

IDENTIFYING THE PROCESS: THE REMOVAL OF 'HALF-CASTE' CHILDREN FROM ABORIGINAL MOTHERS

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In searching for clues as to why white public servants, missionaries and others believed they had the right, and not only the right but the duty, to remove children of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent from their Aboriginal mothers during the middle decades of the twentieth century, it is easy to be beguiled into accepting the justification as it was articulated by contemporary society. One would then accept that so called 'Half-caste' children were institutionalised, or fostered into white families, because contemporary belief has it that their white 'blood' fitted them for a life better than that available in Aboriginal camps. This is essentially as it was explained at the time and such a rationale allowed the 'removalists', mostly white male missionaries, police officers and patrol officers, to face the task with resolution and a sense of duty. This rationale also allowed the wider society to support the actions of the removalists as being guided by high moral principles and generosity to the less fortunate. Folklore heightened the moral necessity of removing the children as it perpetuated the myth that light skinned children would be killed if left with their Aboriginal families.¹ While one might accept these explanations at face value they fail to explain the relationship of the individual with the beliefs articulated and fail to explain the generation of the beliefs themselves. Why was it that there was such wide support for removalist policies; indeed, why the assumption that the belief on which the policy was based was an indisputable truth? One is left with the feeling that there is much more to it than contemporary explanations would lead us to believe.

In an attempt to provide a more comprehensive explanation I will argue here that there was a more pervasive and largely unarticulated set of beliefs that were more powerful than the individual historical actors and that these beliefs governed action. This is not to suggest that the overarching beliefs were never articulated, for they were in the context of other social and political debates, but that they were rarely, and then only tangentially, used to justify the removal of 'Half-caste' children. Individuals then were influenced by a process greater than themselves, even where they were articulating, formulating and implementing state policy, so that many of the beliefs that were informing behaviour remained unacknowledged and unchallenged but nevertheless created the milieu in which the removalists operated. Thus, while we can seek understanding in the contemporary articulation of both policy makers and those who implemented the policy, and in the perceptions of society, this will only hint at a process that was largely unidentified and the

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¹ We are led to believe by a number of historians including Anne McGrath, in Patricia Grimshaw et al, 1994, *Creating a Nation*, McPhee Gribble, Ringwood, that there is some evidence that this was so in early colonial times but there is no reference to it extant official records of the period in question. As folklore it persisted well into the 1970s when as a neophyte teacher I began to teach some of the children who, I was assured, had been 'rescued'.

strength of which can be more clearly gauged from a temporal distance. It will also be argued the milieu created by a particular set of beliefs was difficult to dislodge so that even where new ideas were gaining acceptance they would not be reflected in individual action or stated policy until long after they were recognised as being valid.

In his work *The Logic of Practice* Pierre Bourdieu provides a very succinct explanation of the process explored above and he refers to the creation of a set of beliefs instituted at societal level at the *habitus*.

The conditioning associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor.²

In her exploration of the construction of female sexuality Frigga Haug provides an explanation of the way in which the individual adopts societal beliefs, the structures of Bourdieu's *Habitus*, which is useful well beyond the context in which Haug came to conclusions about its workings.

The process of subjectification can be understood as the process by which individuals work themselves into social structures they themselves do not consciously determine, but to which they subordinate themselves. The concept allows for the active participation of individuals in heteronomy. It is the fact of our participation that gives social structures their solidarity: they are more solid than prison walls.³

Bourdieu eschews the differentiation between conscious and unconscious as being misleading, but there is nevertheless a difference between the beliefs which are articulated by the individual and those that, while still informing behaviour, remain unarticulated. I will be arguing here that where beliefs related to removalist policies were articulated there was frequently a personal commitment to them by those involved. This goes some way towards explaining the apparent altruism of many policy makers⁴ and the good intentions⁵ of many of those acting in official capacities which has been noted.

Using Bourdieu and Haug's explanations of the structures of the *habitus* and the individual's relationship with its social structures we can then explore the beliefs which came to be its 'structuring structures', for it is those beliefs which influenced the shaping of policies regarding the removal of children from their Aboriginal families and it is this set of beliefs which is hidden from immediate view. Mostly such beliefs have been ably dealt with by other historians but not in the context of removalist policies. They are the patriarchal state, which is most tellingly defined though challenges to it such as when women began to exercise power in determining family size,⁶ the creation of a nation, with its attendant beliefs about the superiority of a 'white Australia' and the efficient nation-state, and the nature of 'race' as it was defined in eugenic and, importantly, scientific terms as 'blood'. Aboriginal women giving birth to 'Half-caste' children in the Northern Territory

² Pierre Bourdieu 1990:53.

³ Frigga Haug et al 1987:59.

⁴ Tim Rowse 1990.

⁵ For example see Bain Attwood et al 1994.

⁶ Neville Hicks 1971.

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flouted all those beliefs as espoused by our nation builders and guardians of the patriarchal hegemony, as did single mothers in earlier decades of the twentieth century.⁷ For their transgressions they had their children removed from their care, the clear intention being that the legitimacy of their claims as mothers would be denied thereafter. The policies which denied Aboriginal motherhood were invariably composed and legitimised through reference to the children of mixed descent but the unspoken and unacknowledged legitimacy concerned the transgressions of the mother.

Patriarchy was at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of beliefs that created the *habitus* within which policies that denied Aboriginal mothers the right to raise their children of mixed descent were formulated and implemented. Patriarchy was the basis of state power, economic rationalisation and family structures. In its most fundamental manifestation it acknowledged men as head of family, with others, that is wife and children, in a relationship of dependency.⁸ Aboriginal women, even when they had borne the children of white and other non-Aboriginal men, indicated that they were indifferent to their masculinity and all that masculinity implied; they could survive, even if only as a group given that many individual Aboriginal women suffered severely as a result of their contact with white males. The formal, accepted trappings of 'the home', where white men provided both the income and the link with the political world, was absent, leaving white men deprived of the means to exercise power in this socially acceptable way. Nor did Aboriginal women appear to reflect motherhood in the same way as white women and it was this idealised vision of motherhood that had done so much to legitimise patriarchy. From a Eurocentric viewpoint Aboriginal women did not appear the loving, self-sacrificing and virtuous guardians of the moral and physical development of their young.

Some Aboriginal women chose to use white male sexuality to their own advantage, as amusingly portrayed at the expense of Tom Ronan's character Mr Toppingham in *Vision Splendid*. Toppingham willingly deludes himself into believing that the nightly visits of an attractive young Aboriginal woman, Lillie, are based on mutual attraction and his chagrin when she demands payment for herself and her husband is intense.⁹ More open forms of prostitution by which Aboriginal women contributed to family incomes was common. Many Aboriginal women were taken by force but even then Aboriginal women did not lose their place in Aboriginal society and children born of rape were absorbed into an extended family that did not lack for the absence of the white male. It is significant that where a white male entered into a more permanent relationship with an Aboriginal woman, which was, paradoxically, unlawful and accepted paternal responsibility for the children and was acknowledged as head of the family, then the rights of motherhood were less likely to be denied the Aboriginal woman.¹⁰ More commonly a father could retain control of his child by distancing himself from the child's mother and assuming paternal responsibility.¹¹ Most women had no choice in the lack of paternal responsibility shown to their 'coloured' offspring, and no doubt would have welcomed at least material assistance, but while often impoverished they were not destroyed by its absence. Although individually they suffered, collectively they survived and continued to produce and raise children independent of a white

7 Punishment of single mothers for their denial of male power was principally financial. See Renate Howe and Shurlee Swain 1993

8 For detailed analysis see Marilyn Lake 1993.

9 Tom Ronan 1954.

10 For example see the biography of Matt Savage and his Aboriginal wife in Keith Wiley 1971.

11 For example see the autobiography of Jack Gibbs, in press.

male, Aboriginal women threatened the power base of Australian society by making the men redundant.

The Northern Territory lagged behind other parts of Australia by several decades in developing a strong sense of national identity so that when, in the early decades of the twentieth century the newly federated colonies consciously sought to create a nation, the Northern Territory was still struggling for survival. It was mid-century before continued development was assured and attention could be focussed on creating an identity that would shake off the frontier image and would be more aligned to the respectable working and middle classes of southern Australia. The knowledge that children of white fathers were growing up amongst Aboriginal people in the poorest of circumstances was anathema to the vision of a strong, vigorous and respectable society. Open scorn was directed at those men known to have fathered a child by an Aboriginal woman but the greatest derision was reserved for those who attempted to incorporate an Aboriginal woman into a nuclear family. The challenge this posed to accepted norms was too great to be countenanced. The collective shame of society, about which Tony Austin writes,¹² was perhaps less consciously experienced but it too was indicative of a reaction to the powerful challenge inherent in an alternative family structure, although it stemmed also from beliefs about the supremacy of the white race.

But moral indignation was not the only concern of white Australians. Aboriginal mothers who were raising their children of mixed descent within Aboriginal society were also removing them from the control of white Australia. This had implications culturally and well as economically, and both related to the aspirations of Australian nation builders. At no time in the twentieth century had the Australian birthrate been thought satisfactory for a developing nation and the sparsely populated Northern Territory was of particular concern. While the settlement of white women in the north was actively encouraged¹³ and their role as wives and mothers highly regarded,¹⁴ the white population continued its very slow growth. By the 1930s, however, the decline in Aboriginal numbers had slowed and the overall trend in the Aboriginal population was beginning to turn. Most noticeable, for social rather than numerical reasons, was the increase in the number of children of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ancestry. As the increase in white population was far below requirements, and growth in Aboriginal population discounted except as a positive marker in Australia's international reputation for fair treatment of its indigenous people, something worthwhile might be redeemed from the growth in the number of 'Half-caste' children. This could be achieved, however, only if the children were raised under the influence of the dominant culture where 'appropriate' attitudes to work and authority could be inculcated.

Here, as with the rejection of Aboriginal women as suitable mothers of children of mixed heritage, was a racism which accorded Aboriginal culture no value and judged Aboriginal physical and intellectual inheritance of a very low order. Although scientific explanations of social Darwinism were no longer widely espoused by the middle decades of the twentieth century, beliefs regarding the inferiority of the Aboriginal 'race' continued to inform attitudes to Aboriginal people. This would remain so until 'race' as a basis for genetic inheritance was challenged. Aboriginal women, then, were unfit to raise children whose 'white blood' made them superior.

That 'Half-caste' children had the potential to respond to the 'training' that was to be provided in their institutional homes was a negative belief premised on prevailing ideas of

¹² Tony Austin 1993.

¹³ Suzanne Parry 1992.

¹⁴ Lyn Riddett 1993.

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race. In the 1930s Xavier Herbert had argued that the 'Euraustralian', that is, a person of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent, was the ideal person to populate and develop the Northern Territory¹⁵ combining the Aboriginal instincts of bush life and survival with European intellectual capacity for work focussed on development. There were few who agreed with him; most saw 'Half-castes' as being salvageable because a white heritage gave them a limited, diluted as it was, intellectual heritage which could be cultivated. Thus the 'Half-caste' was placed marginally above other Aborigines. Although positive where others were negative in their response to the question of children of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent, there was shared understanding of the nature of 'race' between the race positivist represented by Herbert and the negative majority. Both believed that intellectual capacity was an inherited racial characteristic as was the capacity for self-discipline and adaptation to change. Clearly defined as the *Other*, Aboriginal people lacked these inherited capacities in the same measure as Europeans possessed them, in irremediable position given their supposedly genetic transmission. Franz Boas' assertion that there were no grounds for belief in 'hereditary racial characteristics'¹⁶ and Ashley Montagu's arguments that 'race' represented one of the most 'dangerous myths' of the time¹⁷ had done little to change race ideologies in Australia. Even where new ideas were adopted at an intellectual level their proponents had grave difficulty in sustaining them within their own discourses, even without the additional burden of using the new theories to refute opposition. Claude Levi-Strauss, the well known international anthropologist, joined Montague arguing in the early 1950s that 'to attribute special psychological characteristics to the biological races, with a positive definition, is as great a departure from scientific truth as to do so with a negative definition.'¹⁸ But changing beliefs which had become structures was a very slow process.

A.O. Neville who had been Western Australia's Chief Protector of Aborigines for over thirty years, continued to influence Aboriginal policy in the post-war years. He graphically, albeit unwittingly, gave voice to the dilemma in his 1947 treatise on 'Australia's Coloured Minority' when he echoed Montagu's ideas when arguing for the invalidity of 'race' as a meaningful classificatory term but concluded his publication with the injunction that the intermarriage of 'full-blood' Aborigines with 'Half-castes' should be legally restricted.¹⁹ Contradictions were equally apparent in his discussion of assimilation, a state of grace which he clearly believed could only hope to be achieved by his so-called 'coloured people'.

Race, evidently, was the one informing factor which could be made conscious and, indeed, was from time to time. Increasingly, however, as the policy of removing children was challenged, it remained unstated. The reluctance to articulate racist ideologies even where they were clearly informing policy, claiming instead environmental considerations, was tellingly revealed in a 1953 challenge to the Acting Director of Native Affairs that

if it was agreed that the removal to an institution was the best means of facilitating the 'assimilation' of part-aboriginals, then the best interests of the full-bloods from the same environment would be served by the same treatment.

The Acting Director hinted darkly at other factors which required consideration but would elaborate no further.²⁰ Ideas regarding the maintenance of patriarchal hegemony and the

¹⁵ Suzanne Saunders 1990:62.

¹⁶ Quoted in Derek Freeman 1983:32.

¹⁷ Ashley Montagu 1940.

¹⁸ Claude Levi-Strauss 1952:7.

¹⁹ A.O. Neville 1947.

²⁰ AANT (Australian Archives Northern Territory), CRS A1361/1 45/3/1, Part 5.

desire to build a nation informed but were rarely articulated, while race ideologies moved from the conscious and articulated sphere to the level of powerful but unarticulated structures. What was at the conscious and articulated level of social operation, and could therefore be given voice by the individual and adopted as personal, was confined to other areas.

In the immediate post-war period and up until the passing of the *Welfare Act, 1953*, patrol officers of the Native Affairs Branch removed Aboriginal children of mixed ancestry from their Aboriginal families under powers conferred on the Director of Native Affairs through the *Aboriginals Ordinance 1918-1947*. Under Section 7 of this legislation the Director of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of every Aboriginal person and every 'Half-caste' child in the Northern Territory. Charged under the Act to provide for the case, education and training of 'Half-caste' children, the policy was to remove children to an institution where they could be raised in the care of white guardians.

Removing children had been commenced in the early decades of the twentieth century by Baldwin Spencer and pursued with a degree of vigour under C.E. Cook's regime as Chief Protector of Aborigines, although even then it was not a written policy which had been through the process of gaining Ministerial approval.²¹ It was given its first official expression in John McEwen's 'new deal' for Aborigines in 1937. There it was encoded in a policy statement and given formal ministerial sanction. When E.W.P. Chinnery was appointed Director of Native Affairs in 1939 on McEwen's recommendation, he restructured the removal process. This was formally endorsed by H.S. Foll, the new Minister of the Interior. F.H. Moy took over as Director of Native Affairs in 1946 and unquestioningly and systematically continued the implementation of the policy.

The correctness of this policy, in terms of its morality, legality or effectiveness, was questioned neither by the public, the patrol officers nor the responsible federal minister until 1951 when Dr Charles Duguid visited the northern parts of the Northern Territory. The Scottish born Duguid, a medical practitioner from Adelaide, had been campaigning for improved conditions for Aboriginal people for almost twenty years. He had frequently proven a thorn in the side of the government in Canberra and his own Presbyterian church whose mission policy he criticised.²² On his return south Duguid published his observations of the workings of the Aboriginal policy, suggesting that in some aspects it was unwise and inhumane.²³ He was particularly concerned about the removal of children from their Aboriginal mothers, and was evidently distressed to witness many of them being removed when still babes-in-arms. When, in 1953, the *Aboriginals Act* was to be replaced by the *Welfare Ordinance* Duguid's criticisms were given no consideration; the policy had been upheld to the satisfaction of the Minister by officials in the Northern Territory.

By 1953, however, international opinion recognised the injustice of racist legislation and in an attempt to conform with international codes the Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, ordered that Aboriginal people not be identified by race in the new law. The Act was, however, always intended as a means for continued intervention in the lives of Aboriginal people and its euphemistic formal title was 'An Ordinance to Provide of the Care and Assistance of Certain Persons'. Aboriginal people were therefore made subject to the law because of 'their manner of living', their 'perceived standards of social habit and behaviour', their 'personal associations' and their perceived 'inability to manage their own

21 Tony Austin 1989.

22 Suzanne Parry (in press).

23 Charles Duguid 1951.

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affairs'.²⁴ Any person defined and categorised on these criteria was to be declared a ward of the state and clearly the intention was to 'declare' any children, regardless of parentage, who were living with Aboriginal people. In relation to the institutionalisation of wards, the Act recognised the increasingly privileged position of the family in Australian social and political life by stating that children would not be removed from their families nor parents from children. Where, however, the 'family' failed to conform to accepted norms it would be subject to injunctions which denied its validity. As it was intended that the removal of 'Half-caste' children be continued, the proviso was added that children could only be removed with the written authorisation of the Administrator. This very quickly became a blanket authorisation where the intent of the law, that every case be given individual consideration, was conveniently overlooked. Adult 'Half-caste' people who were not declared wards, were nevertheless frequently denied the validity of their family where the family failed to abide by accepted norms but the process of removing their children was through the courts under the *State Children's Act*.

When, in 1951, Charles Duguid had publicly raised the issue of removing Aboriginal children a ministerial inquiry prompted the Territory administration to defend its policy. The Secretary for the Department of the Territories was informed that, since the policy had been adopted, 583 children had been removed to institutions, with a total of 109 children removed between the years 1946 and 1951. Of those removed, a little over sixty percent were girls, a ratio that was to be maintained for as long as the policy was pursued. In the post war years the majority of children had been sent to institutions run by the Catholic and Methodist churches on Melville Island and Croker Island respectively and to the Retta Dixon Home run by the Australian Inland Mission in Darwin. Smaller numbers had been fostered into white homes in southern states, some were sent to St Mary's Hostel in Alice Springs and some who were classified as 'almost white' were sent to St Francis Home in Adelaide. The policy of removing children continued into the 1960s. By the mid-1960s, however, removal was increasingly reserved for those believed to be suffering serious neglect, although where parental neglect was evident only children with visible non-Aboriginal heritage would be removed from the Aboriginal family. The policy was not officially abandoned during the 1960s but was employed less and less, particularly as a system of 'native schools' was established in remote areas by the Commonwealth government and the educational imperative of the removalist policy was negated.

Assimilation was the most clearly articulated and readily acceptable justification for the institutionalisation of Aboriginal children. It has been written about extensively²⁵ but is important here because, socially and morally, it was a widely shared ideology and could be easily appropriated by the individual as a personal motivation and justification. As both Bourdieu and Haug explain the role of the individual was important in maintaining and perpetuating the beliefs which allowed these structures to operate effectively. To 'uplift' Aboriginal children to a white standard of living and to accommodate Aboriginal children within a 'superior' culture was seen to be both morally commendable and politically astute. An assimilationist policy had been first accepted nationally at a 1937 meeting of state and territory bureaucrats responsible for Aboriginal affairs. The Second World War delayed its introduction in any serious way but, by the 1960s, a common statement regarding assimilation had been adopted and funds were being channelled into its implementation. There is little to suggest, however, that white Australians ever genuinely believed that 'full-blood' Aboriginal people could assimilate or could be assimilated; the comparatively

²⁴ *Welfare Ordinance* 1953: Clause 14.

²⁵ For example Tony Austin 1989.

limited funds available for primary schooling, the emphasis on 'training' rather than 'education' and high level of white control on Aboriginal settlements are all testament to this. The assimilation of Aboriginal children who had some non-Aboriginal heritage, significant genetically rather than culturally, had been seen as possible long before voice was given to such a policy and was still current when, in 1951, the Administrator of the Northern Territory, F.J.S. Wise, wrote:

Assimilation of full-bloods will, of course, be difficult and slow but partly coloured people have inherited qualities and instincts which, if developed in a proper environment, will make the task of assimilation relatively easy and quick, even of those born in aboriginal camps and under nomadic conditions.²⁶

The discourse of assimilation for 'Half-caste' children could readily be couched in terms of benefits to the child, terms which sat easily with the individual. Focus on the child allowed assimilation documents to refer to the removal of the child not from the mother, as motherhood was positive and sanctified, but removal of the child from the Aboriginal camp, where 'Aboriginal camp' carried with it an image of filth and degradation in which no child of white heritage could, in good conscience, be left. No justification beyond this was needed; the 'social training and social adjustment' and the 'formal education and training for employment'²⁷ which the institutionalised children would receive was so highly regarded that the policy was rarely challenged.

While racist, Eurocentric attitudes had long been privileged in formulating Aboriginal policy, by the 1950s cases of maternal distress were being reported and given some, if limited, validity. But Aboriginal women were also expected to accept the view that it was in the best interests of their child, or children, to be removed from their care. The resignation of these women in the face of an implacable authority was willingly read by Native Affairs personnel as concurrence. Administrator Wise convinced himself and others of Aboriginal complicity in the process:

When a partly coloured child is found in a native camp, a Patrol Officer is directed to prepare the mother for eventual separation. This is done over a period of time, which may be as much as two years, by explaining to the mother and the tribal husband the advantages to be gained by removal of the child and the disadvantages of allowing him to remain in the camp. If the parents are reluctant to surrender the child, he is left undisturbed and the explanations are resumed at the next visit of the Patrol Officer. The parents' confidence is thus gradually strengthened until the child is willingly handed over.²⁸

Even where, as reported in 1952, 'some distress' to the mother was caused at the removal of her four year old daughter, but on the return of a Patrol Officer some seven months later was 'no indication of resentment' the administration was overly willing to believe that Aboriginal women supported a system that denied their motherhood.

From time to time the emotional 'attachment' of Aboriginal mothers to their children was raised but, as the discourse suggests, at a very superficial level. Neither the deep psychological interaction between mother and child nor the rights of the mother were given any weight; the 'attachment' referred to could easily be broken and the powerlessness of Aboriginal women was interpreted as compliance. The only recourse open to Aboriginal families was to physically place children beyond the reach of the Patrol Officer, a ruse which sometimes bought them time but rarely proved a long term solution. Administrator

²⁶ AANT, CRS F1 52/250.

²⁷ AANT, CRS F1 52/250.

²⁸ AANT, CRS F1 52/250.

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Wise acknowledged that 'in a white community, a mother's right to the control and care of her child may be overruled only for very grave reasons and after the most careful inquiry' but had no compunction in recommending to the Minister through the Secretary of the Department of Territories that assimilation could best be served through a blanket policy of removing all 'Half-caste' children from their Aboriginal mothers. Charles Duguid stood out against the policy. He had once favoured the removal of children as being 'in the best interests of the child' but in 1951 pointed out that 'in all enlightened countries today it is recognised that early separation of mother and child is a real misfortune'.²⁹ Rather than separate mother and child Duguid was persuaded that an education system that was extended to all Aboriginal children would facilitate schooling for 'Half-caste' children without family dislocation. In arguing thus he was either naively or provocatively ignoring the deeper motivation for removing children from Aboriginal families, that of placing them beyond the influence of Aboriginal culture. While, during this time, the desire for reducing cultural transmission remained a strongly influential factor, it was nevertheless being called into question as western countries began to reassess the position of indigenous peoples in the post-colonial world.

During the 1950s the age at which a child was to be removed came in for considerable debate. It was a debate which the individual could enter although again the racist imperatives were subsumed and the discourse centred on the child and what was in his or her 'best interests'. In 1952 when, for the first time, guidelines were established for the removal of children, the Secretary for the Department of the Territories overrode the recommendation of the Administrator and the Acting Director of Welfare that no child under the age of four should be taken away from its mother, claiming that 'the younger the child is at the time of removal the better for the child'.³⁰ Unstated by the Secretary, C.R. Lambert, in his claim for benefits to the child was the attitude that the younger the child the shorter the period of obvious emotional distress which the authorities would be forced to endure. It also reduced opportunity for cultural transmission prior to removal. As all that the children had learnt from their Aboriginal families would henceforth be discarded as undesirable, perhaps, indeed, the greater their youth the less traumatic their separation. L.R. Newby, Senior Education Officer with the Commonwealth Office of Education in the Northern Territory was undoubtedly aware of the Director of Welfare's concern for the influence of Aboriginal culture on the children when, in 1954 he reviewed and commented on the policy. He was of the opinion that early removal of the children would 'ease their social adjustment and would enable them to commence school with something closer to the background of the normal European child'.³¹ An integral part of Aboriginal culture learnt by the children was the language and this was also of concern to Newby as no value was invested in any language other than English. Real schooling must then be delayed for as long as it took the child to master English.

In reality, convenience proved to be the greatest single consideration. Thus if a mother was hospitalised at the time of the birth, the new-born child was placed in an institution before both mother and child could return to their home country. Visits to Darwin for other medical treatment were also seen as an opportune time for the institutionalisation of the child. More commonly the child's existence would come to the notice of the Patrol Officer as the child gained independence and moved beyond the immediate protection of mother or grandmother. It was then that the 1951 injunction to adequately prepare the mother for the

²⁹ Charles Duguid 1951.

³⁰ AANT, CRS F1 52/250.

³¹ AANT, CRS A1361/1 45/3/1, Part 5.

eventual loss of her child could be complied with. There were also the rare, but frequently cited, cases of mothers who sought institutional care for children of very young ages; the reasons why a mother might seek such care were rarely investigated. Figures and anecdotal evidence suggest that by time of the review children were more likely to be taken when they had reached school age: of the 109 children removed in the five years up to 1951, fifteen were under four years old at the time of removal, 84 were between the ages of five and twelve, and eleven had been removed between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. Figures for the Catholic home at Garden Point in 1954 suggest that Lambert's policy of 'the younger the better' was adopted as of the 138 children there, sixteen were under the age of four and nineteen were between the ages of five and nine. Several of the children were only months old;³² it was at about this time that a Patrol Officer delivered a seven day old baby to the mission who was then cared for by several of the older girls. By this time an increasing number of children, both of whose parents were 'Half-castes', were being sent to the so called 'Half-caste' homes as a result of court action which placed them in the custody of the State Childrens' Council.³³ Whether from 'Halfcaste' families or from Aboriginal mothers the motives and the results were the same.

An extension of the discourse couched in terms of promoting the interests of the child was that of facilitating his or her entry into the workforce. Genuine assimilation would have meant the right of the 'Half-caste' to exercise full choice in the economic arena but the limited education offered to children of mixed ancestry largely determined their socio-economic position in society. Assimilation, which was only ever intended to be partial, then became a mechanism for control. Occasionally the discourse would lose focus on the child and lapse into the benefits to be gained by the nation as a result of removing children from their Aboriginal families. In 1949 Moy reported that 'Half-castes' were making a definite contribution to the economic needs of the Northern Territory and that they could expect to be 'accepted insofar as the worth of their labour is concerned'.³⁴ By the mid-1950s there was some recognition, at least by those distant from the situation such as Lambert in Canberra, that the social stigma suffered by people perpetually relegated to the bottom rungs of society was in no-one's best interest.³⁵ Some suggested that the discontent thus generated would make 'Half-castes' a ready prey to communist subversion while Lambert was concerned about the 'moral regression' which might result. However, even while these concerns were being voiced in official correspondence the removal of children continued and it was not until a decade later that the incidence of removal was significantly decreased.

If further justification was needed for assimilation it was provided through the adoption of the belief that 'Half-caste' children left to grow up with their Aboriginal families became adolescent misfits in Aboriginal society. By the time their discontent and rejection was manifested it was too late for assimilation, the only grounds on which they would receive limited acceptance in white society. The extent to which this was a convenient belief easily embraced by the individual, but little based on fact, is difficult to determine. Evidence beyond the extant official records of the period suggest that it was only a hazy reflection of the facts. Many of those raised in Half-caste Homes were welcomed back into their Aboriginal families and where the returning family member was willing to demonstrate an

³² AANT, CRS F1 54/61.

³³ Legislative Council for the Northern Territory 1957. Of the 99 children placed in the care of the State Childrens' Council between 1952 and 1957, 89 were from 'part coloured families'.

³⁴ AANT, CRS F1 1943/24.

³⁵ AANT, CRS F1 52/250.

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affinity with Aboriginal culture the welcome was all embracing. Both David Trigger's³⁶ work on Gulf communities and Elizabeth Sommerlad's³⁷ study of Kormilda College confirm that acceptance and rejection in Aboriginal society were more likely to be based on a demonstrated valuing of Aboriginal culture rather than on shades of skin colour or biological heritage. Any maladjustment of 'Half-caste' young in Aboriginal society was more likely to have been brought about by differential treatment by whites than by blacks. Institutionalised 'Half-caste' children were taught by society at large to despise their Aboriginal heritage and on missions and pastoral stations they were taught that they were superior, if only marginally in some cases, to their families. Without considering the source of the conflict, or indeed the distressing position of 'Half-caste' created by white attitudes, Moy wrote:

The part-aborigine is striving to get away from his aboriginal ancestry - he cannot feel proud of his parents who were, in most cases, an ignorant aboriginal woman virtually raped by a dissolute white who later abandoned his unfortunate partner and still more unfortunate offspring to a benevolent Government. Unable to be proud of his ancestry the coloured person is endeavouring to merge into normal society as far as he can or is permitted.³⁸

'Between two worlds' was a myth that became a reality through white intervention in Aboriginal lives. The power of the discourse can be seen in its influence on the construction of identity by individual Aboriginal people, one of whom recently reflected that she was glad she had been taken so as not to be like 'them', leading a meaningless life in an Aboriginal camp.³⁹ Assimilationists would have counted this a success.

Personal commitment to a policy of removing children was highly dependent on the adoption of a discourse with which the individual could identify. Any self-respecting citizen could feel justified in pursuing or supporting a course of action which rescued an innocent child from 'ignorance' and 'dissolution' and provided such an 'unfortunate' with a chance to enter 'normal society'. Those into whose care the children were placed also adopted a discourse which allowed them to proceed with personal conviction. Thus institutionalised children were referred to as 'orphans' and 'deprived children' who were 'without families',⁴⁰ euphemisms which banished potentially disturbing images of bereaved Aboriginal families from mind. The creation of such myths was an important part of the psychological scaffolding for those implementing a removalist policy.

The success of a policy of assimilating children of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage into white society through removing them from Aboriginal culture and placing them in institutions began to be questioned in the late 1950s, and by the mid 1960s the policy was recognised as failing to meet its objectives. The institutional system was dismantled in the late 1960s and increasingly all Aboriginal children were able to attend schools in their own communities. This change of policy had little to do with any recognition of the rights of Aboriginal mothers. Nevertheless, although the hegemony of

³⁶ David Trigger 1989.

³⁷ Elizabeth Sommerlad 1976.

³⁸ AANT, CRS F1 52/250.

³⁹ Personal communication.

⁴⁰ For example see Bro. R. Pye, 1962, Looking Around Garden Point Mission Station on Melville Island, Annals, Vol. 73, No. 9, pp. 260-1 and Sister Mary Venard, 1974, History of the Australian Province of the Daughter of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, OLSH, Kensington, pp. 171-7.

patriarchy has not been entirely torn apart it has become frayed around the edges making any reintroduction of such a policy absolutely unacceptable and causing us to censure policy makers of the past. Nationalism as an ideology which made the rights of minority groups subordinate to the aspirations of the emerging nation has also fallen into disrepute and the legitimate ways in which women may bear and raise children has been considerably widened. Race ideologies have also undergone considerable change. While racist beliefs were clearly articulated in the early days of the removalist policies, they were less and less so over time although as a basis for the policy they did not change. Where removalists consistently articulated, and gained wide community support, for their policies in terms of promoting the welfare of children, they could not have done so had not a system of patriarchy been so entrenched. It was here, with the supporting ideologies of nationalism and racism, that they gained their legitimacy. So deep and all encompassing were the beliefs which supported the hegemonic structure that they needed no articulation or acknowledgment at the conscious level; they informed and legitimised through beliefs that people took as being immutable and based on 'truths' that were accepted as natural.

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