

**Jon Bell's *The Moogai* and the Ghosts of a Stolen Generation:
A Film and Historical Reflection**

Dani Bethea

The orphanage wasn't a very nice place to be in. We weren't orphans, we had family, we had mum and dad. The reason we were taken away...the colour of our skin. [Now] I graduated with the Residential Childcare Certificate which enabled me to help children. A lot of people ask me "why do you go and work for these very people, the Community Services?" I don't know what they used to call it. It used to be "native welfare" during my time. Why do you go and work for these very people [who harmed you]? My answer to them was: if I could help one child make it in this world it'll be worth it.

— Sheila Humphries, "My Stolen Childhood, and a Life to Rebuild" (2017)¹

Often, films in the horror canon utilize a monster allegory to explore the dark realities of histories that leave communities traumatized, violated, and reeling with interpreting the ghosts of intergenerational trauma. One such ghost, called the Moogai by the Bundjalung (Black Aboriginal peoples of the northern coast of modern-day Australia), is the manifestation of hundreds of years of colonization that fundamentally shaped entire generations of native people on the entire continent through the Torres Strait of the Pacific. These native and indigenous children are referred to as The Stolen Generation, who from 1910 to 1970, were the targets of federal and state policies to "civilize" the remaining Aboriginal population after decades of previous genocide and enslavement.

In *The Moogai* (2020), writer/director Jon Bell, who is an Aboriginal person, attempts to unpack the fear and anxieties that still linger for the descendants and last victims of a colonial policy of capture, forced assimilation, and rehousing by the Australian Government. If this horror sounds frighteningly familiar, this genocidal process of reeducation has parallels similar to the Native peoples of North America, who also continue to navigate the

¹ An excerpt from Sheila Humphries, "My Stolen Childhood, and a Life to Rebuild," filmed November 2017 in Perth, Australia, TEDx Perth video, 14:50, <https://www.tedxperth.org/my-stolen-childhood-and-life-rebuild>.

intergenerational traumas of invasion and forced inculcation into “whiteness.” This violent unmooring of various Black Aboriginal communities saw thousands of children tortured by white missionaries, displaced into labor camps—or adopted out, if they were “fair-skinned” enough—to white families.



Figure 1: Poster for *The Moogai* (Jon Bell, 2021)

The poster for *The Moogai* is positively haunting: outstretched, unnaturally long fingers of a white-taloned ghost reach for a beautiful, vulnerable Aboriginal child. The child is barefoot and clad in a simple, but intricately crafted, white dress; this leaves open the possibility that this child could be from a century past or the present day. An additional detail is the child's unseeing eyes—or perhaps eyes that have been blinded by the monster's hands.

In the film, a previously captured child's spirit appears first to the mother Sarah (Shari Sebbens) who believes she's experienced a nightmarish warning from a spirit beyond the grave that her baby is in danger. Sarah's attempts to express her fears to her husband Fergus (Meyne Wyatt) are at first ineffective because he hasn't experienced the

haunting ... yet. Escalating supernatural occurrences throughout the home careen into the first encounter by Sarah which rattles her so badly she refuses to sleep, lest the monster snatch her baby. Pregnancy and childbirth are already harrowing experiences—stressful even for the mother-baby-partner dynamic—but this state quadruples for many in racist colonized environments. Segregation from proper medical care, nonchalance about the individual's pain from doctors, and the hesitancy to seek hospital care where some babies were historically taken away for adoption are all lingering in the cultural memory for Aboriginal people. Also, the physical (maternal) weathering in this case—that is, the health effects of stress and discrimination—have physiological consequences for pregnant people that can be passed down to their children. In

these heightened environments of stress, sleeplessness and hyper-alertness via post-trauma are a grim and present reality that many Aboriginal mothers experience.

During one night of this forced alertness, Fergus is roused by his wife rocking the baby in bed. Dual concerns for his wife's mental state and for how tightly she's clutching the newborn baby prompt him to hold the child and allow her a brief reprieve to sleep while he keeps watch. An absolutely wrenching aspect of this film is its modernity juxtaposed to the past that is constantly on the periphery of their comfortability with a home, career, and a future. Trying to carve out some semblance of stability when you have so much healing to do, unspoken familial trauma, or potential triggers that impede that progress, layers this short film with additional commentary of a house not always being a measure of safety or security but a fortification against a larger white society with its locks and modern appliances to supposedly ward off intruders or invaders. Alas, monsters know nothing of physical buttresses. A jaunty bathroom break while his family sleeps reveals the ghost girl has reappeared to whisper to the husband as he returns to their shared bedroom, "he's watching you". He finally sees and hears the monster that's been keeping his wife Sarah on edge for days; quickly rousing his wife with the baby in his arms, they flee from the house. Driving all night, because even rest stops provide no safe haven or reprieve from the monster's chase, forces them both to the very brink of exhaustion.

Having careened into the forest, the father is shown, deceased, head smashed into the steering wheel ... while the back door is open with the mother ejected from the vehicle grasping her baby in vain as the monster appears and snatches it away into the night. The final shot of film shows the spectral girl apparition isn't alone but is one of many who have been taken from their parents never to be seen again. Sarah's mournful wails are intercut with the haunting image of dozens of Black Aboriginal children in a field scattered like the eeriest of flowers or tombstones. The telltale signs of posttraumatic stress are deftly weaved into the short film as exaggerated startled responses, inability to remain asleep, heightened anxiety, and affected mood to name a few immediate examples. Terror and posttraumatic stressors are studied extensively in the field of epigenetics and reverberate like a bell once you identify the weight the mother Sarah seems to be carrying from the very beginning of the film.

In a 2021 interview with the Writer and Director for the Virtual Indigenous Film Festival, Jon Bell revealed that the child actors are his granddaughter, nieces, and nephews. This note added an additional, personal heaviness to the short film that there are children who will still be grappling with

this trauma for generations to come. The government of Australia still has significant reckoning to do with its colonial past and present, especially because its acts of violence have left many Black Aboriginal individuals lost, depressed, angry, and heartsick for their language and cultural traditions. Like many nations with a colonized past, the native and Aboriginal people have suffered the most, but the weight is also being felt by the white citizenry that must have a continued national healing and diligence to restorative justice, reparation, and repatriation. Films and other pieces of outspoken art work by the affected Stolen Generation are integral pieces of the puzzle to make a nation reflect and their communities progressively whole again. With brilliant direction, chilling sound design, stellar acting, and the injection of historical horror *The Moogai* stands not only as a piece of powerful cinema but a chilling refrain to show that colonization was not an isolated traumatic event and that the ghosts are still being seen to this day.

**The Moogai* is currently available on the Vimeo streaming service.

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