

RUTH SKILBECK

Remembering Australia's Forgotten Mothers

Reclaiming Lost Identity in Colonial History

This fugue narrative tells the story of the start of the author, Ruth Skilbeck's, search to find her Australian mother's family of descent. Her mother was adopted in Sydney in the first half of the twentieth century, and passed away in 2008 in London. Her mother's adoption as an infant occurred during the time of the policies of mass removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia, in an era colloquially known in Australia as the "Stolen Generations." At the time of writing, the author did not know her mother's birth family background. This story is told as grief and as healing, like playing or listening to music, an emotional catharsis. In telling this story, the author, as art writer, reflects on the healing power of personal storytelling as communicative action in the public sphere, and starts to reflect on the significance of the absent mother, women's art and writing, and transitional objects, in women's cultural history of empowerment. The context of the story is Australian colonial families with hidden histories. The narrative includes digital photographs by the author.

In this narrative I tell the story of the beginnings of my journey to find my mother's lost family. The journey began, in the year before my mother passed away, and it is still continuing. The year before my mother died, in London, the need to find out who her "real" family were, became pressing—starting with her birth mother, whose identity had always been concealed. My mother was adopted in early infancy. Her mother had died when she was born, this much was all I knew about her family of descent, my motherlines.

My highly intelligent and mentally acute mother died of early-onset Alzheimer's. The Forgetting began in her mid-sixties; my story tells of a parallel journey, of how, in the same but different time, on the opposite side of the world, I started, in an attempt to recover the lost memories. What was lost

to memory? The memories of my mother's life, her own memories, what she had told me when I was growing up, my memories of her, and the repressed memories of her family of descent... My mother's side of the family that I found, in my research, had been forgotten and 'lost', suppressed in an act of erasure which was part of a mass act of cultural amnesia; in tidal waves of "assimilation" forgetting, generation after generation of children in Australia were swept away from their families, in the twentieth century. (I outline some details of the white Australia policy of assimilation in Australia, in the next section.) It is a huge task of remembering; I know I shall not complete it.

I share my story as grief and as healing. This is my personal story and the views I express about the history and culture in twentieth century Australia, and the events I recount in relation to my mother's life, are seen-and-felt through the prism of grieving and in the process of healing through recovery of family memory and identity, my mother's family; "lost" in colonial history. These are not "easy" views to express in the open space of the public sphere (and such views are probably more usually repressed or kept to oneself or within a family) yet I am taking this communicative action in the conscious hope that through expression of grief in the public sphere of a knowledge community, in the creative process of writing and sharing this story healing may come; that it will be a process of personal and cultural catharsis, the kind of emotional release, and expression, that comes from playing or listening to music, and dancing ... this time to a mourning song. More deeply, I am driven to write of this journey from an "unspeakable" place (Kristeva 1981), where words are rhythms, of a psychic chain, a primal memory of a heart beat, and where the interplay of word and hand and mind and screen, the writing machine, replaces that originary matrixial machine; it is something I am compelled to do, I cannot not write this story. Donald Woods Winnicott theorized the "transitional object" that a child uses to replace "the absent mother" (Winnicott). Can self-made art objects and works of writing fulfill this function, in the process of the creation and play of writing art? For some, I reflect, self-based writing becomes or re-creates its own transitional object.

Stepping back from emotion, to the more usual detached scholarly level of conceptualization—on a philosophical level, I am buoyed in my understanding of "grief narratives" and by the writings of many authors, creative writers, including de Quincey (*Dream-Fugue*), Celan (*Todesfuge*); Plath (*Little Fugue*), and critical cultural theorists (Kristeva 1981; Butler 2009; Barthes), who have written in varying degrees of detachment, and intensity, on grief, and of their own experience of loss, in processes of disruptive, fugal writing. Such writing, I reflect, is, at least in my case, a deep and not fully conscious primal action towards reparation; the reconstitution of the "lost object," loved one, the self and family one never knew and grieves for, in an act of writing: as *communicative*

action in the *public sphere*, to freely adapt terms from Habermas.

Writing Loss of a Loved One, and What it Means to Write of Such “Unspeakable Experience” of Mourning

In the years that preceded my mother’s passing, whilst she was in the decline of her terminal illness, I had researched and written my Ph.D. thesis on forms of fugue writing in literary art; and in doing so found, that many prominent literary writers used fugue forms intentionally, and subliminally, in their works, and reshaped this circular musicalized pre-semiotic form of writing to write about the traumatic experience of loss of a loved one, a close relative: a sister, a mother, a father (these authors included de Quincey, Proust, Joyce, Celan and Plath). Cultural theorists, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler each, in different ways, theorize in writings on grieving, and the public sphere; Butler writes of the “prohibition” on “public grievability” of some groups of peoples in wars and conflict (Butler 2004, 2009). Kristeva writes of the limitations of certain kinds of official writing in healing, that conventional narrative writing is a fragmentation of the subjective self into (the illusion of) fluent prose (Kristeva 1981, 1982). The ‘real’ of the pre semiotic/trauma is articulated in disruptions of poetic form.

disruptive/ rhythms spaces & breaks
writing beyond words

In researching and writing the story of lost memories and identity, on my mother’s side of the family, the deepest meanings of which goes beyond words, I have also sought to use elements of visual communication through digital photographs I took- of items of clothing and objects I found in my mother’s room in the nursing home after she passed away; the writing is disruptive in parts evoking *pre-semiotic chora*, the realm of affect, before words, feeling prior to signification (Kristeva 1982). Why I chose to tell my story is as part of the process of grief and healing, bearing witness. On reflection, it is using emotionalism as a strategy of *communicative action* in the public sphere (Habermas):

To not be forgotten to not forget
To speak out against the night of silence and sadness

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The context of my story is my mother’s family history, hidden in the colonial history and society of white Australia throughout the twentieth century. (How far before that I had not discovered when I began to write this narrative. The piece presented here is an early segment, and I have found out more since).

Before I begin to tell the story of my own family, I first introduce the historical and cultural context of what in Australia has come to be known as the “Stolen Generations,” the practice of removal of children from their families (ostensibly for the reason it was in their better interests) to be brought up by adoptive families or as wards of state, a widespread practice in Australia in the twentieth century that went on for many decades.

Historical/Cultural Context of Australia’s Stolen Generations

An official policy of forced removal from their families of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children operated in Australia from 1909 to 1969. During this time untold numbers of children were removed from their families in a process of assimilation to the dominant white mainstream colonial culture, the numbers are unknown as records were not kept but estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands (*Bringing Them Home*). Assimilation and removal, and adoption by families considered by the state to be in a better position to bring up the children, was a cultural norm, *and it was not only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were removed and/or adopted in this time*. For many of the earlier decades, it seems, there was scant knowledge on record of the effects on a child and their relatives, of removal and adoption, of separation from families, with no explanation, follow up or context, so that individuals grew up isolated from their origins and not knowing the identity of their family of descent, in a very literal sense: not knowing who they were. The lifelong psychological impacts of loss and grief, in the “adoption triad” (adoptee, adoptive family and birth mother/family) have been researched and documented (Silverstein and Kaplan). As this practice did not end until the late 1960s there are still countless numbers of people living in Australia who were directly affected by these policies of ‘assimilation,’ and the trauma of such ruptures can be inter-generational, passing down through the generations, until it is, if it is, processed into understanding.

My Story: A Family’s Hidden History

After my Mother passed away, on October 1, 2008, my life changed irrevocably. Not only was this a profound event of personal grief. But I have found out things since then, about her life and her family history, which is my family history and identity, which I had not known before while she was alive. I have found out about a hidden history in my own family, an erased grandmother, and family, aunts, I’d never known about. This has revealed a history of “white lies” and cover-ups, in the older generation of my family, which had an even deeper impact than finding out about the hidden family. In

effect what this meant was that for over 40 years of my life, I had not known who my family was, I had been brought up under an illusion, deceived about my own family—by my family. Yet, this was not malicious, my experience is commonplace in Australia. Between 1909–1969, the era known as *the stolen generations*, literally over 100,000 children were taken from their mothers and families and brought up as wards of state, in homes, and missions, or in adoptive families.

This was part of the “White Australia” policy of assimilation that was brought in with Federation in 1901. Prior to this, Aboriginals were considered along with white settlers to be colonial subjects of the British Empire. The policy of assimilation, through removal and adoption, did not only affect one or two groups. It was a policy that profoundly and literally and symbolically mixed up Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, Indigenous and non-Indigenous identity in Australia. At the same time that there was deep insecurity and searching in the “white Australia” national psyche as to what was national identity. As a consequence of this widespread practice, a very significant (yet precisely unknown) number of people in Australia do not know their families. When I asked a male relative why we had never been told the truth, he said:

Nobody talked about those things then.

What has impacted on me most strongly in the experience of researching through approaches of art writing and historical research, is the dis-regard and de-valuation of mothers and motherhood in this cultural and personal family history, which is the history of the last century of Australian history, since Federation.

Aboriginal women and mothers, in particular, were treated appallingly in this time. Rape was a weapon and tool of assimilation policy that was one of those things that were not talked about. Covered up in a cloak of secrecy and shame. Yet the official policy of assimilation held that if a child had not “100 percent Aboriginal blood” then they could be taken and brought up as a ward of state, this was a policy with an ugly mission to “breed out” “Aboriginality.” Supposedly, colonial authorities “believed” that the Aboriginal people were a dying race and in three generations would be gone (*Bringing Them Home*).

The strength of feelings, and endurance, of Aboriginal women looking back on this now are well expressed by the broadcaster and Aboriginal activist Auntie Shirley, speaking at a 2007 rally on Human Rights Day, in Sussex Street, Sydney:

Aboriginal women are the backbone that has built this country. They have lain on their backs and been raped and given birth to white fella's



Ruth Skilbeck, Aunty Shirley, Human Rights Day, Sydney, 2007

babies and had their children taken away and grieved for their children. And their blood is in this city and in these buildings. We won't go away. Will we stay around? Come back next year.... (Skilbeck 2007)

At the Rally, I took photographs of Aunty Shirley's passionate speech and was deeply moved by her words (which I quoted in an article I wrote soon afterwards on Australian identity, dislocation, exile and art). This was a year and a half before my mother passed away. It was only afterwards that I found out how closely connected I am myself to the experience of internal exile, that I too am part of this experience of mass dislocation and loss of identity that resulted from the mass exclusion and denial of Mothers in Australia throughout the twentieth century.

Social Disguise, White Lies and Cultural Identity

How has this affected the younger generations, how does this shape the identity of a peoples and personal identity? How can a culture and an individual find, or seek to find themselves, to come to terms with such a history of loss and denial and lies?

After living most of my life, in what some may see as benign deception, I have had to readjust my perception of my family, myself and the world to

a colonial history that I had not known how inextricably we were part of. The Other has come into me and despite the high level of education and intellectual advantages of my family I have to now deal with the evidence that the women in my family were subordinated, not only due to individual characteristics or in certain unbalanced relationships but as part of cultural norms of being Australian.

Beginning around 1998, my years of “fugue” research (which in effect ended ten years later when my mother passed away), was a research into the musical and psychological meanings of fugue in writing as creative art (and began with my writing a fugue novel for my MA), and the many ways and applications the psychological meaning of fugue can be seen as a loss of awareness of identity. I wrote novels using this idea, and playing with the musical aspects of fugue, as well as art theory, in interpretations of polyphony and affect. Now it is impossible not to see the unconscious and unintentional aspects that I wrote about as fugal, were reflexively, performatively, writing my own unconsciousness and family trauma.

The loss of awareness of identity that I wrote of was my own, and of all the other countless thousands of people who, like us, had been “white lied” to or denied knowledge of their families, heritage and relatives.

In my case it was Grandmother, my mother’s mother whom I knew nothing of, and her family.

After my mother passed away, I found out that her mother, my grandmother had died six weeks after my mother was born. And her father had given her away as he couldn’t look after her.

It’s an extraordinary story of the First World War and its aftermath (that I am telling in a novel I am writing) but one where a mother, my grandmother, was eradicated from the historical record. As if she simply didn’t matter, no one ever cared enough to think she was worthy of remembering. No one seemed to think that her existence was worth acknowledging. I find it hard to believe that they all acted not only as if she was dead but as if she had never even existed—and that they all thought that it was alright to do this, that there was no moral issue involved with the public eradication of a mother, my grandmother from history.

Why, what had she done that she should be so forgotten?

Had she committed a crime? An offence?

She died following childbirth at the age of 29. Leaving behind a six-week old baby, her first born, my mother.

And her husband.

I wrote...

My thoughts and feelings triggered by this journey of revelations run through the various projects of art and writing and historical research that I have been

doing, and some that have just emerged, as I have been going about my life, teaching, writing, trying to see my young-adult children as much as I can even though we have been living in different cities for the past couple of years. I have been living alone in a cottage, three hours away from Sydney, family and friends. Sometimes, it has felt as if all I have left, to not be forgotten, is my writing. Whilst I was researching, and finding out about my grandmother, my blog became my voice.

Wednesday, 29 June 2011

Remembering Australia's Forgotten Mothers

MANIFESTO:

WOMEN'S LIBERATION FROM INTERNALISED OPPRESSION AND CULTURAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA THROUGH CATHARSIS IN PHYSICAL ACTS OF PERFORMATIVE WRITING AND ART, IN DIALOGUE, AND IN RITES OF ECSTATIC INTERPRETIVE DANCE.

I am an Australian-based feminist textual artist and theorist. I work in the tradition of feminism that articulates new modalities of writing and art from life experiences of the female subject and self. My focus is in creative writing and critical cultural theory. Pushing the project of post-structuralist reflexive writing as conceptual art across textual modes and boundaries. Into disjointed narratives of exile, fugue and dissociation.

I seek to make conscious the unconscious processes that call out for Catharsis. For Healing from personal and cultural trauma. Through performative acts of fugal writing that bear witness and reclaim dispersed and lost identity. My project and method is to use rituals of writing as action, and occasions of exchange through interviews and conversations with artists, to bring into consciousness, to evacuate and exorcise the internalized content of cultural and personal oppression and trauma.

To rise beyond fear of the censor and surveillance into words and art that speak OUR name and make us STRONG again. Through acts of writing I remember how to feel again. I will remember who I am again. I learn how to think and take part in the world again.

My project is to break through the wall of SILENCE that removed my

Mother's mother's entire existence from the family record, so that, not only did I, and my siblings, never know WHO she was, and had been; we never even knew, and were not supposed to know, that she had ever existed at all.

My project is to honor the Mothers who were erased from the family record as if they did not matter. At the same time, it was in the twentieth century, the third century of the "nation's" cultural history; the Fathers, the men folk, the returned soldiers, from the two "Great Wars" were commemorated in endless ceremonies of Remembrance that almost 100 years later still continue.

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I have nothing against men being remembered, and valued and commemorated and am proud of my grandfathers who fought bravely and suffered in the World War.

But why was it that at the same time in Australian cultural history, that men were Remembered and commemorated excessively, women, specifically MOTHERS, were massively disregarded, excluded, denied, forgotten, and lost in the decades of the "stolen generations," that lasted over six decades, when one hundred thousand children of Aboriginal mothers, were taken and placed in orphanages, missions, or with adopted parents, under a policy of attempted 'assimilation'. There is a huge gendered cultural imbalance in these practices that has not been widely acknowledged. A cultural amnesia has prevailed. My project would be to resurrect the memory of the forgotten mothers. Make a plinth and cover it with their names. Write the story of my family, to start with. The long journey of finding my grandmother.

My mother's mother died shortly after she was born. She was adopted. By an upper class couple. Grandfather was an officer and a gentleman. Grandmother was a lady and very concerned with appearances. They lived in a big house overlooking a gully on Sydney's Upper North Shore. To spare their feelings (so the story goes now) a cover up ensued, the result being that the very existence of my grandmother, was denied and hidden. This would have been forever (had those involved successfully had their way).

It was only by chance and accident, through little slips and whispers, from the other side, that my forbidden grandmother's presence re-entered consciousness. I was the conduit.

The night of that day, the phone rang.

I was living in Sydney, by Balmoral Beach with my two children, whom I had brought up alone since my divorce, years before.

The night we moved into the small rental apartment next to a fish and chip

shop on the esplanade, the first night I slept there, she passed away in the afternoon in London.

The night of the next day, *that day*, the phone rang. The phone had been ringing all day.

The first call was at 7.00 on my mobile, it was my father. He told me the news. My sister in London had rung him.

Then in the blur of the wrung-out afternoon there were calls from relatives in Sydney, friends in London.

Then, an unfamiliar voice:

Hello, Is that Ruth? Yes. I'm so sorry that Elizabeth has died. This is Margaret Rook.

Margaret. I was in shock. You're her sister.

Elizabeth Eileen

Remembering my Pioneering Australian Academic Mother, I Became a Feminist Academic Activist

My mother, Elizabeth Eileen, co-authored the first published cultural and media studies research in Australia and one of the first books of cultural and media studies in the world. *Growing Up in An Australian City: A Study of Adolescents in Sydney* (first published by the Australian Council for Educational Research in 1957) (Connell, Francis and Skilbeck) researched “ways in which an Australian grows up to be an Australian” through surveying the emotional attachments and new popular culture leisure media pursuits—listening to the radio, going to the cinema and reading comic books, which formed adolescents’ sense of identity (this was just before TV). My mother was in her early twenties, with a first class honours BA from the University of Sydney when her professor W. F. Connell, invited her to co-author the book (with an E. P. Francis), a glittering academic career may have lain ahead. But when she married and had a family she and my father decided that she would stay at home and look after my siblings and myself, and instead of pursuing her own research work, she supported my father’s successful academic career. Occasionally, in my peripatetic academic family childhood—she would tell us children that she had “written the first book on Australian adolescents.” This was all we ever heard about it. She put her intelligence, generosity and wisdom into bringing up her children. I was always a feminist but in my own academic journey I had tended to play down my feminist perspective as a mother, and divorced solo parent (I had even been encouraged to do so by my post grad supervisors as I was told that it would harm reception of my work). My approach changed radically when my mother passed away in London. I took my camera with me to the funeral. After I returned to Sydney I was overcome by a need to write

about feminism, art and motherhood and developed two art writing research projects, *The Female Gaze*, and *Remembering Australia's Forgotten Mothers* that I am still working on.

I needed to immerse myself in something bigger than myself; I needed to write a women's cultural history of empowerment.

Hylde Eileen

Good Friday

Easter in the cottage. I am on my own here. With Mum's ashes and the phoenix rising. With the family secret that has, astonishingly, revealed its truth to me in this strange time. I am on my own, but not alone. I have never been alone.

The presence I, laughingly, called "our guardian angel," has always been with me.

I am here, and I am writing.

I am in the study in the cottage, tapping softly at the new laptop, amidst textured hillocks and paper-drifts, opened books and journals inky with my research notes. Before me page proofs for an article on the history of contemporary urban Aboriginal women artists. An image of Fiona Foley's iconic self-portrait *Batjala Woman* is pinned on the wallboard at the level of my eyes. On the table behind me, are the official certificates of death and birth from the NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages.

Blue swirling letters float amongst the sober pages of, almost unintelligible, research notes. They are the unconscious signs that rise to the light when the levers of cognition shift; when the other side of the brain takes over. When the clock strikes midnight and the inner voices speak aloud.

Enclosed in a stylized blue heart, crowned with swirling tendrils and helix-swirls, are the words that bled from midnight's page.

Eileen and I.

The tattoo of a secret life.

That rises to the surface of your skin as you sleep.

When I woke this morning I saw a faint pattern on my left forearm, under the skin. In the shower, I slid a slippery cake of oatmeal soap across the marks. What is this stain? A trace of ink? A rising rash? A subcutaneous skin cancer?

A soapy rub turns to anxious scrub, with flannel. The stain remained.

As the days go by I watch
my arm, with alarm.

What's under the skin floating in translucent layers of dermis is becoming clearer. Now when I peer through my own skin I can faintly make out letters; the letters of a name

By the end of the week, I can see the name

Eileen

inscribed in chic French script the length of my forearm,



Ruth Skilbeck, Last Things—In the Mirror, 2008-2012

For I have found out that is not only the story of Eileen’s enforced disappearance, and the disruptions in identity-consciousness that affected her descendants, the women and girls in my family, that I am researching. It is a bigger story than that. A story of untold hundreds of thousands— even millions—of mothers and their children in Australia throughout the last century. A story whose themes of loss of awareness of identity, confusion and survival, link Indigenous and non-Indigenous women through gossamer threads of knowing and not-knowing—who you are. That includes generations of Aboriginal mothers babies forcibly removed from their mothers and brought up in adoption families or foster homes—their true identity hidden and denied. Some had “white” fathers and were born of secret love. Or rape, which was sadly more likely. Rape of Aboriginal women was a secret weapon of assimilation. Their tribal languages and cultures were lost. The Aboriginal race was suppressed by the colonial policy of assimilation under the White Australia Policy that was only officially dropped in 1969 following civil right activism and a swelling Aboriginal Rights Movement. Finally, Aboriginal people were allowed to vote in their own homeland.

By dismissing the existence of mothers and forging the identity of their children—for the supposed “good” or those children—the dominant discourse reflected and manifested a casual indifference to women, and to Aboriginal peoples. It was a discourse that manifested the attitude that Mothers don’t matter. That Mothers are socially inferior is a discourse that is implicated in and inversely linked to the forging of national identity around the twentieth



Ruth Skilbeck, Nightdress, 2008

century Anzac myth of white male soldiers, who are remembered to the extent that Mothers of the stolen generations are forgotten.

What about women's histories?
The hidden histories?
The stories of identities that were forbidden to be told?
Of women's existence not allowed to be mentioned?

The Mother whose existence was denied but whose presence nonetheless persisted and would not die. Whose consciousness has returned in the next generation?

"We won't go away." The words of Aunty Shirley echo in my inner ear. "Will we stay around? Come back next year..."

This is a cry from the deep heart, that women, mothers, from all over the world can relate to, whether or not they know every detail of their family history. This is the deep driving strength of mothers in history, not afraid to take action, to put thoughts into words of writing, and call for a better world (Lawrence). The history of motherhood in colonial Australia is one that includes attempted genocide on it. *Nobody ever talked about it.* It is a history of smothering, silencing; and Love and extraordinary endurance. Now in Australia, from this context and hidden past, is arising a new motherhood arts movement that is connecting internationally with the twenty-first century motherhood and feminism movement around the world. The internationalization of the

mothers art movements and motherhood movement is demonstrated in the increasing number of motherhood activism and arts and theoretical conferences and events around the world such as the MIRCI Mothers in History: Histories of Motherhood conference in Toronto, and a mother-artists community festival celebrating motherhood in Sydney, which I was involved in organizing and which, by chance, is occurring concurrently.

At last the hidden histories of motherhood are being written, the stories are being told.

Will we stay around? Come back next year...

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