Unspeakable Pasts as Limit Events: the Holocaust, Genocide, and the Stolen Generations

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This article examines the role of testimony in the production of the memory of the Holocaust and the practice of forcible removals in Australia as “limit events”. A “limit event” is an event or practice of such magnitude and profound violence that its effects rupture the otherwise normative foundations of legitimacy and so-called civilising tendencies that underlie the constitution of political and moral community. The references are the stories of removal collated in Bringing Them Home, and eyewitness testimonies from the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961. By situating the stolen generations and the Eichmann trial as limit events, I argue that the effects of witnessing and story-telling exposed a cultural semantics of what was speakable and unspeakable in the narratives of judging historical injustice and remembering past traumas.

Several years have passed since the publication in Australia of Bringing Them Home, the Report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From Their Families. Few events captured the Australian imagination and disrupted the course of our collective self-understanding and reckoning with the policies and practices of previous governments in relation to Aborigines as did that report. Its narrative of the effects of a sustained Government policy of removing an estimated 20,000-25,000 “half-caste” children (Aboriginal children with a proportion of non-Aboriginal descent) from their families between 1910 and 1970 represented a watershed in public consciousness of the injustices perpetrated on indigenous peoples. Controversial claims of forcible removals as genocide and recommendations for reconciliation through reparations sparked a vigorous and often ugly, polarised political and intellectual debate that reached deep into the legitimating and positive tenor of the myths and historiography of Australia’s foundation, and the logic of eliminationist transactions in the project of settler colonialism. That such a word as genocide,

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1 I am grateful to Bain Attwood, Tony Barta, Kate Hunter, Dirk Moses, and the anonymous readers for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
2 The authors of Bringing Them Home suggested that between one in ten and one in three children were removed from their families between 1910 and 1970. Historian Peter Read estimated the figure at approximately 50,000 “separations”, while political scientist Robert Manne contends that between 20,000-25,000 children were taken. I use Manne’s figure. See Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, (Sydney, 1997) hereafter, BTH, p. 37; Peter Read, A Rape of the Soul so Profound: the Return of the Stolen Generations, (St. Leonards, 1999), p. 26; and Robert Manne, “In Denial: the Stolen Generations and the Right” The Australian Quarterly Essay, Issue 1, (Melbourne, 2001), p. 27.

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commonly associated with colonial and modern violence elsewhere, could migrate into Australian history, and find a local exterminating sensibility, saw the debate entertain comparisons with other projects of racial and social engineering. This public conversation revealed the extent to which explanations for the commission and evidence of genocide relied less on the terms of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 9 December 1948, than on the contemporary imagining and visualisation of its twentieth century trope: the Holocaust. Historian Inga Clendinnen, for example, author of Reading the Holocaust, rejected the argument for the intellectual and moral utility of the term genocide in relation to Aboriginal dispossession and the stolen generations. One could argue that this reasoning was less because the practices of expropriation of land, identity and people were not acts of genocide as enshrined in the legal definition of the convention, but rather because they failed her “meta-image” or “vision” of the word’s most extreme practice as intentional physical wounding and homicide, shaped, ostensibly, by her recent immersion into the literature of atrocity. Clendinnen argued:

I remain persuaded that the persistent invocation of the term “genocide” by the authors of the report and their later supporters to describe any phase of Australian policies to Aborigines was not only ill-judged, but a moral, intellectual and [...] political disaster. I am reasonably sophisticated in these modes of intellectual discussion, but when I see the word “genocide” I still see Gypsies and Jews being herded into trains, into pits, into ravines, and behind them the shadowy figures of Armenian women and children being marched into the desert by armed men. I see deliberate mass murder [...].

Statements like Clendinnen’s were not isolated. Rather, they were indicative of the weight of history invested in public utterances of “genocide”, and the word’s attendant criminality that raised parallels about historical and moral equivalence: if the charge of genocide held, could previous government officials and formulators of policy inhabit the same space of guilt and culpability as the Nazis? If the charge of genocide could be proved, what kind of redress or reparation was due morally, politically and financially to the victims of this policy?

Since the publication of Bringing Them Home in May 1997, historiography and cultural commentary on the topic of forcible removals has exploded, representing a very public climax to the “narrative accrual” or “narrative coalescence” of earlier autobiographical reflections and historical inquiry about the stolen generations that Bain Attwood suggested began in the early 1970s. The commentary on forcible removals has also moved beyond the initial frames of reference of discussing racial prejudice or benevolent welfare policies in the determination of removals to revisit the history of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians as stained with genocidal mentalities and moments. The purpose of this article is not to assess
competing strands of historiography generated by this debate, but to revisit its genesis, namely the stories of forcible removals as represented in *Bringing Them Home*. The aim is to analyse how the public and intellectual response to witnesses’ stories in *Bringing Them Home* contributed to the construction of the policy and practice of forcible removals as a “limit event” in Australian history.

The discussion over the making and meaning of limit events has a long history beyond the scope of this paper, though it is necessary to consider what have been the qualifying criteria for using that phrase to describe contemporary historical injustices. I use the phrase “limit event” based on my acquaintance with it in discussions of the Holocaust’s representation in post-war scholarly debates as, variously: the manifestation of the potential barbarism of modernity, as an extreme event of such uniqueness and incomparability that renders it incomprehensible to “those who were not there”, and of contested representational possibility in historical discourse, literary and visual culture, and in testimonial narratives. Hayden White captures the challenge of the limit event more succinctly:

> With respect to the question of how most responsibly to represent the Holocaust, the most extreme position is not that of the so-called Revisionists […] but rather, those who hold that this event is of such a kind as to escape the grasp of any language even to describe it and of any medium —

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Bound up with the issue of limits is the rhetorical employment of the word “unspeakable”, commonly used to describe the impossibility of representing the Holocaust experiences of survivors. Whether or not the semantics of unspeakability, which is so much part of the interpretive vocabulary of registering the offence to speech and language claimed by the Nazi genocide, is misplaced in relation to stories of forcible removals is another question. Related to this, furthermore, is the discursive language commonly employed to represent and deny agency in the Holocaust: the perpetrator, the victim, the bystander, and again whether or not such language holds resonance for interpreting the history, processes and effects of forcible removals. Were children who were separated victims, or witnesses; were they victims or witnesses at the HREOC Inquiry; and, what moral claims are invested in invoking language invariably associated with a far more radical and eliminationist historical event?

The sources for this investigation are testimonies of survivors at the trial of the major Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem from April to December 1961, and testimonies of forcible removals excerpted in Bringing Them Home. By situating the testimony given at the legal forum of the trial, and at the social forum of the HREOC Inquiry which resulted in Bringing Them Home, I argue that both forums predicated their legitimacy on the use of didactic paradigms in producing “traumatic history” from personal memory, and in doing so, laid the groundwork for their reception and ongoing production as limit events. This approach does not infer that the events are comparable in terms of intent, process or outcome. Ever since coming to power in January 1933, Hitler and the Nazi regime advertised and systematically implemented the persecution of the Jews, depriving them of individual, group and human rights, and intended their global physical, ethnic, cultural and material destruction under the cover of war, a criminal programme that resulted in the starvation, disease, deportation and mass murder of six million men, women and children. This programme of systematic, state-engineered policy to destroy an ethnic, cultural or religious group through physical extermination was neither explicit nor a national policy aim in the six decades long policy of forcible removals in which the numbers of those removed, and the racial, eugenicist and ostensibly benevolent motivations of the government administrators remain contested and empirically inconsistent, not so the trauma and memory of the witnesses and victims. Both practices were government-administered, commissioned under the guise of the so-called improvement or cleansing of the white communities and legitimated in the identity building practices of the nation-state, and both were programmes of racial, social and biological engineering, though this motivation was not a consistent feature of policy in relation to forcible removals. Whereas the archival and empirical record of the Holocaust is an irrefutable narrative truth (evidenced in numerous legal victories over the claims of ideologically-inflamed deniers), the stories of removal in Bringing Them Home are a collective memory waiting for a history that “might lend it weight” to validate the premature claims of genocide which so problematically accompanied the passage of the report into public consciousness and into a political battlefield.

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Indeed by taking an uncontested limit event such as the Holocaust, and considering the utility of stolen generations testimony through the representational frameworks and logic generated by the trauma of autobiographical memory, I may be accused of indulging in my own limits of representation, since after all, the perpetration of the Holocaust and the practice of forcible removals are radically different historical phenomena, as I outlined earlier. Any attempt to engage the Holocaust in some form of comparative hermeneutics is without doubt — irrespective of the event or processes examined, such as discussions of Rwanda, Cambodia, Armenia, East Timor, or in terms of contextualising oppressive labour regimes imposed on enslaved peoples in eighteenth century colonial societies in the Caribbean and the Americas and with those in the concentration camps, or with the analysis of biological racism as a historically coded cultural system against blacks and Jews — met with incredulity and allegations of trivialising the Holocaust’s specificity, the particular, eliminationist motives of the perpetrators, and minimising the suffering of the victims. Indeed, it is not the deeply embedded construction of the Holocaust as a limit event that I am seeking to contest. Rather, I am interested in examining how the utility of the Holocaust as a limit event, that is, through the testimonies which anchor it in traumatic language and public memory, has been appropriated in the hurried construction of forcible removals by the authors of the report and by the report’s interpreters as Australia’s moral and historical shame, our limit event. I argue that the effects of witnessing and story-telling operated at the limits of what had been speakable and unspeakable in the respective national histories of adjudicating and voicing past traumas. The aim is to extrapolate differences in national and cultural variants of limit events, and to illuminate how the framing of the Holocaust as the limit event *extraordinaire*, as it has been interpreted in post-*Bringing Them Home* debate in Australia (if not elsewhere in the discourse of “comparative genocide”), has served as a model or standard when discussing the restorative outcome of witnessing as healing, and the symbolic weight invested in reparations.11

As limit events, the Eichmann trial and *Bringing Them Home* were significant breakthroughs for airing memories of state-administered persecution and injustice, and moral validations of the survivor as the voice of memory in the recovery of possibly genocidal histories. Central to the construction of limit events is the consciousness-raising function of witness testimony: “The victim’s story has to overcome not just the silence of the dead but the indelible coercive power of the oppressor’s terrifying, brutal silencing of the surviving, and the inherent, speechless silence of the living in the face of an unthinkable, unknowable, ungraspable event.”12 The HREOC Inquiry and the stories collated in the report contributed to a consciousness of continuing suffering and loss in indigenous communities by presenting a forum that validated the personal experience of trauma and offered a collective memory of what it meant to be “stolen”


in much the same way that the Eichmann trial produced witnesses to testify not necessarily to his guilt or innocence, but more so to the custodial and traumatic legacy of narrating unforgettable memories. This is evident through an examination of three stages in the process of witnessing and validation: the legitimating forum in which stories of persecution and removal could be narrated, the nature and gravity of what was revealed in the testimonies, and finally, the merging of each in the public construction of them as limit events.

**Listening to the narratives of trauma and injustice: the forum**

The forums that enabled the passage of the Holocaust and the stolen generations into public memory as limit events were decidedly different in structure. The war crimes trial of Adolf Eichmann was a global courtroom drama that merged media and trauma. It was attended by reporters and journalists from around the world, filmed by documentary crews from Israel and abroad, internationally televised, and called on more than one hundred survivors from numerous countries to testify as witnesses. The extreme nature of the survivors’ stories of suffering and resistance, and the controversial role of the *Judenräte* (Jewish councils) in the ghettos, brought the Holocaust into international visibility. Survivor testimonies of what was experienced or witnessed also revealed the dimensions of perpetrator behaviour in relation to the Jews. As the Accused, Eichmann was head of Section IV-B4 (Department of Jewish Affairs and Evacuations) in the Reich Security Main Office, the bureaucracy in charge of “resettlements” which administered the deportations of three million European Jews to extermination camps that included Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, and Auschwitz, from 1941 to 1944. That he rationalised his job performance as desk-top murderer (*Schreibtischtäter*) by responding to fifteen counts of an indictment that included crimes against the Jewish people, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, in terms of obedience to authority and administrative efficiency called into dispute notions of guilt, responsibility and individual agency. Eichmann was not the personification of the sadistic and pathological anti-Semitic Nazis of court testimony at the Nuremberg trials in Germany in 1945-46, nor of immediate postwar historiographical representation. He was a bureaucrat, who in Hannah Arendt’s infamous phrasing, embodied a “banality of evil” that was implicitly possible in humanity. The climactic effect of survivors’ recalling and re-witnessing dehumanisation and testifying to Nazi atrocity challenged the applicability of the charge of crimes against humanity levelled at Eichmann as a perpetrator in the criminal regime. In *The Memory of Judgment*, an important study on the history of Holocaust trials, Lawrence Douglas asserts that the representational logic of the Eichmann trial was different to the Nuremberg trial in 1945-46. Whereas the didactic paradigm of the Nuremberg trial was documentary — relying on filmic,

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14 A French/Israeli feature-length documentary, *The Specialist* (*Un Spécialiste*): Portrait of a Modern Criminal was released in 1999. Directed by Eyan Sivan, it was based on 350 hours of raw footage shot in 1961 by Leo Horowitz. See *The Jewish Film Archive Online* for a synopsis of the film and the cinematic techniques used in reinforcing Eichmann’s “banality”. Archived at [http://www.jewishfilm.com/jz12.html#Specialist].

material or written artifact, the representational logic of the Eichmann trial was testimonial, oral, and memory-based. This form of testimonial witnessing constructed the Holocaust as an event at the limits, pushing it outside of explanatory frameworks of historical understanding and beyond precedent. As much as the genocide occurred in the geography of Europe, its ineffability as recalled in testimonies produced a phenomenology of what a limit event could constitute.

The forum of the HREOC inquiry assembled adults who were separated as children in an orchestrated and assisted process that emphasised truth telling more reminiscent of the confessional and courtroom delivery of testimony in Jerusalem. The aim of the Inquiry, an outgrowth of the Darwin conference “Going Home” in 1994, was two-fold: to address public ignorance about the injustices of forcible removals and to provide a forum for healing. It was the intention of then Federal Attorney-General, Michael Lavarch, to respond to “increasing concern among key Indigenous agencies and communities that the general public’s ignorance of the history of forcible removal was hindering the recognition of the needs of its victims and their families and the provision of services”. The HREOC Inquiry took evidence in the form of 535 submissions from adults, witnesses, and organisations in numerous hearings around Australia. The ongoing necessity and restorative effects of collecting oral testimony was seen as central to repairing past injustice: “Healing and ultimately the reconciliation process require that testimonies continue to be received and recorded”.

Critics of the HREOC Inquiry addressed the marginalisation of voluntary removals of children, and the negation of perpetrator testimony as methodological approaches that invalidated the testimonies of abuse given by victims. The credibility question of the “false-memory syndrome” was alleged by Ron Brunton in “Betraying the Victims”, a charge that worked to deny the victims a future form of agency by disputing their memories of separation. Brunton’s criticism of Bringing Them Home deliberately elided the restorative function of the HREOC Inquiry as primarily a sensitive and communal victims’ forum that echoed the “revealing is healing” aspiration of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, a variant of Truth Commissions generally which have been in operation, to varying impact, since the 1980s in several countries including Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Haiti, Nepal, Sierra Leone, and more recently, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Unlike the HREOC Inquiry, the TRC allowed for the meeting of victim and perpetrator voices; it received 20,000 submissions from victims, and 7,000 applications for amnesty from perpetrators. The HREOC Inquiry was not predicated on this meeting of voices, as its mandate was more strictly to establish the nature and effect of the human rights violations perpetrated on indigenous individuals, and to formulate recommendations of redress. The forum of the HREOC Inquiry was the first cathartic step in assembling victims of forcible removals to become witnesses in an officially authorised context of

17 BTH, p. 18.
18 Ibid., p. 21.
telling and remembering what was their truth about the meaning, trauma and effects of separation from their birth families.  

Narrating the limit event

The public airing of individual recollections of persecution and removal was a necessary precondition to its reception and ongoing construction as a limit event. In both the legal and social forum, witnesses grappled with the memory being recalled as a performative and narrative possibility, and consequently, struggled to find adequate words to describe the experiences of removal, dispossession, persecution and atrocity. The exhaustion of conventional language in which to describe the effects of atrocity is a central feature of narrating limit events. For some six decades, interpreters of Holocaust testimonies and memoirs have developed a sophisticated literature around the narration and interpretation of testimony: how does a survivor put into words an experience that empties language of meaning? The extensive discussion of Holocaust testimonies and memoirs has produced a critical vocabulary with words such as “unspeakable”, “inexplicable”, and “incomprehensible” that function as a generic, though useful entry to the demands of representing limit events. What words might we use in a critical vocabulary in interpreting memories of forced removal? Is there a comparable methodology and cultural sensitivity to reading the stories of removal and dispossession recalled in Bringing Them Home as there is available for Holocaust testimonies?  

The Eichmann trial and Bringing Them Home both occasioned a passage from collective unspeakability to collective speakability. This passage or transition moment enabled the witnesses to reclaim some historical and moral agency, produced a realm of public empathy with survivors and their stories, and imparted on an intimate level, the attitudes of perpetrators, and the desperation of the victims. One passage of testimony each from the Eichmann trial and Bringing Them Home demonstrates the processes of removal and transportation and their interpretation by the victim. In the following excerpt, the witness, Moshe Beisky, is cross-examined by the Attorney General, Gideon Hausner. Beisky is recalling a deportation of approximately 1,200
Jews from Plaszow concentration camp (on the outskirts of the Krakow Ghetto in the Generalgouvernement region of Nazi-occupied Poland) on 17 or 18 October 1944 to the labour camp of Gross-Rosen in Germany ahead of the Russian advance:

Witness Beisky: We left in a transport of which at first it was said that it was supposed to go to some ammunition factory. And again, it appeared that such was the case, that the transport would be taken there because they had put into it experts such as engineers, mechanical engineers and technical draughtsmen. I myself, at that time, was a technical draughtsman.

Q. You were transported like cattle?

A. They put us into cattle trucks. I suppose that in each wagon there were certainly 120-130 people. We were closely packed, which didn’t allow all of us to sit down on the floor at the same time — only at intervals. We received food provisions for the road, packed for one day. The camp provisions for one day were not adequate provisions for one day. If my memory doesn’t fail me, we travelled for three days or about two and a half days, since we halted frequently en route. The distance from Cracow to Silesia is not all that far. We stopped at stations. It was already, evidently, the time of the retreat, and the railway stations were crowded. This is my assumption. At any rate, we stopped many times at different stations.

Q. We shall pass over the Gross-Rosen episode.

A. Perhaps at this point, if the Attorney General will allow me, there is one incident worthwhile recalling. When we reached the Camp at Gross-Rosen, this was in the early evening hours and with everything that had been said to us at the beginning that we were travelling to an arms factory, but when we were sent there, we saw something that did not exist in our camp. This was the smoke from the furnaces. And then it was already clear to us that here were the crematoria. Faith always remains, but round about dusk — this was on 17 or 18 October — and at that season in Silesia it was already cold — we were all ordered to undress, again naked as the day we were born, we were taken into a place covered with canvas, and we stood, 1,100 or 1,200 people — again I don’t remember the exact number — who were in that transport, throughout the night from seven in the evening. I was given back my clothes at noon the following day. But when I say that I received my clothes, I didn’t do so in order to say that I covered my body. This was the first sign that we might possibly be going to a labour camp, as they called it, was the return of the clothes. We spent several days in that camp. This camp, from my point of view, seemed to me to be very much worse than anything that there was at Plaszow. It is simply beyond description.

There are many illuminating moments in this passage. Firstly, the method of cattle-car transport reflected the perpetrators’ perception of Jews as inhuman and as cargo. Secondly, the temporal existence or a provisional camp society in Gross-Rosen was revealed in the motif of clothes and transactions of them between victim and perpetrator: prolonged nakedness meant certain death whereas the return of expropriated clothes to deportees meant life, if only temporarily. The particularly interesting moment of this cross-examination is when the Attorney-General decides to pass over the narrative of the camp Gross-Rosen, at which point Beisky interjects and says: “Perhaps at this point, if the Attorney General will allow me there is one incident worthwhile recalling”, as if the survivor needs permission in the court of history to prioritise one episode from others as a matter of historical importance and knowledge because of what he saw or witnessed at this moment: the burning of bodies in the furnaces. Beisky recalls with the retrospective benefit of a survivor: “And then it was already clear to us that here were the crematoria”. The impossibility of capturing the vision in words remains paramount, as the past memory is being relived through the present tense telling: “It is simply beyond description”. The act of telling and being heard is significant in this excerpt, since Beisky is testifying to the heart of the historical truth and physical atrocity of the Holocaust: the burning of bodies, the
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inexplicable centre of Nazi evil, and because of this witnessing, is permitted to continue making history with his testimony.

Suggestive of the history-making and testimonial narrative produced by the victims in the Eichmann trial, stories from Bringing Them Home brought into sharp visibility the effects of the racist policy of removal, and constructed a narrative of what it meant to be “stolen”, rather than provide intimate historical evidence and factual information about the reasons for separation from their families and the identities of the officials involved in this process. Fiona’s story from Bringing Them Home provides an entry to reading Nazi perpetrator processes in the Holocaust. This comparison does not infer equivalence, but is more suggestive of the administrative and practical processes that removed victims from their communities. Her experience of the perpetrators’ processes is reflected in the identification of the victim as a “half-caste” child, the separation and transportation to other locations for cleansing, disinfection, and finally so-called acculturation, anticipate administrative practices undertaken in the identification of Jews for resettlement in ghettos and deportation to concentration camps in Nazi-occupied Poland in the Second World War.

In his analysis of the Holocaust, the political scientist Raul Hilberg argued that there were two major elements that transformed the Nazi racial vision of a Europe cleansed of Jews into practice: the machinery of destruction (the perpetrators) and the destruction process (the methods). A similar process can be extracted in the structure of forcible removals. The policy of forcible removals was predicated on a policy of so-called “good intentions” inseparable from a racist vision of the preferred and future composition of Australian society. Those responsible for this policy were the governments of the day, the officials who formulated these acts designed to segregate and exclude the undesirables from their familial, genealogical and traditional heritage, the police, the mission officials who provided housing, and the individuals who accommodated and abused the children. The process of removals was as much administrative as it was horrific: it involved the processes of identification and concentration that Hilberg would later see as visible in the Nazi approach to the persecution of the Jews. This process in relation to Aboriginal children involved identifying the “half-caste” child in terms of their “whiteness”, discovery of their address, and rounding them up (seizure) for transportation and concentration elsewhere in such places as missions, homes, and hostels. Fiona’s story from Bringing Them Home recalls the implementation and effects of this policy:

1936 we went there. I would have been five. We went visiting Ernabella the day the police came […] We had been playing all together, just a happy community and the air was filled with screams because the police came and mothers tried to hide their children and blacken their faces and tried to hide them in caves. We three, Essie, Brenda and me together with our three cousins […] the six of us were put on my old truck and taken to Oodnadatta which was hundreds of miles away and then we got there in the darkness […]

Fiona’s memory of her mother’s journey to the natives’ camp is suggestive of the genocidal effects of this policy revealed in the conditions which disabled the possibility of cultural and genealogical continuity in the loss of familial identity, traditional belonging, and historical connection:

I remember that she came in the truck with us curled up in the foetal position. Who can understand that, the trauma of knowing that you’re going to lose all your children? We can talk about it from

26 Fiona’s submission to BTH, p. 129.
the point of view of our trauma but — our mother — to understand what she went through, I don’t think anyone can really understand that.\textsuperscript{27}

Fiona’s interpretation of her delivery to the United Aborigines Mission in Oodnadatta also echoes the tropes of the arrival experience of Holocaust deportees in camps such as Auschwitz: the cleansing, and disinfection in having their heads shaved.\textsuperscript{28} The most traumatic aspect of this separation was the loss of language, which has meant a continuing inability to communicate, and an unspeakable history of pain:

I realized later how much I’d missed of my culture and how much I’d been devastated. Up until this point of time I can’t communicate with my family, can’t hold a conversation. I can’t go to my uncle and ask him anything because we don’t have that language.\textsuperscript{29}

Constructing the limit event

The spectacular effect of the Eichmann trial and the \textit{Bringing Them Report} on public perceptions of the Holocaust and the trauma of victims of the stolen generations respectively became evident in an explosion of attention to the “achievements” of each forum in the recovery of an ostensibly silenced narrative. There is a common perception that the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem was the event that exposed Israel’s repressed Holocaust past, and that \textit{Bringing Them Home} was the first significant public reckoning with forcible removals. There was a widespread belief that Israel had denied its own Holocaust history in the form of several hundred thousand displaced persons and European immigrants who resettled there after the war. In Israel’s early years, survivors were described as “refugees”, “rejects”, “banished”, “deportees” and “human dust”.\textsuperscript{30} The inheritance of refugees and their stories of suffering, persecution and witnessing to atrocity seemed both inexplicable and incongruous to the warrior, fighting ideals of the new Israeli nation. As Yael Zerubavel writes:

If the 1960s began to mark a slow change in the Israeli attitude toward the Holocaust, this process accelerated during the 1970s and 1980s. The much-publicized Eichmann trial exposed the Israeli public to Holocaust survivors’ testimonies that had not been heard before.\textsuperscript{31}

This perception is also supported by Harold Marcuse, who writes that the topic of Nazi extermination was largely represented in Israeli public memory through the lens of heroic uprisings that conformed to the needs of a fighting and militant society in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{32} Yet the arguments of Zerubavel and Marcuse are contested by historian Dalia Ofer in Israel, who has convincingly argued that the Holocaust did capture the

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{30} In 1948, 118,993 immigrants arrived in Israel. Of these, 102,498 (86 per cent) had survived the Holocaust. In 1949, 141,608 arrived, 95,165 of who were survivors, constituting 67 per cent of that year’s immigrants. Hanna Yablonka writes: “The significance of these numbers lies in the fact that Holocaust survivors made up some 70 per cent of the total immigration population during the first two years of Israel’s existence as a state”. Hanna Yablonka, \textit{Survivors of the Holocaust: Israel after the War}, trans. Ora Cummings (New York, 1999), p. 9.
imagination of the public, intellectuals, elites and politicians in a significant and vivid way:

Well before the Eichmann trial […] the Holocaust emerged as a moral yardstick in the self-understanding of Israelis of European origin. It was pivotal in defining the responsibility of Israel toward Diaspora Jews; it was visible in internal political debates and in conceiving the relations between Israel and other nations.33

Ofer contends that the Holocaust exhibited a central presence in Israeli public policy and culture in the 1950s. This persistent presence was evident in reparations from the Federal Republic of Germany, the designation of Holocaust Remembrance Day (April 1951), the establishment of Yad Vashem: The Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority (April 1953), and the Kasztner trial (1954-55), which brought to public notice the wartime destruction of Hungarian Jewry and the contentious role of the Jewish councils in the ghettos long before Hannah Arendt’s indictment of collaboration with the Nazis in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.34

Ofer’s portrait, however, of the early years of Israeli confrontations with the Holocaust cannot deny the impact of the Eichmann trial as a forum for telling, which separated it from previous acts of history-making about the Holocaust. Writing about the impact of Claude Lanzmann’s epic documentary *Shoah* (1985) and Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, literary theorist Shoshana Felman contends:

Historical research […] existed both before these works and after them, but it did not displace collective frameworks of perception and did not change the vocabulary of collective memory. These two works did. Acceptable or unacceptable, they added a new idiom to the discourse on the Holocaust, which after them did not remain the same as it had been before them.35

Felman’s conception of the Eichmann trial’s significance is suggestive for reading the intervention occasioned by *Bringing Them Home*, and the responses of numerous Australian historians to its pre-history and impact. Bain Attwood, Anna Haebich and Peter Read, for example, have demonstrated that the issue of forcible removals in twentieth-century Australia as a historical injustice of Government policy predates the HREOC Inquiry.36 Read argues that in 1970, the subject of child removal was not widely acknowledged among welfare authorities, Aboriginal leaders or among those who were taken, owing to mainly a lack of historical consciousness and collective knowledge about the widespread incidence and effect of this policy.37 Attwood suggests that this situation changed in the last two decades with the emergence of stories of forcible removals in autobiographical projects and recollections, and later in the historical work of Peter Read and Coral Edwards. He also credits Read with framing much of the symbolic language of pain and identification in the history of forcible removals: namely the use of the word “home” as a point of an unjust departure and return for separated children, and the coining of the phrase “Stolen Generations”, which for Attwood, has assumed over two decades the form of narrative accrual or narrative coalescence through these autobiographical reflections, historical work,

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34 *Ibid.*., p. 28.
35 Felman, “Theaters of Justice”, p. 201.
36 Examples include Edwards and Read, *The Lost Children*; and Haebich, *For their Own Good*.
cultural performances, film, and literature. From the 1980s, Attwood claims, “stories of the separation of Aboriginal children, which had previously been told in various ways by some Aboriginal people and largely in local or community settings, increasingly became a more homogenous ‘stolen generations’ narrative that was produced and circulated in regional and national forums. As a result, the removal of children came to assume a central place in a broader Aboriginal collective memory and historical consciousness”.38 The two phases of narrative accrual are for Attwood seemingly distinct: one that is testimonial and memorial, and the other historical.

The HREOC Inquiry and the publication of the report can be seen as, on the one hand, another stage in the process of narrative accrual, or, on the other, profoundly disruptive to public understandings of the hitherto sporadic discussion of the gravity of this injustice. The disruption, or the breach in understanding, if not a breakthrough in acknowledging the profound racism which guided the policy of forcible removals, returned the issue to mainstream Australian consciousness, facilitated by extensive media coverage of trauma stories and biographies of victims, and in intellectual debate, evident in major metropolitan newspapers and in magazines such as Quadrant. The response of Robert Manne, for example, in articles written during his editorship of Quadrant, in columns in The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald, and more recently, though qualified, with In Denial: the Stolen Generations and the Right, was evidence of the intellectual construction of the government policy of forcible removals as a limit event. The emerging symbolisation of the event as a major trauma was added historical freight in the writings of philosopher Raimond Gaita, 39 who along with Manne, discussed at length the implication of genocide — its thinking, mentality and practice — as a cornerstone of limit events. Both writers took Hannah Arendt’s articulation of it in Eichmann in Jerusalem as the perpetrators’ intended erasure of those constructed as racially inferior through total physical extermination as the key trope in isolating genocidal intention in the absorptive/biological or assimilationist dimensions of forcible removals.40

Yet, in his otherwise astute analysis, Manne was criticised for eliding reference to the pre-HREOC historical work and cultural narratives of forcible removals. Attwood brought to the attention of Manne and others what seemed to be an overlooked pre-HREOC inquiry history of narrative accrual. Attwood criticised Manne for presuming that his personal ignorance was a metaphor for a collective amnesia, and for his assumption that the history of forcible removals was unknown until Manne recovered

40 Manne’s appropriation of Arendt’s argument on genocide in Eichmann in Jerusalem reads: “Arendt here wrote of the crime of genocide as driven by the desire to make a distinct people ‘disappear from the earth’. She saw such a desire as an attack on the idea of ‘human diversity’. For her the crime of genocide is committed when one group decides that another group is unfit to inhabit the earth and takes action to eliminate them”. (quoted from “The Stolen Generations”, The Way We Live Now, p. 39). Gaita also invokes Arendt: “Hannah Arendt called genocide a crime against humanity because it is a crime ‘against the human status’. It expressed a terrifying arrogance that assumes the right to determine which people shall inhabit the earth. The enactment of that arrogance is always an evil even when it looks relatively benign beside those forms of it that choose extermination as their means”. (quoted from “Genocide and Pedantry”, p. 44). See the influential passage on genocide in Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, pp. 268-269.
them. The visibility of pre-HREOC removals was that “knowledge of this past was much greater than Manne allows; his unknowingness, we might say, was not quite as widely shared as he presumes”, 41 and Attwood supported his charge by pointing to the testimonial and historical phases I mentioned earlier. Attwood charged that Manne’s sudden adoption of the cause of the stolen generations perpetuated a major misconception that Bringing Them Home and the Gunner-Cubillo stolen generations “test case” “constitute the cornerstone of historical study and historical knowledge of the separation of Aboriginal children”. 42 Yet even if the narrative accrual was as fermenting and visible as Attwood suggests, we might question why it had not deeply penetrated the consciousness of Australians as a limit event until the publication of Bringing Them Home.

Suggestive of the staging of the Eichmann trial and its effects on Israeli “collective memory” of the Holocaust, the stories of separation and the fate of children became part of an Australian cultural semantics of admission, denial, and apology in relation to forcible removals. Manne’s public role in making the unspeakable stories a public narrative of shame that demanded an admission of injustice was a direct response to the victims’ stories. The outright refusal, which continues to this day, of the Federal Government and Prime Minister, John Howard, to acknowledge the grief of Aboriginal communities by apologising to and for the victims of forcible removals was a denial narrative that contributed further to the unspeakability of the victims’ stories. The Federal Government resisted the application of “stolen” to the victims of this policy on the unsettling belief that the motivation for mass child removal was benign and should be judged from the perspectives of the “good intentions” tenor of official Aboriginal welfare policy at the time. As Manne and others noted, one major flaw of Bringing Them Home was the authors’ failure to distinguish between differing intentions of the administrators, which, consequently, incorrectly generalised the entire history of forcible removals as genocide. Manne suggested that the policy of child removal could be clearly distinguished between an age of eugenics, biological absorption and racial engineering in the interwar period, and removals in the age of social and cultural assimilation in the postwar period. 43 The methodological and interpretive problematics of Bringing Them Home, identified by Manne and others, produced a further impediment to validating the collective memory of removal and, further, the reparations claims of victims. Given that inadequate archival records remain, inconclusive estimates ranging from 20,000-25,000 to 50,000 removals, have been interpreted by the Federal Government to support their official position on denial, in so far as inconclusive figures in no way quantify “generations” affected and thus the term “separation” is more apt to describe the policy. This refusal to acknowledge the generations of loss and injustice invested in the term “stolen” further diminished the

credibility of this narrative as a speakable trauma demanding political and moral redress.

Although the problems of establishing historical “truth” and veracity in terms of statistical quantification and evidence of genocidal intention at different moments in the formulation of policy of forcible removal persist, what I call a “validating” narrative, this lack of “proof”, was at odds with a visible and political counter-narrative in cross-sections of the Australian community in admitting shame and injustice. As Manne diagnosed:

Even if the charge of genocide remains contentious between people of good will […] that does nothing to change the fact that the policy of child removal constitutes one of the most shameful, if not the most shameful episode in twentieth-century Australian history. That our government refuses to apologise to the victims of that policy, now that the facts are known has deepened that shame.44

This shame of Australian society, firstly through the practice of forcible removals, and secondly through the official denial of racial prejudice and eliminationist thought as motivating factors in government policy, effectively provoked a huge affirmation and validation of the trauma in cross-sections of the Australian public, and contributed to the public reception of the stolen generations as a limit event. By listening and hearing, the public’s emotional alliance with Aboriginal collective memory of limits was a form of vicariously bearing witness to the trauma. This vicarious witnessing, a process of affect in terms of identifying with victims’ experiences, meant making the unspeakable stories “speakable” as an apology narrative, and was expressed in significant symbolic forms. A “National Sorry Day” was designated on May 26, 1998 to commemorate the release of the Bringing Them Home report one year earlier. Carol Kendall, the co-chair of the National Sorry Day Committee remarked: “We want Sorry Day to be positive — a day when all Australians can express their sorrow with a clearer understanding of the whole tragic episode, and celebrate together the beginning of a new understanding”.45 Several hundred thousand Australians around the country signed “Sorry Books” which contained the following reference to twentieth-century dispossession and the legacy of colonial/foundational injustice:

By signing my name in this book, I record my deep regret for the injustices suffered by Indigenous Australians as a result of European settlement and, in particular, I offer my personal apology for the hurt and harm caused by the forced removal of children from their families and for the effect of government policy on the human dignity and spirit of Indigenous Australians. I would also like to record my desire for Reconciliation and for a better future for all our peoples. I make a commitment to a united Australia which respects this land of ours, values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and provides justice and equity for all.46

As with the effect of the Eichmann trial in transforming the negative perception of Holocaust survivor immigrants from so-called “human dust” into a non-objectified presence, the personal stories of Aboriginal dispossession and suffering became part of an unofficial Australian public performance of togetherness, identity building and

reconciliation with indigenous communities. This togetherness confronted a history and a present in which the legacies of forcible removals, as told in Bringing Them Home, were re-positioned as a limit event in Australian history. The stolen generations “narrative”, as Attwood has labelled the exposure generated from Bringing Them Home, did not simply refer to the effects of removal on victims at the time. It also referred to the legacy of passage and transmission: for those in the present who could not claim Aboriginality for fear of exclusion, the loss of continuing reproductive possibility within one’s biological community, and the lack of identity associated with family, history and land — the generations “stolen” in Peter Read’s phrasing.47

The role of witnessing in the construction of limit events depends on the availability of the forum for telling, and the extreme nature of the stories being recalled. One outcome of witnessing in the Holocaust and forcible removals is concerned with the cultural work of these stories as narratives of evidentiary power and catalysts to further oral history projects, research, and reparations. The international impact of the Eichmann trial on the process of witnessing was evident in the expansion of oral history projects outside Israel, in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, though smaller scale projects operated in Europe and the United States before the trial. Some of these projects built on existing oral history initiatives developed immediately after the war which occurred in intimate, Jewish community-based projects in regional and metropolitan locations, such as New York and London. Other projects of oral history documentation in audio and video form now number in the thousands, and the largest of these are located in the United States and Israel, many of them attached to universities and Holocaust research institutes.48 After the Eichmann trial, there was a need to record the testimonies of survivors not simply as a means of information, but as a further reflection of the survivors’ response to Nazi dehumanisation. The growth of witnessing the Holocaust in these oral history projects, quite separate to the written literature of survivors, represented a memorial archive that contributed to scholarly and public interpretations of the dimensions of the Holocaust as an event at the limits. Stories of persecution, hiding, the dimensions of camp life, relationships between prisoners, coping mechanisms, and the brutality of the perpetrators, worked to construct a tense narrative of Holocaust survival marked by an excess of trauma. Oral histories were viewed less for their verification of historical data, and more so as narratives available to the memory of individuals and nations attempting to integrate the meaning of the Holocaust into post-genocidal identities. The oral text of testimony was therefore never simply a reflection on the self in extremity. It also revealed the shadowed presence of the perpetrator and the dialogue that occurred between the victim and perpetrator as a process of relation and effect. Testimony revealed the dimensions of the perpetrator mentality where such intentions were concealed in bureaucratic documents, euphemistic language, or administrative practices. Such a reading is critical to interpreting the differing intentions and processes of the perpetrators in the administration of forcible removals.

The cultural benefits of witnessing the Holocaust as recalled in numerous oral history projects are seen to possess restorative and reconstructive benefits for

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47 Peter Read, “The Return of the Stolen Generations”.
48 In the United States, the most prominent include the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, and the Oral History Collection at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Examples of oral history testimony projects in Australia include the “Holocaust Testimonies Project” at the Holocaust Research Centre in Melbourne (under the auspices of Yad Vashem), and the “Kwiet/Caplan Project” at the Sydney Jewish Museum.
reclaiming a voice silenced by injustice. This positive value was evident in a central recommendation from *Bringing Them Home*, which called for the establishment of an Aboriginal Oral History Archive similar in function to the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation established by the American film director Steven Spielberg in the wake of his 1993 film, *Schindler’s List*. The report said: “This archive would be modelled on the Shoah Foundation set up to record the oral histories of Jewish victims of the Nazi holocaust and would fund and facilitate the collection of oral histories of Aboriginal survivors of our holocaust.” The appropriation of the methodologies used in Holocaust oral testimony projects as inspiring and relevant to the victims of forcible removals revealed an explicit linking and naming of limit events, and attached a moral urgency to the necessity of continuing the recovery of the denied indigenous voice. The cultural necessity of establishing an oral history archive was further addressed in *Healing: A Legacy of Generations*, the Report of the Inquiry into the Federal Government’s Implementation of Recommendations Made by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in *Bringing Them Home*. With funding from the Federal Government, the National Library of Australia commenced work in 1998 on the *Bringing Them Home* Oral History Project under the auspices of Doreen Mellor and Anna Haebich. The project is seen as a part of reparations in terms of oral history, language, culture and access to records:

The purpose of the oral history project [...] was seen to be an element of the healing process. It was said that many issues could only begin to be dealt with when people actually managed to discuss what had occurred to them and what effect it had had on them.

The role of the indigenous witness in constructing a record of how genocide might operate in discussions of atrocity and dispossession in Australian history is only just beginning. That the narrative of forcible removals is still being written and reconstructed as an oral text of trauma and still as evidence of “narrative accrual”, will only add to the complexities of political reconciliation as an outcome of admitting genocidal pasts and the reparations due. The function of witnessing in the construction of limit events bears on how countries view or reconcile the perpetration of historical injustice, and also on the recognition of that injustice as an ongoing collective and critical process in the nurturing of responsible citizenship and morally and politically legitimate nations. It is tempting to theorise about what work “the past”, or interpretations of it, should do to or for ethical and moral commitments to political

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49 The Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation has recently finished its initial work to record 50,000 survivor testimonies from around the world, rivalling the breadth of projects at Yad Vashem. This testimony will be digitalised, catalogued in terms of origin of survivor, variety of experiences, locations in incarceration or hiding, and postwar experiences, and then archived at repositories in universities and Holocaust museums in research facilities in the United States and Israel.

50 Submission 186 as quoted in *BTH*, p. 21.


52 *Healing: A Legacy of Generations*, p. 79.

community, and the bearing it has on responsible citizenship insofar as being responsible for an inherited past is concerned. Although the recovery of an indigenous archive of witnessing aspires to the similar restorative and constitutive function of Holocaust testimony, the process of bearing witness also acknowledges the inherent difficulty of representation to convey experience and the attending dilemma in listening to these traumatic stories. Michael S. Roth and Charles G. Salas note that: “an openness to testimony is seen as ethical response to the fragility of representation and the woundedness of consciousness”. 55 As we have seen from numerous countries’ mechanisms of confrontation with injustices of past regimes, whether by jurisprudence, truth commissions, reparations tribunals, or financial compensation, the aspiration that reconciliation heals the wounds remains critically dependent on “speaking the unspeakable” in limit events, a symptom of recovering and repairing historically aggrieved voices of victims of genocide and crimes against humanity.

55 Michael S. Roth and Charles G. Salas note a shift in the public interest in trauma studies from epistemology to ethics, that is “from a critique of knowledge to a concern with doing (and being) good”. See Roth and Salas, “Introduction”, in Disturbing Remains: Memory, History and Crisis in the Twentieth Century, eds, Roth and Salas (Los Angeles, 2001), p.2.