

**ACTIVE PANOPTICISM: READING SURVIVOR NARRATIVES FROM
MISSIONS AND DORMITORIES**

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Abstract

Imperial Australia gave birth to some unforgettable circumstances of territorial human subjectivization¹ with its unique colonial disciplinary mechanisms. The most effective of such mechanisms was the penal panopticism which was an extended project of the European penal colony that was Australia. This colonial mission expanded and engineered the construction of massive missions and dormitories which came to be symptomatic of ultimate structures of aboriginal disciplining and surveillance. The native population especially the mixed-race was pushed into it depriving them of any human rights once within these territories. Aboriginal narratives have entrusted an enormous amount of importance on the missions and dormitories in the shaping of their lives, often citing its role in their displacement and loss of their native identity. This paper is an attempt to locate the circumstances in and around the colonial missions and dormitories functioning through the study of select aboriginal narratives. An in-depth study of the same utilizes the Michel Foucault's concepts from Discipline and Punish.

Keywords: subjectivization, colonization, missions, dormitories, displacement, surveillance

The early years of 20th century saw the worst of surveillance² carried out on the Aborigines in Australia. Surveillance is an act where the activities of a group can be controlled with self policing. This act is very much ideological and territorial. It is ideological as people can be

¹ Subjectivization is the process that derives from Michel Foucault's concepts of subject creation in the discourses of power and knowledge. To put it briefly it refers to the mechanisms through which a subject is created.

² The concept of surveillance is derived from Michel Foucault and refers to the close observation, regulation and manipulation of a person's activities with or without his knowledge.

threatened to conduct themselves correctly as they are constantly being scrutinized under some higher power a concept very much like the modern day 'Big Brother'³³, where one is observed 24*7 through cameras. It gives the notion that one's behavior is being observed and recorded every single minute. It is territorial as it is limited to a certain spatial boundary. For the surveillance to be effective this process functions as a system which is very much visibly present at the same time beyond the reach of the people due to its inaccessibility and non-transparent regulatory mechanism. Colonial Australia much ahead of its times had premonitory Big Boss approach in its colonial structures. Its active panopticism was the major disciplinary mechanism employed to regulate the native population.

Legalizing Subjectivization

The legal mode of governance in Colonial Australia lavished an enormous amount of attention on its disciplinary mechanisms. These legal mechanisms not only asserted territorial control of the penal land but also reinforced its control over the ever existing indigenous population. Colonization not only imported the white people and their culture to the new colony, but it also witnessed the migration of the European legal machinery to the newly occupied. These laws operated not only on the ideological level but also on the coercive levels thereby creating lasting impacts on the aboriginal life and culture. The primary objective of the legal machinery was creation of obedient subjects which in Foucauldian terminology can be termed as docile bodies. This paper is interested in exploring the process that involved in the creation of economically viable colonial docile bodies in the missions and dormitories.

The idea of creation of docile bodies demands the complete and all round control of a certain population along with the awareness of their knowledge systems. The awareness of the existing knowledge system is tampered with so that with its erasure new system of knowledge can be enforced. In colonial Australia aborigines were made legal subjects by destroying all forms of aboriginal belief systems. This process of subjectivization involved the displacement of aboriginal families into missions and subsequently the removal of their children into dormitories. Lary Cata Barker in her article entitled *Global Panopticism: States, Corporations, and the Governance Effects of Monitoring Regimes* refers to this mechanism of surveillance as a regulatory mechanism. This system of law made for the Aborigines included the aborigines as subjects of the colonial government but excluded them from the citizenship status which was given to the white population. The system of law had another requirement and that was the territorial/spatial control over the aborigines. The territorial control over the aborigines had to be the next motive which was materialized through the constructions of missions and reserves.

Mission refers to a Christian run institution made to propagate Christianity among the Indigenous people of the land. The main objective of the missionaries was in addition to propagating religion was to provide for the food, clothing and education of the Indigenous people. Many missionaries also played effective roles in fighting for the Indigenous rights as well. Mission also refers to the government reserves made for the aborigines. Reserves were generally of two types- managed reserves and unmanaged reserves. The managed reserves were

³³ Big Brother concepts finds its origin in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*(1949) where this fictional character is symbolic of the abuse of the government power and disruption of civil liberties.

also called as stations which were under the commands of the station masters. The unmanaged reserves were taken care of by the police and other authorities.

Missions resettled the aborigines into entirely new living conditions and environment away from the bush lives they had previously led. They restricted the free movement of the aborigines. Within the confines of the mission or reserve they were bound by the laws made for them. For example *Aborigines Protection Act and the Restriction for Sale of Opium 1897* not only prohibited the sale and purchase of opium but restricted the sale and purchase of alcohol to any aborigine. The act was mandated throughout the country and aborigines were not served alcohol in any restaurant or pub even though they could pay for it. This act further propagated discrimination as most of the restaurants and pubs won't allow the entry of aborigines into their place. Even after fighting in war aboriginal soldiers would not be entertained in restaurants and pubs. Alice Nannup in her autobiography *When the Pelican Laughed* recounts the conditions of aborigines after the war had ended. She reflects on how the aborigines were treated equally with the white soldiers when they still wore the uniform and once they were in civil dresses they were no more entertained in the pubs and restaurants.

The founding motivation in forming the missions was spreading of Christianity, as a result the strict observance of religion was very much compulsory in the missions. Missions emphasized the regular visiting of Church and attending to the Church services. The second motivation of the mission was providing for the upkeep of the aborigines. Aborigines were given food, shelter and clothes on the mission. Aborigines even report that they have got tobacco as well. Food was always provided in the form of government rations which was always insufficient for the families. Alice Nannup speaks of the humiliation faced by her when she had to go and ask for the government rations. On those occasions she was asked a lot of questions like why she doesn't have a job and why she had to depend on government rations. The Aborigines Protection Act stated that any property on the mission or reserve belonged to the government. The other motivation of the missions was to provide employment for the aborigines. Ruth Hegarthy's father was never out of work once the family arrived upon the mission unlike the bush. Aboriginal men were mostly used as cheap source of manual labors and the women served as domestic helps for the white families residing upon the mission.

The primary motivation of the mission was to segregate the aboriginal families. Ruth Hegarthy's mother recounts her helplessness of arriving upon the mission. As soon as the family arrived in the Barambah Aboriginal Settlement all were send into different directions. The boys were send to the boys dormitory and the girls to the girls's dormitory.

Most of the aborigines living in the bush were enticed with the opportunities of employment if they move into the missions. Once they moved into the missions their all rights were taken away from them. They no more could stay as a family as children had to go to the dormitories. The aborigines were given employment but most of the times wages were not being paid and in other cases where wages were being paid, they were too low for the family to survive. Alice Nannup remembers how the wages paid were always low and the wages were reduced on slightest mistake on their part. Ruth Hegarthy remembers her white mistress making her pay for her theatre ticket as a punishment for any retaliation on her part. Some aborigines who want to go back to the bush could no longer go back as they found that day by day their control over their lives was being taken away from them. Once in the mission, they had to follow the laws of the mission. The principle on which missions functioned was to reform the aboriginal

people as if they were some sort of criminals. “The extent to which the government went to control, manage and “reform” the inmates of the dormitory can only be described as barbaric”(Hegarthy,25).

For many as well as Ruth Hegarthy mission was like a prison. Even Rita Huggins feels that missions are like prison and the prison system within mission was like prison within a prison. There are certain similarities first between the missions and prisons such as the people residing within its territory are called inmates. Missions like the prisons emphasize the maintenance of code of discipline. Any breach of discipline had to be punished. There always was the reformatory motive behind disciplining of the inmates whether it be the prison or the mission. The mission system believed that all the inmates have to be civilized and reformed as though they are some sort of prisoners. Homogenizing the inmates was the principle that was used alike in both missions and the prisons, that is no one is allowed to retain their individual identity. Like in prisons the mission kids were also dressed alike. What was worse was that they were all bald headed to make them look even similar to each other. There was no place for anyone’s identity in the dormitory. Both in dormitories or in prisons the inmates had no rights owing to the enforced barbaric or uncultured inheritance. Dormitories and prisons never allowed the inmates to talk. What was worse was the aborigines were denied the opportunity to use their aboriginal language, if found doing were reprimanded. Silence was enforced through the systems and complaining was forbidden. “One of the rules of being a dormitory girl is that you never complain out loud, you accept your faith in silence(Hegarthy,103).

Surveillance in Missions and Dormitories

Surveillance is the mode through which knowledge and power is gained over a group of people. Surveillance has been regarded as a complex ‘regulatory mechanism’ which directly acts on a group of people sharing a common territory. Jeremy Bentham’s model of Panopticon serves as the ideal model for regulation in various societies where surveillance was important. Panopticon is a cost-effective structure in which self-policing is the method through which an entire population can be regulated. It gives an impression that one is constantly being regulated through an unseen monitor; hence the person concerned controls his behaviors so as to not get into trouble. This paper attempts to locate the basic loopholes within this regulatory mechanism employed by the Australian colonial government on its non-white subjects. The paper further explores the role of the missions and dormitories in serving as panopticon for the non-white population, the Aborigines.

For the colonial government in Australia to regulate the aborigines on a proper way the surveillance had to be carried over on both level. The initial requirement for the application of surveillance techniques was territorial control of aborigines. Aborigines in their traditional spaces in the bush lived community friendly lives. Community friendly refers to the lifestyle which emphasized on community living where the emphasis is on the community rather on the individual. The colonial rule was not much in favor of this kind of living. Hence, they made the missions or reserves. Missions emphasized on solitary and independent living. Missions were structured so as to confine or restrict the aborigines from freely moving as they used to do. Missions territorialized the aborigines into a confined structure where the rules were made by the legal *Big Brother*, the Chief Protector of the Aborigines Protection Board. Mission structures

had another panopticon within them and those were the dormitories. There were dormitories for the young girls and for young boys where they had to stay separate from their families.

Apart from separation the other principle of the mission was to see that discipline is maintained in the dormitories. Any breach in the following of regulations led to punishment. Dormitory kids of stolen generation often remember the dormitory days with fear because of the punishment meted out to them on several occasions and for minor breach of regulation. The most common form of punishment was whipping and flogging on head. The other common punishment incurred was starving the child. Ruth Hegarthy being a naughty child was subjected to these kinds of punishments often. Another form of punishment which Hegarthy recounts in her narrative was shaving off the head. Hegarthy feels this was deliberately done to most of the kids in the dormitory to humiliate them. “Most of the kids from the dormitory were identified by their bald heads”(Hegarthy, 41). Locking up the children in gaol was another punishment meted out for severe crimes. There were different dormitories for boys, girls(young girl’s dormitories and older girl’s dormitories), dormitories for men and dormitories for women. Hegarthy remembers the gaol experience to be the most frightful experience of the dormitory lives. The gaol would be generally a room with high windows with no ventilation or light going in. “Just the isolation was enough without the fear and trepidation that followed the scratching on the walls. Those experiences had the capacity to disempower any child. We who lived through them will bear the scars of this treatment for the rest of our lives (Hegarthy,43).

Disciplining the Dormitories

Dormitories exercised double-panopticism that is within the panoptic mission another panoptic structure. Every stolen generation child has dormitory experience as the fundamental memory of its life. Stolen generation authors have spoken immensely on the hardships faced in dormitory life. Dormitory lives takes all control of human lives into their lives and produces what Foucault refers to as docile bodies. *Bringing Them Home Report* by Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission(HREOC) is a record of the ill treatment of aborigines in various circumstances and especially in the dormitories.

Dormitories were fully institutionalized government bodies with the legal authorities involved in providing protection and care for the neglected aboriginal children. Ruth Hegarthy became an officially neglected child the day she started going to school “This day was to rob me off the natural that existed between my mum and me, and would place me under the care and protection of the Queensland government, which now classified me as a neglected child”(Hegarthy,26). Those children whose parents were very much alive and known were not allowed to meet their children. Visits were only limited to Christmas when some of the children were allowed to go home. But for others this scope was also not available.

Half-caste Aborigines of mixed race were the official wards of the state and government had promised to protect them. The various protection policies made sure that aboriginal children could be removed from their families at any time they found suitable under the condition that they are neglected. Later on the policies made sure that every aboriginal child was a government ward and parents had no say in their removal. Under the protection laws many children were taken away and were put in the care of dormitories authorities till they were apprenticed to work for the white families. Ruth Hegarthy in her autobiography, *Is that you, Ruthie?* recounts her pain of staying in a separate dormitory apart from her mother as soon as she started going to the

mission school. Going to school, which Hegarthy thought would be a fun experience, came at the cost of getting permanently separated from her mother and she was to be forever categorized as a neglected child. Hegarthy and her mother stayed on the same building but they were not allowed to see each other as they were part of different dormitories- Hegarthy being the part of the small girl's dormitory and her mother being part of the working women's dormitory.

Dormitory life was not only meant for giving protection to the aboriginal children but it was also the training period for the kids. It trained them to be good source of farm labors and domestic help. "It was certainly doing its job preparing us for the future by teaching us to respect authority, discipline and order and the importance of neatness and cleanliness"(Hegarthy,54).

Dormitory life was very conspirational in destroying aboriginal identity. Aborigines were forced to reject their aboriginal culture. By separating them from their families they eliminate every possible source through which they can claim their aboriginality. "Neville⁴, the State Government, the police, the magistrates and even the religious bodies(those stern, harsh dogooders who exorcised the Dreaming and the Dreamtime from Aboriginal souls as works of the devil) co-operated with each other to ensure Aboriginal repression and degradation. In the eyes of the whites, we were nothing, we had nothing and it looked like we were not allowed even our self-respect, pride in our culture or our spiritual strength(Berg,130)". They were not allowed to speak in their native tongue and in many cases the children taken away had no scope of learning their language as they were taken as very young kids. Even they were baptized with English names and given a Christian religious background. They are not allowed to make any connection with their secret-sacred religions and rituals.

Dormitory life was a vicious circle and one who enters it could hardly come out of the system and make a decent life for himself or herself. It gives one no choice but to be victimatised by the system again and again. When Ruth Hegarthy found that she was pregnant without marriage, she had to go back to the dormitory. She felt that her child will have the same fate of being a dormitory kid like her own and she will be one of those paying for the debt of the government for the upkeep of her child as her mother did.

For some aboriginal children like Ruth Hegarthy inspite of all the sufferings of the dormitory life, it's the only home they have ever been to. For Hegarthy it was her home as it gave her food, clothing and shelter. Peter Read who is credited with the coinage of the term "Stolen Generation" acknowledged in his report on the Stolen generation that some ex-wards, especially women, resented criticism of the institutions. They argue that if they had been left on the reserves they would now be barefoot, pregnant or drunk. Through the homes, they say, they have gained a knowledge of the 'right' way to live. There are many other ex-wards who believe that they are successful in their lives due to the training and they received at the mission. Mission sometimes is credited for providing good lives to the aborigines half-castes who would have probably been inefficient if they would have lived a bush life. For other ex-wards mission life is an opportunity for aborigines to walk in pace with the world. Many aborigines who have lived in dormitory are grateful for the relations they have found in the inmates. Mostly the orphaned and abandoned children have found family in the dormitory and dormitory is their only home. But

⁴ A.O.Neville was the Chief Protector of Aborigines of Queensland under whose supervision most of the Aborigines Protection Acts were implemented. He was the main propounder of the 'taking away' of the mixed-race aboriginal children in order to 'breed out' the black colour from them.

most of the removed children have sad stories to share with the world regarding the stolen generation experience. They complain about all the treatment they received from the authorities, the malnourished food, the separation from the families, punishment for small-small offences, sexual violence by the authorities and even ill-treatment at work place.

The mission experience creates great psychological distress among the aborigines. That is the reason why after years of the dormitory experience, they have scars of that painful memory. *Bringing Them Home Report* brings out a lot of cases of ex-wards who have lead chaotic lives inspite of being successful in career and opportunities. The mission scars creates a permanent impact on the lives of those who have lived through that. Ruth Hegarthy in her narrative is of the belief that those who have lived through the dormitory life should be given a certificate for surviving the system.

Missions and dormitories life with their do's and don't were institutions that institutionalised aboriginality. The mixed-race aborigines were their major targets and subjects. They created a new world for the mixed race aborigines which was embedded in discipline and used surveillance as its mechanism. It exercised a whole lot of control over their lives and incarcerated them from rest of their community. They gave them many facilities but seized all their rights. It was a system meant to generate obedience amongst the aborigines and assimilate them into white societies. With its discipline, coercion missions and dormitories have also been home to many half-caste aborigines who know it as their only home.

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