

Embodying Affect: the Stolen Generations, the History Wars and Poles Apart by Indigenous New Media Artist r e a

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Abstract

In her 2009 new media artwork *Poles Apart*, Australian Aboriginal artist r e a,¹ of the Gamilaraay people in northern New South Wales, explores issues relating to the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal children. Based on the personal experiences of her grandmother and great aunt as 'stolen children', r e a amplifies the work's familial dimension by enacting the role of the protagonist fleeing from forced servitude. This paper looks at *Poles Apart* in the broader context of the interrelated phenomena of the stolen generations and the so-called 'history wars'. It is posited that the power, immediacy and affective dimensions of (moving) visual imagery have been instrumental in shifting Australians' knowledge about the stolen generations from the margins into the mainstream. The capacity of the moving image to 'embody affect' [13], it is argued, has enabled many more Australians than previously to appreciate the historical implications and continuing ramifications of this prolonged episode in Australian history. This has in turn led to the development of a more sympathetic public understanding of the phenomenon of the stolen generations as 'lived experience'. In turn this broader social knowledge, and its integration into our shared cultural heritage, has contributed to Australians' general receptiveness to the official Apology issued to members of the stolen generations by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in Federal Parliament (13th February 2008). It is also the case that the popular reception of mainstream stolen generation-themed movies has influenced Australians' openness to the themes and issues explored in contemporary non-mainstream new media work such as r e a's *Poles Apart*. In the latter work, through the use of the vehicle of her own body, r e a demonstrates that the personal is inescapably political, and vice versa.

Keywords--Australian Aboriginal history, stolen generations, history wars, r e a, *Poles Apart* (hd. video).

1. Introduction

In her 2009 video artwork *Poles Apart*, Australian Aboriginal artist r e a, of the Gamilaraay people in northern New South Wales, explores issues relating to the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal children.

R e a's work, based on the experiences of her grandmother and great aunt, has a strongly personal, familial dimension. This paper looks at *Poles Apart* in the broader context of the stolen generations (the forcible removal of Australian Aboriginal children from their families) and the so-called 'history wars' (continuing ideological disagreements about the precise nature of the facts about and effects of 'contact history').²

Before discussing *Poles Apart* in greater depth, the work needs to be situated within a broader historical framework. Of great significance is the fact that, in little more than the last decade, there has been a discernible shift in mainstream Australian thinking about the veracity of the phenomenon known as the stolen generations, and greater public appreciation of the seriousness of its flow-on effects. Underpinning this change was the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's 1997 release of *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Enquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families* [15].

Since the release of the report, the increasingly popular reception of mainstream stolen generation-themed Hollywood style Australian movies has heightened audiences' receptiveness to non-mainstream new media works such as r e a's *Poles Apart*. Key to this shift in mainstream thinking would appear to be three films: the unexpectedly popular *Radiance* (1998), followed by *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), loosely based on

¹ Please note that r e a spells her name entirely in lower case, with a space between each letter, which she explains as 'a rejection of imposed identity' and does not use a surname (pers. com, r e a to the author, June 2009).

² 'Contact history' is the term widely used in Australia to refer to the historical relationships between Australian Aboriginal peoples and members of colonising migrant groups, from post- initial contact with the British in the late eighteenth century, and continuing into the present. The unresolved nature of 'contact history' has become deeply imbricated with the 'history wars', in which the actual facts of the case and the legacy of colonial policies and practices remain subject to bitter dispute.

a true story, and more recently, the fictional *Australia* (2008). All experienced box office success, but particularly the latter two. The popular culture and successively populist cinematic representations of the stolen generations, *Rabbit Proof Fence* and *Australia*, attracted mass audiences nationally and internationally. A number of documentaries about the stolen generations that were screened during the same period, including *Cry from the Heart* (1999), and *Land of the Little Kings* (2000) also elicited largely compassionate responses.

It is argued that the power and immediacy of the (moving) visual image have been instrumental in shifting Australians' knowledge and sympathetic understanding of the historical implications of the stolen generations into the mainstream. The latter development has, it would seem, in turn contributed to Australians' readiness for The Apology, offered to members of the stolen generation by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in Federal Parliament, 13th February 2008.

Pertinent to this argument, but in a different context, Anne Rutherford has argued that the "*materialities of cinematic experience*" can be "*understood as intrinsically linked with the affective power of cinema*" [12]. Central to this is what she describes in another article and in a forthcoming book as '*embodied affect*' [13].

While detailed discussion about the affective power of visual representations and of cinematic identification is beyond the scope of this article, it is clear that while the *Bringing Them Home...Report* may have been the initial catalyst for further understanding of the prolonged chapter in Australian history known as the stolen generations, the aforementioned films and documentaries enabled the subject to be taken to a far wider audience than previously. In addition, there has been a flow-on effect from these mainstream works that has shaped the reception of works such as r e a's *Poles Apart*.

These mainstream films' capacity to *show* rather than simply to *tell* meant that Australians became educated *en masse* about the embodied existence of individual members of the stolen generations in ways that written reports and even live dramatic performances cannot.³ The unique capacity of the moving image to embody and to personalise social and political phenomena has led predominantly non-Aboriginal audiences to envision the phenomenon and its affective dimensions in ways that were not possible earlier. Prior to the release of these films, only considerably smaller, mostly scholarly, audiences had been aware of the phenomenon.

Therefore it is argued that these cinematic predecessors prepared the path for r e a's *Poles Apart*, a non-populist new media work created and screened early

in what could be described as the current 'post apology' era of Australian politics. This locates *Poles Apart* along an historical continuum. At the same time, as a new media work shown almost exclusively in art gallery settings to art house audiences, *Poles Apart* is to be understood as a new, divergent branch of an older tree. Notwithstanding, and while Rutherford's argument may not be applicable to all contemporary new media works, especially those situated outside of a humanist paradigm, insofar as r e a herself enacts the central role in *Poles Apart*, thereby re-creating the experiences of a family member, it can be validly argued that this non-mainstream work is equally premised on the 'embodiment of affect'.

Before examining the specifics of *Poles Apart*, it is necessary to contextualise the discussion by providing more background. The interconnected phenomena known in Australia as the 'Stolen Generations', 'The Apology', and 'The History Wars' are all relevant here. In order to develop a fuller and deeper understanding of the significance of *Poles Apart* this background knowledge needs be mapped onto the details of r e a's own family history. In the sections that follow such broader context is provided to equip the reader in connecting the general with the particular as a means of illuminating r e a's artwork.

2. The Stolen Generations: an Overview

The practice of pastoralists, Government officials or Church authorities in forcibly removing large numbers of Australian Aboriginal children began in the late 19th century and was only halted in the mid-late 1970s. Often children were removed from their families for no other reason than their Aboriginality. Racialized notions of 'genetic arithmetic' played an important part in this process, with the so-called 'half-caste' children routinely removed from what substantial numbers of non-Indigenous Australians believed to be the noxious, corrupting influence of the children's immediate, biological families. Some of the children were placed in orphanages, while others were sent out to work as domestic servants for wealthy whites, and others were adopted or fostered out to white couples. In some instances the latter were told lies by the authorities, and informed that the child's parents had died, or had voluntarily relinquished their children, or had even outright rejected their children. The children themselves were often fed similar stories, only to find out years later that their parents were still alive and grieving for their irredeemable loss [15].

The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission was set up to identify and examine the laws, practices, and policies which resulted in the separation of thousands of Aboriginal children from their families by 'compulsion, duress, or undue influence' [15]. When the report was released to the public in 1997, Australians became more aware of the details of this phenomenon. The report revealed that frequently the authorities did not disclose to either the

³ Several stolen generation-themed plays were staged during the same period, most notably Jane Harrison's successful *Stolen*, which premiered in Melbourne in 1998 and then toured extensively. While live dramatic performances 'embody affect' to the same degree as cinematic representations, the fact remains that the former rarely reach mass audiences and do not have the capacity to be repeated in the same way as cinematic works.

adoptive parents or to the children the facts about their Aboriginal identity.

The children have become known collectively as 'the Stolen Children', or 'The Stolen Generations'. The practice itself, which appears to have been premised on the notion of 'breeding out' Indigenous Australians and creating an all-White monoculture and a monolingual English speaking nation of predominantly Anglo-Celtic Australians, could be described as genocidal in intent, and tragic in its consequences. Today many Australian Aboriginal people are still reeling in its aftermath, suffering from what could be described as collective post-traumatic stress disorder. Central to this process was the rupture in the intergenerational link provided by a common language [15]. Compounding this is the fact that, up until relatively recently, collective erasure of this grim chapter in Australia's recent past by many members of the dominant culture has been the norm, rather than the exception.

The anthropologist Stanner (1968), who for many years worked with Aboriginal people, coined the phrase 'The Great Australian Silence' to describe non-Aboriginal Australians' inability or unwillingness to engage with Aboriginal people in resolving the 'unfinished business' of non-Indigenous and Indigenous contact history [14]. By definition, such 'silence' also involved 'silencing'. This continued to be the case with respect to the stolen generations at both individual and governmental levels until recently.

This changed on the 26th May 1997 when the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's *'Bringing Them Home'*, *Report of the National Enquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*, was tabled in the Australian Parliament and released [15]. While initially the report was fiercely contested, since then, thousands of copies have been bought and read by ordinary Australians, and the media has continued to bring its findings to the attention of the public.

On the 13th February 2008 Prime Minister Rudd delivered a carefully scripted apology to the stolen generations, in Federal Parliament, Canberra, in a nationally televised event attended by many surviving members of the stolen generations. By and large 'The Apology' was well received by Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

3. The History Wars

The variant interpretations, views and often heated exchanges between historians of various political hues (and calibres) about the nature of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian contact history that have continued for almost two decades have come to be known as the 'History Wars'.

The 'History Wars' date back to 1993, when the Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey used the term 'the Black Armband view of Australian history' to describe and deride the ideological positionings expressed in the scholarly work of certain Australian historians, social

scientists and others writing about post-contact Aboriginal history [3].

In Blainey's view 'black armband' intellectuals and other commentators focussed in an unbalanced way on a largely negative portrayal of Australian history. Blainey's remarks were specifically directed at historians' accounts of the historical oppression and ill treatment of Aboriginal people, which, in his view, were factually incorrect and ideologically based. Instead Blainey adopted an equally ideological 'Three Cheers View' of Australian history, in which Indigenous massacres, dispossession, loss of land, near cultural genocide, the Stolen Generations, racism and so forth were radically downplayed and Australia's virtues, including 'mateship' and our putatively 'fair go for all' egalitarianism, were foregrounded [3].

Claims and counterclaims continue from different sides of the political divide. Although originally such debates largely took place in academic circles, they were soon taken up as a populist cause, aided by the Australian media and largely supported by the government of the day. The counter tendency, in which cases for a less positive reading of Australia's Indigenous and non-Indigenous contact history have been presented, was originally spearheaded by academic historians including Henry Reynolds, Robert Manne, Lyndall Ryan, Stuart Macintyre, Bain Attwood, and later taken up by others, including Clark in 2003 [9].

The matter of the stolen generations has been a resilient theme in the history wars. The major contestation centres on the veracity of the notion of whether the children were actually 'stolen'. The question of the precise reasons for the separation of children from their Aboriginal families and the exact numbers involved continues to be debated forcefully. Windshuttle is one historian who has attracted a great deal of media publicity by depicting the people responsible for these separations as, by and large, non-racist humanitarians acting in the best interests of their 'charges' (see, *inter alia*, Windshuttle 2010) [16]. The oral testimonies of the vast majority of Aboriginal people who were either removed as children, or had their children taken away from them, as well as certain written accounts by white officials directly responsible for child removals challenge such a view - notwithstanding the fact that reasons for child removals were at times more complex than those advanced by Aboriginal activists and their supporters.

4. The Stolen Generations, the History Wars, and r e a's Poles Apart

R e a, born into the Gamilaraay Australian Aboriginal people of northern New South Wales, is a new media artist working in photography, digital media and moving images, who also explores creative environments through installation. Born in 1962 in the predominantly Aboriginal town of Coonabarabran in northern N. S. W., r e a's work in digital media dates back to 1992.

Poles Apart, her most recent work, comprises a silent, high definition video, four photographic triptychs, and a Victorian morning/mourning gown created collaboratively with Melbourne dress designer Amanda Fairbanks. Complementing the moving image component of *Poles Apart* are the four large triptych photographs, printed as C-type prints. These too record the central character's flight from undetectable, but nevertheless real and powerful external forces.

In the video the protagonist, played by r e a, is an apparently ageless, androgynous Aboriginal woman, runs through a bushfire-devastated forest. The woman wears a full-length black gown that places her in an earlier era. The fire-blackened trees through which this nameless woman silently weaves her way are tall, stark and forbidding. To this poetic, lyrical artwork r e a brings the qualities and virtues of silent film.

Darkness, and the colour black, and their conflictual cultural significance,⁴ play important symbolic roles in *Poles Apart*. The blackened, burnt out forest, the charred tree stumps, the protagonist's black dress, her short-cropped dark hair and the darkness that periodically envelops the entire landscape, engulfing the woman, working synergistically to create an atmosphere of psychological entrapment, compelling viewers to ask, who is this desperate, hunted, woman, this woman of shadows? From whom or from what is she fleeing?

The answer lies in r e a's own family history, a history that mirrors the larger history of the Stolen Generations outlined in earlier sections of this article. Ruby, r e a's grandmother, and her grandmother's sister Sophie, were forcibly removed from their family and taken to the Cootamundra Girls' Home⁵ (N.S.W.) circa 1916, soon after their mother died. At that time Ruby was just five years old, and she was to remain under the strictures of the Aboriginal Protection Board until approximately 1934.⁶ There, at the Cootamundra Girls' Home, the children were trained to be maidservants, before being sent out as virtually unpaid labour for wealthy white people. As historian Peter Read has written,

As the children approached the age of fourteen or fifteen the question arose of their employment. The girls at Cootamundra were better prepared for the work – described by one of them as 'slavery' – for their training in the home [had] coincided with exactly what needed to be done anyway. It consisted of the scrubbing, washing, ironing, and sewing that the Board did not want to pay anyone to do. [11]

⁴ See, for example, Michel Pastoureau's 2008 book *Black: the History of a Colour*, Princeton University Press (originally published in French in 2008 as *Noir: Histoire d'une couleur*, Editions du Seuil, Paris), for a fascinating historical overview of the colour black in the European context. One important point made by Pastoureau relates to the ambivalence of the colour black within that socio-cultural framework. The question of the very different symbolic values associated with the colour black in Indigenous Australian communities is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵ The Cootamundra Girls' Home was opened in 1911 and closed in 1957.

⁶ r e a: April 3rd 2009: email correspondence with the author.



Figure 1 Photograph taken circa 1914, of r e a's grandmother, Ruby Pearl Leslie, née Williams, sitting on her father's lap (r e a's great grandfather, Thomas Henry Williams); r e a's great grandmother, Agnes Madden (standing) and r e a's great aunt, Sophie Lavern Williams. Photograph courtesy of r e a.

Following this enforced 'education' Ruby was dispatched to work as a maidservant for a General, who lived in Victoria, close to the N. S. W. border. One of the military man's great friends was the celebrated Australian (and internationally renowned) operatic diva Dame Nellie Melba. The Dame took a shine to young Ruby, as a result of which the General permitted Melba to 'borrow' the child for a protracted period. So it happened that Ruby accompanied Nellie Melba around Australia on one of her all-Australian tours, working as her personal maidservant. This story has entered the annals of r e a's extended family history, living on in the collective memory.⁷

Ruby returned to the General where she remained in service until years later when she was allowed to leave,

⁷ r e a: April/May 2009: telephone conversations and email correspondence with the author. For more on collective memory see Halbwachs (1992), who posits that human memory is invariably collective and also selective.

although she was never to return home. By contrast, Sophie, like the protagonist in *Poles Apart*, absconded from the family for whom she worked as a domestic servant, successfully making it back home, which she was never again to leave.



Figure 2 Photograph of Sophie Lavern Williams as an adult, date unknown. Photograph courtesy of r e a.

The fact that r e a plays the role of the runaway in *Poles Apart* is of utmost importance. To some extent in *Poles Apart* r e a has conflated the connected, though different, histories of her grandmother and great aunt, her matrilineal kin and direct forebears. R e a's performance is thus imbued with what could be described as 'body-memory', or the 'embodied affect' identified by Rutherford [13]. By using her own body to chart her great-aunt's imagined flight through the forest, r e a asserts her present-day self as existing within an historical continuum. While r e a herself was not a 'stolen child', nevertheless, as a result of this family history, she perceives herself as being 'beyond the pale' with respect to contemporary mainstream Australian society. *Poles Apart* is thus infused with a contemporary

political consciousness and an identity politics of a type foreclosed to her grandmother and great aunt.

In her 2008 book entitled *Nation, Race & History in Asian American Literature: Re-membering the Body*, Maria Zamora states that her major focus is on how certain bodies pose a challenge to the project of nation building. Bodies that are in some way different, or 'Other', Zamora claims, challenge the very categories of 'nation'. [17]

Building on Zamora's ideas, one could say that such 'different' bodies collectively represent a conceptual blockage to the idea of nation as 'imagined community' because they exist outside of that idealized 'imagined community'.⁸ So, by casting herself as the fugitive woman in *Poles Apart* and drawing on personal body-knowledge, r e a rehearses similarly complex ideas to those of Zamora. In this respect r e a's flight through the forest is simultaneously actual *and* symbolic. Through linking Zamora's ideas with those of Rutherford, who has emphasised the moving image's capacity to 'embody affect', the significance of r e a's performance in *Poles Apart* becomes more sharply defined.

R e a made the conscious political choice to film the work near Daylesford in Victoria, close to where the artists of the Heidelberg School lived and worked.

I conducted my underlying research into the Heidelberg painters, in particular looking at 'The Pioneer' and 'The Wallaby Track' by McCubbin." writes r e a. "*The Heidelberg artists chose not to 'see' the Indigenous presence in that country - Indigenous people were simply invisible to them.*

R e a elaborates on this by conceptualizing such colonial blindness in an international perspective:

The random paint splatter of the colours red, white and blue signify the 'brand' of Empire...At the end of the single-channel video, my body is sprayed with those imperial colours, representing the blotting out of the black (female) body from the landscape...

...In this work I also make historical reference to American pop art and to Jackson Pollock's Blue Poles.⁹

The endgame is the woman's gradual, successive disappearance into the landscape, following her metamorphosis into an ever-tinier fuzzy black shape, until she is no longer recognizable as a sentient, living, breathing human being. The conclusion of the video *Poles Apart*, where this brave, fugitive Aboriginal woman is obliterated by the viscous red, white and blue paint, shows that from r e a's perspective, collective memory has its own evil twin - collective annihilation.

⁸ Cf Carter 2006, 14 (after Benedict Anderson): "*Australia as a nation is both gendered and racialised. It has been imagined predominantly as masculine and white...Both terms imply power relations of exclusion and subordination.*"

⁹ This and the previous quote by r e a are personal communications to the author via email during March 2009.

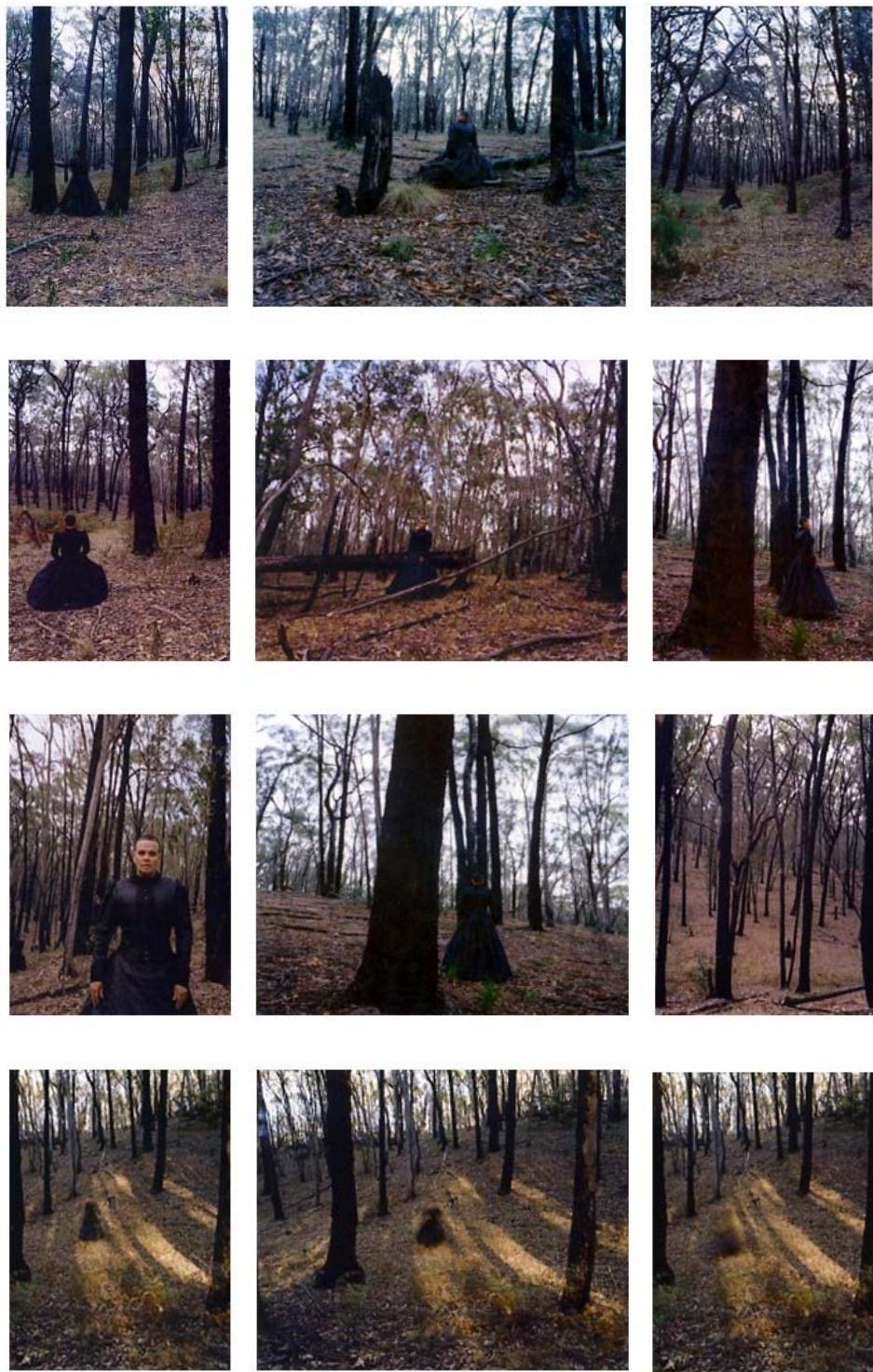


Figure 3 r e a, 2009, Poles Apart, four x triptychs, C-Type prints, medium format negative, width 3.2 metres x height 1.1 metres each, photographs courtesy of the artist and BREENSPACE, Sydney.

5. Conclusion

Poles Apart, by r e a, is not only a finely realised new media artwork, but represents a contemporary intervention into the Australian 'history wars' that have now been playing themselves out for almost two decades. Figuring prominently in the history wars has been the hotly debated issue of the stolen generations, in which Aboriginal individuals and groups have had the veracity of their predominantly oral, intergenerationally transmitted accounts of the forcible removal of children from families not only questioned, but attacked. After Rutherford [13], I have argued that the affective power of the moving image has contributed in important ways to a shift of popular understanding among Australians about the impact of the stolen generations, and that this paradigm shift now extends beyond mainstream media to embrace new media works on the same subject. I would further argue that as a result of this shift in affect the newly sympathetic understanding will not be easy to dislodge. The affective - and counteroffensive - dimensions of *Poles Apart* are evident insofar as the artist has put her family's cultural heritage on display through the medium of her own body. By drawing on her 'body knowledge', and that of her forebears, and by expertly deploying what Rutherford [13] has succinctly described as 'embodied affect', r e a, in *Poles Apart*, extends the parameters of the ongoing debate about the nature of Australian contact history.

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