

Revising Australia's Collective Memory through Post-Colonial Storytelling

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Abstract : In 1914 Topsy Smith, a woman of the First Nations Arabana tribe arrived in Alice Springs with her seven children and a herd of goats. They had come in from the goldfields at Arltunga where they had been living, and Topsy's husband, Welsh-born Bill Smith, had recently died. Sergeant Stott, the local policeman and sub-protector of Aborigines for the region, erected a tin shed for Topsy and the children to live in, which became known as the Bungalow for half-castes. Over the years that followed many more children of mixed descent were removed from their families and brought to live at the Bungalow until, a decade later, sixty children were growing up there, cared for predominantly by Topsy Smith; Ida Standley who was the first, white schoolteacher for the town; and Sergeant Stott. The story of the Bungalow is pivotal to the foundations of social relations in the town of Alice Springs and beyond. At the same time, it is little known, recognised or understood locally, let alone more broadly. This is typical of the dominant historic narratives that have emerged out of the Australian colonial project and led to 'the Great Australian Silence.' The term was coined by Australian anthropologist WEH Stanner in his 1968 Boyer Lectures, in reference to the omission of the Aboriginal experience from the dominant narratives of the nation's history. In his lecture, he attributed this silence to something that may have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views which turned, under habit and over time, into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. This doctoral project, underpinned by a methodology of practice-led research, engages a bricolage of methods including archival research, ethnography, and oral histories to research the bungalow and the context in which it operated. Techniques of fictocriticism, speculative biography, autoethnography, and archival poetics are then engaged to write the research outcomes into a post-colonial, multi-genre work of creative non-fiction that speaks into the silences in the archives. The overall intent of this doctoral work is to explore and demonstrate how techniques of creative non-fiction can be used to rewrite narratives of Australian colonial history that resonate beyond the academy, thus contributing to the bank of post-colonial stories and working towards a more just, honest and inclusive national 'memory' and identity.

Keywords : Australian history, collective memory, creative non-fiction, postcolonialism

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