Breaking through the *Rabbit-Proof Fence*: Colonial Displacement and Aboriginal Resistance in Doris Pilkington Garimara’s Storytelling

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Abstract
This essay analyzes how contemporary Australian Aboriginal storytelling, exemplified by Doris Pilkington Garimara’s book *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002) and its film adaptation by director Phillip Noyce, transcribes the various experiences of displacement and resistance of Aboriginal peoples and provides a basis for a collective listening/rereading of the nation’s complex colonial history. The various guises of displacement and resistance examined in this essay include: the involuntary migration of Aboriginal peoples, especially the Nyungar and the Mardudjara, along the rabbit-proof fence towards government-assigned settlements such as Jigalong (equivalent to “reservations” in the US); the forced relocation of mixed-race children (the Stolen Generations) to missionary camps to be made culturally white; and the children’s heroic journey of escape and homecoming—again navigated through the rabbit-proof fence. The essay aims to demonstrate that Aboriginal storytelling not only discloses a history of disruption imposed by European settlement, but, perhaps more importantly, registers Aboriginal peoples’ strength to resist, adopt, and reconnect.

Keywords
rabbit-proof fence, displacement, Aboriginal storytelling, colonial history, postcolonial rereading, Australian film and literature, the Stolen Generations
Introduction

In settler nation states, European settlement triggered the mass displacement of native peoples. One important example of the dual process of colonial settlement and native displacement happened in Australia. Over a period of two centuries, European settlers—sailors, soldiers, convicts, missionar...
mourning to commemorate invasion” (36). These different interpretations of Australian history “gradually polarized into the history wars of the late 1990s” (36). As Collins and Davis point out, “Australia cinema entered the history wars belatedly in 2002 with the release of Rabbit-Proof Fence”—Noyce’s film adaptation of Pilkington’s book providing “additional fire-power in the prevailing history wars” (37-38). Both the book and the film are important in creating an awareness of a counter-colonial history of Australia for the public. Noyce’s adaptation was listed with The Tracker (also released in 2002) as one of the two most influential films in the history wars “in terms of box office, critical attention and industry awards” (36). However, the film focuses only on the second part of Pilkington’s book, the abduction and escape of three mixed-race Aboriginal children: Pilkington’s mother Molly, and her aunts Daisy and Gracie. Because of the film’s successful public reception, many people thought Pilkington’s book was also a biographical story centered only on one family’s experience. On the contrary, by combining research with oral history, Pilkington’s book documents a much longer history of encounter between the settlers and the Aboriginal peoples in Western Australia, in particular the Nyungar people and the Mardudjara people, and the devastating impact of this encounter.

As Anne Brewster observes, “the narrative of Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence includes many excerpts from archival material including letters, telegrams, newspaper reports, the Aborigines Protection Act etc.” (n. pag.). Brewster argues that Pilkington’s awareness of the archive as “a prototype for global and national systems of dominance” allows her to reconstruct the history of traumatic contact and displacement of the Nyungar people on the Western coast and the Mardudjara people in the Western desert (to which Pilkington’s group Garimara belongs). The use of the historical archive is so intensive that a publisher rejected Pilkington’s earlier 1985 draft of the book, “saying the work read a little like an academic treatise, and suggested she try her hand at fiction instead” (Quin n. pag.). Following the publisher’s suggestion, Pilkington added fiction and oral history to the book. In the reworked 1996 University of Queensland Press version, Pilkington set the Nyungar people’s stories in a “partly-fictionalized dramatization,” with several of the characters in this early section of the book “based on historical resistance fighters; others are fictional” (Brewster n. pag.).

4 The Nyungar people (also spelled Noongar, Nyoongar, Nyoongah, Nyungah, Nyugah and Yunga) live in the southwest corner of Australia. They are the first indigenous groups who took the brunt of colonization in Western Australia. One of Pilkington’s characters, chief Yellagonga, might have been modelled on the historical figure Yagan, who rose as a Nyungar resistance
the involuntary migration of the Mardudjara people from the Western desert to the cattle stations and government depots as well as stories of subsequent child removal and escape, adding details that were “passed down in the oral history of her family” (Brewster n. pag.). The result is an effective contemporary Aboriginal story transcribed in English, or, to use Brewster’s term, a “documentary” life writing” (n. pag.) that offers an account of colonial displacement that counters the perspective of European expansion.

Involuntary Migration of the Aboriginal Peoples in Western Australia

Transcription of Aboriginal storytelling is significant because it reveals mobility as part of Aboriginal culture. As Jennifer Isaacs, the first Aboriginal Arts officer of the Australian Council for the Arts, puts it, the “use of the printed word as a means of communication is relatively new to the Aboriginal people, whose own culture and history is proudly retained as an oral tradition”; however, it is an important endeavor to “present Aboriginal history and culture direct from the people themselves” (6). With the support of the Aboriginal Arts Board, Isaacs compiled Australian Dreaming: 40,000 Years of Aboriginal History, with contributions from over forty Aboriginal storytellers as well as traditional mythology and song-poetry from different parts of Australia. The book is, according to the Arts Board, the first transcribed history of the Australian continent and its people in “the Aboriginal people’s own account” (9). Significantly, this transcribed account proves that movement was already at the center of Aboriginal life in Australia before the European arrival.

The book records that before the arrival of European settlers, Aboriginal peoples and their cultures had already existed on the Australian continent for more than forty thousand years. According to their beliefs, all life as it is known today—human, animal, bird, and fish—was created by the Great Spirit Ancestors. These Great Spirit Ancestors “made their epic journeys across the land, creating rivers, trees and rocks, and naming plants and animals as sacred species for their

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5 The Mardudjara people belong to the Western desert cultural bloc. All Mardu groups speak mutually intelligible dialects of the Western desert language, the largest indigenous language in Australia. This language is referred to in Pilkington’s book as “Mardu wangka” (Rabbit-Proof 18). For more details, see Tonkinson (179-82).
descendants” (33). Before the arrival of the Europeans, different groups of Aboriginal peoples in Australia followed the teaching of their own ancestors. Their distinct identities and cultures were based in large part on elaborate journeys—following the tracks inaugurated by the movement of their ancestors to take care of their own country. As Eric Michaels points out in *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media, and Technological Horizons*, these tracks demonstrate “a complex, utterly precise connection between person, knowledge, and place,” and such complex Aboriginal knowledge of “mobility and place” is “alien to European thinking and law” (171). Unfortunately, European settlers not only ignored and disrupted these traditional forms of journey but imposed other forms of involuntary migration upon Aboriginal peoples, removing many groups from their home and country.

The European settlers treated Australia as a colony of settlement, not of conquest. Aboriginal land was taken over by British colonists on the premise that the land belonged to no-one (*terra nullius*) (Reynolds n. pag.). This is because, in colonial eyes, Aboriginal peoples were regarded not as fellow human beings, their existence not having left measurable marks on the lands, such as cities and bridges, and their cultures not recognizable in modern numerical and logocentric terms. The British settlers imposed what Timothy Mitchell calls colonial “enframing,” a systematic effort to restructure the virgin colony geographically as well as symbolically (33). As Anne Haebich reveals in *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000*, by the time Western Australia was granted self-government in 1889, it had developed booming industries such as pearling, pastoral farming, and mining in “an exploitative and often violent nature” at the expense of the twenty-four thousand or so Aboriginal population (210). Aboriginal peoples were either displaced or forced into labor. According to Haebich, before 1889 “local interest groups” such as the pastoral lobby had “used its control in both houses of parliament to protect its own economic concerns by passing unprecedented discriminatory legislations to ensure a stable Aboriginal work force and to stop cattle killing and other Aboriginal ‘depredations’” (210). After “[the] Aborigines Act 1897 shifted the locus of policy making from the Colonial Office in London to the state parliament in Perth,” these “powerful local stakeholders” continued their influence over legislation (213).

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6 For Aboriginal knowledge of mobility and place, see also, for example, Rose; Swain; and Muecke.
The first half of Pilkington’s book describes how these processes of change and disruption were experienced and felt by the Nyungar people and the Mardudjara people. In terms of landscape, a great part of the wilderness was viewed by the settlers as “arable land” and gradually enclosed for the farming of imported foreign livestock and produce, such as sheep, cattle, and wheat. Much else was taken for mining industries. The development of agricultural and mining industries in turn led to the building of more settlements, then towns and cities (18). Open land was not spared, either. For example, the world’s longest cattle track, the 1,850-km Canning Stock Route, was built in Western Australia for cattle droving. Among the chain of wells along the Canning Stock Route, many were built on existing Aboriginal waters or “rockholes,” to use Pilkington’s term (21). In addition, to reproduce the sense of “Englishness,” British settlers imported rabbits for recreational hunting. With few natural predators, the rabbit population soon exploded; hence the rabbit-proof fence, a gigantic 1,834-km barbed wire fence, was constructed by 1907. Running “from the Southern Ocean near the port of Esperance in the south to the tropical Eighty Mile Beach north of Port Headland,” the fence separated Western Australia from eastern states in an effort to prevent rabbit invasion (32). All these new structures crisscrossed the traditional land of Aboriginal peoples, blocking their hunting trails and greatly restricting their food and water resources.

This landscape enframing or restructuring was supported by the imposition of symbolic orders such as laws and philosophies. As Pilkington points out, it was the government’s legislated policy that allowed a large area of the country to be claimed by the settlers “without any provision being made for the traditional owners” (18). A. T. Yarwood and M. J. Knowling argue that prevailing European philosophies help to legitimize such a policy. For example, the popular biblical idea, elaborated by Locke during the Enlightenment, that “God had commanded man to till the earth and make it fruitful” (12; qtd. in Bretherton and Mellor 82), justifies the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples of their traditional land because “it brought the wilderness into proper economic use” (Bretherton and Mellor 82).

Disputes and conflicts with Aboriginal peoples were also dealt with by the new set of values and laws. This happened on many occasions of encounter as represented in Pilkington’s book—for example, when the Nyungar hunters led by chief Yellagonga “trespassed” the rabbit-proof fence (14), when white workers dug up the Mardudjara people’s sacred ground (19), or when traditional rockholes

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7 All quotations from Pilkington’s book are taken from the Miramax edition.
became government wells marked by numbers (21). Pilkington vividly describes the first encounter of a Mardudjara group, led by chief Lubin, with white drovers. They discover that the “droving team rested and watered their herd at the same rockhole the group intended to visit. Only now it was no longer just a rockhole, it had become a government well that provided water for the drovers and their stock” (21). Lubin’s family thinks the white men are “sharing” the water resource, and they go on to share one “bullock” from the white men’s herd. Before Golda—the poor young man assigned to the job—has the chance to remove his spear from the beast, he is shot dead by a drover. The drover comments on Golda’s body with contempt: “Just a blackfella. I caught him trying to steal one of the young steers” (21-22). The Aboriginal practice of sharing natural resources is overwritten by the new concept of property ownership. Only that “ownership”—for example, of the land—did not apply to Aboriginal peoples, while “stealing” of Aboriginal land was justified in the name of God.

Similar to the treatment of unwanted rabbits, measures were quickly introduced to keep Aboriginal peoples out of the way of the grand project of colonial expansion while remaining a stable and controllable source of labor. According to Haebich, the Aborigines Department in Western Australia was established in 1897 and headed by “the Chief Protector of Aborigines” (213). Ironically, the function of the Department and the Protector was mainly to “protect” white men’s interests, including “to prevent Aboriginal law-breaking; to maintain patterns of employment” and “to enforce segregation of Aborigines” (224). The Aborigines Act 1905 further specified the Department’s rights of “controls over employment” and “controls over movement.” It allowed the Governor to “declare Aboriginal reserves of up to 2000 acres in any magisterial district” and the Minister to “order the removal of Aborigines to any reserve or district without due process of court or appeal mechanism” (220). Aboriginal peoples were gradually encouraged to move or forcibly removed to settlements or depots set up by the government. These settlements or depots served to segregate Aboriginal peoples from whites and to “ensure a pool of trained workers for local employers by training children in stock and domestic work” (238).

Through the stories of several Mardudjara groups, especially the group led by chief Gunbu (to which Pilkington’s family belongs), Pilkington’s book portrays

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8 In Pilkington’s book, groups led by chief Kundilla and chief Yellagonga represent the Nyungar people, and groups led by chief Lubin and chief Gunbu represent the Mardudjara people.
how a large number of Aboriginal people in Western Australia were forced to move towards government-assigned settlements or depots, such as Jigalong. In Pilkington’s account, the rabbit-proof fence, the grand symbol of colonial power, became a guiding landmark for her family and ancestors’ enforced migration (30-33). Pilkington depicts how these Aboriginal people move along the fence and reach Jigalong, a depot set up as part of maintaining the fence, to find their ways of life permanently changed. In the depot, they became “semi-nomadic,” relying mainly on the white government’s provision. Hunting and gathering the traditional foods became only “a regular weekend event” when they wanted to “supplement [the] regular diet of government rations” (35). Sacred objects were brought in from the desert and buried here. Religious rituals could still be performed but are limited. In addition, men are trained to be stockmen, horsemen, and cattlemen, and women are trained to be “loyal servants, housemaids and cooks,” gradually incorporated into the hierarchy of white men’s new socio-economic system (19).

Quoting George Fletcher Moore’s comment from his *Diary of Ten Years*, Pilkington notes that to the white settlers, the Aboriginal laborers were “very serviceable” and easy to exploit. Compared with the English servants who expect high wages, the “black fellows receive little more than rice—their simple diet” (qtd. in *Rabbit-Proof* 16). “As a further insult by the white invaders,” a charity system was established, which included events like the annual distribution of blankets on Queen Victoria’s birthday. The *Melbourne Post* acknowledged that this is “a sorry return for millions of acres of fertile land of which we [the European settlers] have deprived them,” but went on to describe how the “miserable remnant of a once numerous people” received it “with the most lively gratitude” (qtd. in *Rabbit-Proof* 17). Drawing from the stories of Aboriginal Nyungar and Mardudjara peoples in Western Australia and various historical archives, Pilkington is consciously telling a counter-history of displacement for Aboriginal Australians.

**Forced Relocation of the Mixed-Race Children**

Another form of displacement is imposed upon the mixed-race children. They were discriminated against as “half-caste” in the past and now referred to as “the Stolen Generations.” During the process of European expansion, many mixed-race children were born in Aboriginal communities. Their fathers were white settlers and...
mothers were Aboriginal. The government of the time accused Aboriginal women of being “promiscuous” and therefore the cause of an increasing mixed-race population. However, as Pilkington points out and retrospectively testified in the 1997 Bringing Them Home report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, the truth was that “many white men satisfied their lustful desires with the native women until they were able to return to white society” (Rabbit-Proof 40; Bringing Them Home n. pag.). Many cases of such sexual exploitation happened in native settlements. In Pilkington’s book, chief Gunbu’s mixed-race granddaughter Molly was conceived this way in Jigalong. Through the story of Molly, Daisy, and Gracie, the second half of Pilkington’s book and Noyce’s film adaptation depict how mixed-race children were taken away from their families and put in government camps in order to be raised culturally white. It is another form of a heartbreaking journey, being forced physically away from one’s community, and mentally away from one’s culture and identity.

According to Haebich, in Western Australia the definition of persons coming under the 1905 Aborigines Act already includes “half-caste,” and the Act specifies the “Chief Protector to be legal guardian of Aboriginal children to age of sixteen” (220-21). In addition, Western Australia appears to be the only state which formally granted the police the unprecedented power to “summarily remove ‘half-caste’ children over the age of eight years” (243). That means mixed-race children could be removed “for any reason from anywhere in the state,” with “no process of notification and negotiation about their situation with the parents, no court committal process and no right of appeal, just the trauma of sudden loss as they were taken by police using their powers of summary removal” (226). These practices greatly intensified when A. O. Neville became the Chief Protector of Aborigines from 1915 to 1940. In Haebich’s words, Neville had “a determination to strictly implement the 1905 Act and a deep and abiding interest in the ‘half-caste’ problem” (258). He established “settlements at Carrolup in 1915 and Moore River north of Perth in 1918” and “began to look to radical biological solutions built on recent scientific ‘advances’ to make ‘black go white’” (260, 271).

Haebich remarks that “Essentially Neville’s vision was a program of racial and social engineering designed to erase all Aboriginal characteristics from a desired White Australia” (273). The assumption was that “[r]eared in government institutions to be white, young adults would be directed into state-approved marriages between progressively lighter ‘castes’ and whites so that over several generations Aboriginal physical features would be gradually bred out” (273).
Neville’s policy “of biological absorption was enshrined in the new Aborigines Act Amendment (Native Administration Act) 1936” (278).

As Jeffrey Dafler points out in “Social Darwinism and the Language of Racial Oppression: Australia’s Stolen Generations,” the rationale behind this removal policy was Social Darwinism. The policy incorporated “a social Darwinist understanding of the alleged similarity between non-white races and ‘mere animals’ in evolutionary terms” (143). Many white settlers believed Aboriginal people were “sub-human” and “destined for extinction due to their allegedly inferior genetic make-up” (143-44). The full-blooded Aboriginal, who by then had mostly been isolated in native settlements like Jigalong, could simply be left to “die out.” However, the mixed-race were of greater concern. Therefore, the primary goal of the removal policy was genetically to breed out the mixed-race. In both the book and the film, this policy was explained and executed by the character A. O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines. Neville asks white settlers: “Are we to allow the creation of an unwanted third race? Should the color be encouraged to go back to the black, or should they be advanced to white status?” (Noyce, Rabbit-Proof Fence 00:13:30-00:13:41). The answer was obvious. Neville goes on to explain the solution:

Here is the answer: three generations—half-blood grandmother, quadroon daughter, octoroon grandson. Now, as you can see in the third generation, or third cross, no trace of native origin is apparent. The continuing infiltration of white blood finally stamps out the black color. The Aboriginal has simply been bred out. (Noyce, Rabbit-Proof Fence 00:14:02-00:14:30)

According to Social Darwinism, “the genetic traits of a ‘superior’ race would dominate those of an ‘inferior’ race in mixed race individuals” (Dafler 145). If the mixed-race were segregated from darker skinned communities and permitted to marry and have children only with whites, they would be absorbed and eliminated. According to Tony Barta, in a 1937 Canberra conference people were assured that in 50 years’ time everyone would be able “to forget that there were ever any aborigines in Australia” (208).

This policy of removal—or to use Jamie Russell’s term, “hidden genocide” (n. pag.)—was carried out ruthlessly by law and force, without any consideration of the feelings of Aboriginal communities and the children themselves. When Constable Riggs comes to take Molly, Daisy, and Gracie away, “his voice was full of authority
and purpose.” To Molly’s family, these white men who take their children in broad daylight are worse than “the evil spirits who came into their camps in the night” (Rabbit-Proof 44). When the children are chased down and driven away, the whole community is in mourning: “The cries of agonised mothers and the women and the deep sobs of grandfathers, uncles and cousins filled the air.” They “found strong sharp objects and gashed themselves and inflicted wounds to their heads and bodies as an expression of their sorrow” (44-45).

The girls are taken to a camp in Moore River Settlement near Perth, about 1,500 miles (2,400 km) away from their home in Jigalong (Cain 298). They are taken by ships, trains, and cars such as they had never seen in their native community. On the way, the scenery changes. There are hustling, thriving towns with industrial, commercial buildings everywhere: “It was too mad for the girls. They knew they could easily get lost in this man-made environment with so few trees and only small patches of bush” (Rabbit-Proof 58). Once the girls arrive at the camp, they suffer the second dimension of the removal project: namely, a process of imposed cultural assimilation (before time allowed for the genetic breeding out). Confined in overcrowded dormitories with chains and padlocks on their doors, they are forced to abandon their language, religion, and living habits and to learn “European ways” (61-69). They had to make beds, change eating habits, go to church every day, and constantly be reminded that “You girls can’t talk blackfulla language here, you know. . . You gotta forget it and talk English all the time” (72). Again, the racist thinking behind the statements is that “raising them as ‘white’ would lead them to turn their backs forever on ‘savage’ ways and embrace white society” (Beresford and Omaji, qtd. in Dafler 145). To the white people, although mixed-race people were deemed inferior, they could still be “trained to be domestic servants and labourers” and fit into a marginal position in the white system (Rabbit-Proof 40). As Neville’s notorious line reads: “the native must be helped” (Noyce, Rabbit-Proof Fence 00:15:07-00:15:10). Blinded by the sense of racial superiority, many white settlers supported the government’s policy and thought they were doing the right thing.

In fact, the breeding out and cultural assimilation policy implemented upon the mixed-race in Australia is closely connected to a long tradition of racism based on physical differences that developed in the imperial center in Europe and Britain. As early as the sixteenth century, the Italian physician Giambattista della Porta developed a theory called physiognomy, associating physical features, such as large lips and sharp vision, with thieves. About 200 years later, around the same time Britain colonized Australia, Johann Kasper Lavater published his three-volume
Essays on Physiognomy (translated by Thomas Holcroft) in 1789, “claiming that the ‘higher’ character of the English aristocrat and the ‘lower’ character of the London thief could be discerned simply from a detailed study of their faces” (qtd. in Walsh 2). Other European thinkers continued to strengthen the belief that human character and personality were transparent in physical appearance, such as Hubert Lauvergne’s study of French convicts (David A. Jones, qtd. in Walsh 2). However, it was the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso who drew on Darwinism to construct the first biological theory of crime that associated “race” with physical discrimination. In his early work The White Man and the Man of Color, Lombroso used Darwin’s theory to locate human races within an evolutionary hierarchy. He believed that “in the earliest evolutionary stages, everyone was black, and that blacks today remain closer than other races to monkeys. As evolution progressed, it produced people with yellow skin and later white skin” (Lombroso 408).

Based on this evolutionary ladder, Lombroso developed the concept of “atavism” in his seminal work Criminal Man, first published in 1876. Lombroso theorized that “criminals were atavistic beings—that is, throwbacks to an earlier, more primitive stage of human development.” In other words, they were individuals who “more closely resembled their ape-like ancestors in terms of their traits, abilities and dispositions” (Regoli, Hewitt, and DeLisi 84). Lombroso’s theory of atavism injected racism into criminology and at the same time stigmatized cultures of races other than white Europeans. Lombroso asserted that “there are two general races: the White and the Colored” (Lombroso 17). He equated white men, or what he termed the “European races,” with civilization and people of color with primitivism and savagery (408). Such a theory had a profound influence on racism within Europe. Lombroso himself labeled the Gypsies as a “thoroughly criminal race” (19). Books such as Children and the Politics of Culture and Hosts, Immigrants and Minorities: Historical Responses to Newcomers in British Society, 1870-1914 documented the widespread racism facing non-white people in Britain near the end of Lombroso’s life, just as the removal and breeding-out operation of the mixed-race children in Australia was beginning to be carried out. The character A. O. Neville in Pilkington’s book and its film adaptation voices the European fear of atavism: that the mixed-race will sink back atavistically to the “black” and “primitive” at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder of human race and civilization. They must be “helped” to “advance.” What happened in the colony in Australia is a parallel or a mirror reflection of Europe itself.

The removal policy in Australia continued until 1970. According to the Bringing Them Home report, although it is impossible to know the exact number,
“[n]ationally we can conclude with confidence that between one in three and one in ten Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970.” These children were stolen and suffered a tragic journey similar to that of Molly, Daisy, and Gracie. They were called the Stolen Generations because many generations were affected. Today many Aboriginal people still do not know who their relatives are or have been unable to track them down (Bringing Them Home n. pag.). Many were told that “You’re here in this place because your mother didn’t love you” and “the Aboriginal culture was evil” (Pilkington, “Doris Pilkington Garimara Interview” n. pag.). Official inquiry into the Stolen Generations wasn’t initiated until the 1990s. The inquiry was commenced by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 1995 and completed in 1997 with the publication of the Bringing Them Home report. Significantly, Pilkington’s book, a powerful testimony on behalf of the Stolen Generations, reached the public during the inquiry in 1996, and Noyce’s film adaptation further publicized the issue in 2002. As director Noyce puts it, the forced relocation of the Stolen Generations is “the stolen history of Australia as a whole” (qtd. in Birch 126). Pilkington’s book and the film served as powerful media to “inspire [public] outrage, to expose [the] inhumanity” of this history of displacement (Reid n. pag.).

**Escape and the Journey of Reconnection**

The moving power of Pilkington’s book and Noyce’s film lies even more in their depiction of the children’s escape. Relying on traditional Aboriginal knowledge of the land and of nature, some children of the Stolen Generations, including Molly and Daisy, do successfully escape from the camp and find their way home. The escape signals a journey of reconnection—Aboriginal peoples’ will and ability to reconnect to their native communities and cultures despite all that has been forced upon them.

The journey of escape registers the tremendous courage and resilience of Aboriginal peoples. Molly and her young sisters always knew that if they escaped, they would likely be hunted down and punished severely. They had witnessed other girls who failed the escape attempt being whipped, having their heads shaved, or made to wear sacks and endure other more serious punishments. Nevertheless, missing their mothers and “longing for the dry, rugged, red landscape” of their homeland (Rabbit-Proof 68), the girls decide to embark on an incredibly dangerous and long journey home. They needed to find their way, barefooted, through more
than 2,000 km of wilderness in Western Australia in order to reach Jigalong in the north. The landscape is filled with thick undergrowth, dangerous rivers, and vast desert areas, which even adults travelling on horseback and equipped with compasses would find difficult and disorienting. But Molly, then only 14, is confident. She knows the strategy and she has the skills. She decides the simplest strategy is to follow the rabbit-proof fence. From her people, Molly had learned that the fence was an important landmark for Aboriginal peoples who migrated from the desert to Jigalong (109). She was told that “the fence stretched from coast to coast, south to north across the country” (78). Molly has no fear of the wild, either. The traditional knowledge she acquired from tribal elders assured her that nature “always provided shelter, food and substance,” and she “had learned and developed bushcraft skills and survival techniques from an expert, her step-father, a former nomad from the desert” (82).

Pilkington records how traditional Aboriginal knowledge is crucial for the children’s escape journey. For example, instead of a compass, Molly is able to determine the right direction on a dismal, gray day by catching “a glimpse of the sun when it appeared from behind the rain clouds” (82). The children follow the paths made by the cattle to find water, and rely on traditional hunting skills to catch rabbits and other small bush “tucker” (89). They wait for rainy days to cross the rivers because the rain would cover their tracks (92), and make good use of natural terrain to make shelters and to hide from their pursuers (86). Touchingly, the story also shows help offered to the children on the way, from both the white and Aboriginal people. For example, two Mardu hunters offer the children a kangaroo tail and warn them of the black tracker (90-91), and a white lady gives them food and clothes (99).

However, the journey is still too long and hard. They lose Gracie to the pursuers and are starving and exhausted at the end, almost failing in their trek. At this moment, they see an eagle flying in the sky and hear the distant chanting and wailing of their mothers and other tribal women. The eagle, the Aboriginal “spirit bird,” reminds the girls of their happy memories while they still lived with their parents. The chanting and wailing is a traditional ritual of reunion. When the families knew the girls were approaching home, they gathered together awaiting their arrival: “The wailing began softly at first then grew louder as more people joined the group” (123). The eagle and the chanting, which seem to represent the girls’ unbreakable bond with natural forces and kinship, guide them through the last stretch of the journey. As Pilkington puts it, this was a “historical trek.” The girls had conquered “one of the longest walks in the history of the Australian outback”
In addition, for fear of being caught, they did it in record time—within just nine weeks (130). And it is significant that the rabbit-proof fence, signifying collective displacement of Aboriginal peoples, should become a symbol of defiance and resistance in the children’s journey of escape.

Indeed, the double meaning of the fence is prominent in both Pilkington’s book and Noyce’s film adaptation. The book and the film defy the European doctrine of terra nullius and, as Deborah Cain argues, use the rabbit-proof fence as a “prioritised trope” of the “encounter between two different cultures” (298-300). The first meaning of the fence is of course the imposition of European colonial order and its devastating impacts on the Aboriginal population. In this first sense, the rabbit-proof fence connotes disruption and segregation for Aboriginal peoples. As depicted in the first part of Pilkington’s book, the fence cuts through the traditional lands of Aboriginal peoples, blocking their hunting trails and preventing their access to water resources. Such disruption of traditional ways of life is the main reason that forces Aboriginal peoples to comply with the government’s policy of containment and to migrate to assigned settlements such as Jigalong. The rabbit-proof fence also leads to and cuts through the Jigalong settlement (Cain 298). The fence’s original function was to keep rabbits on the east and cultivated farmlands on the west. However, as one of the girls, Gracie, describes to a white maintenance worker, the western side of the fence is “women’s country”—the traditional Aboriginal bush lands and hunting grounds (Noyce, Rabbit-Proof Fence 00:07:53-00:07:59). Although the women and the children depicted in the book and the film still go into the bush on the western side of the fence, they did so only occasionally to supplement their rations in the settlement. The fence, designed to keep rabbits from pastoral lands, now marks a boundary between Aboriginal peoples in Jigalong and their traditional lands and lifestyle. The fence, as Julia Emberley puts it, embodies the European logic of “colonial containment” and “boundary maintenance” (164-65) that applies to both unwanted pests and unwanted racial others.

However, the rabbit-proof fence assumes a more important second meaning: Aboriginal peoples’ ability to adopt, transcend, reconnect, and revive. In fact, as a tool and a symbol of “colonial containment” and “boundary maintenance,” the rabbit-proof fence was a failure. As Danielle Olsen points out, in reality, the fence never stopped rabbits going westwards. Likewise, in the story, Aboriginal peoples showed, all through the process of oppression, an incredibly resilient ability to adopt and to transcend. From early on, Aboriginal peoples adopted the fence, although a man-made structure, as a geographic marker in their enforced migration,
Similar to the way they depended upon other natural geographic features to move about on their traditional journey. From the desert, Aboriginal peoples used the rabbit-proof fence as a guide to navigate their migration to Jigalong. The experience became part of the family story, passed down from mothers to the young generations in the settlement. In Pilkington’s account, Molly, Daisy, and Gracie grow up around the fence, learn the geographical significance of the fence, learn how far it stretches and where it leads to, receive rations near the fence, and listen to the story of how their tribal elders had migrated along the fence to Jigalong. Aboriginal peoples adopted the fence as part of their tribal knowledge and history, and, in Pilkington’s words, transformed it into “a symbol of love, home and security” for the three mixed-race children (109).

By showing Aboriginal peoples’ ability to adopt and to transcend, Pilkington prepares the reader for the climatic story of the children’s journey of escape and reconnection. The girls again use the fence as a geographical guide to navigate their journey, just like their tribal elders did in their enforced migration. Only this time the purpose is to escape from and to reverse their own enforced journey. More significantly, in their case, the fence is no longer just a geographical guide. The film critic Garry Gillard puts it beautifully: “The fence is not merely a line on a map for the girls: it is the heartstring that draws them to their mother” (121). In Pilkington’s narrative, the girls found the fence with “an excited shriek,” yelling, laughing, and waving (109). Determined to reach Jigalong through the fence, Molly “greeted the fence like a long-lost friend, touching and gripping the cold wire” (110). As Cain observes, this description in the book is doubled and strengthened by the scenes in the film “where Molly and then her mother, from separate locations, both touch the fence” (300). Such an unbreakable bond between mother and child sustains Aboriginal peoples’ strength for resistance. As Emberley points out, the implementation of the removal policy was intended to rupture the Aboriginal mother/child relations and could be seen as a severe blow to the then already crumbling Aboriginal kinship and society. The mixed-race children were to be “cut off” from their mothers and “contained” in special missionary camps. However, Emberley argues, through the journey of escape, Pilkington recounts “the story of homecoming that will defy the colonial logic of incarceration and turn its tools of boundary maintenance into a pathway home” (164).

Brewster further observes that the escape journey carries a historical significance beyond the personal. She points out, “Pilkington explicitly endows this story of her mother and aunts with the status of history” (n. pag.). Indeed, Pilkington describes the escaping journey as “a historical event” (xi) and “one of
the longest walks in the history of the Australian outback” (129). Brewster argues that “[t]hese statements definitely rewrite a national history which has to date given European ‘explorers’ the monopoly on long heroic treks” (n. pag.). The story of homecoming has indeed redefined the rabbit-proof fence: transforming it into a symbol of Aboriginal peoples’ faith and strength to transcend colonial violence and to reconnect to and perhaps reinvent their cultures and home.

**Conclusion**

Being both the symbol of colonial oppression and Aboriginal resistance, the rabbit-proof fence marks the fact that both processes are incomplete. The state project of removal cannot suppress the will of people like Molly to reconnect to their native community and culture. Yet, the escape and resistance cannot reverse the colonial process. The epilogue of the story tells us that, although free from the camp, the girls still end up being domestic help to white people, since the Aboriginal social structure had changed. Molly and her two daughters, Doris (Pilkington) and Annabelle, are transported to Moore River Native Settlement once again, nine years after the great escape. Molly absconds again but has to leave Doris behind at the settlement (*Rabbit-Proof* 131-33). Raised in the settlement, Doris Pilkington nevertheless grows up to be the author whose powerful storytelling discloses the suffering of Aboriginal peoples, playing an important part in the campaign for state apology and reconciliation. Pilkington became a member of Australia’s State and Federal Sorry Day Committee in 2002 and won the Red Ochre Award in 2008 for her contribution to Aboriginal movements in Australia (“Pot of Gold” n. pag.). As a result of the Aboriginal movements, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offered a formal state apology to Aboriginal peoples, especially the Stolen Generations, in 2008 (Rudd).

Although Pilkington presents her work in English instead of her native language, and in the form of life writing instead of the traditional oral history, these adopted and reinvented forms enable her to deliver Aboriginal stories to the Australian public and to contribute greatly to Aboriginal causes. Similar projects in English have subsequently been established: “In a growing number of Aboriginal communities the people themselves are setting up their own literature centres where they are tape-recording, transcribing and translating their stories” (Isaacs 9). To the Australian Aboriginal peoples, transcribed contemporary storytelling can be seen as a collective effort of homecoming to the mother culture, given in adopted and reinvented forms. To other Australian people, contemporary Aboriginal storytelling
in English invites/enables collective listening and rereading of the nation’s complex colonial past, and provides “a basis for implementing projects for social justice and change” (Emberley 169). Although Pilkington’s book was originally named *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the author, the story, and the transcribed contemporary Aboriginal storytelling that the book exemplifies convey courage and the strength to break through and reconnect in many ways.

Pilkington’s work and the broader movement of transcribing history also suggest that Aboriginal cultures in Australia are reviving and evolving at the same time. A fuller understanding of the cultures and identities of Aboriginal peoples in Australia would require more emphasis on the experiences of displacement, and on the cultural mixing resulting from these experiences. Pilkington’s *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is an important milestone of such endeavors, and Noyce’s popular film adaptation represents a contribution from outside the Aboriginal communities. However, Pilkington’s book raises a more complex set of issues about enforced migration, as well as the formulation and reformulation of “home” and culture, than Noyce’s film. Jigalong is already an adopted second home for the Aboriginal peoples. However, Noyce’s film could be considered an adventure-quest mainly about the children’s journey home to Jigalong, thus in danger of erasing the histories of displacement and enforced migration that created Jigalong in the first place. The value of Noyce’s film lies in its successful public reception, which created great enthusiasm and a broader public forum for discussion. The film and the book are complementary and best viewed together in order to understand the complex issues of Aboriginal displacement and resistance within the settler colonial nation state of Australia.

Following works by Pilkington and Noyce among others, a Black Wave of film and television has emerged to explore these issues both in history and in the contemporary context. For example, the documentary series *First Australians* (2008) looks back on a variety of forms of dispossession visited upon Aboriginal Australians in different places and times during the colonial period and after the formation of the Australian nation state. The reality TV series *First Contact* (2014) reveals the lively conversations and collaborations going on in urban and regional Australia around the ongoing impact of dispossession and enforced migrations on contemporary Aboriginal communities. As Chesterman and Galligan argue, there have been two great themes to the Aboriginal movement: indigenous rights and citizenship rights (193). Although the High Court of Australia overturned the doctrine of *terra nullius* in 1992 (Cain 300), little progress has been made since Prime Minister Julia Gillard first called for a referendum to recognize Aboriginal
peoples as the “first peoples” in the constitution of the Australian nation in 2010 (Mercer n. pag.). The fight is indeed ongoing. Works that tackle the latent colonial ideology of terra nullius and explore the complex coercive and non-coercive affiliations between Aboriginal and settler Australians become ever more important in gathering momentum for the cause.

Works Cited


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