Book review: Representing Aboriginal childhood and Ngaga-Dji ('hear me')

Joanne Faulkner (2023) *Representing Aboriginal childhood: The politics of memory and forgetting in Australia*. Routledge.

Koorie Youth Council [KYC] (2018) *Ngaga-Dji: Young voices creating change for justice*.

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This contribution begins by reviewing Faulkner's monograph, then brings it into dialogue with the *Ngaga-Dji* report by KYC, the peak body for Aboriginal young people in Victoria, Australia. While Faulkner's book is not explicitly about the criminalisation of Aboriginal children in Australia, resonances between the two trace an important, transformative vision for what justice might mean in settler-colonial contexts, particularly by eschewing settler-colonial notions of punishment and exclusion.

Faulkner's monograph explores cultural representations of Aboriginal childhood in Australia, as a site of mediation (Chapters 2–4), intervention (Chapters 5–6) and impasse (Chapters 7–9) for settler-colonialism. These representations, she argues, reinforce narratives of white sovereignty in distinct but overlapping ways. As a site of mediation, they facilitate a transfer of sovereignty to white children by appropriating Aboriginal ways of knowing and being (e.g. Faulkner, 2023, pp. 37–38). As a site of intervention, they produce invasive policing efforts into Aboriginal communities, including child removals and attempted genocide. And as a site of impasse, representations—particularly from Aboriginal creators themselves—can also constitute resistance to colonisation through a refusal to represent Aboriginal childhood in colonisers' terms.

Readers are aided by Faulkner's inclusion of contemporary examples, especially the media coverage surrounding Don Dale—a youth detention centre where Aboriginal children were revealed to have been teargassed, bound and starved—and Kumanjayi Walker—an Aboriginal teenager killed by police officer Zachary Rolfe in 2019. These examples reflect significant areas of tension between Aboriginal sovereignty and settler-colonial law in contemporary Australia, areas which are characterised by well-documented examples of punitiveness and oppressiveness. Like Aboriginal adults, Aboriginal children are over-represented at every stage of the criminal justice system: they are 2.9 times more likely to be summonsed to court instead of cautioned by police (Allard et al., 2010), and comprise 60 per cent of the youth detention

population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2023).[1] Further, their experiences of the justice system are qualitatively more harmful: police violence against Aboriginal teenagers is never far from Australian headlines (e.g. Murphy-Oates, 2021), and a considerable number of Aboriginal people continue to die in custody (Klippmark & Crawley, 2018) despite the 1991 Royal Commission, painting a bleak picture of Aboriginal people's relations with white law in Australia. It is worth noting these relations are reflected in other settler-colonial states, including New Zealand, Canada and the United States (Cunneen & Tauri, 2019).

Part of Faulkner's contribution is making visible how specific elements of Australia's colonial history have produced these relations. For example, following the Don Dale scandal Faulkner cites a commentator who suggested that reducing incarceration rates among Aboriginal young people would require the "earlier and permanent removal of children" from their supposedly dysfunctional families (Sammut, 2016, in Faulkner, 2023, p.164). This example is compelling not only because its premise is deplorable, but also because Faulkner has supported it through several chapters of analysis of texts—from Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* to Craig Silvey's *Jasper Jones*—which have over decades built up a perception of Aboriginality as destined to disappear and give way to white sovereignty (Faulkner, 2023, p.92). Faulkner connects early examples of this perception as far back as the 19th century, in text and doctrine such as *terra nullius*, to the genocidal practices it enabled throughout the 20th. Even today, she argues that it absolves settlers of guilt by casting the worst of the colonial project as history, creating the sense we are no longer responsible for a sovereignty that appears already superseded.

In my view, Faulkner challenges this perception in two important ways: firstly, she highlights the clear legacy of colonial practices still recognisable, say, in child protection today—frequently noted as a site of children's 'crossing over' into youth justice in Australia (Baidawi & Sheehan, 2021—but also elsewhere, e.g. Stanley, 2017 on New Zealand). Recent data suggests that almost a third of all Aboriginal children experience some form of child protection contact, compared with 4.5 per cent of non-Indigenous children (AIHW, 2019). As Faulkner (2023, p.129) argues:

[1] For reference, Aboriginal adults make up 35 per cent of the prison population in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2024), and Aboriginal people make up 3.8 per cent of the Australian population (ABS, 2021). These figures are included for comparison only: the term 'over-representation' should not be implied to suggest there is an 'appropriate' level of representation for any group in the justice system.

> "…the story of colonisation is represented as past, an unalterable fact of the nation's history… 'the children *were* stolen' drowns out news that 'the children *continue to be* stolen in the present'". (emphasis in original)

Additionally, Faulkner posits that Aboriginal creatives challenge colonial representations of their sovereignty through their own work. This is introduced later in the book to explore how Aboriginal childhood can be an *impasse* for colonialism, existing in conflict with or beyond the colonial project, and it injects a sense of optimism towards the book's conclusion. Accompanying this shift in substance is a shift in theoretical position; trading Lacan for Spivak, the Aboriginal child is no longer a fetish object invested with colonisers' interests, but a subaltern presence existing beyond colonial intelligibility:

> "…these works centre First Nations experiences in context, without didactic explanation…this gesture of centring Indigenous experience and First Peoples as receives of a message intrinsically asserts Blak sovereignty. Interacting with these texts as a settler coloniser forces a recognition of that sovereignty." (Faulkner, 2023, p.195)

While Faulkner selects three films to showcase her argument, I wondered whether other mediums could have been included here: I was particularly reminded of *Ngaga-Dji*, given how Faulkner's arguments relate to youth justice, and given how this report complicates conventional—conventionally bleak—narratives about the criminalisation of Aboriginal children. Though I mentioned elements of these narratives, like over-policing or deaths in custody, this report like Faulkner's book is an important reminder that just because these narratives are conventional does not mean they are inevitable. And indeed, they should be resisted.

The stories presented in *Ngaga-Dji* achieve this by discussing the justice system without *only* discussing the justice system. Rather, many begin and end with expressions of Aboriginal sovereignty, particularly through family. The story of 'Binak', [2] for instance, begins:

[2] While the case studies in the report do not belong to any individual, they were assembled from the stories of almost 50 participants. Symbolic pseudonyms are given to each story: "Binak…means basket in Woiwurrung." (KYC, 2018, p.8).

> "In the old house Nan and me were a team. I did all the cooking and looked after the little ones… Our house was full of kids, cousins and noise. Nan welcomed everyone in that little house 'cos everyone needs a home and a family." (KYC, 2018, p.8)

This passage stands in contrast with depictions of Aboriginal sovereignty as (already) displaced, by signalling ongoing resistance to displacement, to *terra nullius*, over generations. In Faulkner's words (2023, p.194), this also "center[s] First Nations experiences in context, without didactic explanation": although 'overcrowding' is often cited as a reason for child removals (Faulkner, 2023, p.134; KYC, 2018, p.8), the presence of family in Binak's house is never described in those terms—until Binak is removed from her family on these grounds.

Her story, however, continues to show how family is a source of strength and purpose: after Binak's engagement with child protection and youth justice, she is only ready to move on once she knows her family is supported:

> "Family supports help me, Nan and the little ones. They lift the burdens and give me time to find out who I am, stand up for myself, get into TAFE and learn culture." (KYC, 2018, p.15).

Underscoring *Ngaga-Dji* then, is a sense that justice means harnessing the significance of family instead of removing it, as existing colonial justice interventions—particularly child removals and prisons—do. Put differently, the vision of justice presented in *Ngaga-Dji* refuses the colonial frame of exclusion or punishment as justice: it "demands the suspension of coloniser codes if it is to be heard" (Faulkner, 2023, p.201).

Overall, reading these texts alongside each other opens up new spaces of possibility for justice, no longer understood through a colonial lens but through a new one—for settlers, at least—altogether. It also points to the utility of a cultural studies perspective in criminology, and a need for nuanced representations of Indigenous children in Australia and elsewhere.

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