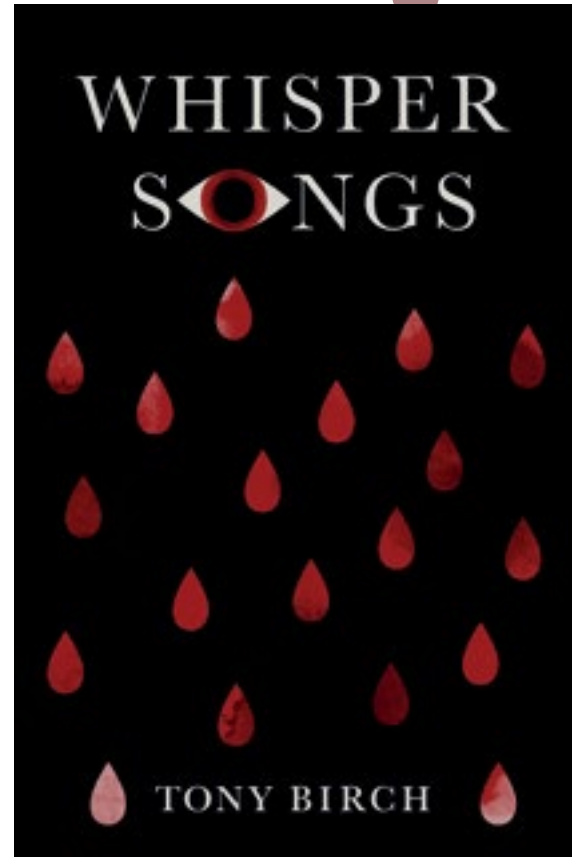


SYNOPSIS

Whisper Songs is a collection of poems by Tony Birch dedicated to Birch's younger brother, Wayne Birch, who passed away in 2018. The collection is edited and introduced by Anne-Marie Te Whiu. Te Whiu compares reading Birch's poetry to the childhood awe of watching Halley's comet: an experience that is both universal and personal, imbued with a sense of timelessness and the enduring power of Mother Earth (xiii). She compares the sections of Birch's collection – *Blood*, *Skin* and *Water* – as representing family (*Blood*), community (*Skin*) and Country (*Water*). The poems in the collection move from the personal to the bigger picture around us: water, land, Country, ancestors and over 60,000 years of First Nations culture and Lore. Birch makes frequent references to his family, and the intimate nature of the poems means readers can at once feel empathy for an experience Birch's family has endured, while also filling in the blanks with their own experience.

Birch acknowledges that he writes on Wurundjeri Country and thanks the Elders and generations who have 'survived the onslaught of colonisation and protected Country all the while' (p. 81). The [Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation](#) explains that 'Wurun' refers to the Manna Gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis*), which is common along 'Birrarrung' (known as the Yarra River), while 'djeri' is the grub found on or near the gum. Wurundjeri are the 'witchetty grub people'.

[Connecting with the Aboriginal History of Yarra: A Teachers' Resource Levels 3–10](#) is an excellent teacher's resource published by Yarra City Council (see Further Reading). It includes a history of the Yarra River and region, which would greatly enrich the study of Birch's collection. It would provide extensive frontloading to build students' knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal connection to Country, pre-contact Wurundjeri life, post-colonisation history and key dates in modern Aboriginal history, including the 1967 Referendum and then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2008 apology to the Stolen Generations. It would also provide an understanding of the modern Fitzroy Aboriginal community in which Birch was raised. It also contains walking trail information and videos about the region by Aboriginal elders.

**BOOK DETAILS**

B-format paperback | 978 0 7022 6327 9
\$24.99

THEMES

Themes covered in this collection include:

- Grief and loss following the death of family members.
- Celebration of family and childhood memories, even in impoverished and disenfranchised communities.
- Racism in Australia.
- Impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders – including poverty, reliance on Government housing and continual displacement from homes.
- Stolen Generations.
- Connection to Country.
- Acknowledgement of a greater power in Mother Earth.

SYNOPSIS (continued)

Birch ends his acknowledgements by thanking the Elders and custodians of Wurundjeri Country for 'showing the way with strength and courage'. His acknowledgement of his community and family is infused with love. Thus, the collection ends on a distinctly optimistic note, despite the often sad context of the poems. This is not an angry or bitter collection, but a reverent collection that acknowledges the hardships those disenfranchised in our communities face, yet it does not ever lose sight of the bigger picture – family love, community strength and Mother Earth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tony Birch is the author of three novels: the bestselling *The White Girl*, winner of the 2020 NSW Premier's Award for Indigenous Writing, and shortlisted for the 2020 Miles Franklin Literary Prize; *Ghost River*, winner of the 2016 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Indigenous Writing; and *Blood*, which was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award in 2012. He is also the author of *Shadowboxing* and three short story collections, *Father's Day*, *The Promise* and *Common People*. In 2017 he was awarded the Patrick White Literary Award. In 2021 he will release two new books, a poetry collection, *Whisper Songs*, and a new short story collection, *Dark as Last Night*. Tony Birch is also an activist, historian and essayist.



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STUDY NOTES

Many of the poems in this collection are autobiographical. Key links to interviews and articles by and about Birch are provided in Further Reading and Resources (p. 10), and teachers can decide how much to present to students, to use in class discussions, or to provide for extension activities for those students wanting to delve deeper into the personal stories behind the poems.

Language Features

- 'At the Creek' (pp. 67–68) is a poignant story of loss. This poem begins with a childhood memory of the poet being at the creek with his brother, with the threat of colonisation and white man's control around them: 'he tells me I must go/ before the ghosts arrive bearing/ blankets and beads willing/ pagan souls to prayer/ I must be the bird/ of every journey/ my brother tells me/ it is now

STUDY NOTES (continued)

the time of flight/ *you must go* he tells me/ *before they whip you/ with lead and chains.*'

As the boys grow, the brother becomes estranged from the family. There is a sense that he is lost to the streets, involved in crime and substance abuse. The third stanza is of note, employing harsh sounds and cold words to depict these lost souls: 'at the creek sad boys sniffing/ chrome and jerk and roam/ their tin-men faces hidden/ grotesque beneath bridges/ heads bowed to the water'. The alliteration of 'sad boys sniffing' and the rhyme of 'chrome and jerk and roam' emphasise a sense of despair.

The third stanza ends with a different image of a boy's body than at the start of the poem: where once he and his brother 'warms a life/ on worn slabs of stone/ resting with our bodies', now the sad creek boys watch, with heads bowed, '... a body drift by/ bloated and beaten/ a boy-angel of broken wings'.

Upon seeing each other as adults, his brother turns away from him: 'turns away in shame/ away from love from me/ for his heart for him', and his friend by his side 'shifts and asks without speaking – "When they voice the claim/ your brother does not exist/ what does your heart feel?"'.

- 'The Arteries' (p. 69) is a powerful poem on the environmental destruction of modern society. It uses imagery to express its point, focusing on the development of Melbourne around the Birrarung (Yarra) River.

Birch describes trucks and an eight-lane highway 'burying the old creek like a/ euthanised geriatric crying/ for the mercy of her children'. He points out the irony that these roads were diverted away from wealthier suburbs so as not to disturb the existence of the rich people who lived there, thereby highlighting that the same consideration was not made for First Nations communities: 'the old school ties of an older city/ holding sway along riverside mansions/ founded on the lie of foundation.'

The powerful imagery in the final stanza drives the message home, with images of a land raped and abused, parched, heartbroken, veins rusted and Country crippled for 'progress': 'the waterways of Country/ beaten raped clogged dead/ the refuse you leave behind/ our heart a parched lake/ veins reduced to rust/ denied flow in the name of progress.'

- 'Away' (p. 13) is a poem depicting someone fleeing – running away from home, family and memories. It contains crisp, evocative imagery with a striking economy of words, in phrases such as: 'warmed hollow/ of a shared bed'; 'fingerprints marking time/ on a kitchen table'; 'a bicycle wheel creaking/ its windmill in the yard'; 'a mother's hand sweeping/ through locks of hair to/ untangle and savour'.

Birch then describes the family secrets as 'ghosting whispers', emphasising the way in which the past can haunt a person. He also describes the person running, their 'crying feet leave no dance', emphasising the person's pain.



STUDY NOTES (continued)

SECTION ONE: *Blood (family)*

Key poems that touch upon loss and grief:

- In 'Little Man' (p. 5), Birch describes searching for his dead brother. He uses rhyme and off-rhyme to construct an image in the reader's mind of the search: 'old haunts street corners/ back lanes dressed in rain.' The search is in vain at first, as 'our whispered songs for you' are ignored: 'face hidden you refused us/ mute silent brother/ we marked you lost/ our hidden faces/ mourning mourning.' The final stanza describes his brother at the time of his passing, based on Birch's memories of him as a boy mixed with the images of when Birch found him deceased on the floor of his home. Birch expands on this in an interview in *Overland* magazine (see Further Reading):

Wayne was on the floor in his bedroom and appeared to be sleeping. A copy of one of his favourite novels, *Oliver Twist*, lay open on his bed. For a moment, I convinced myself that he was simply resting between chapters ...

He began playing the guitar when he was ten years old. He loved The Beatles and early Rolling Stones music, and was a prolific reader of fiction and poetry. When Wayne was a young boy, his hair was a mass of honey-coloured curls, he had big, brown eyes and he wore a stunning smile. My brother was a beautiful boy.

- 'Fading Light' (p. 7) tells the story of the poet's grandfather's suicide, and how Birch's mother found his body. Written at first as more of a prose poem, Birch describes how his grandfather was discharged from the air force, 'saved by colour blindness', and worked night-shifts as a boilermaker. On his last morning alive, he is described 'slipping in the back door while/ my grandmother five children/ slept in oblivion upstairs'. He neatly undresses, 'ever the organised man' and proceeds to the bathroom to end his life. At this point, Birch's crisp and stark choice of words seem to hit the reader in blows: 'stripped to white underwear/ walked into a tiled bathroom/ snapping the brass lock behind him/ my mother a girl of twelve/ found his soulless body/ slumped across the bathtub/ he left her no story/ and the coroner gave little away:/ well-built man/ aged forty-seven/ came home from work/ took carving knife/ cut his throat.' Birch ends the poem with the image of his grandmother later taking him to the grave on his grandfather's birthday. She 'cries forty years of loss' for her husband and also for her youngest son, who we learn was tragically murdered ten years after her husband's suicide.
- In 'Stillborn' (p. 21), Birch takes his grandson to visit the grave of a stillborn brother. It is a beautiful, tender musing on how family members live on in the hearts and bodies of those surviving and the generations to come. Birch watches his grandson, remarking on his innocence: 'he carries the face of my brother/ catches the wind in infant hands/ soft unmarked unscarred loving.' The little boy senses the context of their visit and shows appropriate reverence: 'he smiles marvels briefly/ reaching for toy cars and dolls/ memento mori to those/ a day hours minutes old/ pausing he frowns my way/ sensing sadness living here.' The poem ends with grandfather and grandson lying on the grass by the stillborn child's grave: 'I take my grandson's hand/ gently squeeze the life of him/ ...he lays his head to my chest/ my blood our blood he sleeps.'

STUDY NOTES (continued)

- 'Leaving' (p. 25) describes the upheaval of generations of family from their homes – possibly based on Birch's experience of his family being moved from a housing commission estate in Fitzroy to new estates in Northcote, Richmond and Preston (see the Oral History Project 2015–2017 in Further Reading for more details)
- 'Sacred Heart' (p. 14) describes the now closed Catholic primary school in a suburb where the community has been cleared out. The poem begins with the old graffiti markings of the school boys: 'schoolyard of scattered gusts/ littered with frenzied tags/ marks of soft-skinned boys/ fine hair delicate fingers/ lives of labelled comfort/ this their only rebellion.' The next images are of the desolate, abandoned building and deceased former staff: 'the pigeons no longer bother/ shitting on the slate church spire'; '... vicious headmistress/ long dead long gone.' Then the poem hints at the corruption and abuse in both Australian and Catholic Church history: 'the flag of a diseased nation/ hangs limply above tales of abuse/ Stations of the Cross witness to/ touching here probing there/ cloaked acts in the name of God.' The poem ends with a glimpse of the neglected and forgotten community, in which the school sits, with references to 'crumbling houses', 'rusting rooftops', 'unwanted unloved' and 'houses sparse and heartless'.

Key poems that celebrate family:

- 'A Father Brushes His Daughter's Hair on the First Day of School' (p. 17) is a simple poem describing a father reassuring his nervous daughter. There is a universality in the opening line, 'new year shoes and blisters' that will bring most readers back to their own memories of their first day of the school year. We then get an intimate glimpse of their morning ritual, as the father makes up a touching poem about his daughter to bolster her confidence for the day ahead.
- 'Archie' (p. 22) is a poem about a grandfather going to hospital to meet his newborn grandson. There are the familiar musings we make of babies – 'wisps of dark hair/ skin scent of life', 'warm breath on skin', and the universal tendency to stake a baby's claim in the family by confirming their appearance and fit: 'he's a Birch Boy.' There is the general reverence most people pay to the hospital environment, with just a slight nod to the vulnerability of a newborn baby: 'quiet tentative whispers/ as if entering a Library/ or perhaps a Morgue.' And there is the reflection most families engage in about departed family members – how a baby may evoke memories of them or bear a resemblance in some way – affirming the bonds of family ties over generations: 'I feel the departed flowing through my grandson.'
- These simple, elegant poems demonstrate the deep empathy Birch has for the human condition in general, and how readers can universally appreciate and connect with his work.

STUDY NOTES (continued)

Key poems that celebrate childhood while acknowledging a difficult upbringing:

- 'Matinee' (p. 16) describes memories of going to movie cinemas, where 'we were forever the circling Indians/ content with our savagery'.
- 'Dragster' (p. 6) describes a 'swashbuckling' kind of tale about young boys growing up in the streets, riding bikes, 'fearless' and 'reckless'. Birch brings the exuberance and fun to an abrupt halt in the final line, 'we were born to pain', hinting at the challenges in the boys' upbringing.
- 'TKO' (p. 10) reflects on Birch's experiences learning to box with his father, who he had a tense relationship with growing up. Birch seems to hint that his father put himself first before the children: 'you dreamt one life for yourself and something less for us', 'we were relegated punching bags/ sparring partners and patsies'. He ends the poem with a jarring reference to 'her', which seems to take us out of the boxing ring and perhaps into the home: 'putting her to the canvas down/ down and out for the count.' (See Further Reading for Birch life history.)

Activity: Students should select a poem that they feel exemplifies the universal relevance of Birch's poems. Students should annotate their selected poem and present a summary to the class of what is powerful, effective and relatable in this poem, and how Birch presents an experience readers can universally connect with.

SECTION TWO: *Skin (community)*

Key poems that deal with racism:

- 'The Eight Truths of Bhuta Khan' (pp. 30–41) is a suite of poems that reconstruct historical records based on the humiliating experiences of Birch's maternal great-grandfather who sought exemption from the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* so he could travel to India to visit family. 'Forebearer' (p. 43) includes a description of Birch's paternal great-grandfather, James 'Prince' Moodie, a black convict from Barbados. Both pieces highlight the barbarity with which First Nations people were treated and the dehumanising narratives of white colonisers about people of colour. In Bhuta Khan's application for exemption, he states his claims with a hint of sarcasm, and possibly weariness at the constant injustices he faces:
 - 'Self-attesting to my good character, please allow me to state that this day on the 24 June 1916 I arose from bed & went into the bathroom to shave. In the cracked mirror I saw a human being. I sat at the table in the kitchen with my wife & child. We breathed together & we ate a meal together' (p. 32).
 - '[I] bathed my dark skin with disinfectant for some time. When I was satisfied that I had cleansed my physical body to the standard you require (Regulation 16, Section 2) I bathed a second time. Without your permission, my wife kissed my right cheek before I left the house ...' (p. 32).



STUDY NOTES (continued)

- Khan is quick to emphasise his obsequiousness to please the authorities, still with a hint of irony and sarcasm:
 - 'I greeted neighbours with a discreet nod of the head & they returned the gesture, with the exception of the butcher on the nearest street corner who cordially addresses me as nigger each morning. I hold no malice toward him as I have not been granted permission by your department to do so' (pp. 32–33).
 - 'During my working day, selling haberdashery ... I smiled regularly & I robbed no-one. I did not look upon a white woman's body & when asked, I agreed that yes, I was fortunate to be allowed to reside in such a fair and prosperous Nation' (p. 33).
- In the government paperwork Khan is variously referred to as 'workhorse', 'dusky as sunset', 'Eyes: unknowable/ Religion: unspeakable', 'claims to be a man' (p. 34), and 'Not a white man, but a man nonetheless' (p. 38).
- The authorities change the spelling of his name: '(Khan insists that his name be spelled as B.H.O.U.T.A., but having made additional enquiries ... Immigration Officers gave preference to the spelling B.O.O.T.A. The phonetic generally suffices with foreign names & I have chosen to adopt such an approach here.)' (p. 38).
- A police officer reports on how he took Khan to face his referees so that the officer could verify his identify: 'I brought *my* Boota Khan before those citizens ... It was agreed between myself & the two gentlemen concerned that the Boota Khan in our presence ... of six photographic images ... is the same person. (Khan did not dispute our findings.)' (p. 38).
- Khan's referees are similarly degrading, remarking on how he pays due deference to white men and neither confirming or denying his 'claim' to be a man. One referee states how he harms no-one and that 'no harm should come to him – for now' (p. 40), emphasising white man's power in society: they can give and withdraw approval and protection of black people on a whim.
- The government's degrading, dismissive and at times infantilising approach to black men is reinforced in the convict record represented in 'Forebearer' (p. 43): misspelling his name as Moody, they record that he is of 'Breeding' age, has a 'Midnight' complexion with a head full of '248 Marbles', has 'potential for intelligence', his eyes are 'dark as hell' and he is 'a willing labourer'.
- These fictional pieces based on historical records deftly use the language of the era to highlight the way in which colonial society viewed and depicted black people: as sub-human, slaves to provide labour, given to crime and debauchery and often dirty with poor personal hygiene. All such representations served to justify the colonists' position in stealing First Nations' land.

STUDY NOTES (continued)

Activity: Have students highlight and discuss the phrases that strike them as shocking and unacceptable by today's standards (as in the examples discussed above). In what ways has society moved on from this behaviour? In what ways does racism still exist in today's society?

- 'A Matter of Lives' (p. 44) reflects on the recent Black Lives Matter movement.
- 'Race War' (p. 51) reflects on the displacement of First Nations people by successive governments.

Activity: Compare the poems 'Gallows – near La Trobe Street' and 'The Oath of a White Man'. The first depicts a scene of good Christian white society viewing an execution of black men, the second is an account of a white man reporting the massacres of Aboriginal people he has witnessed (and perhaps been part of). Students could compare the two accounts, asking the question: Who are the 'savages' in these communities?

SECTION THREE: *Water (Country)*

Key poems that deal with Colonisation, Stolen Generations and Massacres:

- 'Beneath the Bridge' (p. 74) and 'Desecrate' (p. 76–77) both refer to Country and water as witnesses to atrocities, while the river supports and heals anyone on its banks, whether First Nations or immigrant.
- 'Beneath the Bridge' (p. 74) describes the loss of Country in colonisation, and ends with the river cleaning up after a large construction accident (West Bridge collapse): 'and the Birrarung lay waiting/ to gather the dead together/ she gave their souls a home/ comforted fear and sadness/ and returned battered bodies/ to riverbank mourners clasping/ soft hands of fatherless children.' This brings home to the reader that nature is there to support us, regardless of race, which further strengthens the need for us to look after our environment.
- In 'Desecrate' (pp. 76–77), Birch gives us rich imagery of creeks, rivers, earth and sky interrupted continually by a refrain, 'a child was plucked from a drain'. At the end of the poem, it's revealed that this child is a member of the Stolen Generations: 'early one autumn morning/ playing with boats in drains/ a child was plucked/ from a drain/ and stolen' (p. 77). The preceding imagery makes this all the more powerful by emphasising how a stolen Aboriginal child is not only removed from their family, but from Country and culture – severing those important connections that keep First Nations peoples strong. The idea that a child could literally be 'plucked from a drain' has its foundations in truth – in all the stories of Stolen Generations people who remember playing as children and literally being plucked out of their lives and displaced completely in a sudden moment.
- Birch discusses the lingering fear of government taking children away in his Fitzroy History Society Oral History (see Further Reading):



STUDY NOTES (continued)

So my mum and grandmother had this habit ... is that they'd get up every morning, they hose the gutter, they hose the footpath, they hose the veranda, they vacuum the house right through and then they sit down. One of my things with my mum, she was out hosing the gutter, I said, 'Mum, what are you [doing?]' – it's raining, right. I said, 'What are you hosing the gutter for?' She goes, 'Because I do.' Then she went in, she did the rest, she wouldn't talk to me until she'd done the housework. I said, 'Mum, why are you doing it?' You know what she said? 'Oh, you never know when a social worker's going to come through your house.' I said to her, 'Mum: one is, they can't do that anymore, and two is, there are no kids here. Who are they going to take away? But you just keep doing it.'

Activity: Encourage students to reflect on the ways in which past government policies and actions still impact people's behaviour and attitudes today.

Activity: Introduce students to [the importance of land and connection to Country](#) - a resource provided by [commonground.org.au](#) explaining the role of country in First Nations culture, how central it is to wellbeing and what the connection to land means for First Nations people. Have students write a response to the statement: 'A stolen Aboriginal child is not only removed from their family, but from Country and culture – severing those important connections that keep First Nations peoples strong.'

Key poems that deal with the importance of Country

- 'The Great Flood of 1971' (p. 78) is a fitting end to the journey Birch takes us on in this collection. After reflecting on family and community, this final homage to Country reminds us of the ultimate power of our environment: surpassing any power that colonisers, or violent fathers, or unscrupulous social workers, or abusive Catholic priests, or terrifying headmistresses, could ever have over a person and community. The poem ends with the protagonist surrendering themselves to the storm and flood: '*i left my body/ tepid water a magnet drawing down/ bands of blackness crushing bodies/ the light above extinguished/ i was alive/ surface gasping in a deluge/ lightning tearing holes in sky/ this river of rising life/ flood me*'.

Activity: Discuss with students how this is a powerful image of redemption, cleansing and returning to Mother Earth (as the Dreaming and Aboriginal Lore tells us will happen after death). In this poignant end, the pain, struggle and violence of the preceding pages is healed and washed away by the sacred Birrarung (Yarra) river. Yet this is not about forgetting: for the memories are forever held in Country's presence, as Black Ophelia (p. 63) reminds us: 'open lips rising breasts /she sounds – always was/ always will be ...'



STUDY NOTES (continued)**Extension Activities:**

1. Students can research how the various impacts of being part of the Stolen Generations can affect generations of family members through intergenerational trauma, entrenched poverty and disenfranchisement (see Further Reading and Resources).
2. Students can select another of Birch's works to compare and contrast with this collection of poetry. *Shadowboxing*, *Father's Day*, *The Promise*, *Common People* and *The White Girl* would pair well and draw on similar themes as these poems. (See uqp.com.au)

ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE TEACHERS' NOTES

Cara Shipp is a Wiradjuri/Welsh woman (descending from the Lamb and Shipp families in Central Western NSW) and currently leads Years 7 to 12 at Silkwood School, Mount Nathan, in the Gold Coast hinterland. She has previously run alternative educational programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; held Head Teacher English/HASS/Languages positions; and served as President, Vice President and Editor with the ACT Association for the Teaching of English (ACTATE). Cara has completed a Masters degree in Education focusing on Aboriginal literacy, and regularly presents cultural competence training at local and National conferences, particularly within the context of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into the English curriculum. In 2013, Cara was part of the ACARA working party on incorporating the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures Cross-curriculum priority into the Civics and Citizenship curriculum.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

Bateman, P 2016, 'Meeting Tony Birch', something real [online blog], viewed 16 March 2021, <<https://somethingreal.com.au/meeting-tony-birch/>>.

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Steger, J 2014, 'Tony Birch', Sydney Morning Herald, 10 May, viewed 16 March 2021, <<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/tony-birch-20140508-37ydb.htm>>.

Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, 2021, viewed 16 March 2021, <<https://www.wurundjeri.com.au/>>.

Yarra City Council, Connecting with the Aboriginal History of Yarra: A Teachers' Resource Levels 3–10, Yarra City Council, Melbourne, VIC, viewed 6 March 2021, <<https://aboriginalhistoryofyarra.com.au/teachersresource.pdf>>.

KEY RESOURCES ON THE STOLEN GENERATION

Black Words Historical Events Calendar – a resource outlining key people and events during various stages of colonised Australia, including government Protection Acts leading to removal of children for placement in missions and foster homes to be enculturated into Anglo customs (Stolen Generations).

Stolen Generations and Bringing Them Home report: National Museum of Australia resource and NMA Bringing them Home; NMA National Apology; John Howard's position.