
SIMONE ARNOL

seeRED

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by Rebecca Ray (Meriam)

Located on the lands of the Gunggandji people in coastal Far North Queensland, Yarrabah is a vibrant cultural place and is widely acknowledged as the largest Aboriginal community in Australia. Yet, like much of colonised Australia, Yarrabah holds a complex and tumultuous history of violent displacement and cultural suppression due to missionisation.

This history has often been recounted from a non-Aboriginal perspective with limited literature that offers true insight into the deeply personal legacies and stories of the early Aboriginal residents of the Yarrabah mission days from 1892-1960.

Since its arrival in the nineteenth century, photography has played a significant role in the lives of Indigenous people. It was particularly used to document, surveil and control Aboriginal people while simultaneously reinforcing harmful social ideologies. These social ideologies, underpinned by scientific racism, resulted in the adoption of widespread national policies of assimilation¹. One infamous policy, that resulted in the Stolen Generation, legalised the separation of Aboriginal children from their families to be placed into government or religious run institutions². This systematic removal of babies from the arms of their mothers is a deeply painful and tragic legacy that still permeates modern Australia, where survivors and their descendants seek to reveal the truth and horror in these histories. Through Arnol's reclamation of the photograph, she actively readdresses the colonial narrative and honours the lives of those stolen.

Separated into three distinct themes Stolen, Mission and Exemption, the series narrates the life of Simone Arnol's great grandmother, Tottie Joinbee.

Born c.1899, Tottie was one of the early Aboriginal Peoples to be removed to Yarrabah. Living to 110 years, she was affectionately known as Granny Tottie and remains a deeply respected woman who held onto her cultural identity and knowledge despite the efforts of colonisation. Arnol's photographic series draws upon her great grandmother's oral histories and Kathleen Denigan's *Reflections of Yarrabah* 2008. As she recreates the memories and significant events of Granny Tottie, Arnol forms a visual record of her life. *The 1899 Yarrabah: Church of England Aboriginal Mission: rules and regulations booklet* is a core component woven throughout Arnol's portraits that situate the treatment of the early Yarrabah residents. Each portrait is layered with a multitude of meanings, perspectives and history, with the dramatic and symbolic colour red tethering the works together. By recentering the Aboriginal experience through the lens of Granny Tottie, Arnol engages in historical revisionism that acknowledges the legacies of the people of Yarrabah.

¹ Lisa Styles, *Repositioning the Aboriginal in Photography*, 1999

² Nina N. Lemieux, Chapter 7: Indigenous Australians and Child Removal, *Australian Eugenics from 1900 to 1961*, 2017
Assimilation/Absorption policies



Stolen

Poignantly beginning with *Stolen*, Arnol speaks to Tottie's early childhood when she was removed from her family at a young age and placed into servitude. The conditions for Aboriginal maids were controlling, cruel and rooted in racial superiority, with Tottie confirming these experiences. The harsh lives of servants often caused the young girls to run away, but all too often they were captured and simply moved to serve somewhere else. Tottie attempted to escape but, bleeding from welts across her body she remembers being picked up by someone on a horse back.

As if inside a memory, Arnol's emotive use of cinematic photography offers a visual glimpse into Granny Tottie's experiences. *I was only small and the lady of the house, I think his wife, put me in a big bath and washed me down.*

Confronted by a tiny Aboriginal body sitting hunched, curled and bleeding red from the welts across her back, we are cast into a moment of complete vulnerability. Without the distraction of full colour, the contrasting black and white aesthetic emphasises the layered interchanging levels of trauma and memory. With her back towards us, we gaze upon open wounds steeped in Arnol's selective use of colour and bear witness to the violence that was inflicted across Granny Tottie's body.

Mission

Tracing her great grandmother's life, the series shifts to Yarrabah and begins to reference life on the mission. Operated by the Anglican church, Yarrabah Mission emerged in 1894, and under the authority of Ernest Gribble, the mission became the official destination for removed children³. Under the Industrial and Reformatory Schools Act 1865, Granny Tottie was removed to Yarrabah Mission in 1914 after falling pregnant.

At Yarrabah every aspect of life was controlled, with the practice of culture prohibited. Life was entirely dictated by the Yarrabah Rules and Regulations Handbook which featured pages of detailed daily tasks, codes of conduct and timetables. The Yarrabah Mission ideologies reflected throughout the handbook, together with the archives of Gribble's life, highlight the entrenched neo-Darwinian views of social evolution whereby Christian indoctrination would civilise Aboriginal culture. However, Gribble was a forceful authoritarian and his missionary management and methodologies reflected ethnocentrism and it is clear that he lacked any genuine concern or the welfare of those living at Yarrabah⁴. As heard through Granny Tottie's accounts, Yarrabah mission was a place where the residents were treated as prisoners under disciplinary punishment that resulted in disease, famine and slave labour.

Throughout the depictions of missionisation, vibrant red sweet potatoes are held in the hands of the young Aboriginal girl. Food scarcity was a significant issue at Yarrabah with sweet potatoes being one of the only food sources available. The disgraceful accounts of starvation and malnutrition are captured within Granny Tottie's memories, *where hunger drained the blood from their bodies*. Laid, curled in fetal position, red spills across the floor. *The staff didn't care if we lived or died; we went to church but had nothing much to eat.*

Exemption

At Yarrabah there was very little socialisation between sexes due to the dormitory systems. Yet, despite the segregation, relationships still formed. Secret love letters were often exchanged, just as Granny Tottie did with Gunggandji man Jack Joinbee. *Every time I go pass, he flick the mirror and I flick it back when the sun hit. He would write a letter, give it to some girl to go down and get sand and she would bring it up.* Capturing the secret blossoming relationship in her double portrait, a young Tottie is reflected back in a handheld mirror from a distance. Here, the double portraits express a sense of intimacy while conveying the forced distance between the lovers. Eventually the couple married and bore twelve children together. The symbols of love, the cross and string, are woven throughout. *I had no wedding ring, they just put a little cotton around my finger.*

Introduced by state governments throughout twentieth century Australia, exemptions allowed government administrators to grant Indigenous people selected freedoms from the protection legislations. At Yarrabah, if a man was married and could provide for his family, he was allowed an exception certificate. Granny Tottie and Jack Joinbee were the first family to be granted exemption from Yarrabah Mission in 1944. According to Tottie, her children were considered too fair-skinned to continue living at Yarrabah. The Joinbee family were forced to leave and were relocated to live in the neighbouring township of Cairns.

³ Yarrabah, Queensland Government, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples History of Yarrabah

⁴ Christine Halse, *The Reverend Ernest Gribble: a Successful Missionary?* Lectures on North Queensland



IMAGE FAR LEFT

Simone ARNOL

Bleeding from welts across her body she remembered being picked up by someone on horseback, travelling to a place where 'there were a lot of coloured people' and onto Ingham Police Station.

I was only small and the lady of the house – I think that was his wife – put me in a big bath and washed me down.

She put medicine on me and found some old dresses for me. 2023 from Reflections in Yarrabah (2008)

digital print. Edition: 1/6

Courtesy of the artist

Model: Zehruiah Teale

IMAGE LEFT

Simone ARNOL

You know, most of us went crazy, we boiled paw paw to keep ourselves alive. The staff didn't care if we lived or died. That's how it was. We went to church every morning but had nothing much to eat. 2023 from Reflections in Yarrabah (2008)

digital print. Edition: 1/6

Courtesy of the artist

Model Tahleise Willet, Gunggandji peoples and traditional owner of Yarrabah



A politically motivated and emotionally driven series, Arnol's photographic suite actively reinstates the record, exposing the absences of these interconnected legacies and experiences of collective cultural trauma within contemporary society. By honouring storytelling, the works create a visual narrative of Aboriginal history that respectfully depicts the people of Yarrabah, while revealing the ongoing strength and commitment to cultural survival that have been generationally passed

down. This deeply personal and evocative series exemplifies the power of contemporary portraiture in its ability to retell and personify people and histories that were purposefully suppressed.

seeRED is a heart-wrenching visual and aural testimony to the history of Yarrabah, to Granny Tottie, and is a powerful interplay of time that connects the past with the present and the future.

IMAGE FAR LEFT
Simone ARNOL

Girl's Home Regulations: BLANKETS to be aired daily. Dirty blankets to be washed. Each inmate to have her own blanket with her name in the corner. Blankets to be pressed by 12 o'clock and the press locked by the Matron. 2023 from the 1899 Yarrabah Rules and Regulations)

digital print. Edition: 1/6
Courtesy of the artist

Model: Sara Fagan, whose great-grandmother was part of the stolen generation and was moved to Yarrabah to be part of the Mission



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