



## Stolen Generations testimony: trauma, historiography, and the question of 'truth'

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In recent Australian Aboriginal history, testimonies have played a significant role in bringing into the public domain knowledge about the practices and effects of the removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities. Broadly defined, the category of testimony includes a wide range of texts, such as autobiographical narratives, oral histories, semi-official testimonies such as those published in *Bringing Them Home*, legal testimonies, Link-Up testimonies, psychotherapeutic testimonies, filmed testimonies and videotape testimonies. While testimony has proven an invaluable means of transmitting experiences and memories of people whose stories often go unrecorded, the category of testimony is a contentious one — especially for historians, who are often concerned with establishing what actually happened in the past.

Not surprisingly, controversy concerning the status and value of testimonies erupted during a Stolen Generations panel discussion featuring Bain Attwood, Peter Read and Robert Manne.<sup>1</sup> In essays published since the conference, Manne contends that Aboriginal witness has become the object of a 'collective hysteria'.<sup>2</sup> For instance, conservative critics such as Ron Brunton and Paddy McGuinness have characterised Stolen Generations testimonies as exemplifying 'false memory syndrome', thereby implying that witnesses have fabricated memories of removal in a sympathetic cultural and political climate.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, however, I focus on Attwood's essay, 'A matter for history', which was published in the weekend *Australian Financial Review*.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike conservative critics such as Brunton and McGuinness, Attwood does not vilify Stolen Generations testimony as false memory syndrome. He does, however, treat testimony as a particularly troublesome kind of evidence for historians who are keen to provide a factually authoritative account of practices of separation. On the one hand, in viewing testimony as evidence to be interpreted by the historian, he undermines the witness's position as a valuable interpreter of events. On the other hand, his essay can be read allegorically as a story about the declining status of academic history as the guardian of the 'truth' of the past. It raises a number of significant issues, not only for

1. The Life Stories Conference at Monash University (July 14–17, 2000).

2. Manne 2001: 11.

3. Manne 1999; Manne 2001: 11; Brunton 1998: 9.

4. *Australian Financial Review*, Friday 15 December 2000, Review: 1–7.

history as an academic discipline, but for our understanding of the discourse of history in Australian public life. These issues include how we conceive of history, who owns the past, and who can speak as an authority on the significance of past events.

Questions of testimony, memory and historiography have been discussed in great detail in an international context, particularly in relation to the Holocaust. Following a critique of Attwood's argument, I suggest alternative critical methods for reading, analysing and evaluating Stolen Generations testimonies. In particular, I discuss two approaches that may enable us to read testimonies not simply as evidence, which places the historian in the role of expert, nor as literature, which makes them marginal for history's purposes of establishing what happened in the past, but as contributions to historiography in their own right. The first approach, represented here by Dominick LaCapra, uses a psychoanalytic framework to address issues of trauma, memory and affect in the context of the Holocaust. Drawing on LaCapra's work raises questions of how the concept of trauma is currently being used in relation to the Stolen Generations, and of whether a psychoanalytic approach is appropriate or productive. The second approach — a discursive approach — focuses on issues of interpretation, agency and authority in the process of making witness. I draw on discursive approaches that have been developed by James Young, who analyses Holocaust testimony, and by the feminist theorists Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, who analyse the discourse of sexual abuse survivors. In the final section, I show how these approaches can be used to analyse Stolen Generations testimony.

### **Stolen Generations historiography: symbolic or forensic?**

Attwood argues that our understanding of past practices of separating Aboriginal children from their kin is in danger of being obscured by the dominance of a simplistic and monolithic narrative. The Stolen Generations narrative is the product of 'narrative coalescence' — the accumulation and convergence of stories of separation — that has occurred over the past two decades. He attributes a foundational role in this discursive process to Peter Read's 1980 essay, 'The Stolen Generations', which provided an interpretative framework through which to make both historical and moral sense of policies, practices and experiences of separation.<sup>5</sup> In the wake of Read's essay, and with the formation of Link-Up in the early 1980s, many people who had been removed began to tell their stories. In addition, the 1996 National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families sought out, listened to, recorded and published many testimonies, bringing them into public circulation. According to Attwood, these minor narratives gradually coalesced into a master narrative of the Stolen Generations, which attributes all removals to the government's allegedly genocidal policy of assimilation. This master narrative collapses differences between separation and removal, and has produced 'simplistic histories of colonialism in Australia'.<sup>6</sup> Attwood apparently shares Peter Novick's scepticism towards 'collective memory' — a memory that is shaped by the concerns of the present, rather than the actualities of the past.<sup>7</sup> Rather than settle for a 'myth' of the past, Attwood advocates the need for more

5. Read 1999 'The Stolen Generations' reprinted in *A rape of the soul so profound*: 46–70.

6. Attwood 2000: 1.

7. Novick 1999: 3–4.

historical research, and for testimonies to be corroborated by research. While I share Attwood's desire for a historical discourse that does justice to the complexities of the past, I am concerned with the rhetorical, methodological and political implications of his argument.

Attwood contends that narrative accrual has resulted, in part, from changes in the production and significance of narratives of separation. During the 1970s narratives of separation were produced in collaboration between a historian and an informant. By contrast, during the 1980s and 1990s they tended to take the form of autobiography. As autobiography, they were 'more the product of memory and discursive practices other than history' and 'were becoming increasingly symbolic'.<sup>8</sup> During the same period, narratives of separation expanded their historical reach and significance. Although they began 'as local or family histories', by the 1990s, 'the [Stolen Generations] narrative was taking on the cast of a national history'.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on Hayden White's well-known categories of chronicle and narrative, I propose that the shift Attwood traces can be described as a shift from chronicle to interpretive narrative.<sup>10</sup> When testimonies were produced in collaboration with historians, they constituted an oral history chronicle, and as such, a source of evidence. Once the historian is no longer involved as a collaborator, the narrative becomes 'more symbolic', and is consequently more properly regarded as interpretive narrative (with implications of fiction) rather than evidence. It is worth pausing to ask: what does 'symbolic' mean, and what rhetorical work is this label doing?

To say that these narratives became more symbolic is to say that the narrators interpreted their experiences according to a set of over-arching symbols, tropes and literary figures. In Attwood's view, the use of symbols gives a false meaning to the past because it obscures or neglects details and events that do not fit the narrative pattern, and thereby denies historical complexity. Thus, rather than telling what really happened in the past, with all the inconsistencies and particularities of an individual's separation, the narrator instead produces a predictable moral tale of innocence and culpability. Yet it must be noted that in singling out testimonies as 'symbolic', Attwood is denying the metaphorical nature of historical discourse itself. As Hayden White and others have convincingly argued, literary figures and tropes are at work in all discourse, including history.<sup>11</sup> James Young has argued in relation to Holocaust testimonies that all narratives, including those that are presented as simple reports of fact, produce a style, if only the style of 'the rhetoric of fact'. In his view, 'the aim of such a style is not to write unmediated facts, but to convince the reader that such facts ... have been established'.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Alcoff and Gray contend that 'when individual narratives are related as if they were not narratives but simple reports' this obscures 'the way in which all experience is itself discursively mediated'.<sup>13</sup>

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8. Attwood 2000: 5.

9. Attwood 2000: 5.

10. White 1987.

11. White 1978.

12. Young 1988: 9.

13. Alcoff and Gray 1993: 283.

If all experience is discursively mediated, why is the symbolic or literary nature of testimony a cause of concern for the historian? I propose that the central issue for Attwood is not the symbolic nature of testimonies, but who is producing historical meaning. He claims that autobiographies are not simply recording the effects of practices of separation, but are now 'telling the broader, collective history about the past'.<sup>14</sup> Witnesses are no longer offering their testimony as evidence to be interpreted by the historical expert. Rather, they are themselves active producers of historical meaning, which Attwood apparently finds unsettling.

### Judicial historiography?

Although Attwood criticises the courts for ignoring the evidence that historians could provide in *Stolen Generations* cases, he uses a legal metaphor to describe historical methodology. He argues that telling 'the collective history about the past' is a 'forensic task' that testimonies 'are not traditionally thought capable of doing' mainly because 'memory can be notoriously malleable and so unreliable'.<sup>15</sup> As Derrida and De Man have pointed out in relation to the language of philosophy, concepts are not pure; they always involve metaphors and histories of metaphors.<sup>16</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary 'forensic' means 'used in courts of law'. Historically, 'forensic' is associated with 'forum', which in Roman antiquity was a 'place of public discussion'. Forensic thus has connotations of theatre, and entails the rhetorical arts of argument and persuasion. Given that historical writing is always 'literary', that it can never be a pure language of 'fact' and 'truth', why does Attwood use a legal metaphor to describe historical method? As historian Carlo Ginzburg has argued, the analogy of history with law draws attention to the concepts of 'proof' and 'truth', which lends credence to the view that history is primarily a matter of finding 'fact' rather than of telling stories.<sup>17</sup> Attwood's use of a legal metaphor must be regarded as a rhetorical move, the aim of which is to distance history from literature, with its implications of fiction.

The analogy between history and law implies that historians should assess testimonies for their 'truth content', using methods of proof similar to those used in law, such as checking testimony against other evidence for accuracy. Thus, Attwood criticises the *Stolen Generations* narrative, as it developed in the 1990s, because it drew on 'oral testimonies not supported by the findings of historical research'.<sup>18</sup> In *Cubillo v Commonwealth*, Justice O'Loughlin uses a medical analogy to describe the process of proof in law, further revealing the metaphorical nature of all discourse: 'The task of the Court is to examine the evidence — both oral and documentary — in a clinical manner, devoid of emotion ...'<sup>19</sup> The metaphor of the clinic suggests that the court should not be emotionally swayed by testimony; by analogy, neither should the historian. The analogy between history and law casts the historian in the role of the judge, and the narrator in the role of a witness who is doubted until proven reliable. It treats 'literary' aspects of

14. Attwood 2000: 6.

15. Attwood 2000: 6.

16. See for instance Derrida 1976; De Man 1979.

17. Ginzburg 1991: 294–95.

18. Attwood 2000: 5.

19. *Cubillo v Commonwealth*, paragraph 79, per O'Loughlin J.

testimony (such as tone, style, structure, affect, symbols) as features which hinder an analysis of its factual content.

In practice, the analogy between history and law is troubling in part because Stolen Generations testimony has not fared well in the courtroom. In *Cubillo v. Commonwealth*, Justice O'Loughlin accepted some parts of Lorna Cubillo's evidence, but rejected other parts. Stating that he did not believe that either Cubillo or Gunner had been 'deliberately untruthful' he expressed concern 'about their ability to recall, accurately, events that occurred so many years ago when they were small children'.<sup>20</sup> It is not surprising that a judge would question a witness's ability to recall events that occurred fifty years earlier. More troubling, however, was his assessment that 'they have unconsciously engaged in exercises of reconstruction, based, not on what they knew at the time, but on what they have convinced themselves must have happened or what others may have told them'.<sup>21</sup> By using the term 'subconscious reconstruction', he implied that the reconstruction that occurred in Cubillo and Gunners' testimonies was motivated by political, ideological or emotional commitments that were in some way suspect. Had he acknowledged that all testimony, grounded as it is in memory, entails a process of reconstruction, then perhaps he might have assessed their testimony differently.

In the light of Justice O'Loughlin's advocacy of a 'clinical' approach to testimony, it is surprising that he allowed negative emotion to colour his assessment of Cubillo's testimony. At one point, he says that she became 'progressively defensive, evasive and argumentative' in her testimony.<sup>22</sup> He later speculates that Cubillo was unloved at the Retta Dixon Home not through any deficiency in the missionaries, but probably because of her difficult personality.<sup>23</sup> The judge's subjective judgement that 'she created an unfavourable impression' suggests that he found her testimony unreliable not simply because it was 'reconstructed' but because she was a difficult and challenging witness.<sup>24</sup>

Given that Attwood has argued that the Stolen Generations narrative is endangering historical truths, it is worth considering his view of historical truth in the light of the analogy with law. His essay reveals two conflicting views of how historical truth is produced. One view, associated with the linguistic turn in historiography, imagines historical truth as a product of interpretation. As Hayden White has convincingly argued, facts do not give rise to their own meaning; rather, meaning is a product of the combination of a choice of plot-structure, an explanatory framework, and an ideology.<sup>25</sup> Attwood treats Read's 'Stolen Generations' essay and the Stolen Generations narrative more generally, as exemplifying the dangers of myth and fiction that result from an excessive and uncontrolled use of narrative and reliance on memory. By contrast, he advocates a return to an empiricist practice of history in which 'a precise description of the unfolding of events is meant to carry its own interpretation, its own truth'.<sup>26</sup> The

20. *Cubillo v Commonwealth*, paragraph 125, per O'Loughlin J.

21. *Cubillo v Commonwealth*, paragraph 125, per O'Loughlin J.

22. *Cubillo v Commonwealth*, paragraph 728, per O'Loughlin J.

23. *Cubillo v Commonwealth*, paragraph 729, per O'Loughlin J.

24. *Cubillo v Commonwealth*, paragraph 729, per O'Loughlin J.

25. White 1973.

latter view is exemplified in the work of Robert Manne, who produces interpretative narratives with a moral meaning, but defends these narratives as an accurate representation of events, as substantiated by meticulous research and detailed description.<sup>27</sup> As Saul Friedlander points out, for empiricist historians such as Manne, there are no clear categories of 'attestable fact' and 'pure interpretation'; rather there is a continuum.<sup>28</sup> Attwood's use of a judicial metaphor is a rhetorical means of promoting the view that historical 'truth' is a process of fact-finding, rather than of narrative interpretation.<sup>29</sup>

The notion of truth as grounded in historical sources is foundationalist in that it conceives of evidence, metaphorically, as the foundation or bedrock of truth. Attwood subscribes, however uneasily, to this foundationalist conception of truth. He criticises the Stolen Generations narrative, arguing that in its presentation 'some of the important "grounding" in historical "sources" that are held to verify what happened in the past, and which provide the basis for the discipline of history's claims to truth, has been lost'.<sup>30</sup> By placing both 'grounding' and 'sources' in quotes, he signifies that he is aware of the post-modernist debates that surround these terms. Yet, at the same time, he does not qualify the notion of 'truth'. This contradiction produces ambivalence: while he advocates a foundationalist view of truth, he simultaneously indicates that he does not enthusiastically embrace it.

Stanley Fish, a theorist of interpretation, suggests that foundationalism is motivated by the desire to ground truth in something other than interpretation, which is believed to be guided by the contingent and fallible beliefs of the day.<sup>31</sup> Attwood's suspicion of testimony as unreliable because it is based in memory, and as requiring checks against other 'historical sources', protects these 'other sources' from scepticism by treating them as if they do not need to be interpreted. If the meaning of all evidence is constructed, however, then there is nothing intrinsically different about testimony. The constructed nature of evidence means that the historian or literary critic should not read any text, including testimony, as a 'window' onto the past, but as a document that must be interpreted. In *Writing and rewriting the Holocaust*, James Young argues that '[o]nce historians recognise their own activity as meaning-makers, they might be more comfortable with the meanings created in the survivors' testimonies ...'<sup>32</sup> For once historians accept that all evidence is constructed — that it only becomes meaningful, and indeed, only functions as evidence, through particular discursive frameworks — then they must acknowledge that they, like witnesses, are meaning makers, not detectives or judges who 'find fact'.

The recognition that the meaning of all evidence is discursively produced leads to an unsettling realisation: that only the culturally conferred status and authority of the

26. Friedlander 1992: 7.

27. See, for instance, Manne 1996: 162–63; 1998.

28. Friedlander 1992: 7.

29. As I have argued elsewhere, narrative plays a major role in producing the meaning of evidence in legal trials. See Kennedy, Rosanne, forthcoming 'Legal sensations: sexuality, textuality and evidence in a Victorian murder trial', in *Romancing the tomes: popular culture, law and feminism*, Margaret Thornton (ed), London, Cavendish.

30. Attwood 2000: 6.

31. Fish 1989.

32. Young 1988: 16.

historian distinguishes his or her interpretations of evidence from the interpretations found in testimonies. What is ultimately at stake for Attwood is the status of the historian. LaCapra argues that 'a neo-positivist understanding of history as a dry and sober matter of fact and analysis and ... a suspicion of memory as inherently uncritical and close to myth ... positions history in a purely enlightened realm that may divert attention from the continual need ... to examine one's implication in the problems one studies'.<sup>33</sup> He adds that 'the problem of subject-position and voice is particularly acute' where one is dealing with 'extremely traumatic phenomena in which one's investment is great'.<sup>34</sup> Imagining history as a 'forensic task' positions the historian as a judge — as one who is emotionally distanced from and sits in judgement on the past. A judicial approach to historiography, and the retreat to an authority allegedly grounded in factual accuracy, protects the historian from the need to consider his or her own subject-position in relation to the events under consideration. In claiming that the act of determining historical meaning is a 'matter for history', and that historical truth should be determined through forensic methods, Attwood's essay has the effect of restricting debates about the meaning of the Stolen Generations to historical experts. He fails to imagine a significant role for Aboriginal people, intellectuals, and the public in determining the meaning and significance of the Stolen Generations and the broader history of Aboriginal dispossession.

Among researchers who write about testimony, there is consensus that memory poses problems, and recognition that testimony should not simply be accepted as a source of historical fact. In the face of these caveats, many scholars have developed productive approaches to testimony, which accept it as an invaluable contribution to historiography. In considering these approaches, I am mindful of a question suggested by LaCapra's work on the Holocaust: that is, in what ways do traumatic events, and the testimonies that bear witness to them, challenge us to rethink the requirements of historiography?<sup>35</sup> But first, I must ask, can the removal and separation of Aboriginal children, and the destruction of Aboriginal culture, be described as 'traumatic events'? For whom?

### **The traumatic event: injury and interpretation**

Over the past twenty years, and with increasing frequency in the last several years, the removal and separation of part-Aboriginal children, and the destruction of Aboriginal culture, have been described as traumatic events. In some cases, the concept of trauma has been used in passing, to convey the extreme suffering and the extraordinary nature of events that characterised separation and removal. This kind of usage occurs in Read's early 'Stolen Generations' essay. In other cases, the use of trauma appears to be more deliberate. Notably, the authors of the *Bringing Them Home* report frequently use the related concepts of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder to characterise both the event of separation, and its effects on individuals who had been removed, and their mothers, kin and communities. In addition to including specific case studies, the

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<sup>33</sup>. LaCapra 1998: 16–17.

<sup>34</sup>. LaCapra 1998: 16–17.

<sup>35</sup>. LaCapra 1998.

authors draw on the work of various psychological experts to support their interpretation that:

Separation and institutionalisation can amount to traumas. Almost invariably they were traumatically carried out with force, lies, regimentation and an absence of comfort and affection. All too often they also involved brutality and abuse. Trauma compounded trauma.<sup>36</sup>

What should we make of the use of the discourse of trauma? Who benefits from it? What are the limitations?

In his recent book, *Post-traumatic culture: injury and interpretation in the nineties*, American literary critic Kirby Farrell provides a cultural analysis of the uses of the concept of trauma in the 1890s and 1990s. He argues that '[p]eople not only suffer trauma; they use it, and the idea of it, for all sorts of ends, good and ill'.<sup>37</sup> For instance, '[t]rauma can be invoked to substantiate claims on the empathy of others, as a plea for special treatment, or as a demand for compensation'.<sup>38</sup> In the context of the Stolen Generations, the discourse of trauma has been used to describe real distress, both emotional and physical, to convey the damage that has been done by misguided policies, to mount a moral campaign for an apology, to invite empathy, and to legitimate claims for reparation. The use of the concept of trauma in *Bringing Them Home*, a report which also applied the concept of genocide to removal policies, can be seen as a rhetorical move to legitimate the — in my view problematic — analogy between the Stolen Generations and the Holocaust. One of the potential drawbacks of the discourse of trauma, however, is that it may individualise and pathologise the experience of removal, and people that have experienced it. People who were removed or separated may be referred to as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, or as having some kind of symptom or displaying the effects of trauma, and may thereby be reduced to victims or examples of 'effects' of trauma. Not surprisingly, one Link-Up witness declares that 'I am much more than 'a long-term effect'.<sup>39</sup>

One feature of post-traumatic culture is the confrontation with events that have long been repressed. Although Farrell draws his case studies from the United States and Britain, his claim that '[t]he present cultural mood reflects the contagious effects of clinical and political trauma, with predictable spasms of anxiety and rage, depression and mourning'<sup>40</sup> also applies, I believe, to the responses to the Stolen Generations, and Aboriginal dispossession more generally. In Australia the 'discovery' of policies of removal, assimilation and absorption have produced responses of shock and dismay, and have threatened national pride. In this context, it is worth noting that not only has the idea of trauma been used to characterise the Stolen Generations, it has also been used by historians to characterise cultural and political responses to these events. Manne titles his analysis of the conservative attack on the Stolen Generations *In denial*. Denial is a psychoanalytic term, which implies an unconscious repression of memories

<sup>36</sup>. National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (Australia) 1997: 196.

<sup>37</sup>. Farrell 1998: 21.

<sup>38</sup>. Farrell 1998: 24.

<sup>39</sup>. Link-Up and Wilson 1997: 126.

<sup>40</sup>. Farrell 1998: 16.



of events that are too painful or challenging to confront. Anna Haebich, in a section of *Broken circles* titled 'Remembering and forgetting', draws on psychoanalytic theories to discuss how Australians could claim not to have known about policies of removal.<sup>41</sup> As LaCapra has argued, the application of psychoanalytic concepts (such as transference, denial, repression, acting-out, and working-through) should be 'a matter of informed argument and research'<sup>42</sup>; he calls for 'a more critical, vigilant, and reflective elaboration of these concepts'. To date, however, these essentially psychoanalytic concepts have been used loosely in Australia, without a careful theoretical reflection on their appropriateness. A more detailed critical analysis than I can offer here is necessary to adequately explore the uses to which trauma and other psychoanalytic concepts have been put with regard to the Stolen Generations.<sup>43</sup>

### Testimony as interpretation: a discursive approach

Some of the approaches that are potentially most fruitful for analysing Stolen Generations testimony have been developed by scholars working on Holocaust testimony. In *Writing and rewriting the Holocaust*, Young maintains that the value of testimonies 'lies not in their supposed neutrality as source material but in their record of "telling history"'.<sup>44</sup> Thus, testimonies should not be evaluated according to the demands of proof or truth. Rather, they should be read and analysed for their insights into how people involved in past events interpreted those events and their implications. For instance, we should consider 'the manner in which survivor-witnesses have understood and expressed their experiences, the kind of understanding they now bring to such disaster, and the ways in which they now understand the world in light of the Holocaust'.<sup>45</sup> It is specifically the subjective nature of memory, the fact that the testimony is situated and embodied, that makes it valuable to the historian or critic. Rather than treat testimony as evidence, which inevitably raises questions of proof and truth, Young encourages us to treat it as an interpretation of experience, and as an intervention into the field of historical discourse. Young notes that historians are dependent on 'this kind of reconstructed source material' but they often distrust survivor testimonies because they tend to be 'laden with pathos ... and so dependent on individual memory alone'.<sup>46</sup>

LaCapra has addressed the question of being affected by events and their pathos at length. While not equating memory with history, he views memory as posing special challenges for history because 'it points to problems that are still alive or invested with emotion and value'.<sup>47</sup> Like Attwood, he argues that, '[i]deally, history critically tests memory', but he insists that the historian must be prepared for 'a more extensive

41. Haebich 2000: 563–570.

42. LaCapra 1998: 43.

43. Tikka Wilson and I have sketched out some of the limitations with the psychoanalytic framework in a paper entitled, 'Reading testimonies of the Stolen Generations: the search for a critical methodology'. Jill Bennett and I (forthcoming) have raised the broad question of whether the psychoanalytic framework deployed by North American trauma studies scholars is useful for analysing the Stolen Generations in the introduction to our edited collection, *World memory: personal trajectories in global time*, Macmillan, London.

44. Young 1988: 165.

45. Young 1988: 164.

46. Young 1988: 163.

47. LaCapra 1998: 8.

attempt to work through a past that has not passed away.<sup>48</sup> Testimony is a 'crucial source for history' because it positions the historian or analyst as a 'secondary witness' who 'undergoes a transferential relation, and must work out an acceptable subject-position with respect to the witness and his or her testimony.' By transference, he refers to 'the tendency to become emotionally implicated in the witness and his or her testimony with the inclination to act out an affective response to them'.<sup>49</sup> In other words, what makes testimony particularly important for the historian or critic is its affective nature — the way that it reveals a past that has not yet been mastered. Historians such as Read, Haebich, Clendinnen and Manne have, in their writings, responded affectively to Stolen Generations testimonies, and have implicitly or explicitly questioned their own implication, and the implication of all Australians, in these events — although they do this without recourse to psychoanalytic notions of transference and working-through.<sup>50</sup> One question, then, is whether the use of psychoanalytic concepts such as transference, working-through and mourning would enrich the analysis of our implication in the events we study, and more broadly, the public response to these events.

### **The politics of Stolen Generations testimony: rethinking agency and authority**

The Holocaust has become a touchstone for scholars working on questions of trauma, witnessing and affect in the United States. The analogy between Holocaust and Stolen Generations testimonies is limited, however, because the contexts in which these testimonies are produced and consumed, read and viewed, debated and discussed, are very different. As Peter Novick has argued, Holocaust memory may be so obsessive in the United States precisely because the United States was not positioned as a perpetrator nation. In addition, the Holocaust and its survivors are removed from present day politics of American national identity.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, in the United States, remembering the Holocaust does not raise the same political and moral difficulties that confronting Aboriginal dispossession, including policies of child removal, raises in Australia. How Australia responds to the Stolen Generations, and whether it re-evaluates the historical record with regard to Aboriginal dispossession, has significant implications for the reconciliation process.

Given the overtly political context in which the Stolen Generations is being debated, a critical methodology for reading testimonies must consider not only issues of trauma and affect, but also questions of power and subjectivity. In this context, I have found the Foucauldian approach elaborated by Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, who have written about issues of agency and authority in relation to survivors' narratives of sexual abuse, to be useful for analysing Stolen Generations testimonies.<sup>52</sup> Drawing on Foucault's analysis of the discourse of sexuality and the structure of the confessional encounter, they argue that a tension characterises the discourse of sexual abuse by sur-

<sup>48</sup> LaCapra 1998: 11.

<sup>49</sup> LaCapra 1998: 11–12.

<sup>50</sup> Christine Watson (2000) has argued for the need, as a critic working on Stolen Generations narratives, to take up the position of the secondary witness, and to trust the veracity of the narrator.

<sup>51</sup> Novick 1999.

<sup>52</sup> Alcoff and Gray 1993.

vivors. On the one hand, this speech can be transgressive of dominant social and power structures, by revealing and insisting upon the reality of unthinkable categories such as 'husband rapist' and 'father rapist'. On the other hand, however, survivors' narratives are often 'recuperated'. They are used in a way that reinforces dominant social relations and power structures, which in turn disempowers girls and women.

Alcoff and Gray argue that one of the primary contributing factors in the process of recuperation is the role of the expert mediator.<sup>53</sup> When survivors tell their stories, particularly on television talk shows and in newspaper articles, they are asked to recite the explicit details of the sexual assault, which are used to attract viewers and increase ratings. The woman may be asked provocative questions about how she was dressed and where she was when the attack occurred, and whether she knew her attacker. An expert mediator, usually a psychiatrist or therapist, is called upon to interpret the woman's story. The expert may present her experience, and its continuing effects, as an example of a 'syndrome', 'symptom, or 'effect'. The expert may discuss ways that women can behave to lessen the incidence of attack or abuse, and what the survivor can do to heal herself, and recover her pleasure in sex. In sum, the expert often shifts the focus from the perpetrator to the victim, who is represented as 'the problem'.<sup>54</sup> Typically, the woman has been disempowered in the encounter, by being reduced to an object to be analysed, rather than being treated as a subject of her own discourse. By treating the individual as a victim, the expert neglects the patriarchal structures and cultural factors that contribute to ongoing sexual violence against women and girls.

In Australia, this kind of disempowering strategy has recently been used, to sensational effect, against Lowitja O'Donoghue. Conservative journalist Andrew Bolt used comments she made about the circumstances of her removal from her mother to cast doubt on the notion of a 'stolen generation'.<sup>55</sup> Her comments were pounced on by John Howard, who took them as support for his own policy of refusing to offer a national apology. In the process, her interpretation of her own experience, and of the broader significance of the Stolen Generations, was silenced. In representing O'Donoghue as at best, having unintentionally misled the public, or at worst, an outright 'liar', Bolt constructed her as an unreliable witness. Bolt's (mis)representation of O'Donoghue shifted attention from an analysis of the racist social conditions that allowed her father, an Irish station worker, to remove his five children from their Aboriginal mother without her full consent to O'Donoghue's reliability.

Although without malicious intent, Attwood took up the role of the 'expert' in relation to Sally Morgan's subjectivity in his critique of her book *My place*. He asked why she constructed herself as 'Aboriginal' in her autobiography, and what psychological need this construction filled for her.<sup>56</sup> As Tim Rowse has rightly pointed out, in taking a biographical approach to Morgan's text, Attwood set himself up as an 'expert' who knew more about her than she knew about herself, and who was especially equipped to judge the historical and psychological correctness of her identity.<sup>57</sup> In posi-

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53. Alcoff and Gray 1993: 282.

54. Alcoff and Gray 1993: 276-78.

55. Bolt 2001, *Herald-Sun*, 23 February.

56. Attwood 1992: 303.

tioning himself as an expert, Attwood reduced Morgan to an object of analysis, thereby stripping her discourse of agency and authority.

How can this kind of situation, in which the witness's words are used against her, be prevented? Alcoff and Gray outline the conditions for 'subversive speaking' — speaking which will not disempower the person giving witness. Conditions for subversive speaking include eliminating or reconfiguring the role of the expert mediator, and abolishing the split between experience and interpretation.<sup>58</sup> Like James Young, they argue for the need to create speaking situations in which 'survivors are authorised to be both witnesses and experts, both reporters of experience and theorists of experience.'<sup>59</sup> For personal testimony to be 'politically efficacious' a witness must recognise her role as an interpreter of her own experiences, and not simply a reporter of facts. Citing bell hooks, they argue that if 'women do not merely "name" their experiences but also "place that experience within a theoretical context ... storytelling becomes a process of historicization. It does not remove women from history but enables us to see ourselves as part of history"'.<sup>60</sup> In such a scenario, survivors might use testimony and memory 'as tools of intervention' rather than as 'instruments for recuperation.'<sup>61</sup> Such a transformation, in their view, 'will alter existing subjectivities as well as structures of domination and relations of power.'<sup>62</sup> I would like to tie together the threads of my argument by showing how the methodological approaches I have canvassed might be used to read *Stolen Generations* testimony.

### Reading *Stolen Generations* testimony

The distinction that I mentioned earlier, between oral history narratives and symbolic narratives — which I labelled as a distinction between chronicle and narrative, or evidence and interpretation — can be used to characterise two groups of *Stolen Generations* testimonies produced in the context of the National Inquiry. The testimonies in the *Bringing Them Home* report mostly take the form of chronicle, and function as evidence that is interpreted by the authors of the report. By contrast, the testimonies in the Link-Up (NSW) submission to the National Inquiry take the form of interpretive narrative. The narrators not only tell their story, but also frequently interpret the meaning of their experiences, and reflect on the broader significance of separation and of Australian Aboriginal history.

Although these two groups of testimonies were produced during the same period (1996-1997), their styles are very different. The style of the testimonies in *Bringing Them Home* could be described as a 'rhetoric of fact', while the style of the Link-Up testimonies is far more confrontational, and to use Attwood's terminology, 'symbolic'. The differences in the Link-Up and *Bringing Them Home* testimonies suggest that the chronological distinction Attwood posits between pre-1980s and post-1980s testimonies does not hold up. Whereas he sees a chronological break in the styles of testimonies, with

57. Rowse 1992: 465-66. See also John Docker, 2001 1492: *the poetics of diaspora*, London, Continuum for the chapter on Sally Morgan's *My place*.

58. Alcoff and Gray 1993: 282.

59. Alcoff and Gray 1993: 282.

60. Alcoff and Gray 1993: 283.

61. Alcoff and Gray 1993: 282.

62. Alcoff and Gray 1993: 282.

pre-1980s testimonies being more of the style of 'oral history', and those produced in the later 1980s and 1990s being more fully interpretive, in fact, in the context of the National Inquiry both styles exist simultaneously. This suggests that testimony should not be treated as a monolithic category.

What would most probably account for the differences in the narrative forms and styles of these testimonies are the differing conditions of production. Conditions of production include the purpose for which the testimonies were produced, the immediate audience for the testimonies, whether the witnesses knew the audience, whether there was a situation of trust, whether the setting was formal or informal, and other such issues.<sup>63</sup> In response to some of the criticisms of the report, Sir Ronald Wilson has pointed out that the National Inquiry was not a legal inquiry; therefore, it was not obligated to prove the truth of the testimonies. Rather than treat the testimonies as evidence, he focuses on the affective dimension of the Inquiry — the healing work it did in listening empathetically to people who had been harmed by policies of removal: 'The objective clearly is not retribution, but understanding and healing'.<sup>64</sup> Much of the report was, he notes, 'expressed in the words actually spoken to us by those who suffered personally from the processes of separation ... The report must be read with an open heart and mind, and with a willingness to listen, and to listen intently'.<sup>65</sup> The Report argues that 'reparation can only begin when there is an understanding that comes through listening, followed by an acknowledgment of the shameful deeds of the past and a genuine expression of regret'.<sup>66</sup>

At the same time, however, the Report did provide interpretive frameworks, such as the concepts of trauma and genocide, to make sense of the testimonies. Although the Report was not a judicial inquiry, it did make a moral and legal case for reparation. It presented witness testimony as documentary 'evidence' — as an authentic and factual report of events — thereby downplaying issues of memory and construction. As Young points out, '[f]or a survivor's witness to be credible, it must seem natural and unconstructed'.<sup>67</sup> He observes that the separation of testimony and interpretation suggests that only the interpreter is making meaning in the text, and that the testimony 'is a pure and normative rendering of events', in which case it appears as if the 'maker of meaning is the event itself'.<sup>68</sup> In the Report, testimony and interpretation were separated, and testimony functioned, rhetorically, to support the case for reparation. To say that the *Bringing Them Home* report used the 'rhetorical trope of the eyewitness'<sup>69</sup> is not to deny either the authenticity or the evidential value of the testimony, or even to say that they should have taken some other approach. Clearly, the use of witness testimony as evidence was effective in producing empathy in readers, and in persuading a good proportion of the public of the need for reparation. Ironically, however, in the process of making its case, it represented Stolen Generation witnesses as victims, and as embodiments of traumatic symptoms and syndromes. It also denied them the agency to

63. See Plummer 1995 for a discussion of how these issues impact on narrative.

64. Wilson 1998: xiv.

65. Wilson 1998: xiv.

66. Wilson 1998: xiv.

67. Young 1988:17.

68. Young 1988: 22.

69. Young 1988.

interpret their own experiences. It must be noted that some of the witnesses who came forward may not have had the cultural resources available to them that would enable them to interpret their own experiences.

In contrast to the National Inquiry, Link-Up is an Aboriginal organisation that is devoted to helping people who have been separated to trace their families, and work through the effects of separation, including identity issues. Link-Up's aim, in part, is to empower survivors of separation and removal, to provide a supportive environment and a network as people come to terms with their past and future, to enable people to speak authoritatively about their own experiences, and to aid the healing process. Link-Up testimonies are produced in a group forum in which the other participants have either shared experiences of separation, or are involved in the healing process. A key premise of Link-Up's analysis is that the separation of Aboriginal family members, although systemic, took multiple forms and had multiple effects. This approach provides witnesses with the resources to interpret their experience. For instance, learning to analyse the social, political and historical forces at work in producing separation may enable people who have been separated to stop blaming themselves and their families for their circumstances.

The testimony I have selected for analysis is from Link-Up's submission to the National Inquiry. The testimony, entitled 'Sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly', is by a woman who was adopted by and grew up in a non-Aboriginal family in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>70</sup> The narrator, adopted as a baby, did not learn that she was Aboriginal until she was in her twenties. This testimony is not a simple report of fact. Indeed, it tells us little about the events of the author's childhood. Rather, the author uses concepts such as 'passing', 'denial' and 'racism' to make sense of her experience. For instance, she comments that 'The only uncle I have found, could not tell me — would not tell me — where all the other uncles and aunts are. ... He's spent his life passing as an Indian. His wife passes as something else'. She speculates that his act of passing is a strategy to avoid 'having their kids taken away', which nonetheless perpetuates the effects of removal: 'This means his kids, and now their kids ... don't know who they are or where they come from either. Removal just keeps being passed on, today, now'.<sup>71</sup> Later in the testimony she talks about how her birth mother is too ashamed and in denial to tell her non-adopted children about her and another sister who were adopted out. 'Part of the reason they can't be told about me is because it's tied in with her history and that's hidden from them too — because it's Aboriginal history'. Thus, she is separated from her siblings and they from her, and '[t]he removal continues ...'.

In this testimony, the witness-narrator does not take up the position of victim and thus she denies the reader or critic the possibility of identifying vicariously with her trauma. Rather, she addresses us as White Australians, and therefore, as implicated bystanders or potential collaborators. Not, perhaps, collaborators to the actual processes of removal, but collaborators in the conspiracy of silence and denial that has made removal, and the repetitions of removal to this day, possible. The narrator comments, for instance, on the ways in which White Australians have denied Aboriginal history:

<sup>70</sup>. 'Sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly' in Link-Up and Wilson 1997: 125.

<sup>71</sup>. 'Sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly', 1997: 125.

Aboriginal history is not something you can hide away from everything else ...

I ... believe that's what the whole of White Australia has done over many generations without even knowing it ... Yeah, they've gone into removal from where they really are and who they really are, where they really fit in — no wonder they can deny or condone the removal of other people. I'm not talking about all White people here ... but I do think that many White Australians have been set up to do so.

This testimony does not ask for our empathy. It asks for us to become critically conscious of our own subject-positions in the ongoing practices of denial, including the denial of Aboriginal history. It asks White Australians, and others who identify with that subject-position, to work out where we fit into this history of separation, and into Aboriginal history more broadly. That question is very different from the question of where Aboriginal history fits into White Australian history, which is the way White Australians are used to thinking about Aboriginal history. In offering her interpretation of the role of both Aboriginal and White Australians in practices of denying Aboriginal history and Aboriginal identity, she challenges White Australians to examine their own role in past and present practices that support racism.

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