



## Decolonising the mind: working with transgenerational trauma and First Nations People

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The author, a First Nations Trauma Recovery and Practice Practitioner, shares her insights into the nature of transgenerational trauma, therapeutic approaches, and how to build bridges between First Nations people and the justice system.

### Introduction

Australia's First Nations People do not want to be overrepresented in the justice system. We would prefer to be overrepresented in the halls of success and influence.

We have had many leaders who have gone to their graves fighting to explain to non-Indigenous Australia that we, the First Nations People of Australia, are sophisticated and intelligent, and have developed strategies to successfully live in Australia and maintain the world's oldest culture and justice system for more than 65,000 years.<sup>1</sup>

Although there has been public acknowledgement at the highest levels of government of the harm done to First Nations People in Australia,<sup>2</sup> the traumatic impact of colonisation and government policies and practices is still played out in the 21st century in Aboriginal communities.

### What is trans and intergenerational trauma?

Trauma may be acquired or inherited and transferred by an individual and/or collectively by a group. Genetic and physiological, behavioural and psychological factors

are considered when diagnosing trauma.<sup>3</sup> The literature characterises such trauma as inter or transgenerational or hereditary trauma.<sup>4</sup> These terms are often used interchangeably.<sup>5</sup> This article refers to the trauma passed down from one First Nations generation to another as transgenerational trauma. The primary cause of such trauma was colonisation and the attendant atrocities perpetrated upon the First Nations People of Australia. The resultant loss, violence, disconnection from Country, family, community, language and culture created such pain and anguish that the physical, emotional, intellectual, and psychological functioning and the DNA of First Nations People altered drastically. Trauma became a source of depression, anxiety, loss of esteem, disconnection from spiritual and emotional wellbeing<sup>6</sup> and caused changes in molecular processes.<sup>7</sup> These changes in the DNA, behaviours and attitudes of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have been shared with generations that followed up until the present.

Multiple massacres,<sup>8</sup> dislocation to stations and missions, government policies that forcibly removed children from their families, often into servitude and sexual abuse, ensured that First Nations People were treated in their own country as less than human.

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1 As documented in B Pascoe, *Dark Emu*, Magabala Books, 2nd edn, 2018. Pascoe provides scholarly evidence of pre-contact Aboriginal farming and land management practices to refute the label "nomadic hunter-gatherers". See also B Gammage, *The biggest estate on earth*, Allen & Unwin, 2011.

2 For example, in then Prime Minister Paul Keating's Redfern speech, 10 December 1992 and then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's "National Apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples", 13 February 2008.

3 American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (DSM-5), 2013.

4 ETH Zurich, "Hereditary trauma: inheritance of traumas and how they may be mediated", *ScienceDaily*, 13 April 2014, at [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/04/140413135953.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/04/140413135953.htm), accessed 17/6/2019.

5 P Dudgeon, H Milroy and R Walker, "Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice", Australian Government Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2nd edn, 2014.

6 J Atkinson, "Educaring: a trauma informed approach to healing generational trauma for Aboriginal Australians", at <http://fwtdp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Judy-Atkinson-Healing-From-Generational-Trauma-Workbook.pdf>, accessed 17/6/2019, p 15.

7 ETH Zurich, above n 4; N Youssef, L Lockwood, et al, "The effects of Trauma, with or without PTSD, on the transgenerational DNA methylation alterations in human offsprings" (2018) 8 *Brain Sci* 83 at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5977074/>, accessed 17/6/2019. This review found an accumulating amount of evidence of an enduring effect of trauma exposure to be passed to offspring transgenerationally via the epigenetic inheritance mechanism of DNA methylation alterations and has the capacity to change the expression of genes and the metabolome. See also A Kuffer, A Maercker and A Burri, "Transgenerational effects of PTSD of traumatic stress: do telomeres reach across the generations?", (2014) *Journal of Trauma & Treatment*, at [www.omicsonline.org/open-access/transgenerational-effects-of-ptsd-or-traumatic-stress-do-telomeres-reach-across-the-generations-2167-1222.1000204.php?aid=30791](http://www.omicsonline.org/open-access/transgenerational-effects-of-ptsd-or-traumatic-stress-do-telomeres-reach-across-the-generations-2167-1222.1000204.php?aid=30791), accessed 17/6/2019.

8 For information and a visual map of known massacre sites in Australia compiled by the University of Newcastle Colonial Frontier Massacres Project team, see <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/>, accessed 17/6/2019. There are 250 known sites in Australia currently mapped.

Secondary to this have been the losses of many First Nations People due to stigma, racism, poverty and genetic poor health. This loss has been manifested in serious negative health outcomes, suicide, self-destructive behaviours and a general breaking down of the will to live.

## How transgenerational trauma is manifested today

Psychosocial dominance became the natural successor to colonisation. First Nations People were historically perceived as inferior to the colonisers. The divide was reinforced through continuing government policy and practice,<sup>9</sup> preventing bridges being built between the two communities.

The effects of colonisation and State-enforced policies continue to play out in every facet of the lives of First Nations' communities as evidenced by the yearly "Closing the Gap" reports.<sup>10</sup> Numerous academic and government inquiries have exposed continuing institutional racism in Australia.<sup>11</sup>

State policing strategies continue to reflect poor relationships with First Nations Peoples. For example, young Aboriginal people are overrepresented on the suspect target management plan, a NSW policing policy that identifies young people for "pro-active attention".<sup>12</sup> The prison system continues to struggle with the overrepresentation of First Nations people<sup>13</sup> and deaths in custody.<sup>14</sup>

The healthcare system has acknowledged institutional racism toward First Nations Peoples.<sup>15</sup> However in the 21st century, First Nations People are still dying earlier than non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>16</sup> The leading causes of mortality and morbidity in First Nations People are coronary heart disease, anxiety disorders and diabetes, with coronary heart disease the leading disease outcome attributable to tobacco use.<sup>17</sup> First Nations People were often paid in tobacco as currency. Today, this highly addictive substance deliberately foisted upon our people as wages is now a leading cause of premature death in our communities.

Children are still being removed from First Nations Families at alarming rates despite the *Bringing them home report*.<sup>18</sup> The education system often suspends children perceived to be difficult and First Nations children are disproportionately represented in NSW education data for suspensions.<sup>19</sup> Suspension of these children impacts on the sense of bias they experience, and contributes to their disengagement with the education system.<sup>20</sup>

First Nations women are often re-traumatised through domestic violence and the hopelessness of their lives. The parents of many of my clients were members of the Stolen Generations; many co-habit with white men to escape the treadmill of transgenerational trauma but experience domestic violence from their partners. Many First Nations women are in loving relationships, but judicial officers often see only those women impacted by transgenerational trauma through family and community disconnection and violent partners. The self-loathing of abused women is a tragic treadmill of abuse and crime and punishment.

- 9 For example, the Federal Government's 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response which declared a "national emergency" was criticised by the United Nations for its paternalism, as being racially discriminatory and its failure to respect the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination: J Anaya, "Observations on the Northern Territory Emergency Response in Australia", 2010, at [www.ncca.org.au/files/Natsiec/NTER\\_Observations\\_FINAL\\_by\\_SR\\_Anaya\\_.pdf](http://www.ncca.org.au/files/Natsiec/NTER_Observations_FINAL_by_SR_Anaya_.pdf), accessed 17/6/2019.
- 10 Closing the Gap is a federal government policy framework directed to eliminate the gap between First Nations people and non-Indigenous Australians: see Australian Government, "Closing the Gap" at <https://closingthegap.pmc.gov.au/>, accessed 17/6/2019.
- 11 See for example Australian Human Rights Commission, *Bringing them home report*, 1997, at [www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-chapter-3](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-chapter-3), accessed 17/6/2019.
- 12 Public Interest Advocacy Centre, "Policing young people in NSW: a study of the suspect targeting management plan", 2017 at [www.piac.asn.au/2017/10/25/policing-young-people-in-nsw-a-study-of-the-suspect-targeting-management-plan/](http://www.piac.asn.au/2017/10/25/policing-young-people-in-nsw-a-study-of-the-suspect-targeting-management-plan/), accessed 17/6/2019.
- 13 During the March 2019 quarter, 25% of the NSW prisoner population was Indigenous: BOCSAR, "NSW Custody Statistics Quarterly Update March 2019" at [www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Documents/custody/NSW\\_Custody\\_Statistics\\_Mar2019.pdf](http://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Documents/custody/NSW_Custody_Statistics_Mar2019.pdf), accessed 17/6/2019. Of the general NSW population, 2.9% identified as Indigenous in the 2016 Census: ABS, 2016 Census QuickStats, at [https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census\\_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/1](https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/1), accessed 17/6/2019.
- 14 From 2008–2018, 16 of 114 Aboriginal deaths occurred in NSW custodial centres: "Deaths inside: Indigenous deaths in custody" at [www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2018/aug/28/deaths-inside-indigenous-australian-deaths-in-custody](http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2018/aug/28/deaths-inside-indigenous-australian-deaths-in-custody), accessed 17/6/2019.
- 15 RACGP, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, "Position statement — racism in the healthcare system", at [www.racgp.org.au](http://www.racgp.org.au), accessed 17/6/2019.
- 16 Life expectancy for ATSI men 2015–2017 was 8.6 years lower than the non-Indigenous population at 71.6 years; for women, 7.8 years lower at 75.6 years. In remote areas, life expectancy for ATSI men is 65.9 and women 69.6 years. Source: ABS, 3302.0.55.003 - Life Tables for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2015–2017, at [www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/MediaReleasesByCatalogue/1A6806AB01AB38CDCA25835300141767?OpenDocument](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/MediaReleasesByCatalogue/1A6806AB01AB38CDCA25835300141767?OpenDocument), accessed 17/6/2019.
- 17 EM Greenhalgh, A van der Sterren, et al, "MH 8.7 Morbidity and mortality caused by smoking among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples" in M Scollo and M Winstanley (eds) *Tobacco in Australia: Facts and issues*, Melbourne: Cancer Council Victoria; 2018, at 8.7.1.
- 18 *Bringing them home report*, 1997, above n 11. At 30 June 2018, 6,680 Aboriginal children in NSW were in out-of-home care (11 times the rate for non-Aboriginal children). Across Australia, in 2017–18, 65% of Aboriginal children were placed with relatives/kin, with other Aboriginal caregivers, or in Aboriginal residential care. These informal arrangements will have multiple effects on the grandparent caregiver, including financial, physical and mental health: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Child protection Australia 2016–2017*, Canberra, 2018, p 48. See also B O'Neill with E Fanning, *Aboriginal people and intergenerational trauma*, Seniors Rights Service, at <https://youtube.com/watch?v=6BYw0u6JHwA>, accessed 30 April 2019.
- 19 Based on 2015 data, Aboriginal children make up 7% of the school population but almost 25% of suspension rates: J Lang, "School suspensions and Aboriginal students" at <http://actuarialeye.com/2017/11/19/school-suspensions-and-aboriginal-students/>, accessed 17/6/2019; NSW Ombudsman, *Inquiry into behaviour management in schools*, 2017, p ix.
- 20 NSW Ombudsman, *ibid*, p xi.

First Nations Men have lost the opportunity for initiation, studying Lore, their tribal place in the community and their dignity. Prison represents a tribal existence and is not a deterrent.

### Strategies to heal transgenerational trauma

I was fortunate to have been granted a scholarship from the Office of Prime Minister and Cabinet to complete a Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Trauma Recovery and Practice at the University of Wollongong. I have relied upon this valuable training in my work as an Aboriginal Community Worker. I work from a trauma-informed basis and have created programs designed to empower women on housing estates to realise their potential and de-colonise their minds. When First Nations Peoples work with their own qualified professionals, there are very good results and outcomes for the community.<sup>21</sup> First Nations People are a people of sharing and consensus. We know what we are dealing with, we know how to fix it, we need to be encouraged and funded to do so, and to be treated equally. In these ways, Aboriginal workers are integral to building a bridge between First Nations Peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.

### Truth telling

Judges and magistrates deal first hand with the impacts of transgenerational trauma, making decisions on a daily basis about people who carry inherited trauma. It is important for First Nations people that judicial officers are informed about the impacts of trauma.<sup>22</sup> The Judicial Commission, for example, provides an Aboriginal cultural awareness program, the Ngarra Yura Program, and information about culturally appropriate programs on the Judicial Information Research System.<sup>23</sup> A working relationship between First Nations leaders and the judiciary, such as we see with the Youth Koori Court, assists our communities to address and acknowledge transgenerational trauma.<sup>24</sup>

The Uluru Statement from the Heart has called for a Makarrata Commission to supervise agreement-making between governments and First Nations people and truth-telling about our history.

### Deep listening or Daddirri

We have written a program called *Yarning About My Stuff* (YAMS) in which clients facing the court system have one-on-one sessions with an Aboriginal worker and explore the circumstances that led to dealing with the justice system and the consequences. It is a simple trauma-informed program that speaks to the person facing court. It is entirely about them. It is still being piloted but has had promising results. A client with highly complex behavioural issues

shared that every time she thinks about using the drug ice, she looks at her YAMS booklet and acknowledges that the part of her that she respects is captured in that booklet.

### Case studies

#### Community Connection

Holly\* had lived on a mission for 10 years from the age of 13. She eventually came back to Sydney to escape domestic violence. She has a school-age daughter. When I first came into contact with Holly, she was non-communicative and so was her child. I would make appointments with Holly which she didn't keep; she had instead returned to the mission where the perpetrator still lived. After building trust with Holly, I realised that she hated living in her flat in Sydney as she was used to a big extended family. She was feeling alienated and lonely. We connected her with an Aboriginal Mothers' and Childrens' group and the local tenants' community group. We have signed her up with a specialised TAFE training organisation where she is looking forward to studying a Certificate IV in Community Services. We are working on removing FaCS interventions from her life.

*\*Name has been changed.*

#### Reciprocity and obligation

Sara\* and her husband had been substance abusers but had rehabilitated and were endeavouring to stay clean. Following an incident at their home, they fled to Sydney where FaCS removed their children. Sara was extremely traumatised when I met her. She is a traditional woman. After gaining her trust, she shared with me one day that the incident that led to her children being removed was due to the behaviour of another family member. I was able to contact her lawyer and explain that, due to cultural reciprocity, Sara was obliged to have the family member stay with her. This changed her case and she now has full custody of her children. The family is strong, and we have assisted Sara to sign up with mainstream TAFE and study a Certificate IV in Community Services.

*\*Name has been changed.*

### Conclusion

Two-hundred-and-thirty years of colonisation and oppression have not changed who First Nations People are. We are deeply spiritual. We belong to community and we have a shared sense of identity. When I work from a trauma-informed basis, these First Nations' qualities are my points of reference.

21 See for example J Atkinson, "Trauma-informed services and trauma-specific care for Indigenous Australian children", Resource sheet no 21 produced for Closing the Gap clearinghouse, at <http://earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/files/ctg-rs21.pdf>, accessed 17/6/2019; L Stuart and A Nielsen, "Two Aboriginal registered nurses show us why black nurses caring for black patients is good medicine" (2010) 37 *Contemporary Nurse: a journal for the Australian nursing profession*, 96.

22 See for example the work of J Atkinson, *Trauma trails, recreating songlines: the transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia*, Spinifex Press; 2002. See also "Aboriginal people" in Judicial Commission of NSW, *Equality Before the Law Bench Book*, 2006, at <https://jirs.judcom.nsw.gov.au/benchbks/equality/index.html>, accessed 17/6/2019.

23 Under the "Diversionary programs" menu at [https://jirs.judcom.nsw.gov.au/menus/services\\_index.php](https://jirs.judcom.nsw.gov.au/menus/services_index.php).

24 The Judicial Commission's Ngarra Yura project officer, Ms Joanne Selfe, participates as an Elder on YKC hearings at Surry Hills.

## Transgenerational trauma reimagined

*The Uluru Statement from the Heart has called for truth telling as foundational to nation building and a just society. Barbara O'Neill presents a compelling account of the impact of transgenerational trauma and how trauma needs to be heard and acknowledged.*

If I were to reimagine Trauma as a person, how would she behave?

Imagine that she has been with you since something terrible happened in your life.

She has decided to position herself into your life in such a way that she becomes an indispensable friend, commentator, decision maker, enabler and assumes to give you the identity she has chosen for you.

She convinces you that all decisions must be made with her in mind, every aspect of your life should be drawn in her image, she resets your emotional regulator, she convinces you that you can run, but you cannot hide. You and Trauma are bound at such a deep level that she, Trauma, is a part of your essential self.

You want to convince her to stop intruding in your life, but she reminds you that she is the holder of your story; only she can validate why you do certain things. She warps your moral compass; she separates you from those who would seek to diminish her hold on you.

As events occur in your life, she does not let you filter and devise strategies to deal with newer traumatic events, she hungrily grabs each event and grows within your very soul.

As she grows, she shapes you into her image.

You avoid finding help and support because she has convinced you that you will suffer as a result. She convinces you that you are undeserving because you should have been able to stop her becoming so dominant.

Trauma takes on a personality of her own. She comforts you when you need to understand whether you are to blame for your behaviour, she mocks you when you declare that you don't want to rely upon her. She also holds your story sacred and protects every detail of your experience as it happened.

Although there are traumatic events you did not experience or witness, they happened to your immediate family and Ancestors. Because they broke the spirit of your family and Ancestors, they became your family's story, held sacred within the very cells shared to conceive you.

You became the holder of the story. You became the receptacle of Trauma. Then she waited to be fed. Any adverse event you suffered she added to the old story, growing with you, waiting to become your best friend.

You perceive the world around you as belonging to the other, not you. Trauma does not want to share you with anyone as you might move forward and stop her from shaping your future.

It is really difficult for you to move forward because Trauma is the story of your experiences and pain. If you separate from her, how can you have a point of reference with which to make sense of your feelings of loss, injustice, pain, abandonment, betrayal and alienation from society? Trauma is your internal point of reference.

Trauma does not want you to share the story she holds for you. Your story feeds her.

By now you have built up an arsenal of strategies so that nothing painful can happen to you again.

In her own way Trauma has set up warning systems for you.

Lately you have behaved in ways that attract anger and consequences toward you. Maybe you are now dealing within the justice system as an offender.

Trauma has convinced you that to stop being vulnerable, you need to hit out and become the perpetrator. Trauma has validated your story to the point that you feel it is you and Trauma against the world. This is exactly what Trauma needs to feed and grow. You are now going to be impacted by the justice system, your vulnerability is going to be laid bare publicly.

This is traumatic. The difference now is that you are not blameless. You are hurting, feeling pain and impacted out of proportion to the reality of your situation. You withdraw and become angry that you are hurting when you were supposed to never hurt again. Trauma feeds your transgenerational memories and makes it hard to deal with the justice system. Trauma rekindles old pain and memories. Trauma wants you to hurt so that she can feed.

There is one thing that frightens Trauma — that you will share the story that she holds for you.

Trauma does not want you to talk, to yarn, to share your pain. If you do share your story, you will own it. You can experience Dadirri or deep listening, as you tell your story. The listener will summarise your story and validate your experience within this story as unique to you and sacred to you.

If you share your story with a deep listener, you will have a chance to objectively look at life events that impacted you and have the chance to understand that the offender owns the consequences that you have been living with until now. You were the innocent party to these events; you don't need to carry shame that you were powerless to stop them.

You can journey away from the impacts of trauma, you can draw a line in the sand and try to move forward. Your story will pain you when triggered, but you will have strategies and will own the story so that you can edit it and report on it how you wish. Trauma keeps the story raw and keeps you beholden to the pain inflicted by the offender.

There will always be that deep well of trauma containing past events. You can identify it for what it is now — the unfortunate circumstances that dominated your life. Now you actively hold the story of your trauma, prepared for the next negative circumstance which you will deal with on its own merit and not let it add to the old well of Trauma.

You can now identify that negative events do happen, that is part of life, but this time round you have stared Trauma down and you will not let new events add to the past, but analyse them as they happen.

If you are an offender within the justice system, it is so important that you have that conversation about Trauma. You will have realised by now that turning perpetrator adds to your lowered self-esteem.

Transgenerational trauma is insidious. Those who carry it receive it at conception. It is in the DNA and cannot be removed. Trauma can only be lessened or destroyed through Truth in historical fact.

## Visit to the Redfern Community with the Ngara Yura Program

Veronica Wong

The author was a young participant on the Commission's Ngara Yura Program community visit to Redfern in late 2018. She shares her observations.

Indigenous culture relies on sharing knowledge and creating an open conversation to promote a sense of interconnectedness within a community. The Ngara Yura Program visit achieved this aura of connection and was an unforgettable experience that I could not be more thankful for. The stories I heard that day made me immensely grateful for the privileged life that I possess, but I realised that the same stories were being written for hundreds of children as I sat listening. Children who don't know what it is like to have safety, security and who grow up waiting to be institutionalised.

As the day progressed, it became clearer to me the importance of family, children and the role of the law in these stories. The justice system serves not only to prosecute those who endanger society but to protect those who have been mistreated by that same system. The Indigenous speakers, Keenan Mundine and Isaiah Dawes, emphasised this. It became obvious that early intervention may have been the most effective way to keep this cycle from repeating. Both speakers experienced living without a home and being separated from their families, as one spoke of finding out his brother had passed away from an overdose, and another of meeting his mother for the first time as he walked through the city to see her begging for money. I thought again of the hundreds of children who in a few years would come to tell the same stories.

The importance of perspective and understanding was also a common theme throughout the day, the experiences that guide people towards certain roads and paths should not be disregarded. Those who work in the justice system have a profound influence over how society operates and the standards that we accept. Though the law serves as a guideline to prevent anarchy and to achieve order for

safety and security, it can also serve to be empathetic and understanding of the society it is governing. I realise that this is easier said than done, however, this experience emphasised to me that this cycle of Indigenous incarceration and misunderstanding always begins with one person. If that person's life changes even slightly, the ones following it will too. The changes that need to be made are not only within the system but also in education. Our history of discrimination should be spoken to understand how the effects of this history linger in every suburb. It is absurd to bury the decisions that mistreated our First Nations people and to ignore the lasting effects.

The Ngara Yura Program visit was an incredible experience that I have never seen anything like. It was a completely open discussion based on listening and understanding without any sense of judgment or dismissal. I was especially warmed by the relationship between the Indigenous elders of Redfern and law enforcement officers, who had a completely kind and compassionate relationship. I cannot express how clear it was, that the systems of law enforcement and the community it enforced, both thrived when there was communication and understanding.

*I am so appreciative to have been a part of the day and hope that the community visits may incorporate more students to understand the importance of recognising issues in our country and working to acknowledge and resolve them. I would like to thank all of the Ngara Yura Committee for their time, work and allowing me to experience such an important discussion.*