“Singing Trauma Trails”: Songs of the Stolen Generations in Indigenous Australia

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Introduction

We may go home, but we cannot relive our childhoods. We may reunite with our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunties, uncles, communities, but we cannot relive the 20, 30, 40 years that we spent without their love and care, and they cannot undo the grief and mourning they felt when we were separated from them.¹

For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.²

In 1997, the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families acknowledged that Indigenous Australian³ children were forcibly removed from their families and communities.⁴ This practice of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their families occurred from the early nineteenth century up until the 1970s as part of a long-term government plan to assimilate Indigenous Australian people into the dominant non-Indigenous Australian community.⁵ Known as the “Stolen Generations,” without doubt not one Indigenous Australian family has escaped the effects of the trauma of removal. Atkinson suggests that trauma trails of the Stolen Generations “run across country and generations from original locations of violence as people moved away from the places of pain. These trauma trails carried fragmented, fractured people and families.”⁶ In 2008 the Australian government finally formally acknowledged and apologized for the loss of language, culture, and identity of Indigenous Australian children who were removed from their families. Yet, there is still much work to be done towards social justice and healing for the Stolen Generations.

¹ Link-Up (NSW) cited in Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997), 12.

² Kevin Rudd, Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, February 13 (2008), 167.

³ The term “Aboriginal” refers to Indigenous Australians whose culture is tied to country on mainland Australia, while “Torres Strait” describes those Indigenous Australians whose country are the islands in the Torres Strait. In this article we use the term “Indigenous Australian” to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

⁴ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

⁵ Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories* (Milsons Point: Random House, 1998), 1.

⁶ Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2002), 88.

Although numerous Indigenous Australian performers have written contemporary songs about the Stolen Generations, very few music researchers have considered how these individual and collective experiences of trauma are realized and expressed musically by Indigenous Australian peoples. Music can play a role in telling this history, and, as Hutnyk argues, “music is politically engaged not solely because of its ability to make a space or because of its lyrical content, but both because it affirms community and because it tells histories.”⁷ This article explores the way in which Indigenous Australian performers and songwriters tell the story of the Stolen Generations through the medium of contemporary song. Examples of song texts are examined to come to an understanding of how Indigenous Australians attempt to tell “stories of pain and stories of healing”⁸ in order to reconcile the traumatic effect of protectionist and assimilationist policies on their lives. We also examine how non-Indigenous and Indigenous responses to the trauma of the Stolen Generations have collaborated together.

Responding to Trauma Trails as Music Researchers

Our reason for writing this paper stems from our experiences and relationships with Indigenous peoples in Australia and the responsibility we both feel as non-Indigenous Australians to respond to the trauma we have witnessed through our research as ethnomusicologists and educators and in our personal lives. Katelyn has been working closely with Indigenous Australian women who have performed in contemporary music contexts for the last nine years. Her research relationships have grown into strong friendships and further research collaborations with Indigenous Australian women performers.⁹ Many Indigenous Australian women have told Katelyn about their own personal experiences, and those of their relatives, of being forcibly removed from their families. Their stories illustrate to her the ways trauma continues through generations of Indigenous Australian people and the ways Indigenous Australian women use contemporary music to help them through traumatic experiences and the trans-generational trauma of colonization that continue to affect Indigenous people in Australia. As a non-Indigenous person, in many ways the experiences of the Stolen Generations are very far removed from her own family experiences in a safe environment untouched by the Australian government’s assimilation and protectionist policies. At the same time she feels a great sadness and compassion for the stories women have shared with her. She hopes to educate others about the experiences of Indigenous Australian people and provide a space for Indigenous Australian performers to have their voices heard.

Elizabeth first started work with Aboriginal women at Borroloola in the Northern Territory of Australia in 1994 when she began her PhD in ethnomusicology. Her early research documented the public performance traditions of Yanyuwa, Garrwa, Mara, and Kudanji women and over time her work has shifted to become intricately linked to the personal relationships and political agendas she shares with the Aboriginal community.¹⁰ Elizabeth’s place in the Yanyuwa, Garrwa, Mara, and Kudanji communities as a non-Indigenous woman has always been interwoven and deeply embedded with the identity of her

⁷ John Hutnyk, *Critique of Exotica: Music, Politics and the Culture Industry* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 147–148.

⁸ Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2002), 96.

⁹ See Katelyn Barney and Lexine Solomon, “Looking Into the Trochus Shell: Autoethnographic Reflections on a Cross-Cultural Collaborative Music Research Project” in *Music Autoethnographies: Making Autoethnography Sing/Making Music Personal*, ed. Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Carolyn Ellis (Bowen Hills: Australian Academic Press, 2009), 208–224.

¹⁰ For further discussion see Elizabeth Mackinlay, “‘For Our Mother’s Song We Sing’: Yanyuwa Aboriginal Women’s Narratives of Experience, Memory and Emotion,” *Altitude* 6 (2005), <http://thealtitudejournal.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/22.pdf> (accessed June 22, 2010).

husband, a Yanyuwa man. She went “into the field” a married woman and was accompanied by her husband’s Yanyuwa maternal grandmother Hilda Muir (now deceased). Hilda generously introduced Elizabeth to her Aboriginal family and community at Borroloola as her grandson’s wife and Elizabeth then began a long process of becoming adopted and accepted within the Yanyuwa kinship system as family. Hilda was forcibly removed from her family in 1928 as part of the official State and Commonwealth assimilation policy and taken to Kahlin Compound in Darwin.¹¹ When Elizabeth listened to Hilda tell her story of removal and return, her mother’s heart was moved to tears when Hilda spoke of the painful moment of separation from her family and the equally heartbreaking experience of pouring the sand from her mother’s country through her old hands. Taking up the questions asked by McConaghy, “How do we bear witness to trauma? . . . Should we be silent or active witnesses? . . . Are we incapable of acting and responding ethically to the traumas of Indigenous Australians?”¹² We have chosen an active and engaged response rather than one whose passivity denies the reality of Indigenous peoples lives today.

We draw on multiple sources of data in this paper: song texts, media articles on Indigenous Australian and non-Indigenous performers, CD linear notes from performers and first-hand interviews and discussions with Indigenous Australian performers. We draw on the words of Indigenous Australian performers to highlight their perspectives on their songs, foreground their voices, and also emphasize some of the strategies performers use to tell their stories of the Stolen Generations through the medium of contemporary song. We are aware that these readings of song texts are our own and as Jacob’s notes “all researchers, then, be they white or black, female or male, carry their own identity into the field with them and this acts to shape the picture created.”¹³ We have attempted to listen carefully to the experiences that performers have told us about themselves or their family members being forcibly removed and the effects this has had, and continues to have, on Indigenous Australian people. In this way the analytical method adopted in this paper combines a content analysis¹⁴ with our understandings from the relationships we have with Indigenous people and their narratives about their experiences.

“Take Them Away”: The Forcible Removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families

Australia’s history included colonial violence, murder, the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from their land and culture, and their subsequent experiences of alienation and the loss of culture, language, power, and control over their lives through policies of protection and assimilation.¹⁵ Former Prime Minister of Australia Paul Keating is credited with being the first Prime Minister to publicly acknowledge this history and brought “the dispossession and marginalisation of

¹¹ Hilda Muir, *Very Big Journey: My Life as I Remember It* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004).

¹² Cathryn McConaghy, “Pedagogy, Trauma and Difficult Memory: Remembering Namitjira, Our Beloved,” *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 32 (2003): 14.

¹³ Jane Jacobs, “Women Talking Up Big: Aboriginal Women as Cultural Custodians,” in *Women, Rites and Sites: Aboriginal Women’s Cultural Knowledge*, ed. Peggy Brock (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990), 78.

¹⁴ For example, Ole R. Holsti, *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1969); Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980); Kimberley Neuendorf, *The Content Analysis Guidebook* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002); and Robert Philipp Weber, *Basic Content Analysis* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1990).

¹⁵ Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier* (Townsville: History Department James Cook University, 1981); Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren’t We Told?* (Ringwood: Penguin, 2000); Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000).

Aboriginal people to the forefront of the Australian imagination.”¹⁶ On 10 December 1992 at the launch of the International Year for the World’s Indigenous Peoples, Prime Minister Keating spoke words of remorse and responsibility for the wrongs committed against Indigenous Australian peoples:

It was we who did the dispossession. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disasters. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us.¹⁷

At the time, many non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians cried alongside Keating with empathy and compassion. There were others who cried with anger and outrage at this assault on their history and identity as white Australians. Some 15 years later, Keating’s address was rated by Australians in a Radio National Australian Broadcasting Commission poll as one of three great unforgettable speeches of all time, because, as Aboriginal leader Patrick Dodson notes, “He placed before Australians the truths of our past and the sad reality of our contemporary society. He laid down the challenge for our future, as a nation united and at peace with its soul.”¹⁸ The challenge was taken up by the Federal Government in 1995 when the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission were asked to examine the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.¹⁹

The Inquiry took evidence in public and private sittings from Indigenous people, government and church representatives, former mission staff, foster and adoptive parents, doctors and health professionals, academics, police and others. People also made written submissions. The report, *Bringing them home: The report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*, was tabled in Parliament on 26 May 1997. The key findings were:

- Nationally, between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities between 1910 and 1970.
- Indigenous children were placed in institutions, church missions, adopted or fostered and were at risk of physical and sexual abuse. Many never received wages for their labour.
- Welfare officials failed in their duty to protect Indigenous wards from abuse.
- Under international law, the policies of forcible removal amount to genocide; and the existence of distinct laws for Indigenous children was racially discriminatory.
- The removal of Indigenous children continues today. Indigenous children are six times more likely to be removed for child welfare reasons and 21 times more likely to be removed for juvenile detention reasons than non-Indigenous children.²⁰

¹⁶ Marcia Langton, “Indigenous Affairs,” in *Dear Mr Rudd*, ed. Robert Manne (Melbourne: Black Inc. Agenda, 2008), 225.

¹⁷ Paul Keating, Speech by the Honourable Prime Minister, PJ Keating MP Australian Launch of the International Year of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, Redfern, December 10 (1992).

¹⁸ Patrick Dodson, “Keating’s High Point for Aborigines,” *The Age*, April 7, 2007, 7.

¹⁹ Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories* (Milsons Point: Random House, 1998), 3.

²⁰ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997), 37.

The report is not, as HREOC Commissioner Sir Ronald Wilson remarked, an ordinary document.²¹ It contains 553 oral testimonies from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and men, and more than a thousand written accounts of their experience of the separation of Indigenous children from their families under compulsion, duress, or undue influence. It was not until 13 February 2008, that the newly elected Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, formally apologized to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were forcibly removed from their families, communities and their country. This was a historic and symbolic moment for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.²² More than 1.3 million Australians watched the Prime Minister read the speech live on television while thousands of Indigenous Australians gathered in Canberra, filling the House of Representatives visitors’ gallery and overflowing outside.²³ In his speech Rudd ashamedly admitted,

There is something terribly primal about these firsthand accounts. The pain is searing, it screams from the pages. The hurt, the humiliation, the degradation and the sheer brutality of the act of physically separating a mother from her children is a deep assault on our senses and on our most elemental humanity.²⁴

Rudd’s words implicitly asked us to witness the painful testimonies of the Stolen Generations, to enact empathy to try to imagine the physical, mental, emotional and cultural trauma of being torn from a mother’s arms, and to reframe the intergenerational experiences of Indigenous Australians under these racist and genocidal government policies as “trauma.”

The histories, memories and contemporary realities of life as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, including the forced removal of children, find similarities with those of other Indigenous groups colonized by the British such as Native American peoples in the United States and First Nations peoples in Canada. As Haskins and Jacobs note the “uplifting,” “civilising,” and dispossession of children from their Indigenous families and communities was a powerful weapon of colonial warfare.²⁵ The colonial practice of taking children was used with violence and expertise to infiltrate the most intimate spaces and relationships of Indigenous experience to further the territorial goals of empire to seize land, labour, resources, and the future from Indigenous control.²⁶ In the United States, the narrative of “saving children” from their savage and barbaric native lifestyle came hand in hand with an assimilationist agenda aimed primarily at educating Native Americans. Once it became evident in Australia that the “full-blood” Aboriginal population was not “dying out” as expected, the removal of children began. Under the rhetoric of protection and absorption, the Australian government took “half caste” children away from their Aboriginal families to breed the “blackfella” out of them and turn them into good white citizens. However, in Australia, there was no agenda of education—the colonials believed that Indigenous

²¹ Cited in Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories* (Milsons Point: Random House, 1998), xiii.

²² A number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian songwriters have responded to the Apology to the Stolen Generations through contemporary song. See Katelyn Barney, “‘Sing Loud, Break through the Silence’: Musical Responses to the National Apology to the Stolen Generations,” (forthcoming).

²³ Matthew Condon, “After the Apology: It’s Been a Year Since the Prime Minister Said Sorry to the Stolen Generations. What’s Changed?” *Q Weekender*, February 7, 2009.

²⁴ Kevin Rudd, Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, February 13 (2008), 169.

²⁵ Victoria Haskins and Margaret D. Jacobs, “Stolen Generations and Vanishing Indians: The Removal of Indigenous Children as a Weapon of War in the United States and Australia, 1870-1940,” in *Children and War: A Historical Anthology*, ed. James Marten (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 228.

²⁶ Jane Jacobs, “Women Talking Up Big: Aboriginal Women as Cultural Custodians,” in *Women, Rites and Sites: Aboriginal Women’s Cultural Knowledge*, ed. Peggy Brock (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990), 455.

Australians were incapable of higher learning and their removal sought to train Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be the working class for mainstream Australia. Jacobs suggests that Indigenous children in America were removed and placed in boarding schools in an attempt to stop the “Indian” resistance to the taking of land and to assimilate Indians to become self-supporting American citizens.²⁷ While the acquisition of territory was indeed a concern for colonial officials in Australia, of greater alarm was the increase in the half-caste population as a direct result of the sexual contact/abuse/rape of Aboriginal women by white men.

A Crying Wound: Positioning Forcible Removal within the Context of Trauma

It never goes away. Just ‘cause we’re not walking around on crutches or with bandages or plasters on our legs and arms doesn’t mean we’re not hurting. . . . I suspect I’ll carry these sorts of wounds ‘til the day I die. I’d just like it to be not quite as intense, that’s all.²⁸

No two words strike deeper into the human heart than stolen children . . . the conjunction of the words ‘stolen’ and ‘children’ is a horror for both the child and the mother.²⁹

Research which specifically explores issues of trauma within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has begun to emerge. Atkinson’s research on generational trauma in Indigenous Australian communities illustrates that the forcible removal of Indigenous Australian children from their families has resulted in “a group of profoundly hurt people living with multiple layers of traumatic distress, chronic anxiety, physical ill-health, mental distress, fears, depressions, substance abuse, and high imprisonment rates.”³⁰ Atkinson demonstrates that the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next is complex and occurs on two levels—“intergenerational” and “transgenerational.” She suggests that intergenerational trauma refers to trauma passed down from one generation to the next, while transgenerational trauma occurs across generations, for example from grandparent to grandchild.³¹ Atkinson also points out that the “government interventions into Aboriginal people’s lives have been multiple, protracted and many-layered, and at various levels have acted as traumatising agents, compounding the agony of already traumatised individuals and groups.”³² Drawing on interviews with Aboriginal people, she highlights that Aboriginal families continue to re-experience the trauma of forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families through “the lives of children of survivors in new and even more traumatic ways” such as violence, sexual abuse, psychological conditions, and fractured identities, families and communities.³³ Atkinson further illustrates how intergenerational trauma disrupts and changes relationships between people and families.³⁴

²⁷ Margaret D. Jacobs, “Maternal Colonialism: White Women and Indigenous Child Removal in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2005): 459.

²⁸ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997), 178.

²⁹ Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories* (Milsons Point: Random House, 1998), 10.

³⁰ Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2002), 70.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 180.

³² *Ibid.*, 68.

³³ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

Atkinson’s framing of the trauma experienced by Indigenous Australians as on-going, violent, and disruptive resonates with the work by Caruth in relation to trauma theory.³⁵ Caruth asserts that the word “trauma” literally means “wound” and is used today to refer to an interactive and intertwined physical and mental distress.³⁶ She understands trauma as having a loose temporality and existing very much as a type of “ghost,” that is, a presence which continually returns from the past into the present. Trauma is lived and breathed very much as a crisis of truth.

Certainly, in the Australian context, colonial discourse wants to enshrine the belief that the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families was “for their own good” while anti-colonial narratives assert the far-reaching effects of these violent policies on the lives of all Indigenous Australians then and now. A good example of colonial discourses attempting to control and white wash the representation of this aspect of Australia’s history can be found in the words of the then Federal Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Senator John Herron. In March 2000, in response to the Report of the Inquiry into the Stolen Generations, Herron tried to assert that “there never was a stolen generation of Aboriginal people because only 10% were removed and some of those for normal welfare reasons” and further that it was “wrong to speak of a ‘stolen generation’.”³⁷ The response from Indigenous Australian peoples to the type of racist and right-wing discourse set in place by Herron was a call to testimony—a plea to all Australians to “listen” to the story of the unbearable nature of the event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.³⁸

Song as Narrative Repair: Performing Trauma Trails in Australia

Music has a role to play in telling stories of trauma and survival across the world. Organizations such as “Musicians without Borders” use music to “connect communities, bridge divides and heal the wounds of war and conflict.”³⁹ Cloonan suggests that songs can also be used to help listeners “cope” and “comfort them” in times of grief and trauma.⁴⁰ The relationships between music and trauma have been examined by music therapists, particularly in relation to the experiences of refugees in Australia⁴¹ and overseas.⁴² Ethnomusicologists have also explored the ways people use music to deal with trauma. Wong suggests that an “often unspoken commitment to social justice marks most work in ethnomusicology” and calls for an

³⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). For a reading of Caruth see Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁷ National Sorry Day Committee, “What Was the Response of the Federal (National) Government to the Bringing Them Home Report?”

http://www.nsd.org.au/home/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=221%3Afaq14&catid=2%3Acat-faqs&Itemid=1 (accessed May 17, 2008).

³⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 7 and 35).

³⁹ Musicians without Borders, “About MwB,” Musicians without Borders. <http://www.musicianswithoutborders.nl/about.htm> (accessed June 10, 2010).

⁴⁰ Martin Cloonan, “Musical Responses to September 11th: From Conservative Patriotism to Radicalism,” <http://freemuse.synkron.com/graphics/Publications/PDF/cloonan11sept.pdf> (accessed June 14, 2010).

⁴¹ Carmen Cheong-Clinch, “Music for Engaging Young People in Education,” *Youth Studies Australia* 28, no. 2 (Jun. 2009): 50; Felicity Baker and Carolyn Jones, “The Effect of Music Therapy Services on Classroom Behaviours of Newly Arrived Refugee Students in Australia—a pilot study,” *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties* 11, no. 4 (Dec. 2006): 249.

⁴² Katrina Bergmann, “The Sound of Trauma: Music Therapy in a Post-War Environment,” *Australian Journal of Music Therapy* 13 (2002): 3.

“ethnomusicology of hope in a time of trauma.”⁴³ Australian scholars have also engaged in explorations of the role of music to express and deal with trauma. For example, Stratton has explored how punk music has expressed the cultural trauma of the Holocaust.⁴⁴ However, very few music researchers have considered how the experiences of the Stolen Generation have been expressed through song.

There is some limited literature on the impact of politics, and land rights issues in particular, on the contemporary music making of Indigenous performers.⁴⁵ Discussing the history of Indigenous popular music and thematic concerns of Aboriginal musicians, Gibson asserts that “themes of self-determination, land rights, resistance to cultural loss, rewriting Australian national history, dispossession, and calls for social justice remain common features of the traditions of Aboriginal popular music.”⁴⁶ He further states that the growth of Aboriginal popular music has created important challenges to the nation’s “geopolitical legitimacy, histories, assumed national identities and sonic landscapes.”⁴⁷ Similarly, Dunbar-Hall and Gibson point out that “contemporary popular music by Australian Aboriginal artists has become increasingly evident as a means of mediating Aboriginal viewpoints and agendas into the Australian national consciousness.”⁴⁸ They emphasise that contemporary music as a form of communication with non-Indigenous Australians continues to be vital in promoting acceptance and recognition of Indigenous rights in relation to land in Australia and stress that “music is embroiled in the very debates and tensions concerning Australian sovereignty and indigeneity.”⁴⁹ Dunbar-Hall and Gibson also stress the importance of the changing political conditions in the 1990s and Indigenous land rights movements which resulted in an increased number of ways music and the other art forms were used as a channel for Indigenous Australian people to communicate their views to the wider Australian public.⁵⁰

Without doubt, song has become a powerful and empowering medium for Indigenous Australians to make visible and share amongst themselves, their families and communities and wider Australia, the traumatic histories, memories, and experiences of the Stolen Generations. In a similar way to written texts, autobiographies, biographies, and fictional works,⁵¹ song as musical text offers the possibility of historical

⁴³ Deborah Wong, “An Ethnomusicology of Hope in a Time of Trauma,” in *Musical Islands: Exploring Connections between Music, Place and Research*, ed. Elizabeth Mackinlay, Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Katelyn Barney (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009), 3; also see Adelaida Reyes Schramm, “Music and Tradition: From Native to Adopted Land through the Refugee Experience,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 21 (1989): 25; Adelaida Reyes, *Songs of the Caged, Songs of the Free: Music and the Vietnamese Refugee Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Suzanne Cusick, “Music as Torture/Music as Weapon,” *Revista Transcultural de Música [Transcultural Music Review]* 10 (2006).

http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/trans10/cusick_eng.htm (accessed on 19 April, 2008); and, Kathleen Van Buren, “Applied Ethnomusicology and HIV/AIDS: Responsibility, Ability and Action,” *Ethnomusicology* 54, no. 2 (2010): 202.

⁴⁴ Jon Stratton, “Jews, Punk and the Holocaust: From the Velvet Underground to the Ramones – the Jewish-American Story,” *Popular Music* 24 (2005): 79; and, Jon Stratton, “Punk, Jews, and the Holocaust – The English Story,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 25, no. 4 (2007): 124.

⁴⁵ Chris Gibson, “‘We Sing Our Home, We Dance Our Land’: Indigenous Self Determination and Contemporary Geopolitics in Australian Popular Music,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 16 (1998): 163; Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, “Singing About Nations Within Nations: Geopolitics and Identity in Australian Indigenous Rock Music,” *Popular Music and Society* 24 (2000): 45; and, Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004).

⁴⁶ Chris Gibson, “‘We Sing Our Home, We Dance Our Land’: Indigenous Self Determination and Contemporary Geopolitics in Australian Popular Music,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 16 (1998): 180.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁴⁸ Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, “Singing About Nations Within Nations: Geopolitics and Identity in Australian Indigenous Rock Music,” *Popular Music and Society* 24 (2000): 47.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁰ Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 50.

⁵¹ See Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

witnessing and the possibility of truth in a new space opened up by testimony and narrative.⁵² Further, by enabling a "counterstory" to be told, the potential exists in song performance to engage in a type of "narrative repair" and "define a past which has been until now, morally opaque."⁵³ Counterstories or "counter-songs" contain elements of repudiation and resistance, deconstruction, correction and redefinition. Through such reframing, counterstories have the potential to heal identities damaged by the violence and trauma experienced by the Stolen Generations, and their families and communities. The collective nature of song as testimony in Indigenous Australia further allows for the possibility of a counter-song to be performed not only by members of the Stolen Generations, but *by others for them*.⁵⁴ Several of the songs we will now discuss are those composed by the children and grandchildren of children who were forcibly removed.

The Album as a Site for Singing Trauma

The histories and contemporary realities of the Stolen Generations and their families is at once an individual, collective, and intergenerational experience and one of the most prominent ways counter-songs about the forcible removal of children have been expressed is through compilation albums. The most well known of these stem from the north of the country in Western Australia where the Kimberley Stolen Generations Aboriginal Corporation has produced four compilation CDs.⁵⁵ (See FIGURE 1.)

Statements from the Kimberley Stolen Generations Aboriginal Corporation about the albums attest to the significant role these CDs play in narrative repair through song. In his speech at the album launch of *Stealem Away*, Aboriginal performer Mark Bin Bakar, (also known as Mary G) strongly stated that "our agenda here is to continue the awareness of the plight of the Stolen Generation peoples journey, it seeks recognition for their painful journey: [t]he fragmentation between mother and child."⁵⁶ Each album "embraces the many emotions of people taken from country, culture and language" and "features contemporary artists, traditional players and soundscapes expressing the deep feelings and experiences of people removed from their families by previous government policies."⁵⁷ Several of the tracks on these albums are told from the perspective of a mother or from the child wanting to reach their mother. We now turn to analyze some specific songs which explore the trauma experiences by the Stolen Generations.⁵⁸

⁵² Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 7.

⁵³ Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 18.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁵ All of the songs discussed in this paper, written by, or for, the Stolen Generations, are available on CD or the Internet via performers' MySpace sites or personal web pages.

⁵⁶ Mark Bin Bakar, "Kimberley Stolen Generation Aboriginal Corporation Chairperson's Speech," May 26, 2006, Kimberley Stolen Generation Aboriginal Corporation, <http://www.kimberleystolengeneration.com.au/smbb.html> (accessed June 8, 2010).

⁵⁷ Kimberley Stolen Generation Aboriginal Corporation, "CDs," Kimberley Stolen Generation Aboriginal Corporation, <http://www.kimberleystolengeneration.com.au/cdsx.html> (accessed June 8, 2010) (<http://www.kimberleystolengeneration.com.au/cds.html>). Kimberley Stolen Generation Aboriginal Corporation also released a fourth CD in 2010 titled *Remember Me*.

⁵⁸ Although we examine a number of songs by Aboriginal performers about the Stolen Generations, there are also others including Kerriane Cox's "Stolen Children," Emma Donovan's "Ngarraanga," Leah Flanagan's "Stolen Child," Mirror Child's "Steal Em," Dan Sultan's "Roslyn." For discussion of women's contemporary songs around the theme of Stolen Generations see Katelyn Barney, "'We're Women We Fight for Freedom': Intersections of Race and Gender in Contemporary Songs by Indigenous Australian Women Performers," *Women's Studies Journal* 22, no. 1 (Nov. 2008): 3.

<p><i>Nobody's People</i> (2004)</p>	<p><i>Stealem Away</i> (2006)</p>	<p><i>Cry Stolen</i> (2007)</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Brown Skin Baby: Bobby Randall with Troy Cassar-Daley 2. Sorry (Marcia Howard): Goanna (Spirit Returns) 3. Took The Children Away: Archie Roach (Charcoal Lane) 4. Nobody's People: Lorrae Coffin 5. Calling (Mark Bin Bakar): Mary G. 6. She Remembers: Naomi Pigram 7. Two To Tango: Patrick Davies 8. Peeping Thru The Louvres: Phyllis Bin Bakar/Mark Bin Bakar 9. Mothers Prayer: Geoffrey Fletcher 10. Somebody Soon: John Albert 11. Shame of a Nation: Michael Torres 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sorry/Political Injustice: Alice Haines 2. Taken Away: Wayne Barker 3. Em No Good: Groovy Lips and the Yang 4. Stolen Son: Tahnee Carrie 5. Turn Back Time: Greg Tait 6. Mr Neville: Gina Williams 7. Lonesome For You Mother Dearest: Sam Lowell 8. Dearest Mother: Geoffrey Fletcher 9. Why Oh Why: Mark Bin Bakar 10. Memories of Dormitories: Trevor Jamieson 11. Mission Days: Charmaine Bennell 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Kunjya Kumi: Mervyn Malardy Yatangal 2. Eulogy for a Black Man: Kev Carmody 3. Mother: Candice Lorrae 4. Coming Out of My Pain: Johnny Huckle 5. Don't Go Down That Dreaming: Richard Frankland 6. For I Aborigine: Carroll Karpany Nukanya 7. Ngarraanga: Emma Donovan & Yanya Boston 8. Jaru Woman: Peter Brandy 9. Learn My Song: Warren Williams 10. Go Go: Stiff Gins 11. Waiting by the Road: Shelley Morris 12. Sisters: Lois Olney 13. Silence: Kutcha Edwards

Figure 1. Kimberley Stolen Generations Aboriginal Corporation Albums of the Stolen Generations

Bob Randall: “Brown Skin Baby (They Took Him Away)” (1970s)

One of the earliest contemporary songs to explore the trauma of the Stolen Generation is Bob Randall’s “Brown Skin Baby (They Took Him Away).” Written in the 1970s, Randall sings of his own traumatic experiences of being forcibly removed from his family in the Northern Territory at the age of seven. Now a Yankunytjatjara Elder and a traditional owner of Uluru (Ayers Rock) in Central Australia, he states that “the system came into my life . . . a policeman arrived on his camel and saw me with my family. And because I was who I was, I was stolen. This is a song I composed about that time.”⁵⁹ Described as an “archetypal folk-country classic,”⁶⁰ the song is performed by a solo singer accompanied by acoustic guitar. It became an anthem for Aboriginal people with its telling of his experiences which resonated with other Indigenous Australian people:

Link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3ytJioxKzI>

Lyrics:

A young stockman
Used to ride
A quiet pony
Round the country side
He’d never forget
A young black mother
Cheeks so wet

Chorus:
Eee-yow-wee-Eee-yow-wee
My brown skin baby they take him away

Figure 2. Bob Randell
(<http://itsvivid.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/bob-randall.jpg>)

⁵⁹ Cited in Melanie Hogan, *Kanyini* (Australia: Hopscotch Entertainment, 2006).

⁶⁰ Clinton Walker, *Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music* (Annandale: Pluto Press, 2000), 217.

The song's reference to "brown skin," based on our interpretation, points to the realities of intercultural contact in Australia since colonization and indicates non-Indigenous people's complicity in the racial oppression of Indigenous people. Tizard and Phoenix point out that:

People of mixed parentage have long been positioned in contradictory ways—as black and as different from black as well as white people. The specific terms commonly used to describe people of mixed parentage and sexual unions between black and white people tend to pathologise those who cannot easily be fitted into the taken-for-granted racialised binary opposition.⁶¹

Randall resists this repressive dualism between black and white by acknowledging and singing about his "brown skin." Kurtzer notes that there is a "notion that Aboriginal people become less 'authentic' as their skin colour lightens . . . [But] to connect Aboriginal identity to physical appearance is to deny the particular histories of Aboriginal people who were removed from their families."⁶² Randall's depiction of "brown skin" also could be read as depicting the legacy of colonialism through which many individuals became lost between "black" and "white" worlds. As Brady and Carey note as a result of this:

for numerous Indigenous Australians, there was a sense of "unbelonging", that is, being not one or the other in their identity. You're not white enough to be white and your skin isn't black enough to be black either, and it really came down to that.⁶³

The haunting chorus emphasizes the mother's perspective and sings of the grief and sorrow of the mother who cried as the stockman "take him away." As Atkinson notes, government intervention into Aboriginal people's lives has acted as traumatizing elements.⁶⁴ Randall sings of his own experiences and in doing so breaks down the repressive binary of black/white and highlights the history of intercultural contact between "black" and "white" through the colonization process in Australia.

Archie Roach: "Took the Children Away" (1990)

Aboriginal contemporary singer, songwriter and guitarist Archie Roach also sings of his own experience of being forcibly removed in the folk-derived song "Took the Children Away," originally released on his debut album *Charcoal Lane*.⁶⁵ The song struck a chord with the wider Aboriginal community and national audiences in its telling of the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families. "Took the Children Away" was awarded two ARIA (Australian Record Industry Association) awards and a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Award. Even though Bob Randall's song "Brown Skin Baby" had told a similar story, mainstream Australia seemed more able to accept Stolen Generations history told within the later song by Roach. Roach notes that he does not remember being taken away from his family but wrote the song for the many Aboriginal people who have been forcibly removed. He states, "We can't measure the depths of each other's suffering. When you suffer, that's the worst suffering

⁶¹ Barbara Tizard and Ann Phoenix, *Black, White or Mixed Race?: Race and Racism in the Lives of Young People of Mixed Parentage*, London: Routledge, 2002), 9.

⁶² Sonja Kurtzer, "Is She or Isn't She? Roberta Sykes and "Authentic" Aboriginality." *Overland* 171 (2003): 52.

⁶³ Wendy Brady and Michelle Carey, "'Talkin' up Whiteness': A Black and White Dialogue," in *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, ed. by John Docker and Gerhard Fischer (Sydney: University of Sydney Press, 2000), 273.

⁶⁴ Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2002).

⁶⁵ Archie Roach, *Charcoal Lane*, Aurora, Compact Disc, 1990.

in the world. That’s what I try to talk about. When I first wrote Took the Children Away, I thought, ‘Here I’m writing for my people’—at last a song that tells this terrible thing.”⁶⁶ The song speaks of taking “them” away highlighting the many children who were forcibly removed through this wide reaching government policy. This resonates with Atkinson’s concept of communal or collective trauma which refers to the traumatic experiences of a large group of people.⁶⁷ In “Took the Children Away” Roach sings:

Link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aywDT6yHMmo>

Lyrics:

This story’s right, this story’s true
I would not tell lies to you
Like the promises they did not keep
And how they fenced us in like sheep
Said to us come take our hand
Set us up on mission land
They taught us to read, to write and pray
Then they took the children away
Took the children away
The children away
Snatched from their mother’s breast
Said this is for the best
Took them away

Figure 3. Archie Roach

(http://www.brisbanepowerhouse.org/generated/images/archie-180807skok_w800_h600_fit.jpg)

⁶⁶ Nick Davies, “Of White Lies and Stolen Lives,” *The Age*, July 6, 1996.

⁶⁷ Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2002).

The statement “I would not tell lies to you” could be read as referring to the ways this trauma has been made worse by the government’s historical refusal to acknowledge and recognize this policy. More recently Roach states, in relation to the Formal Apology by Prime Minister Rudd, “after Prime Minister Rudd apologised it gave a green light, it was like a green light came on.”⁶⁸ Like Randell’s song, Roach sings of children being removed from their mothers “snatched from their mother’s breast” and the trauma of many of the Indigenous Australians who were forcibly removed from their mothers and families. The line “set us up on Mission land” refers to how Indigenous children were placed in institutions and church missions while “fenced us in like sheep” refers to the control and restrictions placed on Aboriginal peoples’ lives.

Roach sings that non-Indigenous people “said to us come take our hand, said this is for the best” which could be read as referring to the ways the government’s strategy of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their families and communities was rationalized because:

Children are removed from the evil influence of the aboriginal camp with its lack of moral training and its risk of serious organic infectious disease. They are properly fed, clothed and educated as white children, they are subjected to constant medical supervision and in reception of domestic and vocational training.⁶⁹

Roach notes that as a result of the trauma of being forcibly removed from his family in some ways resulted in him becoming a musician and states, “If it hadn’t been for that happening to me, I probably wouldn’t have been a musician. We are the sum total of our lives, of that’s happened to us. A lot of things are sad but I would never ask to be different. Terrible things happen because of misunderstanding, but I know I would be a poorer person if I had not been through these things.”⁷⁰ He also suggests that music has been his life saver stating that “If I didn’t have music, I had no other outlet to express myself unless it was very negatively and in a very violent sort of manner, that just made me so sick”.⁷¹ As Atkinson highlights “anger is a normal response to a violation of the self. For some, however, the anger comes disabling. They cannot express it safely to others or themselves because the places in which they live are unsafe.”⁷² Yet, Roach notes that music played an important role in helping to express his anger: “music helped me a lot, brought me out of it.”⁷³ Like Randall’s “Brown Skin Baby,” the song has also become an anthem for the many Aboriginal people who identify strongly with the collective trauma it expresses.

⁶⁸ Cited in Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter,” *Talking Heads with Peter Thompson*, May 12, 2008. <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/talkingheads/txt/s2235744.htm> (accessed June 17, 2008).

⁶⁹ Cited in Andrew Markus, *Governing Savages* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990).

⁷⁰ Nick Davies, “Of White Lies and Stolen Lives,” *The Age*, July 6, 1996.

⁷¹ Cited in Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter,” *Talking Heads with Peter Thompson*, May 12, 2008. <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/talkingheads/txt/s2235744.htm> (accessed June 17, 2008).

⁷² Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2002), 70.

⁷³ Cited in Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter,” *Talking Heads with Peter Thompson*, May 12, 2008. <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/talkingheads/txt/s2235744.htm> (accessed June 17, 2008).

Leah Purcell: “Run Daisy Run” (1998)

Aboriginal singer, actor, author, playwright and director Leah Purcell notes that “Run, Daisy, Run” was the “third song that I ever wrote and it’s about my grandmother’s story. And it’s sort of become the unofficial national anthem for the Stolen Generation.”⁷⁴ Growing up in the country town of Murgon near Cherbourg Aboriginal mission in Queensland, Purcell’s music is strongly influenced by country and western singing, and “Run Daisy Run” is no exception. Purcell frequently performs this song acoustically with solo voice and guitar, or in a *capella* style. Purcell tells the story of her grandmother’s forcible removal from her family in the following way:

She was taken when she was five, her and her sister and her little brother, and their dad was white, a Scotsman. He worked at the Forest Vale Homestead in Mitchell, but he lived in the Aboriginal camp, Murri Camp. The children were taken and he—someone ran across to tell him at work, but by that time, you know by the time he saddled a horse or whatever, they were all gone into town. When he got to the train station the children were in the cattle carts. The girls were in one and the boys were in the other.⁷⁵

In the song, an Aboriginal mother tells her 4 year old daughter:

Run Daisy run, run Daisy run
They were the last words her mama had said
“Run to the highlands, run through the scrub,
Just run, run Daisy run, just run, just run
Because the whiteman he’s ridin’ high”

Figure 4. Leah Purcell

(http://www.abc.net.au/reslib/200604/r82352_239351.jpg)

⁷⁴ Cited in Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “Queen Leah,” *Australian Story Transcripts*, June 17, 2002, <http://www.abc.net.au/austory/transcripts/s579368.htm> (accessed May 12, 2008).

⁷⁵ Cited in Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “Leah Purcell,” *Enough Rope with Andrew Denton*, August 22 2005, <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/enoughrope/transcripts/s1443116.htm> (accessed May 17, 2008).

Purcell focuses on the perspective of her great-grandmother who tried to hide her child from the authorities and resist the government's strategy of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their families and communities.⁷⁶ This rejects the historical government claim that Aboriginal mothers willingly gave up their children. This song could be read as an example of transgenerational trauma – passed from grandmother to grandchild – as Leah suggests that the song was “given” to her:

I literally wrote the song in five to ten minutes. No sort of, even, drafts. At that stage, my grandmother had died. She died when I was ten. And this song came out of me and I believe that she wrote that song through me, because I don't remember writing it. I just remember finishing it and going, “Wow. That's pretty cool.” Literally. That's no joke. I just went, “Wow. That's awesome.”⁷⁷

June Mills: “Sweet Child of Mine” (2005)

A well-known Larrakia singer and community leader in Darwin, Northern Territory, June Mills blends country and western with her Phillipino/East Timorese musical heritage through use of organ, vocals and acoustic guitar. In her song “Sweet Child of Mine” on her album *I'll Be the One* (2005) she sings of the sorrow of the mother who hopes her child will remember her family and her identity. The song also emphasizes the loss of language, culture, and identity of children who were forcibly removed from their families:

Remember your name
Remember your skin
Remember your tribal name
Sweet child of mine
'Cause you're going away

Don't know why
It has to be this way
We tried our best to hide
Sweet child of mine
Tried to hide you away

The impact of the Stolen Generation policies has left its mark on Mills' family as her grandmother was taken from her family when she was 6 years old. Mills states, “My grandmother was taken away from her tribal country when she was about 6 years old and given a new name. She grew up in Katherine and had nine children, she gave birth to all her children at home on her own. She eventually found her way back to

⁷⁶ Another example of this theme is Sarah Patrick's song “Sugarbag” which depicts families hiding children in hessian sugar bags to conceal them from the authorities.

⁷⁷ Cited in Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “Queen Leah,” *Australian Story Transcripts*, June 17, 2002, <http://www.abc.net.au/austory/transcripts/s579368.htm> (accessed May 12, 2008).

her tribe and land of birth by repeating her tribal name to herself every night before she went to bed. She did this so she would not forget her birth name.”⁷⁸

Like Purcell’s song, Mills sings of the attempts to trying “our best to hide” children from being taken away. Her song is written in honour of her grandmother and she notes “My grandmother died before I was born. I wrote this song in honour of her and her wisdom and strength in holding onto her identity in overwhelming circumstances, at such a tender age.”⁷⁹ The song depicts the struggles for identity for many Indigenous Australians who were forcibly removed and the resulting “trauma trails” of “fragmented, fractured people and families.”⁸⁰

Figure 5. June Mills

(http://www.skinnyfishmusic.com.au/images/artists_images/june_mills_sfmweb_bio.jpg)

Shellie Morris: “Waiting by the Road” (2007)

Describing herself as an Australian Indigenous singer who performs earthy and honest songs, Shellie Morris writes acoustic ballads. Trained as an opera singer in the Western art music tradition, Shellie began her contemporary solo career while searching for her Aboriginal family in the Northern Territory. The title track on her album *Waiting Road* is dedicated to her grandmother, Hilda Muir (now deceased) who was forcibly removed from her family in Borrooloola, Northern Territory as a child:

⁷⁸ June Mills, *I’ll Be the One*, Skinnyfish Music, SFJU050901, Compact Disc, 2005.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2002), 88.

There's a song I wrote for my grandmother who was Stolen Generation . . . the song's called "Waiting by the Road" because my Nana's mother was waiting by the road, because the police said they were going to bring her back.⁸¹

"Waiting by the Road" could be described as having a "heavier" musical sound than some of the other songs by and about the Stolen Generations and includes electric guitar and bass, drums and solo voice. In "Waiting by the Road" Morris sings about her grandmother's and great-grandmother's history:

You're waiting by the road
They took your girl away
Policeman on a horse
You waited every day . . .
They said they'd bring you back
But that was just their lies
You waited by the road
Cried and cried and cried.

Like Roach, Morris sings of the "lies" non-Indigenous people told Aboriginal families as they forcibly removed Aboriginal children.

Figure 6. Shellie Morris (Morris, 2007)

⁸¹ Shellie Morris, interview by Katelyn Barney, February 6, 2007.

“From Little Things Big Things Grow”: Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Responses to Trauma Coming Together (2008)

Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian responses to the trauma of the Stolen Generations have collaborated with the re-release of the song “From Little Things Big Things Grow.” Originally written as a folk song in the late 1980s by Aboriginal performer Kev Carmody with non-Indigenous artist Paul Kelly, the song told of Aboriginal peoples fight for land rights in 1966 when Aboriginal stockmen, led by Gurindji man Vincent Lingari, went on strike at Northern Territory Wave Hill Station. In 2008, however, a new version was released which samples former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s 2008 Formal Apology to the Stolen Generations and former Prime Minister Paul Keating’s 1992 Redfern justice speech. The project was conceived of by Australian musicians and the non-profit independent organization GetUp StandUp reconciliation group to commemorate the Formal Apology to Indigenous peoples.⁸² Kev Carmody states that “this version of the song transforms us from a negative concept of the past into a positive concept of the future . . . To me it was part of our oral history tradition. It’s going to stick in people’s heads”.⁸³

The new version is led by Sydney based non-Indigenous musician Tim Levison (Urthboy), a member of the Australian hip hop group The Herd and is performed by Carmody, Kelly, Levison and non-Indigenous artist Missy Higgins. The song features rap vocals over electronic beats, mixed with the chorus of the original folk song. It is also accompanied by a video clip featuring musicians and prominent ambassadors for Indigenous rights, including well known Indigenous people Evonne Goolagong Cawley, Leah Purcell, Pat Dodson, Ernie Dingo, Anthony Mundine and Matty Bowen, and non-Indigenous performer John Butler. All proceeds from the GetUp StandUp version of “From Little Things Big Things Grow” support the GetUp Reconciliation Fund.⁸⁴ Levison states that the new version was “inspired by the ‘Yes We Can’ song that was created for the Barack Obama campaign in the [United] States . . . One of the tricky things is to try and incorporate a political speech without it sounding too dry. We’ve chosen some lyrics that work underneath Keating’s Redfern speech. We added melody and a new touch on the way to deliver the vocals—it’s almost the most poignant moment in the song.”⁸⁵ The song begins with a sample of Prime Minister’s Formal Apology:

Link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWYi1xDvsec>

Lyrics:

As Prime Minister of Australia, I am sorry.
On behalf of the Government of Australia, I am sorry.
On behalf of the Parliament of Australia, I am sorry.
And I offer you this apology without qualification.

⁸² Kathy McCabe, “The Protest Song is Finally Back,” *Daily Telegraph*, April 21, 2008.

⁸³ Rosalie Higson, “Rudd, Keating Grow Big in Hip-Hop,” *The Australian*, April 21, 2008.

⁸⁴ Kathy McCabe, “The Protest Song is Finally Back,” *Daily Telegraph*, April 21, 2008.

⁸⁵ Rosalie Higson, “Rudd, Keating Grow Big in Hip-Hop,” *The Australian*, April 21, 2008.

This is followed by the following lyrics rapped by Levison:

To say sorry means to give respect
 It's long overdue
 Now you failed to imagine
 What if it happened to you

Now they're not only words now it's not just a symbol
 Accepting the past, well it's not always simple
 When thinking of yesterday
 We live for tomorrow
 We can't face the future now
 Till we face the sorrow

Now under the colours, yeah
 Of red, yellow, black
 We say "Never again"
 We say "No turning back"

From little things, big things grow
 From little things, big things grow
 From little things, big things grow
 From little things, big things grow

The song's statement that the Formal Apology is "long overdue" and the importance of "accepting the past" illustrates non-Indigenous artists engaging in recognition of the past history of the trauma inflicted on Indigenous people by non-Indigenous people. Its acknowledgement that "we can't face the future now til we face the sorrow" resonates with Atkinson's statement that talking (and singing) about trauma "provides a means by which people can feel safe to begin talking together, to come to grips with the past, which is the beginning of healing, to find resilience in their actions on which a new future is dependent."⁸⁶

It also shows non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australian musicians working together towards a process of healing. As Atkinson notes "obviously 'telling the story' is only the beginning of healing. Nonetheless it is a vital first step. The experience of violence must be understood for its essential contribution to feelings and behaviours that influence situations of trauma across generations."⁸⁷ Aboriginal singer-songwriter Kev Carmody holds a similar view when he states "this is the first step, in a new beginning for Australia as a nation, to mature, denial of the past makes the future a lie through history the victors have written the history of the vanquished...as someone once said 'from little things big things grow.'"⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2002), 186.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁸⁸ The GetUp Mob, *From Little Thing Big Thing Grow*, 2008, MP3 audio file, <http://www.getup.org.au/media/TheGetUpMob> (accessed June 17, 2008).

Conclusion

The government policy of forcibly removing Indigenous Australian children from their families affected many Indigenous Australians and certainly the trauma is still felt by the generations that have followed. These “trauma trails” are deeply embedded in Indigenous Australian people’s experiences, memories and histories as they attempt to reconcile the devastating effect of protectionist and assimilationist policies on their lives.⁸⁹ Indigenous Australian performers and songwriters tell the stories of the Stolen Generations in a diverse range of ways. Some sing of their own traumatic experiences of being forcibly removed, while others highlight the grief of families when their children were taken away. Other performers sing of the loss of culture, language, and identity of the Stolen Generation and Indigenous Australian people’s attempts to resist the colonizing forces of non-Indigenous people. Their songs are tragic, yet full of the possibilities for beginning the healing process through song. Singing this trauma can be read as a medium for Indigenous Australians to speak back against the traumatic effects of forcible removal. Their songs also illustrate the ways Indigenous people are reclaiming their histories and highlighting the past, present and transgenerational traumas of the Stolen Generations. Non-Indigenous performers have also engaged in speaking back against the atrocities inflicted on Indigenous Australian people. Their engagement in singing about this trauma is hand in hand with the movement to engage with Indigenous Australian people in a different way.

In his outgoing speech as Prime Minister on 26 June 2010, Kevin Rudd stated, with tears in his eyes, that “the Apology [to the Stolen Generations] was unfinished business for our nation. It is a beginning of new business.”⁹⁰ This “new business” must include all of us working together towards a better future for Indigenous Australians. Many non-Indigenous Australians feel ashamed, guilty, uncomfortable, and helpless because of their complicity in this history. Denial, ignorance, and refusal are the easy options. As a first step, songs about the ongoing trauma for the Stolen Generations and their families ask non-Indigenous people to not turn away but bear witness with their hearts, minds, and actions to the pain and suffering so that healing can begin. We feel that it is our moral obligation to do this and take responsibility for this shared history.

We write with hope that our own consideration of these songs may contribute to an understanding of Australia’s colonial history. The social and political message within these songs makes them ideal for performance at large music festivals, events commemorating the Stolen Generations such as Australia’s National Day of Healing,⁹¹ community events which bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians together, and political rallies associated with equality and social justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These songs about the Stolen Generations illustrate the ways song can be used to contribute to the process of reconciliation, helping us to create new relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

⁸⁹ Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails: Recreating Song Lines* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2002).

⁹⁰ Kevin Rudd, “Full Transcript of Kevin Rudd’s Farewell Speech,” *The Australian*, June 24, 2010, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/full-transcript-of-kevin-rudds-farewell-speech/story-fn5vfgwx-1225883796571> (accessed June 26, 2010).

⁹¹ The *Bringing Them Home* report recommended (Recommendation No 7.a) that a National Sorry Day be held each year on 26 May “to commemorate the history of forcible removals and its effects” (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997: 652). As a result of this recommendation the community-based organisation the National Sorry Day Committee (NSDC) was formed and the first National Sorry Day was held in 1998. In 2005 the National Sorry Day Committee renamed Sorry Day as a National Day of Healing for all Australians.

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Abstract

In 1997 the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families found that Indigenous children have been forcibly removed from their families and communities throughout the history of colonization in Australia (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Known as the “Stolen Generations,” it is estimated that a third of the Indigenous population are affected. Despite the wide reaching effects of this government policy, very few music researchers have considered how these individual and collective experiences of trauma are realized and expressed musically by Indigenous Australian peoples. From Indigenous Australian academic Judy Atkinson’s perspective, experiences of colonial violence are traumatic and that trauma, if unhealed, may compound “becoming cumulative in its impacts on individuals, families, and indeed whole communities and societies” (2002, 24). Atkinson suggests that the trauma trails of the Stolen Generations “run across country and generations from original locations of violence as people moved away from the places of pain. These trauma trails carried fragmented, fractured people and families” (2002, 88).

Migrating Atkinson’s (2002) exploration of transgenerational trauma in Indigenous Australia to song performance, this article examines the trauma caused by government policies, underlying philosophies and justifications which allowed for the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. Discussions then turn to the effects of these policies on the Indigenous community today and the way in which Indigenous Australian performers and songwriters tell the story of the Stolen Generations through the medium of contemporary song. Examples of song texts are examined to come to an understanding of how Indigenous Australians attempt to tell both “stories of pain and stories of healing” (Atkinson, 2002, 96) in order to reconcile the traumatic effect of protectionist and assimilationist policies on their lives. It also shows the determination of Indigenous people to tell the story of the past, present, and transgenerational trauma of the Stolen Children so that the same mistakes will not be made again.