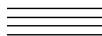


Larissa Behrendt

Home: The Importance of Place  
to the Dispossessed

I am a Kamilaroi and Yualawuy woman, and I wasn't really able to say that until I was in my early teens. When I was growing up, we always knew that we were Aboriginal, but because my grandmother had been taken from her family under the Aboriginal removal policy, my father, for reasons that are now unclear, had been placed in an orphanage at the age of five. It wasn't until he had a near-death experience—he had some terrible heart attacks—and was convalescing that, with the support and encouragement of my mother, he went on a journey to find his family and home.

My father used the state archives as a starting point, and that was the way he located his family, to find out where he was from. Buried in the archives was the certificate that recorded my grandmother's removal. It stated that she had been taken from a place called Dungalear Station (a pastoral property in northwestern New South Wales) and that she had a brother called Sonny Boney. That was the first link my father had to his family and where he was from.



Even as a child I noticed the difference in my father from the time before he knew where his family was from to what he was like after he had that knowledge. My father struggled with his Aboriginality until he was able to place himself in the Aboriginal world. He struggled because, like many Aboriginal people, he was taught while he was growing up that being Aboriginal meant being inferior and that he had to work hard to be accepted.

My father used to tell me a story from when he was in school and the teacher was talking about the explorers coming over the Blue Mountains. All the other children in the class turned around to look at him accusingly when the teacher talked about how the Aboriginal people had stopped the explorers. Those sorts of experiences taught him to be ashamed of who he was.

The difference in my father between when he didn't know where his family was from and when he did was profound. I saw him turn from somebody who was very self-conscious and quite distant from his family to somebody who actually felt that he had something to offer. A lot of what he had to give was information about our people and our stories—to tell us who we were and how we were connected to the world. My best memories of my father were of his stories and adventures with his people and our family.

Even as a child, it struck me that the removal policy's impact on those who were taken away and the families who lost their children was a story that needed to be told. In high school, where my brother and I were the only Aboriginal children, I was very frustrated to learn that my classmates knew nothing of the removal policy—had never even heard of it. Once a classmate of mine expressed surprise that Aboriginal people were massacred on the frontier.

At the time I thought that if stories like my grandmother's and father's could be told about how those policies impact people's lives, it would make people understand who we were, what our history was. Even if it didn't mean granting the rights that we as Aboriginal people feel entitled to, they might at least understand why we feel such rights are important, why it is we talk about land, why it is we talk about culture, and why it is we talk about self-determination and the ability to be involved in decisions that will affect our lives. I believed that the more people knew about the stories, the more people would at least understand why Aboriginal people have the experiences and the political aspirations that we have.

My belief in the importance of storytelling was shaken by the response

of Prime Minister John Howard's administration to the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report.<sup>1</sup> One of the great strengths of the report was that while many reports about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are filled with statistics, this one was faithful to the stories people told while giving evidence to the inquiry. It included the stories of those taken away and of the psychological, physical, and sexual abuse suffered under state care. It also included the stories of people left behind and the parents who grieved for their children. The inclusion of those stories made the report all the more important and powerful.

The official response of the Howard government was that only one in ten children was taken away, a clear attempt to silence the voices within the report and replace them with statistics. Not only is the "one in ten" statistic contested, but it discounts the experiences of the nine people who were left behind—the parents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, grandparents. The base statistics, the numbers of stolen generations, cannot begin to account for the full extent of the trauma endured by Aboriginal communities. The government response to the report sought to play pedantic, semantic games about the ways in which those stories had been characterized. It questioned the use of the term *cultural genocide* and said that removal had been done with the "best of intentions" and was sometimes for the good of the children. To me, the important lesson illustrated by the official response is that sometimes when people hear stories it doesn't open their hearts and improve their understanding—instead, people put up defensive walls.

I wrote *Home* about the impact of child removal on three generations of an Aboriginal family to counter the argument that there were no persisting effects of the policy that had formally ended in New South Wales in 1968. Far from being a thing of the past, these traumatic events still affect people in my community. Trauma, after all, is what happens after the event, rather than being located in or restricted to the event itself. I wanted to write about my family's experiences with the removal policy to make sure that they were recorded, so that people could not eliminate them from history.<sup>2</sup>

When I started writing the novel, many people asked how I was going to juggle being a lawyer with being a writer. But in our culture, in Aboriginal culture, we tell stories as a way to keep our law. The dichotomy between law and story is, from a cultural perspective, fascinating. In Aboriginal culture, laws are told as stories, often presented for children. These cultural stories

actually explain our worldview, value systems, and rights and responsibilities, and they explain our connection to land. These stories can be used as evidence in native title cases to prove our connection to what we hold dear. Even within non-Aboriginal culture, laws create and perpetuate official stories.

When I attended law school, I was taught in a class on property that Australia had been described as *terra nullius*, the legal and political fiction of Australia as an “unpeopled land” or empty land, in order to justify its colonization. This was the first non-Aboriginal story read as law in Australia.<sup>3</sup> In 1992, the Australian High Court’s decision in *Mabo v. Queensland* overturned this legal fiction,<sup>4</sup> but it struck me then that the law couldn’t be described as an unmovable “truth.” It was actually a set of stories, and *terra nullius* has been the law story of Australian legitimacy. It wasn’t one that Aboriginal people were convinced by or accepted. The idea that somehow law is a “truth,” which stands in stark contrast to storytelling, is a false dichotomy, even in the Western legal tradition.



In writing my novel, I used the historical record. I looked at historical events and figures, and I wove them into the story. I blended that with what I knew of my family history, from the stories I had heard from many Aboriginal people about their experiences and the experiences of their families, and I also went back and reread the stories in *Bringing Them Home*. I merged all of these voices to capture the struggle to deal with removal from family and the long journey home.

My novel is about “homecoming” and “home.” My father’s experience of finding his family was a homecoming for him that I wanted to capture, but I also had my own homecoming. When I was accepted into Harvard Law School, my father decided to take me out to our traditional country before I left for the United States. He took me out to Dungaleer Station and showed me all the places that were still special and imprinted on the memory of our family and our community. We saw 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 Aborigines’ 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. It was bittersweet. I

could mourn all the tragedies that had befallen the family over the years—the lost family members, the loss of culture and language, the heartache, the disappointment, the home that was lost and now returned to. But at the same time I could celebrate our survival and the knowledge that, three decades later, my father and I were able to overcome this terrible injustice that happened to our family.

I found much strength from the knowledge that no matter what policies the government inflicts on Aboriginal people, even the worst it can do, such as removing Aboriginal children, will still not take away the vibrancy and strength of Aboriginal culture and community. After all our family has been through, we can come back to our traditional country and say, “I’m still Yualawuy and I’m still Kamilaroi.” That is a very powerful thing to be able to say. Those feelings were reinforced when I lived overseas, away from my family and community, and realized that it didn’t matter what choices I made with my life or where I happened to live, my Aboriginality was inherent and undiminished by distance from home.



When my father went back to find his family, there were several families named “Boney” in the area, so he had a few false starts before he found the right one. When he finally did, he knocked on the door and was met with a really hostile reaction, 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, who had been looking for his sister (my grandmother) his whole life but had died three months before my father arrived on the doorstep.

Bob knocked again on Marilyn Boney’s door. . . .

“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 tea 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. . . .

"You wouldn't know how tough it was for blacks out here in those days. . . . 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. . . . 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. . . ."

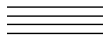
Bob could see the tears welling in her eyes. He stared at his cold milky tea. "Do you mind if I look at some of the pictures you have in the hall?"

Marilyn waved him in that direction. He walked . . . to the hallway where the papered walls were covered in photographs—weddings, debuts, family portraits. . . .

Marilyn walked into the hallway and, after quickly dabbing her eye, said, ". . . 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."<sup>5</sup>



While the impact of being dispossessed from traditional land and being removed from family makes for distinctive stories about home and homecoming for Aboriginal people, non-Aboriginal people in Australia also struggle to find the story of home.

In her novel *The Secret River*, Kate Grenville tells the story of a family who moves from England to the new penal colony in New South Wales when the husband is convicted of stealing. At the end of the book, having claimed a piece of land and made a small fortune from trade, the family builds a colonial mansion as a testament to their wealth.<sup>6</sup> To convey the dispossession on which this house was built, Grenville cleverly places the foundation of the house on top of a stone used during ceremonies performed by Aborigi-

nal clans. This ceremonial spot is signified by the presence of a large fish carved into its surface and suggests that people who lived in the area for the previous thousands of years have been pushed away, massacred, or died of illness. Grenville's metaphor is a striking one for Indigenous Australians—the large house, splendid in its opulence, built on the resources taken from the Aboriginal people, a vision that is a striking reminder of the history that lies beneath the modern Australian state. Just as important, it is a metaphor for the ways in which that history has sometimes been deliberately written out to give the impression of more noble beginnings.

Since the decade of reconciliation (1991–2001), the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and *Bringing Them Home*, it is harder to argue that Aboriginal people no longer form part of the Australian consciousness. The predominant telling of history now acknowledges Aboriginal presence—even if we still see struggles between academics and other commentators about how many people were killed on the frontier and even whether there were massacres at all. But how to navigate that relationship has continued to be the question that has been most difficult to answer. This is further compounded by how dominant Australian culture imagines Aboriginal Australia and the vast chasm between that image and reality.

When Australia hosts an international event or seeks to represent an image to overseas visitors, consumers, or corporations, it is not shy about using select images of Aboriginal people or symbols derived from Aboriginal art and artifacts. One need look no further than the incorporation of a boomerang into the official 2000 Olympic Games motif, a design aimed to meet visitor expectations for the exotic, a logo to stimulate the souvenir trade. The incorporation of Aboriginal imagery and iconography into marketing strategies by corporate Australia, especially with the intention of appealing to overseas tourists as part of the Olympic Games, came at a time when the United Nations Committee to Eliminate All Forms of Racial Discrimination was calling into question Australia's record on indigenous rights on a range of issues, including the Native Title Amendment Act 1998.<sup>7</sup> This highlights the extent to which the lives of Indigenous Australians can be disconnected from the images and artwork used to represent them and their history. It shows the extent to which Australians are able to detach images of Indigenous Australia from the politicized environment in which people actually live and, in the case of indigenous artists, create.

This invisibility of the real in the face of the powerfully imagined creates a kind of psychological *terra nullius*, where, even though Aboriginal

people are physically present, they seem to be invisible, not registering in the national consciousness. The psychological *terra nullius* is most evident in the urban areas of Australia where indigenous presence is pervasive.

I'm often asked, "How often do you visit Aboriginal communities?" I reply, "Every day, when I go home." The question reveals the popular misconception that "real" Aboriginal communities only exist in rural and remote areas, and it is a reminder of how invisible our communities are to the people who live and work side by side with us. I suspect that this view, seeing Aboriginal people as having cohesive communities only outside of cities, finds its genesis in the once-orthodox account of Australia's peaceful settlement, where Aboriginal people naturally gave way to the superiorities (so the story would be told) of British civilization. This is compounded by the view that those Aboriginal people who *do* live within a metropolis like Sydney are displaced, that is, they are not from here and therefore do not have special ties here. This view can remain even if the Aboriginal family has been living here longer than the observer's family. While it is true that an Aboriginal person's traditional land has fundamental importance, it is also true that postinvasion history and experience have created an additional layer of memory and significance for other parts of the country.

If I think of my traditional land, the land of the Kamilaroi, the areas of Lightning Ridge, Brewarrina, and Coonamble, I think of the part of Redbank Mission, where my grandmother was born, or Dungaleur Station, on the road between Walgett and the ridge, where the Aborigines' Protection Board removed her from her family. I remember our elder, Granny Green (and my own grandmother's cousin), taking me and my father across the paddocks. She could remember the spiritual places but also the newer history of the landscape—where children were stolen and, in whispers, where the massacres had taken place. The "traditional," the colonial, and the present are a fluid history connecting place and kin in our culture. Home is a special, specific place. Home is everywhere. Home is the long "lost" past. Home is like a perpetual present.

So, too, wherever we have lived, there is a newer imprint and history, one that meaningfully creates a sense of belonging within Aboriginal communities formed in urban areas. These cultural and political histories are littered across the area where we now live. I live next door to what was once Australia Hall, the place where the Aborigines Progressive Association organized the "Day of Mourning and Protest" in 1938, one of the foundational events of our civil rights movement. I also think of places like



the Aboriginal Medical Service, where community meetings and political movements have taken place. I think of places like South Sydney Leagues Club, which attracted young Aboriginal men from across the state, including my uncle, to come to the city and play football. I think of Redfern Park, where I heard the prime minister of Australia (Paul Keating, not Howard) acknowledge that this was an invaded country.

There is, of course, another dimension to the Aboriginal communities in the Sydney area, and that is their tightly knit kinship and family networks. It is an aspect of contemporary Indigenous Australian culture that kinship and family ties bind our communities in a way that reinforces our more traditional obligations, but the ties interweave more widely than they once did. Once a network of clans within the Eora nation, Sydney now has a large Aboriginal population and has clusters of Aboriginal communities in La Perouse, Redfern, Marrickville, Mount Druitt, Penrith, and Cabramatta. Across these enclaves are family and kinship networks that tie them together.<sup>8</sup>

One of the real consequences of overlooking the indigenous presence and experience is to exclude us from participating in civic life in a meaningful way. This is true in relation to nation-building activities such as drafting the Constitution, voting, working for real wages, and participation in policy making (whether that be about Aboriginal people themselves or broader collective decision making such as town planning and urban development).

This is not to argue that Sydney's population thinks that there are no Aboriginal people here. Indeed, the media attention becomes intense in moments of political crisis, such as when there are socioeconomic problems or racial tension. Through images of youths committing violence, engaging in criminal activity, and displaying antisocial, self-destructive behavior, the Indigenous Australian presence often breaks into the consciousness of Sydney residents through media stories such as the so-called Redfern riots that depicted young Aboriginal people throwing bottles and rocks at police as part of a heated confrontation.<sup>9</sup> But little attention is paid to the vibrant and functional Aboriginal communities throughout the metropolitan area. There is no media coverage of the successful—and rather uneventful—day-to-day lives of Aboriginal people who participate in a broad range of community activities. We do not hear stories about the success of Aboriginal women's legal services; our indigenous radio service, Gadigal; Murawina Community Child Care Centre; and homework centers for our children. These community-building activities and organizations—these political,

cultural, and spiritual homes for Aboriginals—are hidden by images of out-of-control and violent Aboriginal people who are seen as lawless, without a sense of responsibility for community, and dangerous. Aboriginal people are thus seen as a threat to peaceful and cohesive community life within the city. People become fearful of the Aboriginal community and see it as a danger to the social fabric rather than contributing to it. These images also reinforce the impression that no cohesive Aboriginal community exists in urban areas, and we once again become invisible.

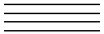
There does seem to be a greater interest in including Aboriginal people in broader community-building activities related to green spaces within metropolitan and urban centers. For example, in the national parks that surround Sydney, there are more active initiatives to engage Indigenous Australians in comanagement arrangements, ecotourism, educational programs about bush tucker, and resource management. While I do not want to diminish the importance of this collaboration, it is noticeable that there is a greater willingness to include Aboriginal people in the “natural” and “environmental” aspects of planning and land management than there is in the planning of urban spaces and communities. It is hard to ignore the “noble savage” romanticism in this preference for Indigenous Australian involvement with plants and animals instead of seeking partnerships in building the community through activities such as development and design of infrastructure and housing. The challenges of recognizing “traditional” Aboriginal communities over the newer, more fluid contemporary cultures is not just a tension for non-Aboriginal people to navigate in relation to how they integrate this presence into their own sense of community; it also has more practical challenges for accommodating Aboriginal people into urban areas.

The focus on—and romanticism of—the “cultural,” especially in the stagnant “traditional” stereotypes of Aboriginal people in urban areas, occurs at the expense of the social and economic needs of those communities. The focus on “traditional” cultural aspects ignores the presence of the contemporary interweaving of other Aboriginal nations into the community in the area.<sup>10</sup>

Health issues such as lower life expectancy and higher infant mortality rates, lower levels of education, higher levels of unemployment, and large and increasing overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system are all dimensions of the unique needs and circumstances of Aboriginal people in the Sydney area. It is not surprising that specific

services, such as the Aboriginal Medical Service and the Aboriginal Legal Service, were first formed in the Redfern area to address the unique needs of Aboriginal people and as a response to the racism that many experienced when they tried to access mainstream services.

Under the current national arrangements for indigenous funding, there is an increasing focus on Aboriginal communities in rural and remote areas. This has already meant a redirection of funds away from urban centers like Sydney to those places that are now seen as a priority. This focus on remote communities—the ruralization of the Aboriginal condition—has been driven by the findings of the Commonwealth Grants Commission’s 2008 *Indigenous Funding Inquiry: Final Report*, which identified areas of relative need predominantly in remote areas.<sup>11</sup> No one would quibble about the needs of remote communities, especially those that have seen disadvantage and social problems up close, but since there is just as much need in other Aboriginal communities—and the statistics back this up—it seems an abandonment of government responsibility not to provide adequate resources to address the needs in one type of community because the government has a preference for another.



The federal government estimates that about 120,000 Aboriginal people live in remote communities. Current estimates of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community would mean that remote communities would make up about one-quarter of the Indigenous Australian population.<sup>12</sup> This leaves out communities in Walgett, Redfern, Framlingham, Brisbane, Melbourne, and Sydney. When considering the poverty in areas such as Mount Druitt and Redfern and in looking at the range of socioeconomic issues that face those communities, a policy stating that these are issues just as easily tackled by mainstreaming—as opposed to targeted—policy and program delivery is not convincing. While it is perhaps easier politically to gather support from the broader Australian community for dealing with problems in Aboriginal communities where the population looks more like “real” Aborigines, it is irresponsible—and in the end, bad policy—to ignore the other three-quarters of the Aboriginal community.

The policy of diverting resources from urban and rural to rural and remote communities is also underpinned by the ideology of mainstreaming and the belief that communities in urban areas in particular should be serviced by mainstream organizations. The danger with the move is

that policies of mainstreaming have failed to shift the poorer health, lower levels of education, higher levels of unemployment, and poorer standards of housing that Aboriginal communities have experienced, and yet they have not offered ways to protect Aboriginal cultural heritage, interest in land, and language.<sup>13</sup> To date, the government has not offered a way in which Aboriginal people can play a central role in making decisions that will impact their families and communities.

In the past, mainstreaming failed because it could not target issues that arise in Aboriginal communities relating to health, education, housing, and employment. This is because mainstream services need to develop specific mechanisms and strategies for Aboriginal clients, and they must do this with limited resources. Furthermore, Aboriginal people claim that they often experience racism within those mainstream services. Particularly regarding the delivery of health services, such claims were well documented in the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* and specifically in the case of Arthur Moffitt. Moffitt was found on a train and taken to jail because he was thought to be drunk; in fact, he was undergoing a hyperglycemic episode and subsequently died in custody.<sup>14</sup>

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When Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered an apology to members of the stolen generation on February 13, 2008, it was indeed a historic occasion. The apology was long overdue. The necessity for such an apology was a key finding in *Bringing Them Home*, which recommended that an official apology should be offered by all levels of government. All state governments had already delivered an apology in some form long ago, but Prime Minister Howard's tenacious view that such an apology was unnecessary ironically meant that, when an apology was finally delivered eleven years later, the occasion took on national and historical significance.

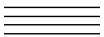
The day was also important for many of the Aboriginal people I spoke to around the country because they were heartened by just how many non-Indigenous Australians obviously believed that the day was significant and important also. They turned up in Canberra, in public places, and at community events to share the moment, and along with Aboriginal people, they were moved and uplifted by the prime minister's speech. To his credit, Rudd devoted a section of his speech, which it is believed he wrote himself, to addressing those in the Australian community who did not understand why the apology was necessary. And in part he can take credit for the fact

that only a third of Australians were in favor of the apology before it was given, but two-thirds thought it was a positive act afterward.

The speech moved so many Australians because for so long, especially during the Howard era, we had been governed by the politics of fear: fear of others, fear of terrorism, fear of economic insecurity, fear of the history of our home, fear of critiquing the myth of *terra nullius*. During that same period, Australia had a prime minister who had a personally held ideological view that the history and experiences of Aboriginal people, particularly those of the stolen generations, should be downplayed and trivialized, if not hidden altogether. During his tenure as prime minister, Howard reinforced and perpetuated his view that our country's history should not acknowledge events or perspectives if it made people feel guilty about their past. A majority of the people responded positively, after such a period of negating history, to the more progressive and inclusive vision for Australia that Rudd articulated in his speech. For the Aboriginal people I spoke to, it was uplifting to see that so many Australians did not share Howard's view, one that had dominated for so long, but instead clearly understood that they could not escape what had happened in the past and should acknowledge that, without guilt, but with a positive view about how we can do better in the future.

February 13, 2008, was also significant for Aboriginal people because the commitment by the new Australian Labor Party government to deliver an apology for the stolen generations so unequivocally distinguished its position from that of the previous coalition government. It also indicated to Aboriginal people that after the problematic policies of the Howard era, there was finally an opportunity for things to be different in Aboriginal affairs. It certainly indicated an opportunity for a renewed dialogue about the unfinished, ultimately unfinishable business of reconciliation.

My only real source of sadness on the day was that my father had not lived to see it. He died the day before his sixty-sixth birthday in 2006.



Gough Whitlam once said that the rest of the world will judge Australia by the way it treats its indigenous people. This will be true of Rudd. He has given the apology, but he has not settled the question of reparation. He has said he wants a national representative body, but we have yet to see how he will achieve this. He has said he will sign the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, but we do not know how or if he will enact it into

domestic law. He has said he wants a research-based policy approach, but he is still following some of the ideologically driven policies of the previous government.

Rudd will always be remembered for the unequivocal apology he delivered on February 13, 2008, but it is what he does next that will define his legacy. As the aunties in my community said to me after I graduated with my doctorate from Harvard, "That's great, bub, but what are you going to do next?"

The apology is, however, another step in the healing process for the many Aboriginal people who are on the journey home after being removed from their families. It is also another step forward in the broader narrative that Australians want to tell themselves about who they are, where they have come from, where our country is headed, and what the political value of *home* means in Australia.

## Notes

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- 3 Larissa Behrendt, *Achieving Social Justice: Indigenous Rights and Australia's Future* (Annandale, NSW: Federation Press, 2003); and Garth Nettheim, "Native Title, Fictions, and 'Convenient Falsehoods,'" *Law/Text/Culture* 4.1 (Autumn 1998): 70–80.
- 4 *Mabo v. The State of Queensland (No. 2)* (1992) 175 C.L.R. 1 H.C.A. 23.
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13 Behrendt, *Achieving Social Justice*.

14 Elliott Johnston, *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1991).