



Indigenous writers / Larissa Behrendt

I want to take a personal rather than an academic approach to why we write and why writing is really important to us. I am a Kamilaroi and Yualawuy woman and I wasn't really able to say that until I was in my early teens, even though when I was growing up we always knew that we were Aboriginal. The reason for that was because my Grandmother had been removed by the Removal Policy and then my father had been in a home since he was 5 and it wasn't until he had a near death experience – he had some terrible heart attacks – and was convalescing with the support and encouragement of my mother and he went on a journey to find his family. He used the archives for that. In fact that was the way in which he was able to make that connection with his family and to find out where he was from. He found in the archives the certificate of my grandmother's removal that had stated on it that she had been taken from a place called Dungalee Station, which is on the road between Lightning Ridge and Walgett and that she had a brother called Sonny Boney. That was the first link that he had to his family and where he was from. The archives kind of yielded up that information for him.

One thing that I noticed, even as a child, was the difference in my father from before he knew where his family was from to what he was like after he had that knowledge. My father really struggled a lot with his Aboriginality until he was able to place himself in the Aboriginal world. He struggled with that for the reason that I know a lot of the Aboriginal people in the room will understand and have seen a lot in our community. Having been brought up in a home, he was consistently taught that being indigenous meant being inferior and that he had to work especially hard to be accepted as a white person.

He used to tell a story of when he was in a classroom and they were talking about the explorers coming over the mountain and all the kids turned around to look at him when the teacher talked about how the Aboriginal people had stopped the explorers. Those sorts of experiences in the classroom had taught him to be very ashamed of who he was and I really noticed that when I was growing up. It's an interesting irony from within my family that my brother and I, who have both always been very proud of our Aboriginality, were always very much supported to feel that way because of my mother. She is not Aboriginal but always taught us from when we were very young to be proud of who we were, so we did not struggle the way my Dad sometimes did. The difference between him when he didn't know where his family was from and when he did know where his family was from was profound. As his daughter, I saw him turn from somebody who was very self-conscious and quite distant from us as a parent to somebody who actually felt that he had a lot to give us. A lot of what he had to give us was information about our people and our stories - to tell us who we were and how we were connected to the world.

When I have my best memories of my father they are times when he would tell me those stories and his adventures with his people and our family at Walgett. Even as a child it always struck me that the impact the Removal Policy had on my family, on my grandmother and my father, was something that should be told. I was always very frustrated when I was going through high school that my classmates, and my brother and I were the only Aboriginal kids in the school, my classmates knew nothing about the removal policy – had never even heard of it. In fact I remember one time a classmate of mine expressed surprise that Aboriginal people were massacred on the frontier. The level of ignorance is something I know many people in the room are very familiar with. I always thought when I had that experience myself that the key must be, if we tell the stories about how those policies' impact on people's lives, surely it must make people understand where we are coming from. And even if it doesn't mean that they are going to be accepting of all of the rights that we as indigenous

people feel are inherent to us, they will at least understand why we feel they are important, why it is we talk about land, why it is we talk about culture and why it is we talk about the important capacity to make decisions that affect our lives.

I really believed the importance of storytelling but I have to say that belief was shaken a little bit with the Howard Government's reaction to the *Stolen Generations Report*. I'd believed that the more people knew about the stories... I was really shocked when they had the response to that report that they did. To me, one of the things that I think is really great about the *Bringing Them Home Report* when we have so many reports done on Aboriginal issues and so many instances where data is collected about Aboriginal experience; I think the power of the *Bringing Them Home Report* was that it was really faithful to the stories that people told. It included within the report itself, a lot of the stories that people so generously told about their own experience, and really importantly, the experiences that people had when they lost a child or a sibling to that policy. So it went to give a really broad reach of those stories and to me, that is why the report was so powerful.

It was interesting that the government's response to it was to say first of all it was only 1 in 10 children who were taken away, so their immediate response was to try to write out the stories and to move us back onto the statistics that don't have a human face to them. In saying that it was only 1 in 10 who were taken away, even though everyone knows that is a really contested figure, but when you say it like that, you are discounting the experiences of the 9 people who were left behind. The other thing that was really infuriating about the Report, was that rather than focusing on the power of the stories, it sought to play pedantic games about the way in which those stories had been characterised. It kind of turned into a debate about the appropriate meaning of cultural genocide, rather than a debate about the stories. And to me that was a really important lesson about the fact that sometimes when people hear stories it doesn't open their understanding and their hearts, it actually closes them and makes them put a wall up.

I was overseas at the time that those responses came out and I remember how angry I felt about it and also because I was overseas, I decided that I would like to write a book about my family's experiences to make sure that they were captured and people couldn't write them out. And so I thought that I would write a book about the impact of the removal policy on three generations of an Aboriginal family because I also wanted to counter that argument well it happened all those years ago, so nobody is living with it now, to really capture how I know people in my community still live with the impacts of that everyday.

I should just say before I talk a little more about the novel and how I tried to tell a historical tale in a fictional way. One thing I was really struck by when I first decided to write the book was people asked me how I was going to juggle being a lawyer with being a writer and which pathway I was going to choose. I thought that the dichotomy was a really interesting one that people were drawing. Sure, when you want to write non-fiction it is a very different process than when you want to write fiction. You know one you have to research really hard and the other you can just make it up; well not really, but it is a really different process and you need to be in a different space. It seems to me that if you are involved with law reform, and the stolen generation's issues are a really good example of that, is that it is so much more powerful to have stories to explain why it is that you want to have law reform than to put forward a very nice, convincing legal argument. It's the power of the human impact of law that is why we question whether it is just or not. Storytelling plays a very important role in how we evaluate our laws.

The second thing about it is that coming from an indigenous tradition, I never thought about them as being very separate at all because in our culture, we tell stories as a way to keep our law alive. Although they are told as stories and they are often presented especially in books as children's stories, they are actually stories that explain our world view. They explain our value systems, they explain our rights and responsibilities, they explain our connection to land. Those stories can be evidence in native title cases to prove our connection to what we hold dear. Those stories are really about law and so from an indigenous perspective, we don't challenge the difference in that way, in the same way that European law thinks of itself as a truth and then as a fiction.

I have to say as an indigenous person and being a lawyer, I never thought this idea that law was a truth and then you have these fictions was very convincing. Probably that was

because I went through law school at the time when we were still terra nullius and I knew from that, the law isn't this thing that we hold up like the constitution that is somehow a truth and it is unmovable unless we go through special processes to really think about how we are going to change this law. But it is actually a set of stories and that is what terra nullius was – it was a way that the English law tried to tell us a story about how Australia came to have legitimacy and it wasn't one that Aboriginal people bought very much. Even with the Mabo case when that was overturned, if you read the Mabo case, one of the interesting things that it does is that it actually rewrites a different story of settlement which is also a contested story of how we came to be a nation. It seems to me that this idea that somehow law is a truth and then you have stories is a bit of a false dichotomy even in the western tradition.

I wanted to talk a little bit more about my book, just to sort of show how when the impetus is to teach as well as to tell a story from the heart, we use the historical record as a very strong basis for doing that. I thought the best way to do that was to read a little bit from the book and as it turned out I picked something that covers the Freedom Rides which is something that has already been a theme this morning. I wrote about North West NSW so of course that was going to be a big issue.

Just to contextualise, I wrote a book that was really about homecoming because that was my father's experience with the way that he came to terms with the impact of the Removal Board. The other thing about it too for me, was when I was first accepted into Harvard Law School, it was a very big time of mixed emotions within our family and one of the things my Dad did before I went over there for the first time was to take me out to Dungalee Station to see that country before I left Australia. He took me around there and showed me all of these places that were still special and imprinted on the memory of our family and our community. Places where people were massacred as well as the place where my grandmother was conceived and the place where she was born. But he also took me to the place where my grandmother had actually been removed by the Protection Board – the very spot that she was stolen from. It was one of the most profound moments of my life to stand on that spot and feel the closing of that circle. Because it was in the context of that great achievement, it was a very bittersweet moment for me. I thought it was a really interesting way that you could tell the success of Aboriginal communities to have survived that, here we are, 3 decades later and we were able to overcome this terrible injustice that happened to our family.

To still know all of those parts of the landscape and to still be there as a family and to know it doesn't matter. I have to say this is a thought that has really held me strong through the Howard years. It doesn't matter what policies government inflicts on Aboriginal people, the worst they can do, like removing Aboriginal children, still will not take away the vibrancy and strength of Aboriginal culture and community to survive it. Even after all of that, we can come back to these places and say, I'm still Yulauwuy and I'm still Gamillaroi, and that was a really important powerful moment .

I thought that at the same time as you can tell it as a story of great success and celebrate that, there are all the sadnesses that are underneath it. For example, that was the first time I'd had the chance to see those places. We didn't grow up having contact with all the Elders who had all those great stories that could have given us so much. We didn't speak our language fluently and there are all these members of my father's family who he didn't know what had happened to and he had that experience of having that fractured family. I think one of the biggest aspects of the tragedy of the story for me was that on the Protection Board document it said that my grandmother had a brother. I am very close to my brother and when you have that it is very easy to see how much poorer your life would be if you didn't have that sibling relationship and that was something that my grandmother was deprived of through her life because of that policy. That to me was one of the unsung tragedies of the story.

I will just read a little bit from the book to highlight how I tried to marry the story of my family and the facts with the fictional narrative that tries to teach as well touch people. When my father went back to find his family, and as people here from the area would know, there's quite a few families called Boney out that way, so he had a few false starts before he found the right family. When he finally did find the right family, he knocked on the door and he was met with a really hostile reception, which he wasn't expecting. And the reason why the woman at the door was so angry with him was because she had been married to Sonny Boney and he had died 3 months before my father had arrived and he had been looking for

his sister his whole life. Although once she got over that initial anger she became very supportive of my Dad and welcomed him in, I thought that was a real tragedy.

The bit I want to read to you is after that first encounter between the character of Marilyn Boney and Bob who is based on my father, and he returns to talk to Marilyn some more about his mother and uncle.

Bob knocked again on Marilyn Boney's door. The morning air was cool but hinted at the searing heat that would follow in the next few hours.

"Alright, I heard you," Marilyn muttered from behind the door as she opened it. She held the door open, sweeping her hand towards the back of the house, directing Bob through.

"Sit down," she said, and he pulled out a chair at a blue laminated table in a spotless blue kitchen. She slammed a cup of team with milk in it before him. Bob was too nervous to tell her he preferred it black.

"Well, what do you want to know?" she asked. But before he could answer, she continued, "He was the most decent man I ever met, I can tell you that. Not like those ones around here who drink too much and hit their women and kids 'round. Always worked hard to provide for us.

"We has the six kids," she continued, turning her wedding band. "Sonny always thought that if you had six kids, even if bad things happened to them, chances were you'd be left with at least one. That might sound a bit pessimistic but that's how it was when we were younger. Between the Welfare and the sickness."

Her eyes turned from her hands to look into Bob's eyes.

"You wouldn't know how tough it was for blacks out here in those days. During the war, there was work around, men like your uncle could leave the reserves and work for real wages. As soon as it was over, they were pushed back to the margins – shearing, branding, fencing. He even tried opal mining for a while. Didn't like handling the stones. The old people always told us not to touch them. But he would always put food on this table." She tapped the laminated surface with her finger, making the whole thing shake. "Even if it was possum. I hate possum. Tastes like gum tree. He remembered the old ways, but our kids weren't much interested in learning them. What do they care about being able to find water in the roots of gum trees when the riverbed is dry. They just get a bottle of it from the store."

"And the missions. I grew up at Narromine where there was no mission. My parents moved us there from Brewarrina for that reason. You can't imagine the conditions people had to live in. They kept anybody off the mission who started trouble and 'trouble' was just complaining about the conditions. And if you lived there, the stores sold everything at inflated prices and the managers kept all the money. Did things like keep two docket books to rip off the little money the blacks living there had. They were dreadful places – frequent fights, too much alcohol even though there wasn't supposed to be grog there."

Bob heard the front door open and footsteps in the hall.

"You took your time gettin' back," Marilyn said to Henry as he entered the kitchen.

"Can I have a cup of tea, Mum?"

"Get it yourself. I'm not the housemaid."

Henry rolled his eyes. "Want another one?" he asked Bob. Bob shook his head. As Henry busied himself with the kettle, Marilyn turned her attention back to Bob.

"Many white folks didn't like having blacks in the town. Always needed us to work for 'em but didn't want to live with us. You don't know what it was like back then. There was violence in the street and curfews to control us, especially the men. It was an offence to be drunk if you were black, and we were arrested whether we'd been drinking or not. I've seen men

handcuffed and beaten with batons for no other reason than that they were black. Beaten until they died.

“When the Welfare Board was shut down, they just wouldn’t rent houses to us. Here in this town there was a Whites Only toilet and they would never let our kids in the swimming pool. Separate church services, separate playgrounds at the public school, separate seating in the picture show. Wouldn’t let us inside the hospitals either – put us on the back verandah.

“But Sonny wasn’t one to complain. Not like most of this mob, sit on their bum, do nothing and expect it all to happen for ‘em. He kept his sense of humour. He told me once that he didn’t want to leave his eyes to science ‘cause he couldn’t read...so they wouldn’t be no good to anyone.”

Henry chuckled. “Yeah, Dad would say a thing like that.”

Marilyn shot him a look to let him know who was telling the story. “And he was a smart man, too. Intelligent. We weren’t given the education back then. Not given the opportunities our kids were.” She levelled a stare at Henry. “But we both believed that we had the same rights as everyone else. Sonny wasn’t like me. He wasn’t involved with the medical service and the legal service. But he’d worked hard all his life and he knew what was fair and what wasn’t. he used to read a lot about what was going on. He used to read anything he could about Aboriginal people looking for their rights. ‘We do not ask for charity, we ask for justice,’ he’d say.

“You wouldn’t know where that came from. It was something tht Jack Patton and William Ferguson wrote. He liked that. Always believed that if we had citizenship rights, everything else would follow – you know, equal wages and equal education opportunities.”

“Dad was always saying ‘It’s not charity, it’s justice’,” Henry added.

“You should have spent more time listening o him,” Marilyn snapped. “Stop interrupting and go out and mow that lawn before the sun gets too hot. When I’m finished here, you can take your cousin over to see Granny.”

Henry left the kitchen through the back door. Marilyn returned her attention to Bob.

“We were both here when the Freedom Riders cam through. Got a picture of me with Charles Perkins. You should have seen the reception they got.” Marilyn started laughing. “I don’t know what those white kids were thinking when they hopped a bus to come here. Met with hostility, tomatoes and eggs. Punched and heckled. Got the wind up the white folks who thought they were just snotty-nosed uni students coming from Sydney to stir up trouble on issues they knew nothing about. But,” she added more seriously, “it meant a lot to your uncle to know that people outside of here cared how we was being treated.

“I never had much time for those other uni types who came out here. They’d sit down and take our stories. Give the old men wine and cigarettes. Then piss on off back to the city, publish their papers and never give anything back to the people here. Old Reggie Green used to just make up stories so he could keep gettin’ drunk. I tell my kids they should get an education. Help us keep our own stories. Not give them to anyone else. Especially not people who don’t put anything back into our community.”

Bob could see the tears welling in her eyes. He stared at his cold milky tea. “Do you mind if I look at some of the pictures you have in the hall?”

Marilyn waved him in that direction. He walked through the lounge room to the hallway where the papered walls were covered in photographs – weddings, debuts, family portraits and a younger Henry dressed in a football jersey, arms folded across his chest, chin jutting towards the camera, eyes sparkling.

Marilyn walked into the hallway and, after quickly dabbing her eye, said, “Yep. Six children and nine grandchildren. Be hard on ‘em this Christmas with their Pop gone.

“He missed your mother ever day, he did. You could see it in his eyes, the sadness.” She was looking at the photographs as Bob glanced sideways at her. She seemed softer now.

She turned to Bob and tilted her head. “You know, he told me once that he sometimes felt that she was within his reach, that sometimes he could swear she was standing behind him, and only by turning around to face the thin air could he prove himself wrong. He wasn’t a superstitious man but he told me she used to visit him in his dreams.”

Marilyn was quiet for a moment. Then she snapped, breaking her own thoughts, “That’s why you should’ve knocked on our door three months ago.”

Behrendt, Larissa (2004). *Home*. University of Queensland Press. Queensland, Australia.