

Adoption is a heavily loaded and contested practice in contemporary Australia. Speaking broadly, adoption is the legal process and legal transfer of a child from their birth family (or legal guardian) into the care of the adoptive parent(s).<sup>1</sup> Language around adoption is, at times, clumsy and dated, and is unable to encompass the range of emotions and experiences of those affected by adoption. It should be no surprise that there is no singular, homogeneous or common experience of adoption. This is echoed by the auto-ethnographic narratives expressed in the artwork of the four artists in this exhibition: Peter Waples-Crowe, Lisa Waup, Ebony Hickey and Weniki Hensch.

In the work of these artists, a range of complex narratives emerge: of marginalisation – at times, a double marginalisation, such as being queer and Aboriginal, as seen in the works of respected Indigenous queer Elder Peter Waples-Crowe – or of the ongoing challenge in piecing together Lost, Stolen and Hidden intergenerational stories that have been intentionally and forcibly silenced through the processes of colonisation,<sup>2</sup> such as in the work of mixed cultural and First Peoples multidisciplinary artist, curator and mother Lisa Waup. Stories of connecting to culture through investigating mediums and ancestral objects within institutional collections are explored in the work of Papua New Guinean-born multidisciplinary artist Weniki Hensch. Using poetry, performance, drawing and video, Haitian-born Australian contemporary artist Ebony Hickey, and her alter ego Koko Mass, playfully explores the blatant and subtle racism, the macro and micro aggressions that she experiences as a queer, black, intercountry adoptee, while celebrating and reclaiming her own DNA. While some experiences of adoption are positive and some are negative, adoption is inevitably intertwined with deep emotions for all those concerned.

Adopted as a baby and placed into a white family, Peter Waples-Crowe's journey of connection to his Ngarigo ancestors, family and culture is one that has been interrupted, delayed and ultimately celebrated. He is well known for using his chosen totem of the alpine dingo (Ngarigo Country is the Snowy Mountains) and utilising text in English and Ngarigu to reclaim and reinscribe homophobic and racial slurs. He has been gifted the name Ngurran from his tribe, which means the emu – the male of whom, in a display of sacrifice (and challenging heteronormative gender roles), incubates the eggs, spending weeks without food or drink before doing sole parent duty and raising the chicks for the next year and a half.<sup>3</sup> In this exhibition Waples-Crowe's work tells the story of his journey to this name.

Lisa Waup was adopted at birth by her close-knit Australian-Italian family, who gave her unconditional love and a strong sense of family. When she was a teenager, her adopted mother helped her look for information about her birth family. Like many adoptees, much of Lisa Waup's adoption history has been uncovered from within government records and paperwork. Following her own history and that of her family through government and institutional records, she discovered that her birth mother had been put into homes at a very young age and that her great-grandmother was part of the Stolen Generations.<sup>4</sup> This legacy of colonialism - of Lost, Stolen and Hidden Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and family - is one that continues to cause intergenerational trauma for the lives of Indigenous Australians, as cultural, spiritual and family ties were forcibly severed.

'The Stolen Generations' refers to the thousands of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children who were forcibly removed from their families, communities and Country by the hands of governments, churches and welfare bodies to be raised in institutions, fostered out or adopted by non-Indigenous families, nationally and internationally.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes, information was intentionally hidden as a strategy for survival. 'The Hidden Generations'<sup>6</sup> refers to generations of Indigenous Australians who hid their children's identities as a form of survivalist strategy from the colonial processes that forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, around 1 in 10, or 11%, of all Indigenous Australians born before 1972 reported being removed from their families,<sup>7</sup> while the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) estimates that this number may be as many as 1 in 3.<sup>8</sup> Making art has enabled Waup to trace, unearth, connect and express her cultural history and ancestral ties to make pathways through a fractured, and at times missing, family history.

Historically, adoption has been viewed as an act of humanitarianism; a solution to the social issues of infertility and the so-called 'shame' of illegitimacy. It has been seen as saving children from poverty and need, while simultaneously offering adoptive parents the blessing of raising children 'as their own'. The past practices of forced family separation reflected the idea of a 'clean break': where a mother and her child were separated as early and as completely as possible, in a misplaced attempt to mitigate grief. 'Forced adoption', or 'forced family separation', describes the practice where pregnant unwed women (and their partners) were subjected to unauthorised or illegal separation from their children - whether or not the children were

subsequently adopted (many spent considerable time in children's homes or other out-of-home care).<sup>9</sup>

Recently, a more complex picture of adoption has emerged - one in which past adoption practices and processes are seen as unethical, immoral, and often illegal. This change in perspective is largely due to the testimonies of those who have experienced the ongoing pain, suffering and trauma that many adoptions have caused. In 2013, then Prime Minister Julia Gillard gave a national apology to victims of forced adoption practices.<sup>10</sup> Narratives from unwed mothers of pressure, manipulation, coercion, dishonesty, lack of willing or informed consent, abuse and administration of drugs against their will are among some of the common experiences mentioned. The practice of 'closed adoption' resulted in many adopted people being unaware of their origins, often only finding out as adults, and in traumatic circumstances.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, forced adoptions, or 'forced family separations', were commonplace in Australia from the late 1950s to the 1970s. At their peak, in 1971-72, there were around 10,000 forced adoptions in Australia.<sup>12</sup>

Today, in Australia the number of adopted children is considerably lower. In 2020-21, a total of 264 adoptions were finalised (the lowest number on record), and the majority (69%) were 'known child adoption';<sup>13</sup> this is where the child and adoptive parents knew each other before adoption. Only 42 of the 264 adoptions finalised were intercountry adoptions. Generally, 'intercountry adoption' describes the adoption of a child/children from countries other than Australia, through one of Australia's official intercountry adoption programs. Although the impacts of COVID-19 may have contributed to the low number of intercountry adoptions finalised (meaning an adoption order had been completed by an Australian court), there have been steadily declining numbers of this type of adoption.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that Gillard's National Apology for forced adoptions did not include those affected by intercountry adoption.<sup>15</sup>

Ebony Hickey and Weniki Hensch were both born outside of Australia, although only Hickey's adoption was finalised in Australia through the intercountry adoption process. It has been said of intercountry adoption that 'a global child welfare intervention was born out of disaster'.<sup>16</sup> While advocates argue for a less bureaucratic and simpler adoption process, adopting a child from another country should be difficult - intercountry adoption faces multiple ethical problems. The most obvious is the prevention of the international trafficking of children; children should not be smuggled, sold or

bought. Adoptive parents should not have saviour complexes. Delving deeper, there is a power imbalance embedded in the practice of intercountry adoption. As Cuthbert et al. explain: 'Intercountry adoption has always taken place in the shadow of the colonial past and of present inequalities of wealth and power. Why do parents choose to adopt a child from another country, another culture, another race? How do they address the challenges of raising such a child and deal with issues of identity that cross national boundaries?'<sup>17</sup> Ebony Hickey's powerful video artwork *Divine Make-up* speaks to the complexities and of her lived experience as an intercountry adoptee - as she attempts to 'shake loose' her trauma and abandonment, and ultimately reclaim her sense of self through her art.

Weniki Hensch's practice draws upon ancestral knowledge found through cultural objects, materials and spirituality, while looking ahead to future generations. Since the birth of her daughter, she felt compelled to delve deeper into her adoption story. Born in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (PNG), she was adopted by Caucasian parents and raised with blonde, Germanic-looking siblings (her adoptive father is German, her adoptive mother is English). At the age of 19, her search for and later reunion with her birth mother brought her back to PNG. A year later, Hensch had her own child. Researching and handling cultural objects from the Oro Province, where her birth mother is from, has had a profound impact on her practice. Working with PNG collections at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Melbourne Museum and the National Gallery of Victoria has led to an ongoing investigation of mediums, practices and languages and a greater understanding of her ancestral bloodlines.

The artworks in this exhibition show the vast and complicated multitude of layers, identities and narratives found within the experience of adoption. In this essay, I have attempted to unpack some of the issues as evidenced in the artwork and lived experiences of the artists involved. On a personal note, I have found this essay very difficult to write - I, too, am an adoptee - adopted in Sydney, New South Wales, in 1972 at The Mater Misericordiae Hospital for Women and Children, Royal North Shore Hospital. 'The Mater' was run by the Sisters of Mercy and was a maternity hospital established to care for mothers who were 'unmarried, and destitute before and after the birth of their babies. Babies for adoption were also placed from the Mater.'<sup>18</sup> My birth mother came to Australia alone at the age of 21. Her single-fare airline ticket had been paid for by my birth father. This anecdotal information was handwritten by the social worker on one of the

government-issued forms. The phrase 'Infant for adoption' is stamped repeatedly in upper-case black letters over my birth medical records and adoption papers. The language and comments throughout these documents are brief, subjective and judgemental. Many of these comments reflect the attitudes, practices and language of Australia at that time. My birth mother's ethnic group is written as a fraction. Māori is misspelt as 'Mairi'. A mixed-race child in 1972 in the state of New South Wales was considered to be a child with a disability or special needs. In the year of my birth, adoptions in New South Wales peaked at their highest recorded rate in Australia's history.<sup>19</sup> Since that time, adoption rates have consistently fallen. This is in part due to the introduction of the Supporting Mother's Benefit (1973), greater availability of the contraceptive pill (from 1972), the decriminalisation of abortion (South Australia was the last state to do so in 2019) and advancements in women's rights. While adoption practices in Australia have undergone change since the 1970s the impacts of adoptions are still deeply felt – psychologically, emotionally, spiritually and intergenerationally.

**Dr Kirsten Lyttle / 25 July 2022**

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