Broken Circles: An Interview with Anna Haebich

Anna Haebich visited the University of Western Australia in the last week of August 2002 to present the annual Fred Alexander Lecture, titled “Twilight of Knowing” Australia and the Stolen Generations Issue. Anna is currently Associate Professor and Australian Research Council (ARC) Fellow in the School of Humanities, Griffith University. She has taught and written widely in the area of indigenous studies and has also worked as a curator, artist and art historian. After a special lunch with postgraduate students at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Natalie Lloyd interviewed Anna with regards to her award winning book, Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000.1

Anna, I wanted to start by asking about the title of your book, Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families, where the impetus came from and how it relates to the structure of the book?

I have no actual memory of when I thought of the title ‘Broken Circles’; it seems it was just always there. I talked about it for ages with friends and some said it sounded very New Age or Native American, but I thought it was just right. I heard Aboriginal people talking about circles and healing circles and broken lives and so on. The book itself is written in the form of a circle. It wasn’t conscious at first, but it became more deliberate, starting with Louis Johnson’s story and his murder here in Perth and circling around to the end with Darryl’s nephews walking the same unsafe streets in Perth as Louis in the early 1990s, but they were streetwise in the sense that they knew what to do to survive in a racist world. Tragically Louis didn’t. Contained within this larger circle is the national history of
child removal in Australia, the policies and administrations in the different states and territories and so on.

**How was it that the Broken Circles project came about?**

There is a story to this, about questions maybe not to ask or to ask when you go to a conference. I saw Steve Mickler, who at that time was the Louis Johnson Memorial Trust Fund Fellow at Murdoch University, at a conference in Sydney. I was teaching at Griffith University and asked if there was any work going in Perth. Steve said, “I don’t know, I’ll have a look”. He was working on his book, *The Myth of Privilege*, which looks at the radio shock jocks, the car chases and reported crime waves of the early 1990s in Perth, and Louis Johnson’s murder in the context of that. He rang me back and said the Johnsons were wondering if I would interview Louis’ Aboriginal family, the Braedons, in Alice Springs. I did that and I met Bill Johnson there; we talked about the possibility of writing a national history because the *Bringing Them Home Inquiry* had just started and everybody was very conscious of the fact that it didn’t have much allocated time for historical research and Bill Johnson said, “Maybe you could write a national history that would extend on what they are able to do”. I thought about it for quite some time. It was a very emotionally charged issue and a lot of Aboriginal people were already working in the area. I talked to people like my mate Rob Riley who has since passed away and everyone was very encouraging. They said, “Look, you are in this unique position where you have the time to do the research, and you’re living in the community within a Nyungar family and you have all sorts of insights and contacts and you have the space.” Most Aboriginal people have so many commitments and demands on their time that they just can’t get the space to take time out to write. Everyone said, “Go for it” and so I did. I made sure that I had a research process, and advisory committee...

**Yes, that was my next question. What exactly was the advisory process; did you meet with a board of advisors regularly?**

The process was pretty informal. First of all I was attached to Murdoch University but I was also attached to the Aboriginal Studies Centre at the University of New South Wales, so that was my base over there. That was important, because here I had a lot of Aboriginal contacts whereas over there I needed introductions. My advisory committee: I tried to have members from all the different states and territories, so that they might put me in contact with people or suggest names and they would have perspectives on what happened in their region. They also read drafts as we went along and were advising on the structure. This worked really well, we didn’t ever meet all together, and it was very much an informal thing.

I imagine that this process would have been important as you were working through the material, to be able to debrief.

Yes, debriefing about the sensitive and upsetting research material, getting guidance and emotional support, all of that was really important. I also travelled around to quite a few of the Inquiry hearings and that was very important too – to be able to meet the people who were working on the Inquiry, to sit in and listen to what people were saying about their experiences of removal, to get a feel for what happened, to hear what people thought should be done.

I wanted to talk a bit about your background in Anthropology and Fine Arts. From reading your work I thought it notable that you combine anthropological and historical analysis, which allows you to include a people’s world view and kinship structures with an administrative history. I am interested to know your thoughts about the ‘baggage’ that comes with the disciplines, specifically the subject/object relationship, and whether it was an issue for you while you were writing.

My introduction to Nyungar history was through working on a project with Nyungar people who were collecting their family oral histories and family trees. I came with an awareness of anthropological concerns about family and kinship structures, mythology and so on. Then I felt I was very much the researcher looking in and that I was handing on research skills, but then I realised that I was being given a crash course in Nyungar ways by the people I was working with. It was two-way learning! Then, later, through my relationship with Darryl I became involved as part of a Nyungar family and my learning curve steepened sharply. So I guess one thing built on another. It was a strange coincidence of things. There has always been a shifting, a movement between being someone who is an outsider to being someone who is participating to some extent. I may have been misleading myself, but I ended up feeling pretty much outside of anthropology and history. But I guess
I have heard you mention the motif of weaving as a description of how you like to work. I was reminded of Heather Goodall’s current work on the Darling Basin and her collation of the different communities’ relationship with land.

Yes, I really like the idea of weaving as an image of the process of writing, of weaving strands of stories, of weaving, as Heather does, voices from communities with distinct experiences and viewpoints into patterns, into a sort of tapestry.

Through your work you must have come in contact with the differences in people’s experience of being part of the Stolen Generations, was this ever problematic?

Of course there are many different stories, we are talking about thousands of individual lives, and this has been discussed during debate about Stolen Generations’ narratives and memories. I didn’t collect oral histories myself; I was using mostly archival sources. I made that conscious decision because I wanted to focus on policies and administration – what white Australians did and why. Of course I addressed experience as well, and I was very conscious of the pitfalls of generalising. I wrote Broken Circles with an imagined audience of thousands critically looking over my shoulder. It was pretty daunting! In terms of individual experiences, the differences have been highlighted for me through my involvement as co-editor of the book, Many Voices, that draws on the National Library’s Bringing Them Home Oral History Project, which collected over 600 hours of interviews. For example, people had very different experiences of adoption, some had very loving families that encouraged them to find their parents and then there were those who had directly opposite experiences.

Was there a sense that the people you were working with and listening to at the Inquiry felt any kind of pressure to come up with a coherent narrative, because of the impending rhetoric and media treatment?

Well, some historians have raised questions about the extent to which narrators appearing before the Inquiry reconstructed their experiences in response to what was happening, to fit with expectations in the present. It would be naïve to deny that this was happening but, personally, I had no experience of any people deliberately re-adjusting their stories. I do feel that media treatment and public debate subsequently led to a simplification of story lines, to the creation of a sort of generic experience that erased the complexity of individual personal stories. Now, everyone knows that when we talk about human experience, people’s lives, about intervening in families, that all sorts of things can happen and you are going to have so many different emotions and experiences and that if this is not acknowledged, then people will become suspicious of what they are being told.

In your book you point to the distancing and normalising practices reinforced by bureaucratic structures as partly explaining the general white populations ‘blind spot’ to the Stolen Generations. The history of relationships between governments and missions come to mind; what were your findings with regards this symbiosis?

At the individual level, most missionaries accepted lives of poverty and deprivation – this was their choice and their expectation, they put up with these conditions because they saw that as their lot, but these also became the conditions that Aboriginal children were forced to live in. They worked hard for very little money and were fairly ruthlessly controlled by governments, but they also contributed to policies, they were in there advising. They needed the children for their own survival, and they wanted to create communities of Christianised, civilised Aboriginal people. All of this suited governments that wanted to operate Aboriginal affairs on a shoestring budget. Meanwhile the broader public could feel that Aboriginal people were being looked after by kindly Christian folk.

You note the feminisation of mission work during the nineteenth century. I think this is an important issue when considering mothering within an historical context. Gayatri Spivak has shown the way in which black women’s sexuality is made to carry what is denied in white women’s sexuality in European literature. I was wondering if a similar point could be brought to the subject of mothering within the narratives of Government
policy. You mentioned in your Fred Alexander lecture that to be born of an Aboriginal mother was to be deemed a neglected child.

Yes, consider women missionaries – often single, experiencing mothering through caring for children of black women, projecting their sexual anxieties onto the young women in their care… If you think about mothering and idealisation of white women as mothers being very pure and then you have the mirror image of mothering by Aboriginal women, and particularly mothers of children of mixed descent, who always seemed to be ‘alone’, abandoned by the children’s white fathers… So yes, negative views of Aboriginal mothering were spelt out in this specific way in nineteenth century Queensland legislation and were built into discriminatory laws around Australia. These mothers were not to have responsibility for the care of their own children; this was automatically vested in officials, usually the Chief Protectors of Aborigines were the children’s legal guardians. Mind you, while the mothers were disparaged, the fathers – black or white – barely even got a mention.

Some of the critics and detractors of the testimonies in the Bringing Them Home Report, argued that the motivations for the removal of children were often ‘good intentions’, thus isolating those acts from any kind of systematic oppression.

Well, some critics of the Report have claimed that there wasn’t enough about the people who implemented the systems and what their motivations were, that there was some sort of interference on the part of the Inquiry, that they were discouraged from giving evidence. Actually, it was up to the public to come forward and make submissions. My research indicates that there was a complex intersection of motivations, from genocidal to humanitarian – the so-called ‘good intentions’. Of course, this raises the question of where ‘good intentions’ can sit in a system that is inherently oppressive? There is really no fence to sit on. An important aim of the National Library Oral History Project was to give these people a voice, and there are many interviews with policy makers and carers and so on. In Many Voices there are two chapters about them and their varied attitudes, motivations and ideas. What is particularly interesting about the officers is that most say they have no recollection of removals. Many were working in the fifties when the policy of assimilation was brought in and they say, “When we came in we were changing things and we didn’t do things like Mr Neville did”. My feeling is that they have come to believe their own rhetoric, that is, that assimilation kept families together. Well, it may have been intended to do this, but in actuality children were still taken away as a result of this policy.

In your discussion of the Child Welfare Ordinance (1958), which applied to the general population of the Northern Territory, you highlight the way the Act effectively targeted Aboriginal people because at that time they constituted the majority of disadvantaged and destitute people. This assessment is still pertinent to current policy ideas floated in parliaments, most currently the linking of family payments with parental education courses, and of course, there is also the three strikes law.

In the Northern Territory, Sir Paul Hasluck wanted to get rid of the concept of race, his vision was that ‘it’s not race it’s a social issue’. So the Territory legislation set out to erase the whole idea of race, but, of course, Aboriginal people were living in conditions that made them susceptible to removal of their children and because the way they brought up their children was different to mainstream parenting practices. In the Western Australian context, Commissioner Stanley Middleton was brought over from Papua New Guinea to get rid of the old ways and bring in the new and specifically to target Aboriginal child welfare. His vision was frustrated by lack of money for proper housing, the idea that Aboriginal people had to be trained endlessly to be able to live in houses, and, of course, whites didn’t want them in houses in the towns. School attendance was only enforced for Aboriginal children from the late 1940s, and then many were taken away from their families who were seasonal, itinerant workers and the kids wouldn’t go to school, or they weren’t well dressed enough to be accepted. They were put in government or mission homes and hostels and, in many cases, weren’t allowed to go back to their families because officials considered living conditions weren’t good enough. Aboriginal organisations in Melbourne were writing to Western Australia saying, “You know you were just separating those kids all over again” and in fact they were. And today, many Aboriginal families are asking, ‘What’s changed?’

Warwick Anderson addresses the interconnectedness of science, public health and theories of race in his book The Cultivation of Whiteness. Do you think it is helpful to project from policy analysis outward to an
There could be more individual Aboriginal voices, more oral history. The Western Australian Museum has a process of working through its Aboriginal Advisory Committee, and this is fine but it needs to look to employing Aboriginal people as curators and in decision-making positions within the museum structure.

I was wondering what your response might be to Raymond Tallis’ convergence of opinion with Roger Sandall’s book The Culture Cult, the argument being that cultural relativism and the romanticising of tribal cultures is contributing to the ghettoisation of Aboriginal people in Australia.

Tallis is an assimilationist and people like him have been the catalyst for the topic of my ARC (Australian Research Council) fellowship, Imagining Assimilation. Ideas of assimilation keep coming back in different forms over and over again; they are a very powerful part of our psyche. To claim that assimilation is the answer and that cultural relativism or romanticising or, to follow the argument further, that self-determination policies and rights-based programmes of the post 1970s have failed is highly simplistic. First of all self-determination and rights based programmes have never been fully implemented. They have always been tempered by bureaucratic interference and allegiance to notions of an assimilated Australian nation. To blame self-determination for the conditions that many Aboriginal people are living in is extraordinary. At the same time communities do need to take responsibility for what is happening and generally they want to but often the means to achieve that responsibility are not in their hands. When they are, things can often be turned around. For example, with juvenile justice issues in Perth where kids are picked up by the police, some Nyungar parents are saying, “Let us have some of that control over the behaviour of our kids”, and so finally some Aboriginal adults have that opportunity through the Nyungar Patrol in Northbridge. It seems to be actually achieving something.

I feel there must be a place for your rigorous historical research and writing in addressing prejudice still existing within these services. There is a need for communication barriers to be broken down through the promotion of an historical consciousness.

Perhaps the real alternative is to employ more skilled-up Aboriginal people into specialty areas, rather than trying to convert white workers who are already there. I think certainly there is a need for a wider awareness of history. Non-Aboriginal Australians think they know but we can’t assume that we know, we have this really ill-informed national discussion, we have people getting national media coverage saying that a film like Rabbit Proof Fence is wrong and a distortion. This is extraordinary. I think the historical consciousness of the non-Aboriginal community is still appalling.

Has there been any evaluation of how people respond to your work in the exhibition at the Western Australian Museum about the experiences of the Stolen Generations?

Well, with such exhibitions the response of visitors is usually to the whole exhibition, rather than to the work of an individual curator, as a curator you don’t have a lot of recognised authorship. When you write panels for an exhibition there is so much research involved and then it looks like you’ve done almost nothing! Some feedback suggests there could be more individual Aboriginal voices, more oral history. The Western Australian Museum has a process of working through its Aboriginal Advisory Committee, and this is fine but it needs to look to employing Aboriginal people as curators and in decision-making positions within the museum structure.

Aboriginal families continue to be held up as examples of dysfunction.

Yes, its as if non-Aboriginal Australians are unable to talk about their own dysfunction but they have to talk about it as ‘out there’, in the Aboriginal domain, talking about child abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, domestic violence, when these things are everywhere in our society.
With regards to compensation, how vital do you think that is for a sense of resolution for the Stolen Generations?

This was one of the recommendations that came out of the Bringing Them Home Report. A lot of Aboriginal people would be very keen to see this happen. At the same time, PIAC, a community organisation in New South Wales that has been consulting Aboriginal communities about compensation and forms of redress for the Stolen Generations, has reported that monetary compensation is not at the top of the list. People want a tribunal where they can go to tell their stories and be acknowledged. Other people do say, “We want money, we want services, we want link up services”. Then you have the example of Queensland where workers who had their money taken from them by previous governments have been offered a level of compensation that amounts to an insult. I don’t see the Stolen Generations getting compensation under this or any other government. The Australian public will never endorse it.

That has its precedent in the lack of apology.

Yes, native title, the whole thing... Non-Aboriginal Australians are so harsh towards Aboriginal people.

To finish, I wanted to talk about your future work. I am interested in your ideas about representations of assimilation as an ideal.

Well, with the ARC project, I have managed to locate myself in Humanities at Griffith University and also at the Queensland College of Arts. One area I want to look at is those creations of the 1950s and 60s in Western Australia — the amazing examples of pamphlets and films that were put out to encourage Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to accept assimilation. Also the subtle images that envelop us, influencing us all the time to become certain sorts of people. I’m interested in looking at assimilation comparatively and through a whole lot of different genres. I’m really just starting but I would like to eventually create exhibitions as well as a straight historical text. Another area I’m interested in is the spaces in-between white and black, and the so-called tortured lives of those Aboriginal people who exist/ed there.