

Becoming 'Otherwise': A Story of a Collaborative and Narrative Approach to Art Therapy with Indigenous Kids 'in care'

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With a commentary by Galiindurra

ABSTRACT

This paper engages with the question of working with 'the other', and especially with those who are Othered by colonialism, through an account of therapeutic work with two Indigenous Australian children who have been removed from their families of origin. As a non-Indigenous art therapist working in collaboration with an Indigenous community worker and carer, I consider this experience in the context of past histories and present-day effects and practices of colonisation, in particular the legacies of the Stolen Generation. The paper is framed by a commentary from the Indigenous worker and carer, since collaboration and consultation are just as central to the methodology of writing this account as to the therapeutic work itself. Within this frame, I offer a series of tellings and retellings, and engage with how visual art can gesture toward the unspeakable. I take up poetry as an alternative form of enquiry to the genre of the case study, in order to shape a poetics as well as a politics of therapeutic practice. I consider how this work, and writing about this work, has brought my dominant professional identity and practice into question and engaged me in becoming Other-wise.

Galiindurra

You know, Sheridan, we're working with third generation removed people.

You look at the little faces of the little ones, say, in my care, and you think, oh God, her grandmother was in an institution, and she didn't get to parent her children, and now the third generation of these kids are in care.

Little Maree said something to me the other day. She said "How come all my Mum's kids end up in care?"

And I said 'Why do you think?'

And she said, "I think it's because of the drugs."

I mean, what do you say to an eight year old? Can you say "It's transgenerational grief and separation?"

There isn't one person in that family who hasn't been affected, who isn't grieving, yeah, it makes you sad.

Joining the dots

For Galiindurra and the girls

'This child will be in therapy for the rest of her life.'

'Separation anxiety.'

'Uncontained anger.'

'Manipulation and lies.'

'She's ADHD and oppositional.'

'She has no empathy.'

'Her foster mother needs to provide more boundaries.'

'She's damaged and you have to contain her.'

'Keep her in the room.'

'Keep it to an hour.'