrow the footnoting style demonstrated by Elia Harding in his honours thesis entitled “Strictly 4 My Mob: A Blak Family History” (BA Hons, University of Melbourne, 2019) and use italic face font to highlight the names and nations of Australia’s First Nations scholars. Throughout this paper, I will be using the term First Nations People or First Peoples when referring to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people across Australia. I use second nations to describe anyone who is not First Nations but live in what we now call Australia. The term blak was created by First Nations creative artist and photographer Destiny Deacon as a symbolic strategy of reclaiming colonialist language to create means of self definition and expression

¹ Copy, C. Apma to Dr. Basedow, 17 February 1928, Aborigines Friends Association Correspondence Files, SRG 139/1/216, Mortlock Library, State Library of South Australia.

Springs (Horseshoe Bend) demanding his daughter be returned to him. I am a proud Arrernte woman of the Northern Territory, a stolen generation survivor, family historian and I am the great grand-daughter of Charlie.

In all the states and territories that comprise Australia, where children were (and can still be) silently moved away from community and in some instances lose their identity completely, stories lie woven throughout colonial archives where First People were the object (and subject) of the gaze of colonial authorities and “experts”.² The Stolen Generations were not the only people impacted by discriminatory and cruel policies.³ Exemption was a policy imposed by state governments on some First Nations people during the twentieth century in Australia. It was enacted through a single clause included in many of the so-called “protection” Acts that were passed by every state from the late nineteenth century on, and which allowed the government to control the lives of First Nations people. Aunty *Judi Wickes* has written about the way in which families with exemption policies find stories of sadness and misery when they access their files, further describing how it leaves them with mixed feelings.⁴ In some instances, like the telegram cited above, these stories portray misery and degradation, caused by a complex chain of historical circumstance, that continues into the present day. Yet there are moments when these stories open up pathways to more information and where misery turns into contentment and degradation turns to recovery.

In this paper, I reflect on the combination of the auto-ethnographic description of my personal experiences of my archival research in seeking to understand what happened not only to myself, but my mother and grandmother. This paper is influenced by a journey of sovereignty, truth-telling, and self-determination, and I share the importance of how cultural artefacts and personal and historical narrative enabled me to re-author, re-tell, and re-matriate a new family narrative back to family and country.⁵ It highlights the profound effect of the practice of creating a cultural artefact in the form of a self-printed her-storical biography. It further discusses the complexities, challenges and the value the archival re-authoring practice has had on me as an individual and of my family’s experience as means of reconnecting to country and understanding identity.⁶ I argue that such an approach also might be of use to people who find exemption in their family histories.

Through the re-telling of my her-story I unashamedly describe my feelings of being intoxicated with love. A love I did not know was possible for a grandfather I had not

² Lynette Russell, “Indigenous Records and Archives: Mutual Obligations and Building Trust,” *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 34, 1 (2006), pp. 32–43.

³ The Stolen Generations refers to a period in Australia’s history where First Nations children were removed from their families through government policies. Between 1910 and the 1974, many First Nations children were forcibly removed from their families as a result of various government policies. The generations of children removed under these policies became known as the Stolen Generations.

⁴ J. Wickes, “‘Never really heard of it’: The Certificate of Exemption and Lost Identity,” in *Aboriginal Biography and Autobiography, Aboriginal History*, eds. F. Peters-Little, A. Haebich, and P. Read: ANU Press (Canberra, 2010), pp. 73–91.

⁵ Cultural artefacts as a practice are associated with dealing with inherited family archives; the creation of new artefacts, such as scrapbooks and collections of letters, out of repurposed archived materials. Liz Gloyn, Vicky Crewe, Laura King, and Anna Woodham, “The Ties that Bind: Materiality, Identity, and the Life Course in the ‘Things’ Families Keep,” *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 43, 2 (2018), pp. 57–76.

⁶ “Country” is used to recognise First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing. Karen Martin and Booran Mirraoopa, “Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing: A Theoretical Framework and Methods for Indigenous and Indigenist Re-search,” *Journal of Australian studies*, Vol. 27, 76 (2003), pp. 203–14.

met. The telegram was the first piece of information I was presented with in 2016 at the front end of my personal archival experience. A small piece of information with a massive impact. It sparked an urgency greater than that of curiosity — and so the journey began through the hallowed precincts of archival institutions, where the path and the process was unfamiliar, slow, demeaning, and most times traumatic. At times the information found was too hard to read, too difficult to fathom, and immeasurable amounts of tears were shed. Yet at my disposal was the visual feast of family data, leading to an obsessiveness to overcome the challenges in using the archive to reauthor a new narrative. In the moment of reading the telegram I felt the transgenerational wisdom and the despair of my grandfather, yet somehow recognised in those words the familial trait of resilience that thrust me into the search to understand my family story, come to grips with my identity and my desire to create a family cultural artefact.

My her-storical biography is a large format self-published book with narrative that uses description and dialogue and personal reflection. The inclusion of maps, photographs and other documentary evidence such as diary excerpts, telegrams, newspaper reports, and government reports, from personal collections and public archives brings the audience into the experience of the author in a real and tangible way.

Her-story

My research comes from a personal place. It is an exploration of the history of my family, fifty-four years of searching for my identity and trying to belong. You see, my grandmother, my mother, my two sisters and I were forcibly removed from each other and our families as children spanning from a period from 1920 until 1969.

I start with my grandmother. She was eleven years old when she was violently stolen from her parents in 1920 from Central Australia by Dr Herbert Basedow and his wife Olive (“Nell”). Basedow was on his third “medical” expedition, funded by pastoral and mining company interests, ostensibly to examine First Nations people’s health in the lower southern part of the Northern Territory. Loaded into the back of Basedow’s camel-drawn buggy to Adelaide, where she was to be enslaved in the Basedow household, apparently invisible to government authorities for eight years, despite the protests of at least three deputations between 1922 and 1932 by her father, a senior law man, and other Arrernte elders, demanding that she be returned to him and her country. Upon the sudden death of Basedow in 1933, my grandmother was treated like a family heirloom and passed over to Basedow’s unmarried sisters for further enslavement. Bound in servitude, unable to go home and unlikely to marry, it was never expected that my grandmother was to have children. Despite the odds, she did — a son born in 1942, and then a daughter, born in 1943. Both were taken from my grandmother’s care in very different ways. Her son was kept in the care of the Basedow sisters until 1963. He passed in 1996, unmarried and without children. My grandmother’s daughter — my mother, was taken and placed in Colebrook Training Home a children’s institution for First Nations children run by the United Aborigines Mission (UAM).⁷ She was then under the UAM’s control for a further twenty-six years, during which time she had three children of her own — including me — all of whom were taken from her. My grandmother finally returned to Alice Springs in 1958 and passed in 1990. Her mother and father had both passed without ever seeing her again. I reunited with my mother, and my sisters and my Nan when I was nineteen. Five women across three generations re-uniting is an unusual occurrence. But it would take thirty-one years to uncover the real story.

⁷ The United Aborigines Mission ran residential institutions for the care, education, and conversion to Christianity of First Nations children, mostly on mission stations and in children’s Homes.

Archives

I knew nothing about archives when at age fifty I embarked on the process to find my story. Some might say it was a mid-life crisis, but when you do not know that story, where you struggle to belong, where the intergenerational trauma was and continues to be prevalent through your family, it was important not just for me, but for my children and grandchildren, that I did so. From adoptee, survivor to family genealogist I started with my family ancestry to trace kinship, lineage and to understand my adoption, my mother's institutionalisation and Nan's life of slavery. The more I uncovered the more my role morphed into historian, navigating how to weave stories of the past within stories of the present that document how First peoples have struggled to survive the policies of colonisation that sought to annihilate, make invisible, destroy, and reconstruct traditional identities.

I travelled across three states and two territories of Australia in order to locate my family's story. The experience of accessing archives that relate to your family is both chilling and intimate. My family story is both personal and political and it is not only an untold story, but also one that has significance for the history of this country. It was a family snapshot into my own and my family member's lives lived under extraordinary surveillance, and yet I was compelled to continue the process, seeking the diamond, the gem that would reveal all.

Once I began my PhD my focus became that of the trained historian. I began thinking about the use of the colonial archives collections in which First Nations individuals, families, and communities are heavily documented and the important role storytelling has for re-authoring new stories. The conventional positioning of individuals as the "subjects" of the official archival record continues to have a disempowering effect on First Nations people whose lives have been so extensively documented for the purposes of surveillance, control, and dispossession. What is striking about the archives is the degree of totalitarian control, overt racism, and absence of accountability they evince concerning the history of past treatment of First Nations people.⁸ As a First Nations woman I have to negotiate what First Nations historian *Lynette Russell* and *Aileen Moreton-Robinson* have referred to as the "incommensurable ontologies" of western and Indigenous knowledge systems in that the records were as confusing to access and interpret as the institution (i.e. the archive) itself.⁹

The archives of exemption are sensitive, personal, and are mostly, across the country, given a "restricted" status by state records offices, which means they can only be accessed by descendants.¹⁰ Similarly the archives I wanted to access were of the same nature "restricted" and I was forced to prove my identity and my relationship to my family or ask my mother to pen her kinship ties through statutory declarations in order

⁸ Anna Haebich, "Aboriginal Families, Knowledge, and the Archives: A Case Study," in *Decolonizing the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia*, eds. Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer (Amsterdam, 2014), pp. 37–53.

⁹ Lynette Russell, "Indigenous Knowledge and Archives: Accessing Hidden History and Understandings," *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, Vol. 36, 2 (2005), pp. 161–71; A. Moreton-Robinson, "Incommensurable Sovereignties: Indigenous Ontology Matters," in *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 257–68; A. Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Katherine Ellinghaus, "The Poisoned Chalice: Exemption Policies in Twentieth Century Australia and the Writing of History," in *Black, White and Exempt: The Lives of Exempt Aboriginal People in Australia*, eds. Lucinda Aberdeen and Jennifer Jones: Aboriginal Studies Press (Canberra, 2021), pp. 24–40; Victoria Haskins, "Skeletons in Our Closet: Family History, Personal Narratives and Race Relations History in Australia," *The Olive Pink Society Bulletin*, Vol. 10, 2 (1998), pp. 15–22.

access records. There was just so much power at play in these requirements, it provided for some people effective custody over our family story, again. It was at times frustrating. The system that sought to annihilate, make invisible, destroy, and re-construct traditional identities was still working hard to keep our stories and identities from me and my family.

Four Sites of Colonial Power

The larger context surrounding my family story is complex, long, and complicated and encompasses four key areas of colonial power: missions/reserves, indentured labour/slavery, exemption and the stolen generations that have caused dislocation, loss of identity and culture. At the moment, and it is only through my own lived experience, I notice how these inter-sectionalities do not get discussed together, not in First Nations community, nor in a scholarly way (unless very briefly) or in the broader community. There are First Nations individuals, families and descendants who have had an experience across one or more of these areas. This is my own circumstance.

My own family history intersects across all four colonial power structures. Firstly, with the colonial control through missions and reserves. Both were sites of Christian evangelical theories and of colonial rule, where astonishingly broad powers over First Nations people's lives was granted and where managers applied and tested a variety of approaches to achieve some form of disconnection and control.

My children through their great grandmother *Kath Edwards (nee Couzens)* and their father identify to Framlingham Mission, south-west of Victoria.¹¹ It is also where my children have grown up being on country, knowing their connection to family and continuing to practice language and culture today, just as their father did, his father and his parents before him. It is because of this experience that I wanted my children and myself to have that connection to the Arrernte family cultural traditions. I started to find my own family's story of mission/reserve experience when I uncovered a letter I found in the South Australian library written by my great great-grandmother *Nellie Williams* from Kingston in 1874 to Mrs Stuart, the missionary, after she came to Poonindie Mission.¹² Nellie wrote about her feelings regarding mission life:

I wish I was going home with Dondle, I don't like Poonindie a bit.¹³

¹¹ Framlingham Mission is located on Kirrae Wurrong (Girai Wurrong) country beside the Hopkins River and was set up as the government announced it had reserved 3500 acres in 1861 for a potential Aboriginal Station. However, it wasn't until 1865 that Framlingham Aboriginal Station was officially established by Church of England missionaries on the land. Residents were provided with rations of flour, sugar, tea, and tobacco but were expected to hunt for meat. The board provided basic clothing but residents were expected to earn money to pay for items like boots. Framlingham operated for around 25 years. "Framlingham Aboriginal Station," 12 February 2022, <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/ref/vic/biogs/E000929b.htm>

¹² Poonindie Mission was established in 1850 by Adelaide Archdeacon Matthew Hale as a "training institution" for young Aboriginal families. Land outside of Port Lincoln was chosen because it was relatively isolated at that time. At first Poonindie was only to take young people who had some basic schooling and Christian education. The first group of residents (originally from the Adelaide Plains and River Murray region) had been educated at the Adelaide school, and at Poonindie they were expected to live a Christian lifestyle, form nuclear families and learn domestic and agricultural skills. When the Adelaide school closed in 1852, Poonindie lost this pool of future residents, and soon they were persuaded by the Protector of Aborigines to accept people from across South Australia, and some from Western Australia. "Poonindie Mission," 12 February 2022, State Library South Australia https://guides.slsa.sa.gov.au/Aboriginal_Missions/Poonindie

¹³ Nellie Williams to Mrs Stuart, 12 March 1874, Correspondence Files SRG 94/W83, Mortlock Library, State Library of South Australia.

In this letter it is clear Nellie is not having the same experience as my children's families experience at Framlingham. At Poonindie most people came from many different localities, as they most often did to all missions/reserves, and some may argue that they laid the foundations enabling the establishment of a new, strong, First Nations communal identity.

Secondly, indentured labour/slavery contributed to my grandmother's experience of how women laboured in the homes of their colonisers from the late nineteenth century.¹⁴ Her oppression was even publicly promoted. My grandmother was featured in photographs and newspaper articles in South Australia that included descriptions that are not about "who" she was, rather than "what" she was seen to be, an uncivilised, black girl, sewing expert, untrained, wild, Aboriginal maid, lovable creature, to name just a few. The public was invited to see my grandmother in such a way as to highlight the process of civilisation and applaud the domestication by the state. In these articles I could not hear my grandmother's words, her truths. What was visible was the sadness in my grandmother's downward-looking eyes in the many photographs I sighted, the same sadness mirrored in my own eyes.

Thirdly, across the country during the twentieth century the government offered "exemption" to First Nations people. Acts in New South Wales, Queensland, the Northern Territory, Western Australia, and South Australia had clauses which allowed government administrators to declare some individual First Nations people, who were somehow judged to be worthy, "exempt" from this legislation. This meant they were no longer under control of the legislation. There was the formal exemption certificate that enabled a person to be released from the "protection" legislation — however, there were other forms of informal exemption in the Northern Territory where by working on the pastoral station, women cooking and cleaning and men on the land could escape the reserve/mission system.¹⁵

Exemption was a form of control where those who were coerced into it no longer had contact with family or community members, but for my family the experiences of my Nan's brothers are different again. Both my grandfathers were born to white station managers. One made a decision to send some of his children to Colebrook for

¹⁴ First Nations domestic service in Australia from the early nineteenth century not only served an economic purpose but was also presented as a means of reforming a population that was designated a "problem" under the structures of colonialism. Many First Nations women like my grandmother and mother, who were taken from their mothers, prepubescent and put in homes of the "white master" or "boss lady" to care for their children, to cook and clean the house, were not provided with an employment contract. They say they were slaves. I claim that today slavery is never a convenient topic when discussing First Nations labour. In fact it is often penned within the academy as domestic service. Stories of being "enslaved" and exposed to the Governments surveillance and control based on the theory of race vary across First Nations women, and for this reason we need re-think about the colonial and discriminatory repression within the colonising project in Australia. See I. Walden, "'That Was Slavery Days': Aboriginal Domestic Servants in New South Wales in the Twentieth Century," *Labour History*, Vol. 69 (1995), pp. 196–209; H. Goodall, "'Saving the Children': Gender and the Colonisation of Aboriginal Children in NSW, 1788 to 1990," *Aboriginal Law Bulletin*, Vol. 2, 44 (1990), pp. 6–9; See also Victoria Haskins, "Family Histories, Personal Narratives and Race Relations History in Australia," *Canberra Historical Journal*, Vol. 45 (2000), pp. 25–9; Jackie Huggins, "White Aprons, Black Hands: Aboriginal Women Domestic Servants in Queensland," *Labour History*, Vol. 69 (1995), pp. 188–95.

¹⁵ Protection legislation entailed a variety of methods that controlled the lives of First Nations People across all of Australia from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s. These Acts defined racist biological identities for First Nations people and dictated who you could marry and what happened to the children.

education and to be free from being stolen, the other had good “reports” written about him by Pastor F. W. Albrecht, superintendent of Ntaria (Hermannsburg). All of these children, now aged in their seventies and eighties, speak language, and continue to be connected to family, country and culture. Not so many others are so lucky to have this connection, to know their storylines and language. In *Black, White and Exempt: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lives Under Exemption* both *Aunty Judy Wickes* and *Aunty Kella Robinson* share their stories of their grandfather’s experience and their own experience, which are starkly different — in fact I would say that the only thing that is similar to their shared stories is that of being subjected to the loss of their cultural identity to varying degrees.¹⁶

Finally, through all the generations I’ve just talked about — there have been stolen children, more commonly known as the Stolen Generations. This form of discriminatory legislation dominated white Australia from the late nineteenth century into the mid-twentieth century and is now recognised as one of the most striking and destructive historical policies directed towards First Nations people concerning those who were forcibly removed from family and community placing them in white families, foster homes, and government institutions. It is now known through the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families that between one in three and one in ten First Nations children were removed in the period 1910–70.¹⁷

The Stolen Generations and the policies surrounding the forced removal of First Nations children continues to be debated among the broader community. In fact the common belief pertaining to assimilation, the Stolen Generations and forced removal policies of First Nations children concerns whether it was “invasion” or “attempted genocide” and that it was carried out for our “own good”. This debate denies the impact that Government policies and practices of removal has generated across First Nations community and is therefore irrelevant to those of us who live with the fact we have been forcibly removed from our families, because it is not how you were removed, it is *that* you were removed from family, Country, culture, and your identity.

Genealogy and Identity

Accessing and understanding my family genealogy was significantly important to understanding who I was, where I belonged and to whom I was connected. I had dreamed of travelling to Arrernte country to experience my culture and country first-hand, I wanted to visit sacred sites, share knowledge and learn about songs, stories, art, tracks, places, landforms, plants, animals, and natural resources. I was ready to learn from Elders and relatives about the significance of my heritage, stories, totems, clan, and family obligations, and most importantly I wanted to foster long and lasting connections with family. The way First Nations relate is to our family stories, it helps establish our unique, authentic core identity but in order to know my story and be connected I had to locate a family tree so I could understand who I was related to.

¹⁶ Lucinda Aberdeen, Kella Robinson, and Judith Wickes, “‘Playing the Game’: Aboriginal Exemption in Queensland and New South Wales,” in *Black, White and Exempt: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lives under Exemption*, eds. Lucinda Aberdeen and Jennifer Jones: Aboriginal Studies Press (Canberra, 2021), pp. 62–84.

¹⁷ R. D. Wilson and M. Wilkie, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* Sydney, Australia: Human Rights Commission, 1997.

My research then and now continues to take me 25 km west southwest of Alice Springs to Hermannsburg Mission also known as Ntaria. It was conceived as an Aboriginal mission by two Lutheran missionaries A. Hermann Kemp (sometimes spelt Kempe) and Wilhelm F. Schwarz of the Hermannsburg Mission from Germany. They named their new mission among the Arrernte people after Hermannsburg in Germany where they had trained. In October 1894, Carl Friedrich Theodor Strehlow, anthropologist, linguist, and genealogist was appointed jointly with his friend and former fellow student Rev. John Bogner to take over the abandoned mission station of Hermannsburg in Central Australia, then largely financed by sales of sheep, wool, horses, and cattle. It had been newly purchased by the Immanuel Synod and Strehlow took on the role as missionary pastor. Carl and later his son, Theodor George Henry Strehlow, played a contributing and major role of working with the Arrernte people recording their genealogy and it is because of their work that I have been able to access my family tree at the Strehlow Research Centre. My family tree dates back three generations from my great, great grandfather, and is described as the largest recorded Arrernte family genealogy.¹⁸ First Nations people place the importance of ownership of personal/familial/individual stories as a way to finding identity and cultural connectedness greater than just genealogy alone.

The report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (now called the Australian Human Rights Commission) dedicated a chapter to records and recordkeeping, and the role that institutions play in supporting family and community reunions and the reclamation of personal and community identity (Commonwealth of Australia 1997).¹⁹ This was an important process identified by the many First Nations people, including my mother and myself, who gave testimonies to the Inquiry. It acknowledged that we needed to reclaim identity by knowing our family background and our story through our own use of archives so that we could reconnect to the places and culture of our community and family.

First Peoples' collective identity arose with the naming of this continent's original people as "Aborigines" at the point of invasion.²⁰ Our identities as "Aborigines" is a colonial construction, as are the policies that were and are designed to control us. From the mid-nineteenth century and well into the twentieth-century First Peoples in Australia were defined by racist definitions of Aboriginal identity that include caste definitions that attempted to forcibly separate First Peoples from each other and destroy family and cultural life. Up until then, First Peoples were defined by the kinship system of nations, clans, skin groups, language groups.²¹ We now know that the terms "half-caste" and "full-blood", "tribal" and "native" were racist descriptors imposed by the law and the institution of Government. Personally, I am unable to recount the times I

¹⁸ The Strehlow Research Centre manages one of Australia's most important collections of Arrernte genealogies, film, sound, archival records, and museum objects relating to Indigenous ceremonial life. The Strehlow Collection was put together by Professor T.G.H. Strehlow in his lifetime of anthropological research with the Aboriginal people of Central Australia.

¹⁹ R. D. Wilson and M. Wilkie, *Bringing Them Home*.

²⁰ Anita Heiss, "Black Poetics," *Meanjin*, Vol. 65 (2006), pp. 180–91.

²¹ The kinship system is a feature of First Peoples' social organisation and family relationships across Central Australia. It is a complex system that determines how people relate to each other, roles, responsibilities, and obligations in relation to one another. The kinship system determines who marries who, ceremonial relationships, funeral roles, and behaviour patterns with other kin. An individual gains a "skin name" upon birth based on the skin names of his or her parents, to indicate the section/subsection that he/she belongs to.

have been asked “what part Aboriginal are you?” as if I exist in sections, or told “but you don’t look Aboriginal”. Yet, when we think about identity it is assumed we grow up knowing our identity. But how do you identify yourself? And, what is the most important part of your identity, and does identity really matter? Is there one aspect of your identity that stands out from the rest, or does your identity change depending on who you are with, what you are involved in, where you are in your life? These are the questions that many of us, particularly those who have had our identities stolen, ask.

Rebecca Carroll reminds us in her book *Surviving The White Gaze* how identity, particularly racial identity, is forged in a thousand different moments. For me it began when I was seven and I was asked why I was a different colour to my parents.²² When I raised the question with my adopted parents they proceeded to tell me that they had adopted me and I was Aboriginal and right then it confirmed what I already knew — that I was different. Different to them and those around me. Identity can be described as the bedrock to personal truths that we can recite and remember unless you are of colour. Then it is all about race, even if you try to brush it off, race attaches itself to you, your identity, and ultimately to your family story.²³

Our personal story and the stories we tell ourselves about the world hold immense power in all our lives. Throughout history, family tradition, culture, and memories have been passed down through the art of storytelling, where these stories help new generations connect to their history, develop environmental context, and form identity. As David Lowenthal writes, family history and genealogy give an added dimension to our lives by linking it with people and events.²⁴ More than this, connectedness allows for shared family history and stories and assists us to “reveal traits that we may have inherited from our ancestors”.²⁵ So where do First Nations people begin when trying to answer the question of identity and more? How do we retrieve the intergenerational narratives, or begin to practice the oral history tradition where stories that parents and grandparents share with their children about their own past experiences growing up has not been afforded them? Well, like me they have to rely on archival materials, and seek ways of finding their story through the intricacies hidden within the archives.

The Duality of the Archive

In Australia, there is a duality to the archival records. While they have in the past been instruments of oppression and the construction of a negative view of First Nations identity, they can in the present and future play an important reconciling role in recovering identity and memory and reuniting families.²⁶ These archives are painful and problematic, but they are also so important. Despite the lies and insults studded throughout them there is also truth within them — a striking example of that is the telegram of my great grandfather! Archives of state control can be dangerous, not to

²² Rebecca Carroll, *Surviving the White Gaze, A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster 2021).

²³ Georgina Lawton, *Raceless: In Search of Family, Identity, and the Truth about where I Belong* (London, 2021).

²⁴ See David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

²⁵ Vera Rosenbluth, *Keeping Family Stories Alive: Discovering and Recording the Stories and Reflections of a Lifetime* (Port Roberts: Hartley & Marks Publishers, 1997), p. 11.

²⁶ Lynette Russell, “Indigenous Knowledge and Archives: Accessing Hidden History and Understandings,” *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, Vol. 36, 2 (2005), pp. 161–71.

mention traumatic for those who have been subjected to them, and there are major challenges in efforts to decolonise them.²⁷

The historical narratives of Australia are governed by a collective sense of amnesia and denial around the injustices perpetrated against First Nations people. This forgotten historical past in Australia leaves the burden of public recall to the surviving members of families and their descendants.²⁸ This history, our shared history, is neither simple nor pure. The collective refusal to speak the truth of this history has allowed and continues to allow for the development of a fictitious national identity which ignores the brutal and ongoing impact on First Peoples. For this reason there needs to be a focus on how we as First Nations people are acknowledged as agents capable and interested in research, recognising that we have expert knowledge about ourselves. In order to properly address this question of archive-as-source to archive-as-subject, the colonial archive has to be interrogated more thoroughly, particularly by First Nations people who refuse to be removed from the written record or face a future without an identity. Discussion, theories, explanations of family narratives, and memory have been put forward by Robyn Fivush who upholds the view that one's own story is embedded in the stories of others in the past and in the present. She argues that stories we create with others through socially shared interpretations and evaluations of our personal past constitute our very being, just as we know stories serve as an important cultural tool for expressing our understanding of feelings and beliefs.²⁹

My ongoing work relates to a methodology created by *Natalie Harkin* that disrupts the colonial narrative and questions the construction of identity, arguing that the surviving archives of institutional remembering and forgetting are reinvested with meaning through a cultural lens.³⁰ By situating myself as a First Nations historian I am in the first instance positioning my standpoint in the same way, applying the method employed by *Harkin* to address the professional discourse of historians by contesting the historical record through a critique of the colonial archive as a site of persuasion through what she terms her sovereign expression.³¹ This emerging scholarship points to the importance of re-authoring our stories to provide a sense of identity.

²⁷ Kath Apma Penangke Travis and Victoria Haskins, "Feminist Research Ethics and First Nations Women's Life Narratives: A Conversation," *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 36 (2021), pp. 126–41.

²⁸ For example, assimilation was discussed at the 1937 Commonwealth-State Native Welfare Conference where it was concluded "that although the Governments can do a great deal towards helping the aboriginal people towards assimilation, ultimately the success of assimilation will depend on acceptance of aborigines by the whole Australian community, and assistance to them in this difficult period of transition." See C. D. Rowley, *Outcasts in White Society* (Canberra, 1971), ch. 18. On periodising assimilation, see Tim Rowse, *Contesting Assimilation* (Perth, 2005), pp. 1–2; Anna Haebich, *Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia 1950–1970* (Fremantle, 2008), pp. 9–10.

²⁹ R. Fivush, "Remembering and Reminiscing: How Individual Lives are Constructed in Family Narratives," *Memory Studies*, Vol. 1, 1 (2008), pp. 49–58.

³⁰ See Natalie Harkin, "The Poetics of (Re)mapping Archives: Memory in the Blood," *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, Vol. 14, 3 (2014), pp. 1–14; Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form," in *Refiguring the Archive*, eds. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Dordrecht, 2002), pp. 83–102; Tony Birch, "The Invisible Fire: Indigenous Sovereignty, History and Responsibility," in *Sovereign Subjects, Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, ed. A. Moreton-Robinson: Routledge (Sydney, 2007), pp. 105–7.

³¹ I use sovereign expression referring to the statement "Nothing about us, without us." It is a phrase that represents our rightful call as First Nations people to control our own destinies and to be given decision-making power over things that affect us at all levels of government and leadership.

As I undertake my PhD, I am aiming to produce a new body of work in the form of a short documentary that will show the possibility of exposing and exploring personal and familial connections through the use of archives for the purpose of re-authoring new family narratives. This process aims to validate the transformative effect and decolonising possibilities created by re-constructing new cultural artefact. These cultural artefacts explore how re-claiming, re-authoring, and re-telling new family narratives play a significant role in locating voice and belonging to address individual, family, and community identity and intergenerational healing. The possibilities of reconstructing new cultural artefacts raises questions about voice, representation, truth, and subjectivity that have been silenced or omitted from mainstream discourses and challenges accepted methods of historical truths and “talks blak” to the archives.³²

Our communities’ stories and the way in which they are shared have strong power and influence. They shape our imagination and identity through the passing of cultural information from one generation to the next, and provide a sense of belonging and a sense of history. Philosopher Frantz Fanon remarks that identity is influenced by the colonial impact so it is no wonder that even today identity and its formation is a challenging issue. It is still framed by how First Peoples not only see ourselves but also how colonial structures desire to see us.³³ First Nations stories are living memory of the past for cultural preservation or instilling moral values.³⁴ Our stories are interwoven and shaped by the many methods that may include song, dance, and art and craft-making. Our stories when orated are regarded as essential for cultural continuity and survival for preserving and passing on cultural knowledge to future generations and are fundamental to First Nations identity (both personal and community).³⁵

Aileen Moreton-Robinson gifts First Nations people strength to speak back to discriminating and oppressive white discourses where there is a continued prominence and “normality” of white voice narration “about” First Nations people.³⁶ Her honest account of whiteness, as construct and reality, shows that it is institutionalised through the context of bureaucracy and government that continues to contribute to the devastating impact of colonisation in this country. My work aims to shift the disruptive paradigm of disconnection, loss of identity, language, and culture particularly for Stolen Generation survivors and exemptees by decolonising the state archives to address the professional discourse by speaking blak and contesting the historical

³² Enza Gandolfo, “Constructing Imaginary Narratives: Practice-led Research and Feminist Practice in Creative Writing,” *Qualitative Research Journal*, Vol. 12, 1 (2012), pp. 61–74.

³³ Political philosopher Frantz Fanon is broadly known and influential in the fields of post-colonial studies, critical theory and Marxism and for his philosophical analysis on identity formation. His best known book *Black Skin, White Masks* applies a historical critique to the complex ways in which identity, particularly Blackness, is constructed and produced. Fanon describes the psychological inadequacy and the effects of colonialism on both the coloniser and the colonised, arguing that the “native” develops a sense of “self” as defined by the “colonial master” through representation and discourse, while the coloniser develops a sense of superiority.

³⁴ Shannon Faulkhead and Lynette Russell, “What is Australian Indigenous Oral History?,” in *International Oral History Association Conference*, 12–16 July 2006 (Sydney: University of Technology, 2006).

³⁵ Renée Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod, “A Layering of Voices: Aboriginal Oral Traditions,” in *Aboriginal Oral Traditions: Theory, Practice, Ethics*, eds. Renate Eigenbrod and Renée Hulan: Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing (Black Point, Nova Scotia, 2008), pp. 7–12.

³⁶ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press and St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2021).

record.³⁷ By its very nature my research continues to explore how voice, belonging and connection talks back to the colonial narrative. In this way, I honour the voices of family and community giving greater authority and ownership to First Peoples as a way to ensure that the generational stories that form bridges between oral traditions and written history are never forgotten.

By showing the human side of research through documenting the research process including the relationships made with others and family during the research, the creative forms such as family her-stories and documentaries provide a powerful model for others to follow. This form of storytelling becomes a living archival experience, whereby intergenerational narratives sit at the nexus of personal and collective memories, in that they are lived experiences being told by the older generation.³⁸ This method of practice-based research of creating a cultural artefact shares my own personal experience of “looking inside the archival box”, demonstrating how creative practice and telling our stories in ways that make us stronger can benefit other First Nations Peoples in a similar way.³⁹

Since writing my her-storical biography I have been able to re-matriate our story back to country and reconnect to family “on Country”. I have had the opportunity to sit with my Aunties who have revealed many new stories, some good, and some bad, like the harrowing knowledge that Nan’s brothers thought she had died as a child, they did not know where she had gone, and when she did return she did not talk about her experiences and they did not ask. These Aunties today share and talk of the love for Nan, and have shared with us so many amazing stories about “who” she was. I truly believe in the power of re-authored family narratives — how we re-claim our stories — not ones written about us, but stories written by us.

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³⁷ The Right of Reply is a participatory archive model, where Indigenous people can directly address material related to or depicting their culture. The Right of Reply is the right to enhance, correct, update, critique or even withdraw Indigenous knowledge in collections. See Indigenous Archives Collective, “The Indigenous Archives Collective Position Statement on the Right of Reply to Indigenous Knowledges and Information Held in Archives,” *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 49, 3 (2021), pp. 244–52.

³⁸ Stories we tell about our lives very much define who we are as individuals, within particular families, cultures, and historical periods. Keeping family stories alive are key to intergenerational narratives and may be used in response to address intergenerational trauma. See Natalie Merrill and Robyn Fivush, “Intergenerational Narratives and Identity Across Development,” *Developmental Review*, Vol. 40 (2016), pp. 72–92; Saviona Cramer, “Intergenerational Narrative Practice in Response to Intergenerational Trauma,” *International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work*, Vol. 1 (2019), pp. 1–11; Rosenbluth, *Keeping Family Stories Alive*.

³⁹ Barbara Wingard and Jane Lester, *Telling Our Stories in Ways That Make Us Stronger*: Dulwich Centre Publications (Adelaide, 2001).