

Memory of the World

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples and I also like to thank Aunty Agnes for her welcome on Tuesday.

When I was asked to present this paper and talk about what memory means to me, my immediate response was that Memory means everything to me.

Memory helps to define who I am, and I know that that is the same for many Aboriginal people. Our culture is one of oral traditions, histories, laws etc all passed on by the spoken word, all memories. When those memories are not passed on, then there is a gap, a space an emptiness that cries out to be filled.

In my own family, there was no talking of the past, no passing on of memories. I knew I was Aboriginal but that was all I knew, my family did not talk of the past their memories they were too painful. My grandmother even went so far as to deny her Aboriginality by telling me that we were Indian, because of her past and her memories it was better to be thought of as coming from India than as an Aboriginal person in her own country. So when my grandmother told me this I was 12 and I just thought, "Great I'm Aboriginal and Indian".

It wasn't until I began work at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, AIATSIS, that I gradually began to find those memories. AIATSIS is the world's premier institution for information and research about the cultures and lifestyles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. AIATSIS has four sections two of which are its Audiovisual Archives and the Library. The AIATSIS Audiovisual Archive holds the world's premier collection of moving image, recorded sound and photographic materials relating to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories. Its vaults contain approximately recorded sound, photographic images, and film.

The majority of the items held in the Audiovisual Archive represent the primary results of field research funded by the AIATSIS Research Grants Program as well as historical and contemporary items which have been deposited by individuals, families or organisations for safe-keeping and appropriate access. The material is unique and irreplaceable and provides an invaluable link between past, present and future generations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The AIATSIS Library holds the most comprehensive collection of print materials on Australian Indigenous studies in the world.

The Library holds print materials in all formats. These include manuscript materials, serials, language materials, books, rare books, the records of organisations, and much more.

When I started work at AIATSIS, one of the first things I did (apart from work) was to look for everything I could find on my family. I had some names but little or no information about my own ancestors or my own culture. What I found often brought me to tears, some of joy, some of great sadness, but I was one of the lucky ones AIATSIS library and archives held information on my family. I was able to find photographs of a number of my ancestors, photographs that I had never seen, information about my great-grandparents, information that I never knew, audiotapes of my great-grandmother speaking language, Wergaia, a language that no one in my family can now speak. I found a document, a word list, written by my great-grandmother in her own hand, in pencil, and most important to me I found a genealogy going back 5 generations. I found not only my family but where I fit in a broader Aboriginal community.

I found understanding of why my grandmother said we were Indian. She was raised on a mission station, called Cummeragunja which was established in 1881, which is on the New South Wales border side of the Murray River, where she was heavily influenced by the missionaries. This was a time that she never spoke about, a memory that was not passed on. One of my great-grandmothers was raised on another mission station called Ebenezer, which is in Victoria, where speaking language and practising culture was forbidden. The Ebenezer Mission Station in north-west Victoria was first established in 1859 by the Moravian Church. This mission station was established to 'civilise and Christianise' the Aborigines of the area. Only the Christian culture was allowed. The mission closed in 1904.

For me and I know for many other Aboriginal people knowing who we are, comes from knowing where we came from. In one I am lucky, no one in my family was taken away, my family were not part of the Stolen Generations but for those who are finding those memories are vital. There was forced removal of babies and children, to children's homes or white families, and servitude that was slavery without that term ever being used. The government has acknowledged that between 1910 and 1970 up to 100,000 Aboriginal children were taken forcibly or under duress from their families by police or welfare officers. Most were under 5 years old. There was rarely any judicial process. To be Aboriginal was enough, and they are known as the 'Stolen Generations'. The governments of the time 'believed' that it was in the best interest of Aboriginal children to be removed from their culture and assimilated, so justified the systematic disruption of Aboriginal families.

AIATSIS, is the place where I found a lot of memories, it is a place where others may also be fortunate and find information on themselves or their families, or it may have little or no information for some people. However, AIATSIS does have a Family History Unit that can help people to research at AIATSIS or can refer people to other organisations. The AIATSIS Family History Unit also works with an organisation called Link Up, which is helping those people of the Stolen Generations to not only find information on their families but to actually reunite people with their family or if their family has passed away with their community.

The Stolen Generations were not only stolen from their families but from their memories, their history, language and culture, all of which many are hoping to find, as well as their families.

For me and many other Aboriginal people knowing who you are, comes from knowing where you came from, so institutions such as AIATSIS, archives and libraries that are repositories for the memories that were taken away from us, are so important.

I may never have learnt the language of my ancestors from my own family, but because of such places as AIATSIS I can now begin to learn it and pass this and other reclaimed memories on to my own two children.