The power and the passion:
The Forced Adoptions History Project

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Kathleen Anderson

Abstract

In 2013, the Commonwealth Government commission the National Archives of Australia to take carriage of recommendation 20 of the government’s response to the Senate report findings into, The Commonwealth contribution into Former Forced Adoptions Policies and Practices. Later that year I was recruited to the stakeholder engagement role on what was known as the Forced Adoptions History Project. For the next two years I was immersed in the world of the ‘other’. Now the project has come to a close, my time to reflect has come. For my part, I can recognise there are many perspectives; binary positions that like magnets with different polarities attracted and repulsed, they eventually osculate into a cultural context. Perhaps the greatest lesson to learn that it does matter what colour clothing you’re wearing, what we do as individuals but also as institutions, the way we construct and influence the community from the perspective of exhibitions, content development and even public programs has huge implications on how history will be remembered and recorded.

Keywords: Forced adoptions; national archives;

I am a storyteller, an ethnographer of sorts, trained in social science. I am fascinated by society and culture, exploring who we are as individuals and as a community. In 2013, I accepted a contract position with the National Archives of Australia as a Stakeholder Engagement Officer on the Forced Adoptions History Project. The creation of the role and my subsequent appointment was a reflection of the nature of the project as unique with a remit to collect the experiences of individuals affected by forced adoptions. Direct engagement of this kind was not the traditional business of the National Archives. Records of forced adoptions did not exist within the immense resources of the National Archives collection. These records were state based, often in private collections and notoriously difficult to locate.

My role had not existed previously nor does it exist today. The Archives had previously ventured into crowd sourcing content but such undertakings had always been anchored in the collection. It is fair to say the project was unique and required adaptability and agility in ways of seeing and working. In practice, this project meant rolling up our sleeves to work with the community of the affected; to sit and listen to another person’s pain. Not usually the ‘done thing’ for the commonwealth, as professionals in government, we are far more comfortable with facts and records than with feelings.

To reflect the dynamic at work in the project, I submitted a paper for the 2015 Museums Australia conference, called the “Power and the Passion”, essential elements of the NAA
project and yet I found myself presenting at a session on “Introverts and Extroverts”. Navigating this shift meant turning to my default position, social science and the notions of binary opposites a paradigm that fits nicely with this discussion that provides an even greater opportunity for reflection. For our cultural reading of everything from gender, status and beyond, all play on binary relationships. A notion that suspends things together and yet separates, it is a relationship defined by the ‘other’. Like magnets with different polarity they attract and repulse; symmetry vs. asymmetry, introverts and extroverts, hero vs. villain, power vs. passion and so on. It’s the way we make sense of the world giving structure and form, from one side of an equation to its counter position.

In approaching this discussion I had a hundred ideas running through my head as I tried to consider some clever way of entertaining my audience, some participatory moment to excite the audience but instead I faced reality, that’s not me. Instead I will write about my truth, my experience, after all the Forced Adoptions History Project has been seen by many, as a recovery of the truth.

The Forced Adoptions History Project was one of the most challenging projects I have ever worked on and yet it taught me some of the greatest lessons in life. Through the process of national consultations, 14 formal workshops and tens of thousands of emails, I learnt something about people, an important life lesson, that sometimes there is strength in feeling vulnerable - sometimes a shiny suit and a slick sales pitch doesn’t send the right message. Sometimes it is the introvert rather than the extrovert that needs to be seen.

Early on in the project, after a particularly draining consultation, I remember discussing my work with my father, the weight of responsibility I felt and the need to get it right. His answer, “Just do your best and besides what other people think of you is none of your business and more to the point it has as much relevance as what colour underpants you are wearing.”

Salient words for my father but then my father is an interesting man. At seventy something he is a man of another time, a golden age of Australia. Born in Kensington and schooled in Darlinghurst, he put the deposit down on his first home in Bondi at 24, the same year he married my mother. The deposit came from a win on a long shot at Flemington, the equivalent to a year’s salary on a single race. It sounds unfathomable but in the 60’s my dad was the youngest bookie ever given a bag. Racing was in the blood, it was in his veins, he’d been a chalkie for his dad for years.

But these men, despite this small vice, were men of conscience and so as a general rule the earnings from a Saturday at the track was followed by a visit to Sr. Ann, a Josephite who worked to build St Margaret’s Maternity Hospital in Darlinghurst. The community of Darlinghurst and surrounding area had gotten behind the nuns. In particular, the racing community, who it was said bought the land and fundraised for the much needed maternity hospital. My grandfather spent so much time fundraising for the hospital that it earned him the name Doc, a nickname he took to the grave in January 1972 where he was eulogised for his community service and commitment to family. I never knew my grandfather just his legacy.
On 15 November 2010, the Senate referred to the Community Affairs References Committee an inquiry into former forced adoption policies and practices. The findings released in 2012 found that very same hospital\textsuperscript{3} was one of the top twenty reported to have undertaken the unethical and illegal policies and practices of forced adoptions. So my question to you is how will history record my grandfather as hero or villain?

It was an interesting phenomena that throughout the consultation process it became clear that as a representative from the Commonwealth Government, we held an inordinate amount of power, disproportionate to those affected. For the women of forced adoption, Institutional power still loomed large, perhaps a little less than in my grandfather’s time but they still lacked agency. They could influence, contribute as we consulted them but in the end it was the work of the team to make the ultimate decisions, it was the professionals and The Archives as an institution that held the power. Contributions through the website were essentially the collection - but even then this had restrictions – they had to follow protocols to ensure contributions could be published online and while we can justify this within legislative frameworks or from legal advice under Privacy Principles, this was not an unfettered collection of personal experiences.

From a social science perspective forced adoptions pared back to a basic principal was concerned with domesticity and social contracts around notions of motherhood and the idealised post-war family. This was the business of bringing back order from the chaos of war - instilling values. The dominant power was reaching into the sacred space of home and hearth and as many women have argued hegemonic masculinity was alive and well. While I can concede to this viewpoint, I would add that there were other forces at work – society was stratified – with professionals being experts and individual not encouraged to advocate for themselves the power differential of institutions and authorities was enormous. And within this golden age, the practice of forced adoptions was accepted as everyday occurrence. There was no support for an unplanned pregnancy or unmarried mother- this was a stigma to be hidden away or erased. Against this backdrop, is it any wonder that many women went to their grave with the secret?

Yet for others passion burnt fiercely, fuelled by the sense of injustice despite being told to go home and forget the experience of having a child. For half a century the rage simmered below the surface till the feeling had become fury. For women such as these the significance of the National Apology is without bounds. It is everything and nothing in a single defining moment. It is vindication, validation and for some it was realisation that the past could never be recaptured only the hope that lessons learnt for future generation to prevent such events from occurring again.

In May I was visited by a woman I will call Tiger Lily.\textsuperscript{4} Over a coffee we spoke, She had arrived from interstate unannounced to see the exhibition (Without Consent). Her first words to me were, “you didn’t expect us to accept the exhibition – did you - you know we won’t?”
I assumed there was some issue with the narrative but then she said something I didn’t expect, “Why wasn’t I or my friends included - my friends, we fought together why aren’t we in the exhibition?”

Then she mentioned another group that had been adversarial, and asked about their absence from the exhibition.

I remembered some of these women she mentioned, they had been tough in building consensus, they would be hyper critical and right when I thought I had lost them, they would touch my hand or do something affectionate, as if to say this is business don’t take it personally. On the day of the exhibition launch, one had handed me a card with this Margaret Mead quote, “never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

In answering Tiger Lily - I could only say it is the curator who decides. But she really didn’t seem to care about the content of the exhibition. This diminutive woman who had never known true power, an introvert, wanted me to hear her message, she hadn’t come to workshops, just like me she didn’t do the group thing. Now it was too late to do so, she wanted to talk,

“This should have been the story of women. You’re a woman, you must know. You’re a mother you know how to nurture, you can’t go back to pretending you don’t know. I can’t keep fighting, it is up to you as a woman to carry this. I’m passing this to you. For a moment I thought she meant forced adoptions and then she said the work of being a feminist”.

The ideology was the legacy, not her story. This conversation was not about history, content or events but about the future. For me that was indicative of the success of this project, it is a conversation. Its legacy is connections made over coffee, workshops public programs or understandings made through the exhibition. The work of the Forced Adoptions History Project is a beginning not an end.

Tiger Lily wanted me to see her as more than one of the 250,000 Australians affected by forced adoptions. She didn’t define her entire existence as being about those events and more to the point she wanted to know that I had been irrevocably changed, that I would have courage fighting the good fight.

This interaction also left me wondering about those others, the people we hadn’t reached or indeed how many introverts hadn’t been comfortable in participating. It is always the dance in projects of heightened emotions, how do we ignore the noisiest, the loudest voices and find the unassuming observers; the introvert who remain in the wings being reflective and considered. Or when they feel small, over shadowed by the slick sales pitch of the shiny suited extrovert.

I wasn’t a child or mother of forced adoptions and yet I shared something of the legacy. For cultural Anthropologists it takes two years in the field – my time to reflect is now.
I could argue a case about histories for the need for expert and objectivity but I would be preaching to the converted. History holds different truths, discrete perspectives understood through a relationship of belonging to the dominant narrative or existing outside.

Forced adoptions narrates a tale of the authority of government failing to protect the rights of its citizens at a time when they were most vulnerable. But more importantly it is about women and children, it’s about love, trauma and resistance.

As I reflect upon my father’s wisdom – I think my dad got it wrong, it matters what colour underpants you’re wearing. What we do as individuals but also as institutions, the way we construct and influence the community from the perspective of exhibitions, content development and even public programs has huge implications on how history will be remembered and recorded. For my part I can stand objectively acknowledging the binary positions of Tiger Lily and Doc. I can suspend them like magnets with different polarities and I can explore them discretely as the authority of the institution gives way to the perspective of the masses.

Symmetry vs. asymmetry
Introverts and extroverts
Power vs. Passion

Notes
The Forced Adoptions History Project was recommendation 20 of the Government response to the Community Affairs Committee of the Senate report, “The Commonwealth Contribution into Former Forced Adoption Policy and Practices.”


Federal cross-agency mapping analysis recorded St. Margaret’s listed as one of the top twenty hospitals mentioned in the report.

The woman, represented a group of regional women who have lobbied for many years and are amongst the original women who sought justice through political and legal means.

Reference