ABORIGINAL HISTORIES IN AUSTRALIA GOVERNMENT ARCHIVES:

Working with Records of Trauma

Kirsten Thorpe and Cassandra Willis

Introduction

A little over a year ago, our Kinship Research Team found ourselves working together again at the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia (UTS). We had met first over a decade ago when we were the New South Wales Government Aboriginal Affairs Kinship Research Team. Our work in Jumbunna was different, we were now a multiple-member team, we had moved from the Aboriginal Protection and Welfare Boards (the Boards) and were repaid to their rightful owners, at the same time, an exhibition, *Living Memories*, was being prepared for the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in Canberra, which included our work. The exhibition is significant in terms of survival stories for Aboriginal people in the South East of Australia.

On reuniting at UTS, we have had an opportunity to reflect on these two major projects and the use of these government records for reparations and social justice. We reflect in this article on our shared experiences of this intensely challenging period of our professional and personal lives. It paired our Kinship Research Team with a new and emerging Aboriginal Research Team and we had to negotiate our relationships with each other and with our ancestors (and to the extent we reflect on this article, we both felt our ancestors feeling in turn. Despite our efforts to be balanced, we realise that we still carry the feelings of distress from this period, of trying to navigate these projects with ancestrally and respectfully and bearing the face of an archive of trauma. Nevertheless, we are excited to share these experiences in hope that we can bring accounts for healing and for truth-telling, and we also want to have contributed to the wider team's valuable work.

> "We were brainwashed to act, speak, dress and think white and we were punished if we didn't.....We were not allowed to talk in our language or about culture or about our families."
>
> Aunty Lorraine Peeters, Healing Foundation, 2019

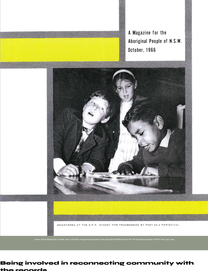
Cover, *Dawn* (Aspects) May-July, A monthly magazine produced by the Aborigines Welfare Board (Vol. 1 No. 1) Aborigines Protection Board (Vol. 1 No. 2 onwards)

The Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards

The Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards operated in NSW from the period 1883 to 1969. These Government agencies (the Boards) were responsible for developing policies that supported the Boards to control and dispossess Aboriginal people from their land, communities and culture. Most notably, the Boards administered the Aboriginal Protection Act 1909 (the Act) which was used to forcibly remove Aboriginal people from their families and communities. The Boards had wide-ranging power, of which served to destroy Aboriginal culture, language and connections. Firstly, under a 'protectorate' ideology, the Board set up Aboriginal reserves, together with missions and stations, where Aboriginal people were forced to live. Secondly, with a changing focus on supposed 'welfare' the Board sought to assimilate Aboriginal people into European society.

The records that have survived from the Boards operation are incomplete. They were not created for future archives – records that supported the day to day operations of the Boards. Some of the records in existence recording depositions and reports of Board members and stations and homes. Other material documents the intervention of the state in child removal, the denial of parents visiting their children in state institutions, the control of movements by being restricted to both town and reserves, and the control of Aboriginal labour.

Despite the inherent bias of the records, there are moments where Aboriginal people's voices are revealed. Set in a pattern, it has devised in a conspiracy of silence, the voices of those who resisted during the injustice of the Boards practice. For us, the collection is a period of trauma, an archive which is a place of trauma, and we have had to negotiate our relationship with our ancestors as subjects of the archive. They are records of propaganda, used to hide its justly discriminatory government legislation and policies.

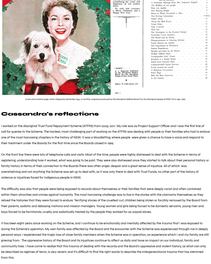


Cover, *Dawn* (Aspects) May-July, A monthly magazine produced by the Aborigines Welfare Board (Vol. 1 No. 1) Aborigines Protection Board (Vol. 1 No. 2 onwards)

Being involved in reconnecting community with the records

Both the Scheme and the Living Memory exhibition utilised these records as a form of government repatriation. Both projects brought us painfully especially to survivors of the Boards, but the projects also provided an opportunity to acknowledge pain using dialogue and a moment to share stories of resilience. It is complex process to engage people with records that are very offensive and racist. Relationships are key to reconnecting people with these records, and you must be prepared to sit with people for the hard talk that arises.

Both projects occurred when diaspora programs and systems to support digital engagement were in their infancy. Despite a growing body of knowledge around participatory archives and the Australian Records Continuum model, which acknowledge multiple rights to records, limited work has been carried out to implement these in institutional settings. There were so many challenges to play with these projects that the right of reply and co-positioning of the archive in first time seemed insurmountable.



Cover, *Dawn* (Aspects) October 1966, A Magazine for the Aborigines Welfare Board

Cassandra's reflections

I worked on the Aboriginal Trust Fund Repayment Scheme (ATFRS) from 2019 to 2020. My role was as Project Support Officer and I was the first line of call for queries to the Scheme. The hardest, most challenging part of working on the ATFRS was dealing with people in their families who had to endure the impacts of the Aboriginal Trust Fund (ATF). The ATF was a fund that was created by the Aborigines Protection Board and was a place where Aboriginal people had their trust money held. The Board had control over the ATF and the money was the Board's asset to use.

On the front line there were lots of telephone calls and visits. Most of the time, people were highly distressed to deal with the Scheme in terms of explaining understanding how it worked, what was going to be paid. They were also distressed once they started to talk about their personal history or their family's experiences of the Aboriginal Trust Fund. Some of the calls were very emotionally charged, with people in tears, shouting, and at times, very aggressive. Some of the calls were very sad, and I felt very sad for the caller, and I felt very angry on their behalf, as it was very clear to them and with Trust Funds, no other part of the history of violence or injustices faced for Indigenous people in NSW.

The difficulty was also that people were being exposed to records about themselves or their families that were deeply racist and often contained derogatory and offensive language. Some people were very upset by the language used in the records, and I felt very sad for them, and I felt very angry for what the Scheme had they were forced to endure. Terrifying stories of the coalition cut, children being taken or forcibly removed by the Board from their parents, systems and detaining mothers and mission managers. Young women and girls being forced to be domestic servants, young boys and young boys forced to be farmhands, and additionally treated like property to be sold for an unpaid wage.

It has been eight years since working on the Scheme, and I continue to be emotionally and mentally affected by the trauma that I was exposed to during the Scheme's operation. As, was family was affected by Protection and Welfare and with the Scheme was established through my in deeply personal way. I experienced the tragic loss of close family members when the Scheme was in operation, an experience which I and my family are still grieving from. The oppressive history of the Board and its subjugation of Aboriginal people is not in the past, it is ongoing for our individual, family and community lives. I have come to realise that this trauma of dealing with the records and the Board's oppressive and violent history, on what I can only be described as rapture of terror, is very recent, and it's difficult to find the right words to describe the intergenerational trauma that has stemmed from this.

144 Act No. 25, 1909.

Aborigines Protection.

Act No. 25, 1909.

An Act to provide for the protection and care of the Aborigines, for the exemption of Half-bloods from Aboriginal Protection Act; to amend the Vagrancy Act, 1902, and the Police Offences (Amendment) Act, 1908; and for purposes consequent thereon, or incidental thereto. [29th December, 1909.]

Short title.

Repeal.

Interpretation.

Constitution of Board.

Constitution of Trust Fund.

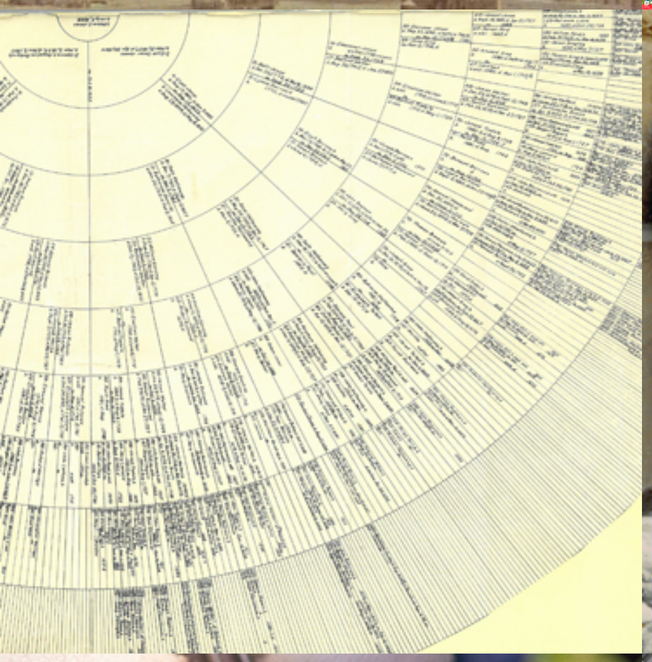
Protection of Aborigines.

Reserves.

Aboriginal Trust Fund Repayment Scheme, Kinship Research Project, Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney, 2020

Kirsten's reflections

One of the hardest aspects of working with the records of the Board was like the. The unfortunate 'facts' that were based on files and constructive now perceived to be the truth. No archives education, no history degree, no sociology degree can prepare you for this kind of work. It was truly pun educating to witness the ongoing trauma of recordkeeping in the hands of Aboriginal people in both the Scheme and the Living Memory exhibition. Being involved in reconnecting people who have records, they often say, is different from attempting a reading room and reconnecting people with their records. It is a very, very, very,



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