

**Peter Read, *Tripping Over Feathers: Scenes in the Life of Joy Janaka Wiradjuri Williams: A Narrative of the Stolen Generations* (UWA Publishing, 2009)**

Joy Janaka Wiradjuri Williams was an enigmatic figure who remained an enigma even to herself, despite her desperate search for self-knowledge. Her identity quest is triggered – and made impossible – by being a member of the stolen generations. Peter Read’s biographical account is also incomplete and attempts to render some of the hazy half-story intelligible through imagined ‘scenes,’ always supported by source material such as interviews, poems, and conversations. The biography recognises the limits of knowledge and is told unconventionally – a series of vignettes which progress backwards in time and allow the reader to retrace the making of a self with ‘key moments in the history of a personality’ (xxii). Furthermore, the text has strong elements of *autobiography* as Joy’s voice is projected through poetry and dialogue. In this form of historiography or bio-history, the subject is also the story-teller. While the text is primarily concerned with an individual life, it is simultaneously a portrait of a broader history of stolen generations. Joy gives voice to the many others who are silenced or who choose to remain silent.

Parenting is a central theme of the narrative, particularly the sense of failure to protect children when taken away by authorities. This guilt was often internalised by Indigenous parents and made them less likely to seek reunions. When Joy Janaka Wiradjuri Williams was born in 1943 in Sydney, the Aborigines Welfare Board immediately removed her from her Wiradjuri mother, Doretta (Dora), to an institution for Indigenous children displaced from their families. Bomaderry Home was inherently unable to fulfil a caring parental role and subjected its inmates to abusive regimes of oppression and neglect. Joy’s story echoes her mother’s uprooting from family and is repeated when her own daughter is forcibly taken away, highlighting the vast intergenerational damage caused by the colonisation of Indigenous Australians. Her battle with mental illness and alcoholism are the insidious products of her troubled life and sense of abandonment. Joy is a changeable and unpredictable person, as manifested in her adoption of various alternative names according to the context. She frequently triggers ambivalent reactions in those around her, including the author of this ‘imaginative reconstruction’ (xxi). She starts life feeling unwanted and unloved, indeed, is explicitly told that she was abandoned by her mother. These painful untruths are juxtaposed in the narrative with accounts and records which reveal the desperate search for lost family members, forced sterilisation, and the deceitful methods used to manipulate the surrender of children.

Family is often a source of self and connectedness to place, although in Joy’s case, she is unable to bond with her relatives when they finally meet – the reunions cannot possibly heal the long-standing wounds, breach the gap of absence, or match expectations. Joy and her mother share the same ‘soul-sadness’ (61) and yet are divided by time and events, resorting to alcohol as a bonding cement. Joy has a fear of being rejected at their first meeting and yearns to ask ‘the question’ (36) of *why* her mother relinquished her. However, the very act of ‘coming home’ is a strike against the removal policies by ‘breaking the chain’ (54) which aims to separate and disperse family connections. These relatives are essentially unfamiliar strangers, an example of how cruel assimilation policies irrevocably distorted relationships and life trajectories.

Book reviews: *Tripping Over Feathers* by Peter Read. Sophie Alexander.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Again, when Joy meets her own daughter Julie-Anne, the pattern of alienation and discomfort is repeated. As Julie-Anne states, 'she tried to be a mum but she didn't know how' (vii). The fact that her cultural identity continues through her daughter is an act of survival in defiance of official interference with their lives.

The text depicts Joy's constant struggle to retain emotional equilibrium and fear of losing control or 'tripping over feathers,' for this means being at the mercy of institutional authorities. She finds comfort in words and poetic expression, which also act as primary sources for the author. Education and language are forms of rebellion and power by enabling her to use the instruments of colonisation to resist that very dispossession. Despite these efforts, she is never quite successful at quashing her sense of self-repulsion and need to be punished. This same shame instinct is still currently afflicting many broken lives with the 'deadly, terrible shame' (126) of being Indigenous. The bio-history concludes with an extract from Joy's failed court case against the Australian Government in 1999, a stark reminder that paternalism continues to thrive and disseminate the lie of voluntary abandonment in the case of stolen generations. The preceding accounts within the book and direct source material, however, demonstrate that this version of history is patently false. These stolen children were very much loved and mourned.

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