Mothering and trauma
Lived experiences of Aboriginal mums in NSW prisons

by Stacey Lee Lighton

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Under the supervision of:

Professor Elizabeth Sullivan
Professor Juanita Sherwood
Dr Sacha Kendall Jamieson
Professor Eileen Baldry
Dr Jonathan Marshall

University of Technology Sydney
Faculty of Health

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, STACEY LEE LIGHTON declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Health at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Abstract

Australian Aboriginal women are incarcerated at ever increasing rates and are currently the fastest growing segment of the New South Wales (NSW) population, a disturbing trend reflected across Australian states. Mothers form 80 per cent of this group. The incarceration of Aboriginal mothers significantly impacts their social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and that of their children, families and communities, but the literature concerning this group is scant and requires updating. Moreover, much of the prison health literature focuses on Western-based health and disease models that exclude Aboriginal people's conceptualisations and standpoints on health. The aim of this study is to provide a depth of understanding of the women, their mothering, and the shaping effects of trauma in their lives, from their own perspectives.

Forty-three semi-structured qualitative interviews from the 'Social and Cultural Resilience and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Mothers in prison' (SCREAM) (NSW) project, which was conducted with Aboriginal mothers across six NSW prisons, were analysed. The PhD study was informed by an overarching Indigenous paradigm and guided by the SCREAM (NSW) project advisory group. A multi-method approach that included grounded theory analysis and the employment of case studies was applied. The results included: (1) women's narratives demonstrated strength and connection with family and sustained adversity in childhood, framed by the intergenerational effects of Aboriginal child removal and ongoing colonisation; (2) the trauma experienced by the women has not been well captured in Western-based diagnostic systems, and specific traumas shaped pathways to prison while untreated trauma sustained cycles of incarceration; (3) the compounding effects of child removal and criminalisation were causes of extreme stress; and (4) mothers experienced contact with their children on a connection/disruption continuum with corresponding clusters of SEWB states.

The findings reveal the specificity of stress and trauma experienced by incarcerated Aboriginal mothers, and underscore the need for translation of collaboratively generated research into the practice of culturally safe trauma prevention and treatment and into the provision of support for parenting rather than punitive removal.

Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACE	Adverse Childhood Experiences (study)
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
AIC	Australian Institute of Criminology
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ALRC	Australian Law Reform Commission
AHMRC	Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (NSW)
AMS	Aboriginal Medical Service
BOCSAR	New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and prevention (US)
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CPTSD	complex post-traumatic stress disorder
DCJ	Department of Communities and Justice (NSW)
DoCS	Department of Community Services (NSW) (replaced by FACS)
DSM-5	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th edition)
FACS	Department of Family and Community Services (NSW) (replaced by DCJ)
GMAR	Grandmothers against Removals
GP	general practitioner (family doctor)
GT	grounded theory
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission
ICD-11	International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (11th revision)
IRM	Indigenous research methodologies
MAGIC	Mothers and Gestation in Custody
NGO	non-government organisation
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
NSW	New South Wales

NTER	Northern Territory Emergency Response
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
QLD	Queensland
SCREAM	Social and Cultural Resilience and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Mothers in Prison (research project)
SEWB	social and emotional wellbeing
SNAICC	Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, now called SNAICC: National Voice for Our Children
UNSW	University of New South Wales
UTS	University of Technology Sydney
VIC	Victoria
WA	Western Australia
WHO	World Health Organization

Glossary of terms

Aboriginal nation   A large Aboriginal language group with responsibility for a specific area of Country. There are more than 250 language groups in Australia.

Aboriginal person   A person who is of Aboriginal descent, who identifies as Aboriginal and is accepted by other Aboriginal community members.

colonisation   The forcible takeover of the land of Indigenous peoples and the exploitation of the land and the people, ignoring the rights of Indigenous people.

Community   Often capitalised when used in Aboriginal contexts. It has a more specific meaning when employed by Aboriginal people. 'Community' may refer to a physical group of people, and/or to belonging and laws, culture and descent that people have in common.

Country   In standard English 'country' refers to a nation state or the countryside. In Aboriginal English 'Country' refers to the special relationship that Aboriginal people sustain with the land, culture and nature.

decolonisation   The recognition of Aboriginal people's sovereignty and, flowing from this, the recognition of Aboriginal culture and the validity of Aboriginal and ways of knowing, being and doing. In praxis it involves a critique of dominant Western-based ways of doing business. This can lead to the changing of dysfunctional structures and processes entirely. Or it may mean collaboratively embedding Aboriginal people's standpoints, cultural values and practices in systems, institutions and processes and meaningfully including Aboriginal people in governing power structures.

DoCS   The word 'DoCS' (Department of Community Services) was used by the women in interviews to refer to the state agency responsible for child removals in NSW, though it had been superseded at the time of the interviews (2011) by the NSW

Department of Family and Community Services (FACS), which it turn was more recently replaced by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (July 2019). As well as a designated name for a state agency, it also carries meaning for Aboriginal communities related to the punitive removal of children.

domestic violence In this thesis the term 'domestic violence' refers to violence perpetrated by a person against their partner (see also family violence)

Elder An Aboriginal Elder is someone who has gained recognition in their community as a custodian of law and knowledge. Elders provide vital support, guidance and wise counselling to their communities.

family violence In this thesis 'family violence' refers to broader interfamilial violence. It includes physical violence but also refers to sexual abuse, threats of harm, emotional violence, kidnap, damage to pets or property or exposing children to these.

First Peoples In Australia, First Peoples are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who inhabited and were sustained by the land, prior to colonisation.

foster care Foster care is one type of out-of-home care provided for children who are no longer able to live with their parents. It is home-based care.

growing them up Aboriginal English for 'bringing them up'

growling In Aboriginal English, a word that refers to being told off for wrongdoing

Indigenous person A term at times used in Australia to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Some Aboriginal people do not like this term, as they feel it has colonial overtones and prefer to self-identify according other means, such as Aboriginal nation affiliation.

kinship care A type of foster or adoptive care that places a child or young person with a relative or someone they already know. In Aboriginal communities, kin may be a relative of the child or someone who shares a cultural or community connection.

link-up services	Aboriginal-led services, funded to assist all Aboriginal people who have been directly affected by past government policies by being separated from their families and culture through forced removal, being fostered, adopted or raised in institutions, to trace, reconnect and reunify with family and Country
out-of-home care	Out-of-home care is a temporary or medium- or long-term statutory living arrangement for children for whom care and protection is transferred to others, most often as a result of child removal.
Stolen Generations	Refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were forcibly removed from their families as a result of social policy, enacted by state, federal agencies, churches and welfare agencies. This process of targeted removal of Aboriginal children began from the start of colonisation and lasted until the 1970s. Many children were taken into institutional care, other children were fostered or adopted into 'white' families. Removals broke families apart, causing enormous feelings of grief and loss, and violated relationship and traditions of child socialisation. The details of many children's true identities were denied to them, and they did not know to which families and groups they belonged.
terra nullius	A concept in international law meaning 'a territory belonging to no-one' or 'over which no-one claims ownership'. A myth and deceit used to justify the colonisation and removal of Aboriginal people from their lands.
yarning circle	Both the culturally safe space that is created for communication on issues important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the process of engaging in collective, cultural, trusting and respectful communication on important subjects.