

# Reconciliation Dialogues: Kathleen Mary Fallon's *Paydirt*, and Narratives of Mothering

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I'm sorry I don't know any other way to be with you than stiff-backed and suspicious, the whiteness rising up in me... I'm sorry I haven't been a better mother (Fallon, *Paydirt* 47)

TEN YEARS AFTER ITS PUBLICATION AND ALMOST TWENTY YEARS FOLLOWING THE release of the 1997 *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (BTH), Kathleen Mary Fallon's semi-autobiographical narrative *Paydirt* continues to be a subversive and confronting work. Its complex evocation of mothering, contemporary Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjectivities, and the racism, sexism and abuses of indigenous children and mothers by state and federal governments, along with its distinctively Australian character make the work as relevant today as it was when published. A decade has passed since the publication of the *Little Children are Sacred* report (Anderson and Wild), and nine years since former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's National Apology to the Stolen Generations. In more recent years there has been a resurgence of activism from groups such as Grandmothers Against Removals about the increasing rates of removal of Indigenous children into care, frequently to non-indigenous carers.

When the *BTH* was released, one in five Australian children in the child protection system was Indigenous. Over the last two decades that has increased to almost one in three children. In his 2016 report, *A New Stolen Generation?*, Michael Lavarch (former Attorney-General and instigator of the 1995 HREOC inquiry that culminated in the *BTH* report) writes that today, '[a]ssimilation is not driving this rate of child removal[,] and laws and policies mandate that it should only be occurring to protect the interests and welfare of children—but occurring it is.' (13).<sup>1</sup>

A re-reading of *Paydirt* is, for these reasons, apposite. The novel's distinctive contribution arises from its author's lived experience informing the fictional representation of white and Indigenous Australian mothering in the context of the Stolen Generations. While the voice of the child is a key presence in the text, just as the voices of children have been in the national enquiries, the text is unusual in that it also represents the experience of the mothers. In *Paydirt*, the indigenous mother whose child has been taken and the white foster mother of the indigenous child are placed in a textual dialogue together, a narrative conversation that seeks to be robust and ethically unsettling.

### Literary Context

Fallon's first novel, *Working Hot* (1988), was a sexy, jubilant, carnivalesque performance of lesbian sexuality and of writing itself, a 'spectacular and productive disruption' to and queering of Australian literature.<sup>2</sup> It was a feminist and outsider work that, like other feminist works of the late 1970s and 1980s such as Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* and Ania Walwicz's poem 'Australia', quickly acquired cult status (Morris 38-39). *Working Hot* has well outlasted Daly, and like Walwicz's 'Australia' continues to be referenced and read. *Paydirt* also puns and pirouettes, but it isn't a celebratory work.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper goes to press as the NSW Government proposes changes to *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act* and the *Adoption Act*. The changes will include the necessity for a permanent home and adoption for children in care being found within two years, even when the adoption is against the wishes of the parents or when the Department of Community Services has not assessed the children to be in danger. In NSW currently, over 800 Aboriginal children are in care. Aboriginal groups warn the changes to the Acts could create yet another Stolen Generation, with children permanently separated from their families and culture.

<sup>2</sup> *Working Hot* won the 1989 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for New Writing, and critical studies have been extensive (Sorensen and Mead; Ravenscroft; Lynch; Lever; Keane; Jagose; Hugo; Farrell; Campbell; Boyde and Lawson). *Paydirt* has by comparison received little scholarly attention, although the screenplay for the film *Call Me Mum* was shortlisted in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards (2006). *Call Me Mum* has screened internationally and achieved AFI and AWGIE nominations and awards.

Where *Working Hot's* liberating carnival of words and queer sexualities speaks invitingly and conspiratorially to its readership, *Paydirt's* subject is mothering, not sexuality, and racism, not queer marginalisation. Its tenor is much grimmer even when it is also ironic and witty: the individual and historical politics can be fairly claimed to be more complicated for its readers than those of *Working Hot*, for every non-Indigenous Australian reader is implicated in the genocidal practices of colonisation. The text figures that its readers will be both indigenous and non-indigenous, subverting the assumption of 'literary whiteness' (Morrison).

### **Non-indigenous Foster Mothering**

*Paydirt* is a response to what Fallon has described in a number of arenas ('How Violence', 'White Foster Mother', 'Kathleen Mary Fallon', 'Goat Song') as the fraught experience of being a white and queer young woman fostering an Indigenous child, constantly subject to the manipulations and interventions of the Queensland Children's Services Department (QCSD), aware of her complicity in Australia's genocidal regimes, and lacking contact with and knowledge of the child's family or community. She had first met Henry when she was working in the Brisbane-based Presbyterian home for children with disabilities. He'd been removed from Thursday Island and assessed as blind and severely intellectually disabled. In 1973, sometime after Henry turned five years of age, he came to live with Fallon as a foster child. Fallon herself was then only twenty-three years of age. It wasn't until he was a teenager that Henry (and Fallon) met his birth family:

When my foster son was 17 I flew north with him to be reunited with his birth family. The after-shocks of the reunion, meeting his family, my foster son's responses, my own family's response were to last many years, years in which I gradually came to some deeper comprehension. ('Kathleen Mary Fallon')

Kate, a semi-autobiographical character based on Fallon, voices her uncertainties about her responsibilities and capacities as a mother and the negative influence of her own whiteness and complicity in his removal (*Paydirt* 46). She wonders what her foster-son Warren's Torres Strait Islander mother, Flo, would want her to do. Her own mother, Dellmay, does not offer her a model for engaged, empathetic mothering. Kate has grown up in an environment in which she 'never felt at home and safe' (26).

For foster mothers such as Fallon, who saw her foster son grow into an independent man able to manage his disabilities until his death from diabetes at age forty-six, there is a private achievement in that outcome, but one not

supported by public discourse. Denise Cuthbert's research finds that the voices of white adoptive and foster mothers of indigenous children have remained problematically 'invisible' in discussions of the Stolen Generations, and that,

like the parallel occlusion of the specifically gendered nature of the impact of the assimilation policies of which they formed a part, [this invisibility] raises very interesting questions for understanding the intersecting but also competing dynamics of race and gender in a settler colonial context such as Australia; and also for understanding the ways in which women's roles as mothers are subject to manipulation, intervention and even co-option by the state for its own purposes. (Cuthbert 140)

The adoption of Aboriginal children by non-Aboriginal mothers in Cuthbert's view is 'one for which there exists, neither at the academic nor at the popular level, an adequate *vocabulary* in which to talk about their significance and their experience' (141, emphasis added). Speaking about one's mothering risks a double exposure: to white Australia 'betrayed' by 'miscegenation', and to Indigenous Australia which sees the non-indigenous mother as another instance of colonisation and dispossession, and participant in the regimes of the Stolen Generations.

Other texts by white Australian women about their mothering of Indigenous children are conspicuous by their absence. Liz Mackinlay, a West Australian married to a Yanyuwa man and birth-mother to two Aboriginal sons, writes of being supported by her boys' grandmothers who share with her their skills and knowledge as Indigenous mothers and women. However, after being publicly vilified she experiences a terrifying shame that while her mothering nurtures her Aboriginal sons it also sustains the wrongs of colonisation. Writing into this shame, she asks 'does that mean [I] should be more like an Aboriginal mother or more like [my]self?' (Mackinlay n.p.).

Historically, most white women's interactions with indigenous children and mothers was through public institutions: indigenous children's homes, missions, church organisations and hospitals and as employers of female indigenous domestic workers, rather than via individual adoption and foster care. White women were employed in these institutional settings because it was assumed that *white* women had a 'special responsibility' and capacity for socialising, educating and regulating the sexuality of Aboriginal women and children (Cole 153). Anna Cole evaluates the work of one such woman, Ella Hiscock, and her twenty years as matron of the Cootamundra Home for Aboriginal Girls. Cole concludes in part that Hiscock's work there showed:

the essential incompatibility between her role as 'surrogate mother' to hundreds of Aboriginal girls and her wider role in a state-sanctioned policy of enforced 'assimilation' and the attempted destruction of Aboriginal family life. (Cole 156)

In place of these infrequent histories there is a now extensive body of works from the perspective of indigenous writers whose childhoods were spent in foster care or institutions. Many Indigenous life-writers write about their white adoptive or foster mothers, or more often, the administrators and carers they encountered in institutions. The writers employ a broad range of literary strategies, producing hybrid works of life-writing, counter-histories or fictionalised biography (Brewster, *Reading* 250). Texts by writers such as Ruby Langford Ginibi, Doris Pilkington Garimara, Ruth Hegarty, Jukuna Mona Chuguna, Rhonda Collard-Spratt, Kate Howarth, Samantha Faulkner, Laurel Nanup, Hilda Jarman, and Alf Taylor along with works of fiction and poetry by writers such as Alexis Wright, Tony Birch, Kim Scott and Ali Cobby Eckermann (to name just a few) all relate stories of non-indigenous women who had care of and authority over the writers (or their characters) as children. These accounts most often tell of neglect, abuse and continual efforts to stop the children knowing about their indigeneity. The HREOC inquiry also found that 'Few who gave evidence to the Inquiry had been happy and secure. Those few had become closely attached to institution staff or found loving and supportive adoptive families' (153).

*Paydirt* contributes differently to these histories of neglect and abuse by white Australian women and men. *Paydirt* is a narrative about an unusually loving, self-aware foster mother, one who also knows that the child is indigenous, which many foster mothers in previous decades did not know. It is a work produced to reflect upon the author's experience of caring for an indigenous boy and to critique her own (our/my white) racism and ignorance. Fallon sought out and sustained relationships with Torres Strait Islanders (TI), and the book is dedicated to the memory of the late activist Ephraim Bani and other TI activists, and includes an afterword by Ricardo Idagi, a Murray (Mer) Islander. *Paydirt* is the outcome of a series of immersions of the kind that Jeanine Leane might be pointing to when she argues that too few Australian writers have the experiential knowledge and empathy required to meaningfully represent indigenous stories and characters:

to achieve empathy [the writer] must know those they are seeking to represent—and not just through limited and controlled observation, or through a state archive, or someone else's research. Rather, they must know through social and cultural immersion. (Leane n.p.)

Fallon's writing process was unlike the non-indigenous novelist Kate Grenville's approach to the writing of the critically divisive *The Secret River*, in which Grenville effectively avoided and was uncomfortable with actual contact with Indigenous people (Kelada; Grenville, *Searching*).

The text insists that none of its subject matter—the fostering, the mothering, the fictional testimonies to institutionalised racism, violence and poverty—can be naturalised with romanticising or othering tropes that are the 'traditionally useful constructs of blackness' (Morrison x). There is little in the way of white 'good feeling' about the fostering of the indigenous, which could, in Odette Kelada's words in discussing Baz Lurhman's film *Australia*, obscure 'the narrative's ethical violence of corporeally repossessing the dispossessed' (Kelada, 'Love Is A Battlefield' 84). The text's dialogic, polyphonic structure and interleaving language registers encourage the reader to be alert to alterations and lacunas in the characters' perspectives. It invites the reader to feel as uncomfortable, gleeful, hopeful and despairing as its characters. Felicity Collins's observation of the film version *Call Me Mum* (the screenplay written by Fallon), is equally relevant to *Paydirt's* readers: 'the viewer is asked to tolerate exposure to deeply ambivalent (if not profoundly damaged) personal and historical meanings of "mum" and "home"' (46).<sup>3</sup>

### **Maternal Talk—Collaborative Storytelling**

*Paydirt* opens with Kate and Warren flying to Queensland on the eve of his eighteenth birthday to meet his birth mother, Flo. The text is structured into four chapters, the characters speaking in first person in a series of soliloquies, with Kate's parents Dellmay and Keith sharing the third chapter (under the portmanteau 'Dellkeith'). As Kate and Warren fly to Cairns, Dellkeith are at home and Flo is in a hospital bed very ill with diabetes, awaiting her son's arrival.

The three mothers, Kate, Flo and Dellmay, narrate their stories of mothering. Each of the women is connected to the other two through a mother/daughter or mother/mother relationship. Their dialogic narratives expose confronting racial, gendered and cultural truths of mothering in non-indigenous and indigenous family settings, as well as the institutional brutalities of child removal, inequalities in income, education and health outcomes, and the structural, legally enforced oppression of Indigenous Australians. Given the dialogic, polyphonic narratives and the communicative, immersive process that Fallon undertook in

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<sup>3</sup> Felicity Collins situates *Call Me Mum* within a continuum of Australian films that 're-frame the figure of the mother through the lens of colonial history' (46); a continuum which includes the 1955 feature film *Jedda* (dir, Charles Chauvel); *Night Cries, A Rural Trajedy* (dir, Tracy Moffatt), which focuses on the now adult Indigenous daughter caring for her dying elderly white mother; and *Radiance* (dir, Rachel Perkins).

the writing of the work, it is possible to read the book as a form of what Maggie Nolan has described as 'collaborative storytelling' and as a contribution to the national Indigenous reconciliation process.

In *Paydirt* mothering is never far from censure, disappointment, racism and shame. Kate well knows that she does the mothering, 'enacts it' on a daily basis, but does that make her any kind of mother?:

This is a story some would say shouldn't be told but I'm a witness, more than a witness ... I am his mother, well, foster mother as I've always described myself, not knowing if using this term to describe myself was right or wrong. (Fallon, 'Goat Song')

Flo speaks to the profoundly difficult challenges of mothering following repeated miscarriages amongst TI women suffering high rates of stillbirths and miscarriage (126) and living with a violent partner. She has defined herself (harmfully) through her sexuality while suffering racial discrimination, as well as being blamed by her own community for the injuries inflicted on Warren as a three-year-old by his father (127). Flo's mothering of Warren ends within a few short years: the story she narrates as she anticipates his arrival is about what happened before he was removed, and how she built a life after losing him. Her narration draws attention to the years leading up to his injury, and the years without him that followed.

Doris Pilkington Garimara (in Brewster, *Giving This Country*) and the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia (*Telling Our Story*) have observed that shame is frequently experienced by indigenous mothers whose children were taken: Flo employs the word a number of times to describe her feelings, and she anticipates feeling shamed in Kate's presence (141). At many other points she has pride too, and Flo's narrative concludes with her vividly and radically re-inventing the possible past and future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia. *Paydirt* resists its characters or readers settling into a sense that a single idea or statement or feeling concludes a matter; as with Fallon's other writings, the text is endlessly unquiet, mutable and digressive in order to affect the emotional and political complexity of its characters' experiences.

In anticipating her meeting with Warren, Flo says, 'Shame has come back. But it's not just shame, it's pride. Pride has come back too. Shame and pride. He is now well' (153). She feels betrayed and hurt by Islanders and has not lived there for years. The sad 'truth' is that the reuniting that Warren believes he'll be enjoying with his TI family is not going to happen. Even if she were well enough, Flo initially has no intention of returning (141) with Warren to show him his former community. In her view the Islanders have conveniently 'forgotten' past white

violence and discriminatory practices (140) and believe she is not black enough because her father is white (133) and she's had white boyfriends:

'It's true I've got a different way of seeing things after all these years down south ... that old fellow, you know he said to me, he said, "Flo, go back where you came from. That's the way we do things on the Island"... I go back there now and they call me Mainlander. Down here I'm an Islander or a Boong or a Nigger, up there I'm not even an Islander any more I'm a Mainlander with whitefella ways, black on the outside, white on the inside'. (141-42)

The child of an Islander and an Irishman, Flo was officially adopted by Malays when she was young (133). There are disadvantages—Flo is called a 'bingai, dirty Islander' (133) by the Malays—but supposed advantages as well. Her adoption having made her 'officially a Malay', she was afforded her certain privileges, such as the ability to drink in pubs, which was denied to Islanders (134), but the degradations in turn created discord in her relationship with Warren's father, Albert (134). Flo's story testifies to the divisiveness of identity-based politics when communities have little in the way of resources and autonomy.

Although she has mothered Warren intensively for thirteen years (4), Kate continually doubts her capabilities, but then also asserts her firmly-held values which attest to the fact that the boy needed to be cared for. She has saved him from a childhood of institutional care with its over-medication and developmental regressions (20), yet she believes that she hasn't 'made much of a fist of mothering him' (46). Kate argues that removal of children such as Warren is the action of the patriarchal state attempting to rectify the destructive effects of more than two hundred years of colonial dispossession, disruption and destruction of indigenous communities. However, that still leaves her with her personal situation of caring for Warren: the calamity of her white woman's guilt and anger lives within her mothering, caring body. Her self-critical narrative bears witness to the anxieties that she experiences arising from the isolating system of foster care (6, 9), the broader context of racism in the community, the lack of contact with his birth family or other TI communities, and the effects of having taken on mothering Warren as a disempowered young woman:

some day I want to try to tell somebody who'll listen, just sit quietly and calmly and tell someone who'll sit quietly and calmly and listen, tell someone the blank, simple, raw facts. (9)

Teenage Warren's monologue is textually framed as a tape-recording that he is making for his 'real' Islander mum, Flo. Warren's intellectual disability and sight



and hearing impairments lead him to linguistic inventiveness, and 'accidental' parodies of governmental and legal vernaculars. He inventively mishears and reinvents expressions. Much of his narration's wit comes from these perceptive (mis)interpretations: the duplicitous documentary-maker is a 'Real Racketeur' (59) who talks to Warren about 'Similar Relationsist Genderslide' (60). In accusing Kate of trying to make him 'white' and stealing him from his birth family, Warren also reveals his lack of cultural knowledge and his false assumptions about what it means to be indigenous:

'I have to wash all the time and use that deodorant and clean me teeth and keep me nose clean and that's cause maybe she [Kate] reckons Blacks smell ... and she's always tryin to ruin my Black Mind Power by makin me use one of those diary organisers ... but us Blackfellas don't need to write stuff down do we? ... we got oral stories, that's what I heard. (55)

Kate's parents expose the ingrained lies and self-deceptions of white Australian racism. The text's oldest mother, Dellmay, is a figure of vicious feminine morality, a woman wholly invested in patriarchy's machinations of power and the supposed prestige of class and femininity. Dellmay's secret is that she allegedly has Indigenous forebears (93), which she coyly and ashamedly labels 'black Irish' (92). She reveals that she smothered her elderly mother when her mind was 'wandering' and she was talking openly about their Indigenous forebears (88, 91-93). Unwittingly echoing a white liberal sentiment that (ironically) she doesn't understand, Dellmay complains that Kate has gone from a 'Christian Goody-Two-Shoes' to a 'Genocidal Assimilationist Colluding with a Racist Regime' (100). There is an ironic possibility too, that Dellmay and Flo may be related, as both mention their old Uncle Tommy (98, 147), potentially the same man.

Kate is a perennial disappointment to her, a daughter who refuses to perform heteronormative femininity or to be daughterly. Kate, 'even as a baby', challenged and 'defied' her (112). The thoroughly racist Dellmay believes that fostering Warren has 'ruined [Kate's] life' (2). When Kate is feeling despondent about Warren, she also questions herself: 'I should just let you go off and be "free", piss off to "tropical paradise with your real mother"' (2).

Though less judgmental of his daughter's choice to foster Warren, her father Keith also makes known his deeply racist attitudes. A more passive racist than Dellmay, he remains glibly ignorant of his own / white man's contribution to the 'problem': 'Thursday Island, huh! Broken Bottle island we called it. And V-bloody-D was so prevalent up there we called it the old T.I. handshake' (111).

### **Misaligned Knowledges and Outsider Mothers**

The narrative is replete with stories, histories and political facts about racism explored through the activity of mothering or not being able to mother. As a consequence, the five characters' perspectives, histories and sympathies seem on the surface of things to be intractably misaligned. However, Flo and Kate are, in fact, engaged in a process of reconciliation through their desire to bring about Warren's reuniting with Flo and to meet each other, the two of them the boy's 'Mum'.

Their imminent meeting will come about years later than it should have, and despite the Department's efforts to ensure that it would never take place. Flo has located Warren through illegal and urgent investigations: she mentions that 'Aunty Iris' hacked into the online files of the 'Department' (of Children's Services). Flo's diabetes is at critical stage and 'Iris knew I wanted to see Warren before I went. I'm real sick this time, real sick' (136).

Cuthbert observes that there are institutional parallels between the Indigenous mothers whose children were taken and the adoptive and foster mothers who had care of them. What these women share, which *Paydirt* exposes, is that successive governments have taken the view that mothers should remain subject to the State's authority and not enjoy independent authority as mothers:

it is instructive to consider the parallels between the situations of the two sets of women [Aboriginal mothers and non-Aboriginal adoptive/foster mothers] in the context of the ways in which the state polices, intervenes in and co-opts the maternal role to suit its interests, not infrequently privileging the interests of one group of mothers over another as part of this process. (Cuthbert 142)

Flo and Kate's monologues emphasise the cultural, racial and legal disconnections between them. At the same time, they are engaged in a 'desegregated' (Cole, Haskins and Paisley xxix) intimate, thematic dialogue. They fearfully and sometimes tenderly imagine speaking to the other woman. While never directly conversing—the text concludes before the reuniting of Warren with Flo—Kate and Flo imagine telling each other about important life incidents and perspectives, especially as they pertain to Warren. They are outsider mothers: women whose authority and identity as mothers is denied and challenged. Kate is a non-indigenous lesbian sole mother/carer, and Flo portrays herself as both a Torres Strait Islander, and a 'half-caste' mother without her child. Neither mother has legal authority over Warren. *Paydirt* aligns the white foster mother and Indigenous mother through their parallel relationships to the

various state departments and governmental child welfare and indigenous policies.

Warren and Flo's reunion will not be free of serious consequences, as Dellmay has informed the Children's Services Department that Kate is a lesbian, a fact that Kate had gone to lengths to conceal (16). *Working Hot's* frisky, intertextual, corporeal affirmations of queer identities and female sexuality are not present in *Paydirt*. Kate, Warren and Dellmay's narratives draw attention to the multiple ways that lesbians are discriminated against: in the view of the State, lesbian women are unfit to be foster mothers. Dellmay has also warned the Department that Warren is undertaking an 'Unauthorised and Unsupervised Reconciliation Across State Lines' (98), which she knows will result in Warren being removed from Kate's care:

And did I tell you that ... the Authorities don't let women like that anywhere near children even in this permissive day and age? (98)

### **Maternalist Feminism and Indigenous Women's Activism**

Maternalist feminism in the first half of the twentieth century was based on the belief that women and mothers regardless of class or race had a special contribution to make to society and political life through their childbearing and childrearing experiences. Less known is the history of white maternalist feminist support of Aboriginal women's activism for Aboriginal rights, a history of cooperation which demonstrates points of allegiance and shared aims between these groups of women over Aboriginal mothers and families' rights to their children and decisions about their welfare and education (Lake; Cole, Haskins and Paisley). White Australian maternalist feminists and Aboriginal mothers sometimes jointly advocated for regaining guardianship of removed children from the 1920s through to the 1950s (Lake), with white maternalist feminists arguing in the press, and in federal and state election campaigns for the rights of Aboriginal people. Marilyn Lake writes that these early feminists were sometimes strategically useful to Aboriginal women spurned by the State:

When feminists espoused a politics of sexual difference, focused on securing recognition of 'the common status of motherhood', their political campaigns proved to be of more relevance and use to Aboriginal women, brutally deprived of their maternal rights by a racist state, than feminists' subsequent pursuit of equal rights with the men of their own class. (Lake 361)

The suffragettes had not campaigned for indigenous women to get the vote in the early 1900. But here, Aboriginal and maternalist feminists' concerns coincided in

the aim to have all mothers' maternal authority recognised, regardless of class and ethnicity. For white mothers, claims for custody of their children were incrementally recognised, but not for indigenous mothers whose claims were invariably dismissed: politicians were willing to listen as long as white activists 'did not advocate for changes in policy or support Aboriginal people against authorities' (Cole, Haskins and Paisley xviv).

From the mid 1950s, accelerating in the 1960s and 70s, white Australian feminism turned away from its former alliances and co-operations with Aboriginal women as a part of the shift away from maternalist ideologies, to a new focus on the feminism of difference and equality (DiQuinzio) and campaigns around employment, welfare and education rights. Fallon's writing has always been politically informed, and keenly aware of these feminist histories (Campbell). By recognising the role of the State in the persecution of indigenous women and communities, and its controlling regimes of *both* indigenous and adoptive/foster non-indigenous mothers, Fallon's *Paydirt* articulates this sometimes conjoined history.

The narrative specifically remarks upon the divisiveness of separatist feminist orthodoxies, when Kate remarks with some bitterness that she has had no support from her lesbian feminist friends. In Kate's view these women practice a feminism that privileges one's sex and sexuality over indigeneity and disability:

'Putting all your energy into a male child.' Stupid, dumb, dyke bitches. Think they're sooo radical because they're lesbians. Middle-class twats. I don't see them anymore. (9)

Much of the second-wave feminist theory of the period in which the events took place saw itself in opposition to motherhood, either neglecting mothering altogether, or presenting overly simplistic and often heavily Marxist analysis that didn't address the importance of mothering to women's lives (DiQuinzio 62; Benhabib and Cornell). The foster and Indigenous mothers in *Paydirt* recognise the importance of their mothering, and appreciate their commonalities over their differences, while recognising that their differences are nevertheless highly significant and not 'equal', and have in fact led to Flo and Warren's initial separation.

Flo is cautiously welcoming of her son's foster mother, while Kate mourns their years of alienation from each other. In her apology to Flo, Kate invokes the lie of Australia as a *terra nullius* land. Reconciliation dialogues are embedded throughout Kate's and Flo's narratives. They each, crucially, recognise the need for truth and justice in their personal 'reconciliation' process. Kate's offer that, 'I'm sorry we don't have any common ground, any terra firma, to stand on together to help him' (48), isn't entirely true as they are in fact finding further common ground through their acts of resistance and subversion of the State's

child welfare regulations. Flo counters that Kate has ‘grown him [Warren] up well’ (160). She incorporates Kate’s foster mother role into Islander traditions despite Kate’s non-indigenous identity and her own ambivalence about her Islander identity:

when a kid is adopted Islander-way the mother never comes and takes that kid or anything, that new mother is the real mother. She’s my son’s mother so I call her ‘Mum’. (141)

That Warren’s mother should think of her as a mother makes Kate uncomfortable. The recognition that each has had a share in mothering Warren, and the fact that Flo doesn’t blame Kate as an individual, but instead blames the State for Warren’s removal, expresses their shared aim of respecting and nurturing Warren (141).

Flo’s assertion that they call one another ‘Mum’ (4, 141, 161) reiterates the place of mothering as a point of both resistance and collaboration. Kate’s maternal work hasn’t received the recognition she and Warren have needed from the authorities or from her own friends and parents, and yet here is Flo, Warren’s birth mother telling Kate:

you’ve grown him up well my little sick, ruined Bub ... like a monster when I last saw him Mum ... I am so happy that my poor baby found someone to love him and look after him ... *I would love to have done that myself* ... (160, emphasis added)

Flo reiterates the wrong that has taken place (‘I would love to have done that myself’) while reinforcing the value of Kate’s foster mothering. In the final pages, following her extensive, cathartic recollection of recent Islander social history on TI, she resolves to enact recognition of Kate’s mothering through exchange: ‘I’ll make you wauri tebud then I can give you my boy properly after all these years... then I can call you Mum and you can call me Mum’ (161). For Flo, calling one another ‘Mum’, drawing on ‘Islander style’ adoption traditions (133), becomes a symbolic act of solidarity in the two mothers’ collective, intersectional resistance to the State’s laws and procedures: rather than see each other as ‘the problem’ their anger is appropriately directed at the State and its policies.

### **Truth, Justice and Reconciliation**

While Kate and Warren idealise Thursday Island as a place of social and spiritual connection, Flo relates how colonialist missionary and government involvement have brutalised TI culture, leaving ‘half-castes’ like her in a place of cultural non-belonging. Her grief is present in example after example of cultural suppression,

segregation, police brutality, and the general oppressive mistreatment of Indigenous Australians (132, 134-35, 139, 140). As a consequence, 'Frangipani Land', she says, has become 'Bullshit Land', a place from which she 'took off' and only returned once (125). Communicating family history is a responsibility that weighs upon her, one which Flo deliberates upon throughout her narration. She wants to educate her son, so he knows who he is, but also protect him from hurtful knowledge, particularly that his physical and intellectual disabilities are a result of his father Albert's alcohol-fuelled violence (128-29). But the now deceased Albert (whom Warren believes is still living) is also a more complex man than we first understand him to be from Flo's narrative: she then explains that he was an initiated Mabuiag Island man who also taught his son traditional songs (137), one of which Warren still sings, unaware that the song is his father's legacy. Warren's song 'whale car knackie' (12) was originally '*awaial gar naki*' (137). Albert's notebooks, which Flo 'knows by heart' (159) reveal a highly literate man with political convictions and potent insights ('My interpretation of history is not what happened in the past but how it is told.' (159))

With no Indigenous/Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge herself, Kate refers to Warren's 'whale car knackie' song as his 'little nonsense song' (12). She has re-interpreted it, and sung it to him to comfort him, but the correct words, the cultural meaning and the significance of it being his initiated father's song has been erased by the foster care context.

*Paydirt* is consistently critical of wilful and unwitting white Australian historical ignorance. Kate is suspicious of, yet nevertheless relies upon, the official and untruthful accounts of the circumstances of Warren's initial institutionalisation. She repeats what she has been told: 'His family chucks him out. His people chuck him out' (38-39).

'... hello Flo ... so you just let the Department take your sick baby and that was that ...' A voice like a balled fist. The Protector's wife will be serving afternoon tea on the front lawn. You wouldn't dare touch a white woman. (5)

Kate's self-critical narration demonstrates she is aware of her place in the continuum of discrimination, and that as a foster mother she is linked to other institutionalised white women such as the 'Protector's wife', a reference to the state's various Protectors of Aborigines (from 1949 in QLD, the 'Protector of Islanders, Thursday Island' (Frankland)). She imagines that Warren and Indigenous Australia despise her:

'because we're whispering all the stories of the other mothers, his real mothers. The abuses and the rapes, the removal and the broken

hearts and broken lives and anguished wailing. When he looks at you he sees the Enemy'. (42)

Although herself a participant in what will later come to be known as the Stolen Generations, she is resisting this same regime. She reflects upon her own subjectivity as a white woman invested with 'the White Man's Burden'. Racist internal voices which urge her to 'put down that Burden' (43), instead strengthen her resolve to protect him: 'I'm his guardian and I won't leave my post. I'm the ever-ready Eveready and I'll never say die' (48). But with Warren now angrily believing that she has stolen him from his family, Kate is counting on his birth mother's influence: '[Warren's] only hope now is that his family, his mother, Flo ... Meeting again after all these years, she'll calm him down. She's just got to' (3-4).

### **Mothing as Resistance**

*Paydirt* reprises the maternalist feminism and indigenous women's activism of the first half of the twentieth century. In its characterisations of Warren's two mothers, we see that Flo has challenged her Thursday Island community, criticising its men folk for their discrimination against the women; she has worked to define herself as a woman with self-agency, and has proactively re-located her son and engaged in dialogue with his foster mother. Kate's maternal practice is also resistant and activist. Despite communications from the Department bureaucrats reminding her that Warren has 'never been legally adopted' and that 'the Director of Children's Services [remains] his Legal Guardian' (37), she repeats to herself, 'To foster—to nurse, to nourish, to care for, to harbour in one's heart. And I fostered Warren' (38).

### **Recuperating Lost Histories**

She laughed at me when I called her 'Mum'. It hurt a lot when she did that but, when I thought about it later, I realised that she probably didn't understand, yet ... *Later maybe*. But I can still call her Mum to begin with and try to explain. (161, emphasis added)

Flo's statement, 'Later maybe', recognises that the harms done to Indigenous Australians have been enacted over generations and continue. Her 'maybe' straddles the possibility that Kate and other whites will never understand, and the alternative possibility that Kate will come to share in understanding—later. At this point in the text, Flo has invoked the names and achievements of those indigenous and Torres Strait Islander activists who have guided her, including Eddie Koiki Mabo—'Uncle Koiki' (157), Ephraim Bani (146) and Ellie Gaffney (141).

Each chapter has opened with text in Western and Eastern Islander languages, and Warren's chapter with an epigraph sourced from Ephraim Bani, which reads in part, 'If Torres Strait languages become extinct or the culture becomes pure contemporary ... our identity will become a torturing dream' (51). Flo's final decision as to what to share with Warren is drawn from Albert. She affirms that the boy should know everything. Flo concurs now with Albert who had said, 'we had to keep telling our stories no matter what. Even if they were sad or hard because we were being forced into a sort of amnesia...' (160).

In the crescendo of the last pages, with the intense anticipation of Warren's arrival, Flo recalls her father and grandfather's Darnley Deeps pearling, Australia's internment of Japanese Thursday Islanders during World War II, and Albert's notebooks. These recollections evolve into a reinvention of early colonisation events, and a merged Dreaming/new history of a possible future. Flo's voice, which has been firmly located as hers alone, in these final sections merges with those of her father and other ancestors. She/they drive back the missionaries and the colonisers' boats, rewinding the 'old black and white film': 'the missionaries scurry backwards from the village... I am doing a wonderful warrior war dance on the beach...and then they are gone'. (152) Stolen artefacts and spirits are being returned:

... from the crates in the cellars of old European museums. They are opening their eyes. They are beginning to hum, beginning to sing, beginning to chant and do their dance ... if the 'pagan' past comes back—Warren has come back ... The spirit is here. Things are returned. Evil is reversed. (153)

With her vernaculars shifting between her own and traditional Torres Strait Islander speech and song, Flo achieves a clear position on what to share with Warren. As his mother and cultural guardian, she has recuperated her people's history and will now share it with the boy. At the text's conclusion Flo calls herself a full Islander, declares that 'Things are returned', although with 'typical' Islander (and Fallon) humor she can also say TI is 'still a shithole' (162).

## **Conclusion**

Of Fallon's film script for *Call Me Mum*, the film's director Margot Nash said 'the gift of Kathleen's text is the complexity that it uncovers and names' (Collins 52). Kate, the autobiographical character whose experiences are based on the author's own, openly declares herself to be aware of her complicity in the regime of separations. This declaration could reduce the text to a static, regretful apology for past wrongs. Tony Birch argues that reconciliation apologies can be



an abdication of the ethic of responsibility, 'allowing colonial listeners confronted with a narrative of their own violence... to simultaneously absorb and purge themselves of trauma' (in Ryan and Crabbe 140). But, *Paydirt* tells a difficult story for indigenous and non-indigenous readers.

The book was authored and published in the years following the revelations of the national HREOC inquiry into the removal of Aboriginal children. Fallon has commented on the vast changes in knowledge and attitudes toward foster care of Indigenous children from when she first fostered Henry in 1973 to when the report came out twenty-five years later:

'Nice' people went from saying how 'kind' and 'Christian' I must be to have taken on such a 'burden' to contemptuously and self-righteously 'abusing' me as supporting a 'genocidal and racist regime'. It has been a complex and difficult experience for both my foster son and myself, forcing us to confront profound personal, social and political issues. (Fallon, 'Kathleen Mary Fallon')

It is a narrative of an inevitably flawed response to the Stolen Generation removal of children by a self-titled white 'do-gooder', and the fictionalised Indigenous woman whose child was taken. The text ameliorates this through immersive listening, dialogue and cultural connection. Moments of reconciliation around particular, local histories are shown as possibilities, suggesting that only desolation will arise from a continuance of cultural erasure.

The fact remains that white adoptive and foster mothers of Indigenous children are numerous but remain problematically 'invisible' in discussions of the Stolen Generations. Few non-Indigenous writers have sought to incorporate into their writing process or their published works Indigenous perspectives and words as intensively as has Fallon. A decade following its first publication, *Paydirt* remains as a disturbing and perceptive 'vocabulary' of mothering, that speaks directly to the complex responsibilities and ethics of the foster mothering of Indigenous children by white mothers and the incalculable losses felt by the removed children, and their Indigenous mothers and families from having the children removed.

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