The Political Uses of Death-as-Finality in Genocide Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Holocaust

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Examining the concept of death can provide a new perspective on the question of why prominent sections of the Australian political and media establishment have resisted recognising the Stolen Generations as a genocide. This paper examines the role of death understood as definitional in genocide, and finality as the defining aspect of 'death' employed in this way. Genocide, in the popular imagination, is based on the Holocaust as paradigmatic case and invokes death as central symbol. Since mass death as a consequence of the state's actions toward its civilian subjects is posited as illegitimate, the legitimacy of a state which has committed genocide is in question. In the context of Australia's 'history wars,' the arguments of denialists are premised upon the position that if death did not occur then genocide did not occur, and if genocide did not occur, then the state is legitimate and national identity is secure. This argument relies on an implicit use of the metaphor of a collectivity as a human individual (subject to death). The argument that death (due to its finality) is necessary for genocide is itself used to 'assassinate memory' (Vidal-Naquet), to finalise the genocide that indigenous Australians have suffered. An emphatic response has and continues to be made by Aboriginal Australians’ assertion of survival.

This paper examines the concept of death as finality, in regard to the role of death as definitional in a finding of genocide. I will argue that death, inasmuch as it is considered an illegitimate and final outcome of (state) action, is a fundamental spoke on which various aspects of the understanding of genocide turn; and I will demonstrate the way
that this narrative has played out in regard to the case of child removal in Australia.

To that end, I investigate the question of the legitimacy of the death of the state's own citizens as a consequence of action by the state. The perceived illegitimacy of certain forms of death as an outcome of actions by the state is connected to the question of death's finality, and it is this that sets death apart from other state-enacted violence. In turn, the finality and illegitimacy of the state's imposition of death upon communities of its own civilian citizens is then understood as a definitional aspect of genocide, the 'crime of crimes.' Genocide is thus conceived as qualitatively different from other forms of state-enacted violence.

I first examine definitional and conceptual issues around legitimacy, and around 'genocide' itself; I go on to look at death, finality and moral legitimacy in relation to popular understandings of genocide, and the way in which these connect to a particular, politicised Western self-representation. I compare widespread conceptions of the Holocaust (understood in the narrow popular sense as the Nazi killing of Jews) with the genocide of indigenous people in Australia. In Australia, two distinct genocides occurred: frontier killings, and child removal (Tatz 1999). I am concerned here with the latter. Looking at the arguments which have been made as to why child removal does not constitute genocide reveals how the ideas of death as finality, and of certain forms of killing as illegitimate, play a central role in popular understandings of genocide as such. The resulting popular narratives are employed in the politics of 'History Wars,' the conflicts occurring since the 1970s, and accelerating from the mid-90s, over factual interpretations and moral evaluations of Australian history (Macintyre & Clark 2003). Underlying these ideological conflicts, I suggest, are the metaphor of the community and/or the state as individual organisms, and particular conceptions of the relationship between individual and collective death. In concluding, I comment on genocide denial as the 'death of memory,' and the assertion of survival as a response. In bringing together historical and conceptual themes in this way, I hope to bring to the field a new perspective on the centrality not only of killing, but of state-caused illegitimate death as such.

Death, Legitimacy and the State

We may begin by inquiring into the legitimacy of death, particularly when enacted upon the state's own subjects. The contemporary state sanctions killing in certain cases: for example, the killing of enemy soldiers during wartime, and, in some cases, in capital punishment and euthanasia. However, if the direct and purposeful outcome of a state action is the collective death of its own civilian citizens or subjects—as in genocide—this violence is generally considered to be illegitimate (Savage 2009). Of course, this does not mean that a state will not carry out such actions—only that they need to be reframed in terms of legitimate violence (Weber 1991).
What is meant by this statement? 'Legitimacy' is a term which may be used in different ways, and which has a specific technical meaning in political science. However, I am employing the term in a more general sense. When describing the actions of a state as illegitimate, I do not mean that it governs without the consent of the population. Nor do I mean that that state has committed a crime—though this is likely the case—or that statehood is itself a 'state of exception' in relation to the Law (in the tradition of Schmitt and Agamben). I am concerned with the actions of states in a global era, and with responses to those actions in a world of competing nationalisms. Certain acts are generally considered wrong or immoral vis-à-vis the accepted role of the state, and hence are perceived as illegitimate. The mass killing of civilians by the state is an example of such illegitimacy. If a civilian outgroup is seen as a problem for a particular state, it is not acceptable for the state simply to declare that fact—with destruction as a solution—on the world stage. Rather, such an act is usually either concealed, or else it is represented as a more legitimate action, such as warfare.

Why is mass death considered to be an illegitimate (direct) outcome of actions by the state towards its civilian subjects, whereas other forms of violence are not so considered? It is the finality of death which gives it this particular importance in terms of state action. The argument regarding the distinctive connection between death, finality, legitimacy, and the state, is one which has been established in relation to capital punishment, in legal as well as academic terms (Batey 1984). However, it has not been much in evidence in regard to other forms of state-imposed death—in our case, genocide (but see Attwood 2005, p. 89). In noting this, my interest is to draw a connection between the way in which genocide by definition is conceived of as illegitimate, and the way in which this illegitimacy relates to the infliction of death upon the state's civilian subjects. The construction of death as a necessary aspect of genocide is closely related to the defence of the inherent legitimacy of the state, and of the 'people' by whom it is constituted in a nationalist imaginary. I bring this nexus of connected discourses to bear on the case of child removal in Australia, and to the struggle over the definition of this episode as 'genocide.'

Genocide: Legal and Popular Definitions

There is a significant discrepancy between the definition of genocide given in the UN Convention, and the concept of genocide that circulates in the public imagination. According to the United Nations definition, genocide requires the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. The intended action may be carried out not only by killing, but also through the following four acts:

- causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly
transferring children of the group to another group. (United Nations 1948)

Furthermore, the attempt to destroy, in whole or in part, such a group constitutes genocide. Thus, an attempted genocide is a genocide, just as an attempt to destroy a part of such a group is genocide. Genocide need not be seen through to its desired conclusion to be considered as such, and the short-term attempt to cause the direct physical death of victims is only one of five possible actions which constitute genocide.

Raphael Lemkin, the man behind the creation and adoption of the Convention, himself employed a very broad definition of genocide (including aspects such as 'moral debasement' related to what Lemkin called 'cheap individual pleasure')—remnants of which remain in the Convention’s wording (Lemkin 2005). Lemkin’s understanding of his own concept changed over time, and the inherently politicised nature of the Convention’s wording ensured that it did not represent his foundational perspective unmodified, but what is clear is that neither Lemkin himself, nor the Convention, defined death or killing as a necessary aspect of genocide (see Moses 2010b). Amongst genocide studies scholars, it is now broadly recognised that genocide need not involve mass killing or mass death—although this is not always true for contemporary scholars who are not genocide experts, and nor was it necessarily the case for an earlier generation of genocide specialists, which may explain the significant discrepancy in the definition of genocide adopted in scholarly debates.

All of these facts have been well rehearsed elsewhere in the literature, as has (in Australia, at least) the way in which the removal of children has not been read as genocide—precisely because it does not involve organised killing (Moses 2005, 2010a; Tatz 2003). In terms of indigenous voices, some Aboriginal Australian figures with a public profile, such as Jim Everett and Michael Mansell, have supported the identification of Australian colonisation as genocidal, to be spoken of alongside the Holocaust (Attwood 2005, p. 105). Similarly, in the testimony of survivors, sometimes one cannot help but be struck by awful parallels:

This is where we learned that we weren't white. First of all they took you in through these iron gates and took our little ports [suitcases] off us. Stick it in the fire with your little bible inside. They took us around to a room and shaved our hair off ... They gave you your clothes and stamped a number on them ... They never called you by your name; they called you by your number. That number was stamped on everything. ('John,' in Bringing Them Home 1997, pp. 166-167)

Another survivor explicitly describes the consequences of genocide as akin to death:
When me and my little family stood there ... there wasn't a word we could say to each other. All the years that you wanted to ask this and ask that, there was no way we could ever regain that. It was like somebody came and stabbed me with a knife ... Once that language was taken away, we lost a part of that very soul. It meant our culture was gone, our family was gone, everything that was dear to us was gone. ('Fiona,' in Bringing Them Home 1997, p. 130)

In the context of thinking about death and the Stolen Generations, I don't want to rehash arguments about whether child removal is genocide—this should by now have been established—but to ask: what is it about death that makes it paradigmatic in the case of genocide and hence establishes it—in the popular imagination at least—as the definitional aspect of genocide as an illegitimate activity of the state? To answer this question, I juxtapose what is commonly regarded as the quintessential case of genocide—the Nazi genocide of Jews—with the case of the removal of Aboriginal children in Australia: a clear-cut case of genocidal child removal which is subject to widespread denial. I am aware, of course, that genocide need not be committed by a state—frontier genocide in Australia is a noteworthy example of a ‘private genocide.’ I focus on state-enacted genocide here simply because my concern is with perceptions of the actions of the state and national citizens. But how does genocide as such relate to the question of death's finality?

**The Finality of Death**

Surprisingly little has been written on the finality of the violent death of the Other. Research has been done into the idea of death as final in the context of arguments around capital punishment, and a great deal of scholarship has been produced in various disciplines looking at the subject's understanding of his or her own death, as well as the response of the subject to the death of an Other. Writing around capital punishment broadly points to the way in which the finality of death can define killing as qualitatively distinct from other forms of violence (Batey 1984). But in a more specific sense neither of these approaches is particularly helpful when trying to understand the role of finality in constructing violent death as definitional to genocide. From the perspective of genocide studies, death has been considered relevant to analyses of trauma, mourning and memorialisation; but elsewhere most work, including my own, has framed this subject in terms of killing, or murder, rather than in terms of death as a concept.

There are two conflicting themes which both tend toward seeing death as definitional to genocide, and thus excluding cases where killing has not been a part of the genocide. On the one hand, the centrality of the Holocaust—understood here in the popularly-accepted sense as the killing of Jews by Nazis—means that the concept of genocide is inextricably bound up with that of illegitimate, organised mass killing. Other, more recent episodes which are generally considered by mass
media and mass publics as uncontroversial cases of genocide (Rwanda, for example) also display these features.

Paradoxically—and this is where the concept of death as the finality not only of the individual, but also of the group, becomes more overt—there is a tendency to reject a finding of genocide if there still remain significant numbers of the victim group. In Australia, the ongoing presence of indigenous people, along with the fact that child removal did not involve killing, both militate against a public or popular perception of genocide. There has also been a reluctance on the part not only of nationalist conservatives, but also of left-liberal academics and historians outside of the field of genocide studies to identify Australian child removal as genocidal—an issue which has not gone unnoticed by genocide scholars such as Tony Barta (2001, p. 43).

A prime example of this attitude is found in an early statement of Henry Reynolds, perhaps Australia’s most prominent historian to deal with post-invasion Aboriginal history, and also a notable figure on the ‘Left’ of Australia’s ‘history wars’: ‘Was it a genocide? In a literal sense, clearly no. The Aborigines survived the invasion’ (quoted in Barta 2001, p. 43). Reynolds (2001) has since modified this position, but even for authors who challenge the denial of the violence of colonisation, this attitude can still be a cause for concern. Bain Attwood, another prominent historian of indigenous Australia, writes that,

[In insisting that Aboriginal people “were not the victims of a holocaust” ... [denialists] overlook the probability that many, perhaps most, of the 500-600 Aboriginal groups in this country prior to 1788 had no survivors within a generation or two of the British occupation of their land. (2005, pp. 92, 105)

Although recognising the violence of colonisation and subsequent denial, Attwood also rejects the use of the concept of genocide in Australia, describing such use as a ‘truthful myth’ (2005, p. 105). The ongoing representation of indigenous Australians as a ‘problem’ or a ‘question,’ and the right-wing critique of measures taken to redress inequality, discrimination, and historical injustices, may contribute to a mood of public irritation about the identification of the removal of indigenous children as genocide—which forms one aspect of a broader public antagonism toward ‘empathetic’ causes (see Hage 2003). What is the basis on which the issue provokes this denial? In order to understand the connection between death, finality and popular genocide denial in Australia, we need to look at popular conceptions of the Holocaust.

The Imagery of Death and the Political Use of the Holocaust

The Holocaust, understood as the Nazi genocide of Jews, has come to be the paradigmatic case of genocide in the Western popular imagination (Barta 1985, pp. 154-155; MacDonald 2008a). The reasons for this are political, inasmuch as, in public rhetoric, the
Holocaust thus becomes available as a powerful symbol and example in constructing particular narratives of history and identity (Finkelstein 2003; Novick 2001; Attwood 2005 pp. 100-104). The reasons are also cultural, in a more general sense (Clendinnen 2000; Sontag 2002). Popular media, particularly (but not only) in terms of fictional representations, is saturated with Holocaust narratives, and from these, and from the centrality of the Holocaust in the Western historical imagination, there is a great deal of received knowledge about the event – much of which is inaccurate. If we were to sum up this representation, we would say that much of it deals with death implicitly or explicitly: piles of corpses, lethal medical experiments, trains headed toward camps, camps themselves and emaciated camp prisoners, and gas chambers – what Barta calls ‘[t]he images which cluster round the name of Auschwitz’ (1985, p. 155). Even those images which do not directly deal with death, often deal with the erasure or ending of human individuality: the tattooed number, the yellow star, the ‘striped pyjamas.’ When we come to other episodes which are broadly understood to constitute genocide, such as Rwanda, Cambodia or the former Yugoslavia, imagery concerned with death tends to be the central focus in much the same way (see for example Karnik 1998).

Why is this so? While there is undoubtedly a certain voyeurism at work, this fascination itself links in with the image of the Holocaust as an ‘ultimate evil’—and thus, as the defining example of illegitimate state action. In states which were founded as settler colonies, the question of genocide is deeply fraught (Zimmerer 2005, p. 51; Attwood 2005, pp. 136-140) and often involves discussion of the Holocaust. In Australia specifically, the connection between this perception of the Holocaust, and the debate over genocide, has been noted by scholars including A. Dirk Moses (2003) and Simone Gigliotti (2003).

The Holocaust understood in this way is politicised inasmuch as Western countries which were involved in opposing the Axis powers can congratulate themselves on their role in preventing this evil—the greater the evil, the greater the achievement—and hence ‘saving civilisation.’ That is, the defeat of the Nazis and the ending of the Holocaust ‘saved’ legitimate government and legitimate socio-political structures. Furthermore, the geopolitical importance of the alliance between Israel and the United States (and its Western allies) means that the Holocaust is available as a justificatory narrative for violent or oppressive actions taken toward the Palestinian population (Barta 1985, pp. 155-156; Finkelstein 2003), while Israel is seen as a model of modern democracy in contrast to surrounding states. The ‘indelible stain’ of a genocidal past, for state or citizen, is thereby avoided, as is recognition of the entanglement of genocide with modernity and ‘progress’ (Bauman 1991). Westerners would rather see the Holocaust as a result of a unique Sonderweg or uniquely ‘eliminationist’ anti-Semitism—as evidenced by the public popularity of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996), which runs precisely this argument. The theory of the Holocaust as a ‘screen
memory—as a way to displace, deny or repress knowledge about more local and more identity-threatening histories of violence and trauma—has now become widespread, though not uncontested (Attwood 2005, pp. 104-105; Levi 2007). In Australia, the Holocaust is thus used to ‘normalize and de-dramatize’ violence toward indigenous Australians (Levi 2007, pp. 135-137). Even cultural depictions of the Stolen Generations which would suggest that genocide is an accurate finding may use a Holocaust vocabulary to do so—as in the film Rabbit-Proof Fence (Frieze 2012, p. 125).

Other genocides may also be comfortingly conceptualised as ‘uncivilised.’ In reality, of course, the ‘civilising progress’ itself, in Australia and elsewhere, inherently involved acts of ‘barbaric’ cruelty (van Krieken 1999). In cases such as Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, the Western powers have certainly not been devoid of critics of their role in failing to prevent—or indeed in becoming accomplices—to these genocides. But in each case there remains a self-congratulatory quality for the ‘Enlightened’ Western observer inasmuch as the people involved, victims and perpetrators, are seen as caught up in atavistic and primitive cycles of violence from which the observer’s society has progressed (Tatz 1997, pp. 308-309; Wall 2007). In these cases, the perpetrator state must be seen as an exceptional Other whose ‘violence is not coequal with ours in its effects’—without such differentiation and judgement of perpetrators, ‘[e]ither all killing would constitute crime, or all killing would be sanctioned as legitimate and commonplace’ (Dauphinee 2008, pp. 64-65). Othered perpetrators’ violent actions are understood to demonstrate the illegitimacy of their rule—and may even be used as an argument for intervention, if so desired.

What is most important for us here is that, in each of these cases, the infliction of unnatural death is seen, through its aspect as finality, as the greatest evil, as the most irrevocable violation of another. The reading of collective death as the central trope of the Holocaust, and, to a lesser extent, the ‘barbarous’ infliction of death by the perpetrator Other, allows such a self-congratulatory narrative to persist and thrive. When death is understood as final, and when its infliction by the state is understood as illegitimate, then the non-genocidal or the genocide-preventing state is both legitimate and praiseworthy. In turn, if the state is to be legitimate and praiseworthy, it must not have a history of genocide. These narratives—concerning genocide as the paradigm of state illegitimacy, the Holocaust as the paradigmatic genocide, and death as the central or defining characteristic of genocide—are self-reinforcing, and speak to politicised interests and self-representations (Hirsch 1995, pp. 23-36).

The Australian Case: Nationalism, Death and Denial

What can all of this tell us about the resistance in the Australian public sphere to applying the label of genocide to the removal of indigenous children? As far as the Convention is concerned, a more obvious case
would be hard to imagine. We have, after all, the rhetorical question put by A. O. Neville, Commissioner for Native Affairs, in 1937, demonstrating genocidal intent: ‘Are we going to have a population of 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth, or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there ever were any aborigines in Australia?’ (in Manne 2005; see also Attwood 2001, Bartrop 2001, Charlton 2001). ‘Full-blooded’ Aborigines were in the process of ‘dying out,’ and biological assimilation of those of mixed heritage would complete the process—part of a broader quest for racial purity which also comprehended the exclusion of Jews and ‘racial undesirables’ from entry into the nation (Bartrop 2001, p. 82; see also Charlton 2001, pp. 56-57, Barta 2001). Prominent Australian scholars who specialise in the study of genocide—such as, among others, Colin Tatz, A. Dirk Moses, Tony Barta, Paul R. Bartrop—concur that child removal constitutes a clear-cut case of genocide.¹

The debate about genocide in Australian history takes place within the broader context of the ‘culture wars’ and ‘history wars’ which have been notable in the Anglophone public sphere since the 1980s (Macintyre & Clark 2003; Moses 2008). In the late 90s, as the voices of Australian genocide scholars multiplied, Bringing Them Home, the Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, argued that child removal was genocide (1997, pp. 270-275). Resistance to the claim (and to any claim of systematic or purposeful mistreatment) was and has remained strong on the part of influential figures on the commentarial Right, including, among others, Keith Windschuttle, Andrew Bolt, Ron Brunton, and the late P. P. McGuinness (see Attwood 2005, pp. 60-84; Bartrop 2001, pp. 83, 87n26; Summers 2011). Those who deny that child removal constituted genocide include politicians from both major parties, as well as large segments of the Australian public (Manne 2001).

In Australia, the academics whose work came under fire—I am thinking here of Henry Reynolds, Lyndall Ryan and others—tended to be experts in Australian history, rather than in genocide studies, and we have seen that there was some reluctance on Reynolds’ part to accept that genocide occurred. In contrast to the accepted practice in Holocaust Studies, where scholars generally refuse to debate denialists, prominent Australian historians such as Reynolds (who embarked on a series of public debates with the influential denialist Windschuttle) often avowed a liberal discourse affirming visible participation in public dialogue, and the primacy of reason and empiricism in resolving questions of historical truth and interpretation. Thus, although the question of genocide and the connection to the Holocaust loomed large in public discourse, there was little informed discussion or satisfactory resolution of the genocide question in the public sphere. In the contemporary era, despite making an official apology for child removal policies, the present (2013) Labor government has not accepted the claim of genocide, and maintains a paternalistic and discriminatory approach to indigenous issues in the form of the various policies which constitute the ongoing Northern
How do denialists frame their position in relation to the state, and the concept of death? Questions of national morality and identity are central to ‘history wars,’ and genocide denial is frequently associated with nationalism (Akçam 2004; Churchill 1997; Vidal-Naquet 1992, pp. 120-126). From the perspective of nationalist denial, the importance of the national state lies not in the question of the precise role played by various bodies and agencies in genocide: in Australia, different government bodies and individuals had distinct programs and ideological approaches to child removal (see Charlton 2002), and rationales and understandings of the program changed over time (Bringing Them Home 1997; Manne 2001). The significance of the state lies, rather, in its existence as an imagined community (Anderson 2006), and as an entity—‘Australia’—which is understood as an ongoing actor. Moral condemnation of historical actions which are understood to have been taken by this actor are then seen to threaten the security or satisfactoriness of the identity of present-day citizens.

Thus in Australia, a right-wing and/or (crypto-) ethno-nationalist position which would deny both the genocidal act, its outcome, and any present possibility of reparative action has developed; those speaking from this position reject the accusation that ‘Australia’ committed or could commit genocide (see Bartrop 2001, p. 85; Cohen 2001; Tatz 2001, pp. 27-34). As Windschuttle’s mouthpiece website puts it, ‘Genocide is clearly the most terrible crime it is possible to commit’ (Windschuttle, n.d.). In such situations, forgetting becomes necessary (Haebich 2011, pp. 1034-1035), particularly since political, rhetorical and affective value may also be attached to the perpetrator group’s own claims of victimhood (Curthoys 1999; MacDonald 2008b). Australia has historical form on this issue: in arguing against the adoption of the Genocide Convention, it was suggested by Mr Blain, the Member for the Northern Territory that the Treaty ‘deals with a crime of which no Anglo-Saxon nation could be guilty’ (in Tatz 2001, p. 17n3). We may see this, employing a concept adopted by Moses from the work of Caruth et al, as a psychological-discursive defence against the onset or recognition of ‘perpetrator trauma’ (Moses 2001, p. 93; 2005, p. 10).

It is the construction of death as finality which, in part at least, provides this resistance with both its foundational trope and its rhetorical force. Such construction ties in with the perception, on the one hand, of the Holocaust as the paradigmatic genocide, and, on the other hand, of genocidal perpetrators as illegitimate rulers: uncivilised or barbaric Others, who are quite unlike invader and settler Australians. As Neil Levi puts it, the meaning of the objection to comparison is to say, ‘whatever we are, we are not that’ (2007, p. 136; see also Bartrop 2001, p. 76).
There is a discursive nexus here between the rejection of genocide in Australia; the defence of the actions of past administrations; and the Holocaust, in its aspect of death, as paradigmatic and incomparable. This thread runs through the entire debate, as an archetypal intervention into the public representation of Australian history demonstrates. A passage from Windschuttle’s *Submission to review of National Museum of Australia* reads:

The Aborigines did not suffer a Holocaust. To compare the policies towards Aborigines of Governor Arthur Phillip or Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur, or any of their successors, with those of Adolf Hitler towards the Jews, is not only conceptually odious but wildly anachronistic.

There were no gas chambers in Australia or anything remotely equivalent. (National Museum Australia 2003)

Other prominent commentators have also picked up on the ‘offensiveness’ of the connection to the Holocaust (for example, Bolt 2006).

This view that child removal is neither genocide, nor should be mentioned in the same breath as the Holocaust, is one which is not solely the preserve of the pugnacious Right, but which has also been put by those more sympathetic to indigenous people and arguing from a more intellectually sophisticated position—and indeed by some indigenous people themselves. A telling and frequently quoted passage from acclaimed Australian historian Inga Clendinnen (2001, p. 7, my italics) may be seen as representative:

... when I see the word ‘genocide’ I still see Gypsies and Jews being herded into trains, into pits, into ravines, and behind them the shadowy figures of Armenian women and children being marched into the desert by armed men. I see deliberate mass murder: innocent people identified by their killers as a distinctive entity being done to death by organised authority. I believe that to take murder out of genocide is to render it vacuous...

Objections like Clendinnen’s – which have not gone uncontested (Levi 2007) – use death imagery and the Holocaust to ‘disappear’ Australian genocide. Clendinnen herself has considered the complexity of the colonial encounter, most notably in *Dancing With Strangers* (2003). But in the broader context, the denial of genocide achieved using this strategy absolves the nation as such; and, at the least, it is one factor in allowing present day Australians to remain (as former Prime Minister John Howard put it) ‘relaxed and comfortable’ about the treatment of Aboriginal Australians since colonisation (‘An Average Australian Bloke’, 1996). Such absolution rests on a definition of death as the ultimate finality, and hence, both as paradigmatic for a finding of genocide, and as constitutive of the ultimate illegitimate act which can be visited either upon an individual, or upon a people.
Collective Death and the Role of Metaphor

The question of a community understood, metaphorically, as an individual who can die brings us to the second important point concerning death as final and as definitional to genocide, one concerning the ‘operations of imagination’ which employ the concept of death to conceal genocide by making it ‘unthought’ (Lloyd 2000, p. 37). The groups which are defined as possible targets under the Convention are based on an essentialising model. In other words, even where they are not biologically defined (as for religious groups), they are understood in an essentialised or categorical fashion. In saying this we should further bear in mind that, in the popular imagination, genocide is the destruction of an ethno-racial group, and a large-scale attempt must be made to destroy the group in its entirety—as opposed to the terms of the Convention, where, as we have seen, both any attempt to destroy, and the attempt at or achievement of destruction in part, constitute genocide.

If we turn this popular definition around, we can see that, in doing this essentialising job, the Convention suggests that groups which are not ‘essential’ in this way cannot be the targets of genocide, (presumably) because such groups may not be destroyed in any final sense. Hence—extending back from the terms of the Convention into the popular realm, but following the logic through—groups which have not been so destroyed cannot have been the target of genocide. And if such groups were not the target of genocide, then no inherently illegitimate attempt was made to destroy them as such. Admittedly, this logic sits oddly with the Holocaust as paradigmatic genocide, a case in which there are obviously survivors from the victim group. However, I would suggest that, in the rhetorical terms of public debate, contradictory positions need not be identified and hence disqualified. Rather, the strategy consists in flinging enough mud at the ‘genocide’ wall to ensure that some of it will stick.

In the case of genocide as destruction of a group of people, there are two aspects to be explored in relation to death. Firstly, if the action did not involve the death of the individuals, then the ‘death’ of the group as such is considered an impossibility. In the case of child removal, a program aiming to ‘breed out the colour’ over a number of generations in order to destroy the group is hence not understood as constituting genocide. This is particularly so given that this action is alleged to have been carried out with ‘good intentions’ toward the victims. Secondly, there are those who would denigrate indigenous people in present-day Australia, and who would blame their culture, biology, or individual character for their unenviable demographic situation. For those who hold such a position, the continued existence of this group and the ‘problem’ that they are seen to pose means that a claim of genocide is doubly offensive.

How so? Everyone agrees that genocide must be carried out upon a group. The concept therefore necessitates conceptual reliance on
what Moses, after Brubaker, calls ‘the social ontology of “groupism,”’ arising from Lemkin’s original concept and the context in which it was developed (Moses 2010b, p. 22). According to this paradigm, ethnic groups are understood as ‘substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed ... [and] even unitary collective actors with common purposes’ (Brubaker in Moses 2010b, p. 22). Victims of genocide become such because they are identified as belonging to that group, not for perpetrators’ individual reasons. But, runs the implicit logic, if this group have been the victims of genocide, that is, if they have been subject to externally-imposed communal death, why is it that they are still here and posing a ‘problem’? From this perspective, the non-indigenous Australian can understand her- or himself as being asked to accept that an illegitimate attempt was made by ‘Australia’ to wipe out indigenous people. Yet the victim group is still very obviously present in ways which this same person understands as problematic (Barta 1985, p. 157). A double bind arises in which the unstated question runs: ‘if what you say happened actually happened, then how could you be here to tell about it?’

In conceptual terms, we see here a manifestation of the ancient metaphor of the community as a human body. This metaphor is implicated in ethnic-nationalist genocidal discourse, when a society or nation-state is compared to an homogenous, boundaried body threatened by alien outsiders (Savage 2007); and we have seen the way in which, for nationalist denialists, the nation-state is considered a single actor. However, we can now see that the metaphor is also implicated in post-genocidal denial. When a ‘group’—as imagined by another—is conceived of metaphorically as a single individual, then genocide is conceived as the ‘death’ of that individual. This metaphor includes the idea of death as finality—as it is in the case of an individual (at least when putting aside the question of an afterlife). This ‘death’ is then metonymically mapped on to the individuals who form the group, such that both death and the finality that it is understood to entail are considered to be necessary for genocide to have occurred (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). In other words, without death, there cannot be genocide.

This belief occurs in the context of the fantastical ‘imagined community’ on which the bodily metaphor can draw—the idea that all the citizens of a nation-state partake, in a meaningful and ongoing way, in a unity which constitutes that nation (Anderson 2006). According to this paradigm, a slur on the moral legitimacy of the actions of one’s national forebears is a slur on one’s own identity. In Australia, furthermore, perpetrators of child removal do not only involve forebears, but also contemporaries: the practice continued until the 1970s and 80s.

Survival itself, according to Zygmunt Bauman (1992, p. 13), is a social and socially managed relation, and a potentially destructive impulse, one deployed in the creation of social coherence and the drawing of ingroup-outgroup boundaries: policies of survival must ‘harmonize
individual self-constitution with the constitution of society (another example of metonymy). Nationalism and the cause of the racially pure society are among the most potent forms of what Bauman terms the ‘common cause’ policy of survival. Drawing on Elias Canetti, he argues that the very survival of the imagined perpetrator community as such is premised on the successfully-achieved death of the Other (1992, pp. 10-15). The panicked defensiveness which meets claims of genocide in Australia suggests that issues of this level of seriousness are felt to be at stake (see Attwood 2005, pp. 188-189; Veracini, Curthoys & Docker n.d.). As Alexis Wright (1998) bluntly puts it, ‘The Aboriginal people [...] carry the corpse for this country’s neglected civil duty.’

Thus, in Australia, if the charge of illegitimacy is to be deflected—if the perpetrator community is to survive in its own eyes—death must be employed as a definitional aspect of genocide.

Conclusion: Memory and Resistance

In reaching the foregoing conclusion, I have established the functional and politicised use of a discursive link between death, finality and the perceived legitimacy of the state, and examined the way in which this is employed in popular discourse. We are now in a position to ask explicitly how this relates to the process of denial.

One survivor described the theft of her children in these terms: ‘it has made our lives to be nothing on this earth’ (in Bringing Them Home 1997, p. 214). This paper has thus far discussed not so much genocide itself, but popular and academic understandings or representations of genocide. But one argument regarding the denial of genocide—denial of the kind that remains influential in Australia—is that the physical genocide itself does not complete the act. The remaining task is to annihilate the memory of the very existence of victim people, and of what they suffered. In Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s (1992) memorable phrase, denialists are assassins of memory. And in Australia, as Barta puts it, genocide itself is ‘interred’ (2008a, p. 311).

The paradigm of death as a definitional aspect of genocide is employed to deny that genocide occurred, a denial which relativises violence against Aboriginal Australians, and shores up the moral legitimacy of the Australian state (see Barta 1985, p. 160). The employment of this discourse sets up a self-referential cycle of Foucauldian power/knowledge (to say nothing of biopolitics). That is, the concept of death as finality is employed in the attempt to finalise, to complete, the erasure of identity of the people upon whom that concept is imposed. The strategic nature of this use of death can be seen, too, in individual cases of child removal:

I remember this woman saying to me, “Your mother's dead, you've got no mother now. That's why you're here with us” ... And this other girl said, “Your mother up there.” And because they told me
that she was dead, I said, “No, that’s not my mother. I haven’t got a black mother”. (in Bringing Them Home 1997, p. 155)

Paradoxically, the absence of death in child removal is made part of an attempt to accomplish the death of memory.

This is a process, however, to which Aboriginal Australians (and other survivor peoples elsewhere) mount fierce resistance. The question of whether to assert the claim of genocide has itself been an issue of strategy; what would the consequences be for Aboriginal Australians if a wider acceptance of the accuracy of the label ‘genocide’ were achieved? Could such a claim support the disempowering perception that the group are destined for perpetual victimhood? Given the popular understanding of genocide as death, would it contribute to a wished-for denial of the consistent, insistent presence of Aboriginal Australians, the unavoidable recognition of ‘unfinished business’?

Even in former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s apology speech, the question of genocide was ‘buried’ (Barta 2008b, p. 211), while the expressed desire was for a reconciliation which would ‘bring the first two centuries of our settled history to a close’ (in Barta 2008b, p. 211; my italics). Thus the discourse around death, genocide and the Stolen Generations perpetuates the pattern identified by Barta: ‘a deeply seated impulse in Australian society [is] to separate problems of Aboriginal life and death in the present from the European attitudes to Aboriginal life and death in the past’ (2008b, p. 209).

In order to resist this reactionary use of the concept of death, and the bad faith such denial entails (Cohen 2001), denial is addressed by a similarly ‘double[d] recovery’ (Barta 2008a, pp. 296-297), rejecting both the colonialist wish for the death-as-disappearance of the colonised people, and also the erasing denial performed by associating genocide (or serious moral culpability) with death (Lloyd 2000, pp. 36-37). Whether or not the terminology of genocide is used explicitly, survival is an assertion—one made not only textually, but in the person of the speaker—which embodies this response:

[T]he story of the survival of [Aboriginal] people as a culturally significant minority in Australian society in the face of enormous oppression is a story of triumph. (Miller cited in Attwood 2005, p. 45)

Settler society understands its own survival as premised on the death of the Other (Bauman 1992); but simultaneously, its legitimacy can only be maintained by denying that any attempt was made to carry this out. This double-bind, this necessary ‘knowing and not-knowing at the same time,’ may be the source of the frustration settler society expresses at the very presence of Aboriginal Australians. And indeed, its claims are countered with an asseveration of presence which also demonstrates that survival need not be a zero-sum game. Survival refuses to allow the cognitive dissonance produced by this knowing-and-unknowing to be managed. It is an emphatic response to the strategic deployment of death—the conceptual following the literal
stage—in Australian colonialism. This paper is intended, firstly, as an analysis of the relationship between the concepts of death and genocide; but also as a contribution, however minor, to a politics of resistance to death in its aspect as the erasure of lived history.

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Notes

i For a summary of the debates and developments over the question of genocide in Australia both within and outside the field of genocide studies, see Barta 2008a.

ii This was a response directed broadly toward the claim of genocide in the earlier colonial era, rather than child removal specifically; however, the use of this rhetorical position is the same in either case.

iii For example, academic and activist Marcia Langton (n.d.).

iv See for example Langton 2012.

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