Vulnerability – an affliction of the powerless

A Nyoongar Story
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This thesis is presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Murdoch University 2012
Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work, which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Gerrard Shaw

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses and investigates the issue of vulnerability among Australian Aboriginal people, as exemplified through the Nyoongar Shaw family and in particular myself. The Shaw family is from southwest Western Australia, more specifically the area belonging to the Yued nation. This thesis examines events in the lives of ancestors and descendants of the Nyoongar Shaw family. It specifically reconstructs the personal stories of our Aboriginal great-grandmother, Mary Ann Chuberan, our Aboriginal great-grandfather (in law), Frederick John Blurton, our Aboriginal grandfather George Shaw, Charles Fitzgerald (our Aboriginal grandfather in law), our Aboriginal aunts, Lilly, Jane and Margaret Shaw, and our Aboriginal mother, Ruby Shaw. By examining these lives, this thesis offers a way of understanding past Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships in a West Australian context. It does this by drawing on government records, personal interviews, and the telling
of my story as a member of the ‘Stolen Generations’. Using the post-modern concept of auto-
ethnography as a literary tool, it combines the genres of biography and autobiography.
Through the telling of my story, I explicate my experience of being raised to be vulnerable,
manifesting itself through inadequate emotional care in childhood, thereby setting me up for
failure in dealing appropriately with relationships in adult life. This provides a personal
account of the effects of removal. Through recording the stories of both ancestors and
descendants, I demonstrate the vulnerability of Aboriginal people, the result of living under
government legislation during the years 1920-1959. These stories will show how, over time,
this legislation disempowered and dispossessed them, and are intended to facilitate further
discussion on what the effects of vulnerability mean for the lives of Aboriginal people and
the community more broadly.
Acknowledgement

Stephen King pointed out that to be a writer you need someone in your life that believes in you and the value of the message contained within your writing. Therefore I thank Dr. Kathryn Trees for her belief in the value contained in the message of my story. Through her unfailing support, I found the courage needed to tell my story. Kathryn has been a source of comfort and counsel throughout, but above all a continuous source of inspiration and empowerment.

I want to acknowledge a significant friend I met up with at while with the Servites in 1965. He joined this Order with a view to becoming a Brother. He, together with another postulant visited me at St. Charles Seminary on a monthly basis. I stayed with the community during term breaks. As a result of a sustained contact for over forty years, this person has come to know me very well. Sometimes, I think he knows me better than I know myself. He has committed himself to support me in the course of writing my story. I am grateful for this, and his almost photographic memory. He was able to bring to life memories I had long forgotten. As we shared memories from the past, his self-appointed role as ‘Devil’s Advocate’ emerged. He exercised this role by challenging my perspective on past experiences, and thereby endeavoured to keep me honest and realistic throughout the exercise of remembering. He is the kind of person any autobiographical writer would value.
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2. White Shaw Coat of Arms

3. The *dwernt* (Nyoongar for 'dingo') is the Nyoongar Shaw family totem

4. Application for Aged Pension

5. Amongst the New Norcia Archives is the record of Victoria Blurton's Baptism Certificate, which refers to her parents Mary Ann Chuberan and Frederick (John) Blurton

6. Lefroy's Cricket Team 1879. John Blurton is in the front row seated

7. Second New Norcia Cricket Team. John Blurton is in the front row left

8. The Wanderers Football Team. John Blurton is the tall player with his arms folded (centre row)

9. Our Aboriginal great-great grandfather William (Willie) Shaw, Father of George

10. Rabbit-Proof Fence (image reproduced by courtesy of Jabal Films Pty Ltd)

11. Uncle Billy Shaw and his wife Topsy

12. Aunty Margaret (left) Our Mother (right) with Sister Mary, one of the Benedictine Sisters

13. Permit for Employment of Aborigines

14. Natives' Medical Fund

15. Elder Charlie Shaw (left) and Peter Shaw (right)

16. Three Cottages with the Church in the background 1950

17. Charlie and Lillian pointing out the location of the cottage they once lived in. Saint Joseph's Orphanage, now the New Norcia Museum and Art Gallery, is seen in the background

18. Aunty Lily Shaw

19. Lillian (left), and Celine (right) are first cousins (me centre)

20. St Brigid's Catholic Church, Northbridge

21. First Communion Day at St. Joseph's Church Subiaco, where I was later confirmed into the Catholic faith by Bishop Rafferty

22. Brigid's Catholic Primary School and Kindergarten

23. Fellow postulants at Servite Priory, Tuart Hill, with me in the centre