



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

The Stolen Generations

*Racial Discrimination and the Reclamation of Identity in Doris
Pilkington Garimara's Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*

B.A. Essay

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May 2012

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Summary

This essay examines the acts of racial discrimination portrayed in the book *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington Garimara. It takes a close look at the historical background materials Garimara used in her narration of the Stolen Generations, and her role as an advocate for healing and reconciliation amongst her people. Experimental assimilation procedures, with systematic separation of Indigenous Australian children from their families, by the postcolonial government in Western Australia, are the main political issues she addresses in her book, as she strives to regain her own cultural identity. Garimara, who is a victim of the child removal policies herself, makes an emotional decision to publish a testimonial narrative covering an oral recital from her mother and aunts, and thus postponing her own revealing biography. Her story about three young girls of mixed-racial descent, forcefully removed from their mothers, incarcerated in governmental settlements, and finally their heroic escape, became symbolic for the racial suppression endured by thousands of Aboriginal children that eventually became known as the Stolen Generations. The girls' rebellion against the system, walking 1600 kilometres along the Rabbit-Proof Fence towards their freedom, gave hope and encouragement to many misplaced children to seek their stolen identities. The fence that symbolises freedom and reconnection in the book runs from coast to coast in Western Australia, originally built as a rabbit plague prevention. Doris Pilkington Garimara was twenty-five years old when she was reunited with her mother and heard her story. In this paper the bond between mother and child and the repercussion from early separation is analysed as two opposing elements are presented: the trauma caused by abduction and alienation from native families and culture, and then the need for acknowledgement and reconciliation as the healing journey towards reconnection begins. The topic is explored within a historical context in an effort to show how the book influenced public recognition and brought about reconciliation.

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1. Introduction

Doris Pilkington Garimara is one of the many Indigenous Australians of mixed descent who fell victim to the strategic relocation of children, practiced by the Australian government since colonisation. She and others like her were systematically separated from their families and eventually became known as “the Stolen Generations.” After acquiring a much greater knowledge of her own past and the experience to which her people had been subjected, Garimara summoned up the courage to step forward and speak. With the publication of her book, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* in 1996, the stealth with which the planned “assimilation” of the indigenous people had been executed was finally exposed. This paper looks closer at some controversial elements Garimara presents in her book: the bond between mother and child and the repercussion from early separation; the trauma caused by abduction and alienation from native families and culture; and the growing need for acknowledgement and reconciliation as the healing journey towards reconnection begins. In the book Garimara documents an oral tale originated from her mother and aunts. The main topic of the book is their childhood memories of abduction and incarceration back in 1931, and their subsequent and heroic flight to freedom. With this, Garimara seems to postpone writing her own abduction story in order to narrate her mother’s. The author’s personal approach appears to bring the story to life, and her candid interpretation of the oral tale raises public awareness while addressing a highly political issue. On the other hand, her portrayal of “stolen” children, postcolonial suppression, and racial discrimination seem to straddle a line between fiction and non-fiction.

The objective of this essay is to demonstrate how Garimara’s book cleared the way for open discussion on Indigenous affairs that led to a national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal children from their families. It will examine the personal and historical elements that became the basis for Garimara’s writing, especially in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. The terms Aboriginal and Indigenous will be capitalized and used conjointly (as performed by the Australian government). The former represents the language used in the book as well as by Aboriginal Australians today, and the latter depicts modern-day views (Flinders Univ. 1).

The thesis is divided into four sections. The first section describes the onset and meaning of the term: “Stolen Generations.” With the objective of examining the socio-cultural consequences of the racial discrimination, this section looks at the cultural and social history of Aboriginal people from Western Australia, the persistent attack on their ethnic identity and the relevance to Garimara’s story. The next section covers the author’s symbolic journey, following the Fence towards her own Aboriginal identity. Furthermore, it illustrates how finding her mother led to the documentation of a tribal oration, and the complexities Garimara faced as a writer, transforming the oral tale into a traditional literary genre. This section also examines the oral traditions of her native family, and its influence on the writing of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. The third section looks at how the recognition of the book, as one of the first testimonials of the Stolen Generations, provoked public scepticism. The third section concludes with a reflection on the emotional writing of her own past, in *Under the Wintamarra Tree*. The fourth and final section focuses on the reconciliation between Aboriginal people and other Australians by illustrating how influential Garimara’s book became, in the campaign for public acknowledgement and resolution. Finally it compares the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002) with *Australia* (2008) to show two very different perspectives on the Stolen Generations.

In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Garimara describes her ancestral history to the reader in a social context as she simultaneously tries to reconnect with her ‘stolen’ identity. From the first lines onwards it becomes clear that the reader is accompanying the author on a symbolic journey, into unknown territories along the fence that leads to reconnection. Equipped with perseverance and profound hope her mission is no less than to break centuries of silence. With the publication of the book a generation of dislocated indigenous children received a voice. Supporting her case, Garimara uses public documents as her hard evidence as she describes acts of racial discrimination and suppression by the government in Western Australia after the colonisation, showing how ignorance and prejudice were rife in official circles. In 1997, the release of the research report, “Bringing Them Home” by the *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC)*, brought the skeleton out of the closet. This report confirms that child-abductions were planned and executed by the Chief Protector of Aborigines under the auspices of the Aborigines Act of Western Australia. *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*

gained international recognition in 2002, when it was adapted to the screen by Australian film producer, Phillip Noyce. Worldwide appreciation for the book, and subsequently the film adaptation, prompted a national acknowledgment of past events. Furthermore, it opened up gateways for reconciliations, giving other displaced Indigenous people opportunities to search for their lost identities.

Sheltered by her success, Garimara gained the courage to mediate her own story. Armed with material gathered from her research, for *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, she symbolically follows the fence from her captivity at Moore River up to her family at Jigalong. In her article “Only Understanding Will Bring Down the Fence Dividing a Nation” in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2002, Garimara describes her real journey back to her native environment, and its relevance to her writing:

Then I took the journey back to my land at Jigalong in Western Australia, where I was taken from my family at the age of four, to the Moore River Settlement, 1600 kilometres south. I took my children to walk on my hot, dusty land. It was then that I was reunited with my mother and learnt her story. (15)

In 2002, *Under the Wintamarra Tree* was published. As an independent sequel to her former work, this book serves as a journey of healing for the author, thus concluding her search for her biological and cultural identity – her stolen identity.

Thus it could be argued that in her quest to deliver the informative message of the misplaced children, and by employing the creative non-fictional genre to mediate her mother’s memoir, Garimara found herself torn between two conflicting aspects – the heroic endeavour, and her personal identity revelations

2. The Background

Indigenous children have been “forcibly separated from their families and communities since the very first days of the European occupation of Australia” (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC], part 2, ch.2). Most of them were children of mixed-descent, but all were victims of official policies, practiced until the 1970s – these children are the Stolen Generations. Sexual relations between the white newcomers and black natives were seen as distasteful and problematic as they often resulted in increased mixing of blood. For such interactions the “ugly term, miscegenation was deployed” (Manne 3). Children of mixed-descent, referred to as half-caste, were seen as a developing problem within ‘white’ society.

It is not possible to state “with any precision how many children were forcibly removed, even if that enquiry is confined to those removed officially” (HREOC, ch. 2). The number 100.000 has been given as a raw estimate, although the removals are said to have began long before 1910. Although it can be concluded “with confidence that between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children” of mixed-descent were abducted from their families and sent to missionaries all over Australia, from 1910 until 1970, when governmental laws regarding Indigenous affairs were changed (ch. 2). To fully grasp the notion of stealing children, and the reasons given for these monstrosities, it is necessary to explore the past. *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is an epic tale from the past.

At the beginning of the book, Garimara’s emotional conflict seems to begin as she divides her book into three sections: starting with a documentary type of text filled with informative details, she then proceeds with the non-fictional creative narration of her mother’s escape odyssey, concluding with the chapter “were are they now.” Hence the political message is up front – right at the beginning. The first chapters portray postcolonial views on past events. Detailed descriptions of interactions between the Nyungar people of Western Australia, and the settlers they thought to be mythical creatures. Soon reality struck. With the establishment of the first colony, Swan River Settlement in 1829, it became clear that these pale sea-faring newcomers were not spirits of myth. Claiming ownership of large portions of the Pilbara region, which had fostered its natives for thousands of years, the pastoralists drove the bush people from their native surroundings (HREOC, ch. 2). Depriving them of access to their “sitting

down places” and provisions, the white man de-structuralised the tribal form of survival; as a result the colonial cattle stations gained cheap work force (Garimara 35). Adapting the creative non-fictional genre for her book, Garimara manages to ‘inform’ the reader whilst addressing a profoundly political issue. The use of historical facts and figures concerning the colonisation allows her to promote wider social understanding, as well as draw attention to the suppression and sufferings of her kinsmen - Indigenous Australians. In an interview with Kelrick Martin, in the online newspaper *Headspace* in 1999, she said that she hoped that her writing would “open the eyes of all Australians to the fact that this history is a part of theirs as well” (Martin). Furthermore, the evidence based narration gives more credibility to biographical features as well as geographical explanations. These historical references, concerning Aboriginal people, became the basis for the story’s main issue of the stolen children.

2.1. White Policies Concerning Race/Ethnic Mixing

In 1905, with the passing of the *Aborigines Act*, Indigenous people of Western Australia lost their freedom and official segregation began. With this Eurocentric law the Chief Protector of Aborigines was the acclaimed protector of all ‘first native’ Australians, thus distinguishing the colonial hierarchy from the Indigenous ‘others’. His powers were extended even further with the *Native Administration Act* in 1936, as this law “defined ‘natives’ to include nearly all people of full and part descent regardless of their lifestyle and expanded restrictions on movement and lifestyle” (HREOC, part 2 ch. 7). He had the power to remove any half-caste child (up to the age of 16, and later up to 21) from its family, and from anywhere within the state. In the years between 1869 and 1935 all territories and states within Australia had enact legislations of Indigenous child removals (ch. 3-7). These mixed-descent children, like Garimara and her mother, were relocated in missionary run settlements to learn the ways of the ‘white man’ - in preparation for a future as manual labourers. Debased, distraught, and degraded, they were deprived of their biological mothering and youth. Many were sent from these labour camps, to work as domestic servants or stockmen at cattle stations. Reaching adulthood, the abducted children began an emotional search for their biological families. For some, the painful experience went on for decades; for others it is still an ongoing search. Unlike Garimara, many have never reunited with their relatives. However, one common factor seems to remain - the sad fact that many of these people

have been emotionally scarred for life by the traumas inflicted on them by their ordeal. In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the account of segregation and abduction of Aboriginal children is juxtaposed against Garimara's main storyline - the heroic escape of her mother and aunts, from one of the above-mentioned missionaries. The disoriented abductees are the victims of segregation, and later, strategies to assimilate the black natives with the white Australians.

2.2. Solutions – assimilation, abduction, oppression

The assimilation process in Western Australia, and the colonial policies it followed was forcefully driven by Mr. A.O. Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines, and producer of these eugenic assimilation practices. According to Webster's Dictionary, the word "eugenics" means: "the science that deals with the improvement of races and breeds, especially the human race, through the control of hereditary factors." Neville's claim was that the settlements would prepare the Indigenous children for "biographical absorption" with the "non-Indigenous society" (ch. 7). As pointed out by Haebich in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Neville is said to have "shaped official policy towards Aborigines" from 1915 until he retired in 1940 (Haebich). In her book, though being a member of the Stolen Generation herself, Garimara successfully manages to avoid using negative connotations in her interpretations of characters such as Neville. Instead she opts to focus on documented facts. Ironically many of the documents were retrieved from the Colonial Secretary's Department that Neville had been largely responsible in organising and conserving (Haebich). In an interview for the *Bringing Them Home Oral History Project*, Garimara states that, in the years she spent at Moore River Settlement, she was unaware of the fact that she was a victim of Neville's eugenic plans (Pilkington, int. 3).

Though the settlements, like Moore River, were officially intended to serve by proxy as Neville's educational institutions in order to ease the assimilation process, they were more like prisons. Thus the official reason given was far from the truth, as stated by Haebich in the entry on Neville's work in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*:

The ostensible purpose was to bring about permanent segregation of Aborigines of full descent, who were believed to be near extinction; and temporary segregation and training of those of part descent who would

re-enter society as domestics and far-workers, eventually blending with the white population through intermarriage. (Haebich)

Garimara explains her ignorance of the circumstances caused by the assimilation procedures, in the interview with Kelrick Martin in the online newspaper *Headspace* in 1999, by saying: “it wasn’t until I did research, for *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence*, that I read how government policies were implemented, how children were removed under ministerial warrants and their mothers had no say in the matter” (Martin). At a conference on Aboriginal welfare, held by the Commonwealth of Australia in Canberra in 1937, Neville introduced a plan to “breed out the black” (17). His first argument was that the “full-blooded aborigines” would die out; second on his agenda was the removal of the “half-caste children” from their families; and finally, intermarriage should be “encouraged” (17). By this, the intentions of the government in Western Australia could be seen as strategic attempts to eradicate the culture of the Indigenous Australians with the assimilation process. Neville proclaimed that if nothing was done their numbers would “increase until they menace our security” (17). This ideology and its execution compares to the description of Genocide by the United Nations Genocide Convention (1948) Article II (a-d), and especially (e) which states: “Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” (UN). The story Garimara mediates in her book, as well as her own story, is emotionally and factually entwined with these sad events. The Garimara family, as a proud skin-group within the Mardu tribe, of the Nyungar nation, had to succumb to the degrading treatment of the colonial forces – forcefully conducted by the empowerment of Mr. A.O. Neville. In the early twentieth century, Europe was coloured by ethnical cleansing with the ideology and science of eugenics. The Chief Protectors of Aborigines in Australia: Cook, Bleakley, and Neville seemed infatuated by this new science. They created a hierarchy of Aboriginality by categorising (using adapted definitions) the Indigenous people into: half-caste (offspring of a full-blooded native and a white person), quadroons (one-quarter native and three-quarters white), and octoroons (one-eighth Aboriginal decendency). After that the children were considered full-blood natives (Commonwealth of Australia 21). The abducted children are clear examples of those victimised by these experimental procedures. To alienate these stolen children even further from their cultural identities, the use of their native languages was forbidden at the settlements as they were not to associate themselves with the

Aboriginal culture. Garimara, as a former inmate at Moore River Settlement, includes detailed descriptions of these aspects, giving the reader some insight into the humiliating conditions that her protagonists have to endure in their incarceration. In an interview with John Bannister, for the *Bringing Them Home Oral History Project*, she states that at Moore River bars covered the windows of the dormitories, and a fence separated the mothers from their young children as the “half-caste kids” were told their families were dead - “They were taking identities away” (Pilkington, int. 2). With his eugenic crossbreeding plans, Neville followed the same ideology as Adolf Hitler. Hitler saw the Jews as a threat to the Aryan race and they were thus an undesirable presence, despite the fact that they were German by nationality. Garimara and her protagonists from *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, as the abducted children, were equally seen as outsiders.

3. How the Silence Was Broken

“I know it’s a long way to go but it’s easy. We’ll find the rabbit-proof fence and follow that all the way home” was Molly’s replay when her aunt asked her how they were going to escape from their incarceration at Moore River Native Settlement (Garimara 77-78). Molly Craig is Garimara’s mother. She was, at the age of fourteen, along with her aunts Daisy Kadibil (8) and Gracie Fields (11), victimized by the child removal policies of Western Australia in the 1930s. Their flight for freedom was a rebellion against the ‘system’, and later their story became a unifying factor for Aboriginal people in Australia, in the battle against racial suppression and abuse. Writing the story was Garimara’s way of presenting this highly political issue to the public while honouring her ancestral history. *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* the tale of three Indigenous girls who were, in July 1931, forcibly removed from their families, at Jigalong in the East Pilbara region of Western Australia, and sent to Moore River Settlement. It tells of their miraculous escape, walking for nine weeks, 1600 kilometres, alongside a rabbit-proof fence that ran from the north coast to the south coast of the state. The true historical relevance of these events became evident with the publication of the book. Extensive research of governmental documents led the author to disturbing information about the treatment of her kinsmen; files revealing suppression and racial discrimination. As the child removal policies were well documented, exploring them empowered Garimara to excavate the gap in her own childhood memories. This was undeniably a turning point. With the newly gained knowledge about Moore River and other camps, she felt pressured to spread the news, even though she did not wish to accentuate the political elements. Faced with conflicting emotions, she chose to write her mother’s memoirs and postpone her own. Feelings of anger and rejection had to be put aside for the task in hand. In *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2002, she described her inward peregrination by saying:

For a long time, though, I was angry, particularly at the missionaries who brought me up to believe Aboriginal people were dirty and evil. For many years that alienated me from my people. [...] My reunion with my mother, my ability to return to my country, was pivotal to my healing – as it is for others separated from their families. (Pilkington 15)

Hence her trek towards personal identification began with her biographical creation; as she theoretically ‘walked’ with her mother and aunts alongside the fence.

The rabbit-proof fence was (as the name indicates) originally constructed as a preventive measure against the alarming increase in the wild rabbit population that was proving to have endemic proportions. The purpose was to keep the rabbits, which were already a menace in the state of Victoria (South Australia), from flocking over to Western Australia. According to the Library of Western Australian History, the fence ran from the South coast (of WA) to the North West coast (of WA), or 1834 kilometres (“The Rabbit Proof Fence”). In the interview in Headspace, Garimara symbolises the fence as a racial barrier when saying:

Today a fence still divides this country, but it is not one to keep the rabbits out of farmland. It has been built in an effort to divert the nation away from issues of human rights. But the issue of the stolen generations is not going to go away when many people are still hurting from the policies that produced them. We all share the history. We must come up with solutions together. (Martin)

In contrast to the real fence, the fence in the book symbolises hope. Molly Craig knew that following the fence would lead them back home – to mother.

3.1. Narrative Methods

At dawn, on Christmas Eve 1962, Doris Pilkington Garimara was reunited with her mother, as well as with her Aboriginal identity. At the age of twenty-five she travelled with her four young children she travelled to unknown territories. She had high expectations for the reunion, as she had been one of the fortunate children at Moore River because she knew her mother’s name. Relations of hers from the Pilbara region, who arrived at the settlement, had insisted that she should remember that “her mother was Molly Craig from Balfour Downs Station near Meekatharra” (Pilkington, int.1). Though her native memory had dimmed, she remembered her mother’s name.

Meeting her mother turned out to be bitter sweet. Molly Craig had mourned her daughter for two decades, and seemed emotionally distant when they finally met her. Being known as Doris Garimara at Moore River was the only string that tied her to her family. Unaccustomed to maternal warmth, as “touching and hugging were taboo at the mission”, she hardly knew how to express her feelings once in the presence of this

unfamiliar woman (int. 6). She had been bereft of her mother's presence all these years without fully understanding why, and in ignorance she had accused her mother of giving her away by sending her to Moore River. The reunion felt like a full-circle moment. Garimara had been abducted in 1941; her youth and adolescence had been wasted when institutionalised; now she was back again – with mother. Hence the journey towards Aboriginal recognition concluded, and life as a native Garimara began - again.

Getting to know her father was a rewarding experience. Toby Kelly was a proud full-descent Aboriginal who welcomed his long lost daughter with open arms. He introduced her to the complex traditions of her 'skin-group'. According to the Australian Institute of Judicial Administration, the methods of social classification are often highly complex within Aboriginal culture. At birth "each member of a traditional Aboriginal language group is classified into a social group dictated by its law" then each child receives a "skin-name" which "establishes that child's place within the language group" (ch. 2: 8). Garimara is a skin name of a family within the Mardu language group of the Nyungar nation of Western Australia.

Gaining cognitive knowledge in Mardudjara (her native language) became the essence of her 'native self', being able to follow the rituals, dances and oral narrations of her family, with a sense of belonging. In Homi Bhabha's terminology, of the sense of not belonging is classified as "unhomeliness", and

Although the "unhomely" is a paradigmatic post-colonial experience, it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of historical conditions and social contradictions. (13)

Disavowing "unhomeliness", Garimara, in communion with her family, gradually became acquainted with events that took place in her youth; making peace with the past. She was amazed to learn the story of Molly, Daisy and Gracie and their miraculous escape from the settlement. She was even more surprised to learn that her mother had been at Moore River as she had no recollection of her mother being there. Certain cultural matters were never spoken of, and her mother wanted to forget. After realising the complexities of her mother's life, and how triumphant the decampment, back in 1931, had been, Garimara opted for a public portrayal of the recountal by documenting the story.

When asked about the main topic of her book *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Garimara emphasized that she set out to write an adventure story, but the biographical genre offered greater freedom of expression (Pilkington, int. 1). Although the main theme is the three girls and their miraculous escape from Moore River, Garimara's use of historical facts intensifies the political undertones. Speaking to John Bannister, for the *Bringing Them Home Oral History Project*, the author alludes her mother's resistance, comparing the epic abscond to "escaping a concentration camp." She points out that by the planning and execution of that plan, Molly Craig shows three adaptive qualities of Aboriginality: bush craft (survival technique to find 'bush tucker'), courage and initiative - "beating the system" (Pilkington, int. 1).

In her writing, Garimara portrays similar courage by immersing herself in the family history from which she was estranged and thus bridging the gap of her native memory. In an effort to separate herself emotionally from the narrative, she theoretically follows the three girls from a distance; like a protective eagle flying high above them with clear vision and fair prospective. Faced with two opposing angles, Garimara seems to have chosen the right route. She stays true to her mother's oration, excluding her own venture. Thirty-four years passed from the emotional reunion with her family, to the publishing of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Time used for adjustment, recognition, and spiritual return to Aboriginality.

3.2. The Link to Another Past

It was in her 'new' cultural surroundings that Garimara witnessed an oral recitation that motivated her later writings. Recording her mother's reminiscence forced Doris Pilkington Garimara to come to terms with her own past, and with her chosen form of narration she strove to claim identity and acknowledgement as an Indigenous author. Filled with anticipation she heard her mother's story for the first time. One winter's day up at Jigalong, the women of the Garimara family assembled, as two old women commenced their tribal oration. First they spoke of the dramatic day of their abduction, the ride from Jigalong to Port Hedland, and the voyage down to Freemantle (Perth). Second part of the story included their arrival at Moore River Settlement, and finally a detailed account of the epic escape. Amazed by the descriptive manner those tales were told. She wrote them down, and with permission she decided to construct a literary frame around them.

The term “literature” was not applied to Indigenous works until 1927, when David Unaipon became the first Aboriginal author to have a book published (*Australian Dictionary of Biography*). Chapter two of the *Aboriginal Benchbook for Western Australia Courts*, published by the Australian Institute of Judicial Administration, states that:

Aboriginal literature includes stories, poetry, songs and chants. These may relate to everything connected with the traditional life: the Dreaming stories, magic, totems, hunting, fighting, epics or mourning. Sacred Dreaming stories are especially prized and the privilege of telling them may be strictly controlled. (17)

Hand drums, clapping sticks and didgeridoos are often used in the “corroboree” (a singing and dancing ceremony) honouring the Dreaming. The Dreaming is the Aboriginal past, present and future. It began “at the dawn of time, remains bound up in the present, and will endure forever” (17). In her paper on the Aboriginal Dreamtime narrative, Kathleen Crocker points out that Aboriginal authors use the Dreamtime “beliefs, values and styles to support and sustain” their narratives, like the “colonizer’s epistemology was and is inexorably enmeshed in Christianity” (106). Oral traditions practiced by the Indigenous peoples of Australia are like the Icelandic Sagas - a precious heritage. The Sagas had been in oral citation for centuries before they were documented. The oral history tradition, as a visual- and performing art form, supposedly succeeds (traditional) literature in many ways. Margaret Clunies Ross, in her article on Australian Aboriginal oral traditions, argues that: “nineteenth-century views of the superiority of the white to the black races undoubtedly led to assumptions of the inferiority of Aboriginal culture” which prevented “all but a few early observers from even conceiving there was anything of interest in Aboriginal oral tradition” (232). Ross believes that the Indigenous people traditionally regard song and dance as “the high forms of culture. At the same time she raises the question of the status between “spoken and sung genres” within the story-telling tradition (239). The traditional oration plays the part of inter-active medium (multi-media), both for educational purposes as well as for amusement. Writings, such as by Garimara and other Indigenous authors have been categorised in the past as being: less colloquial than European literature, or minority writings; without the recognition of the fact that they are most often manuscripts of oral

histories. In the same article, Ross states that: “Most Aboriginal prose texts can be seen as either monologue or dialogue or mixture of these two forms, and they often advance narrative by means of conversational exchanges between the *dramatis personae*” (251). In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Doris Pilkington Garimara utilises her newly gained knowledge of her ancestral history to create her own entity as an Indigenous writer.

4. Recognition

In 1996, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* became a bestseller in Australia. The heroic endeavour of three innocent souls in search of their mothers evoked interest. However, it was the hidden message juxtaposed with the escape drama, which made a more controversial mark; the issue of the Stolen Generations that had been camouflaged by the colonial powers. Garimara's creative non-fictional biography shot into the limelight of Australian literature, but not without public scepticism. As one of the first Australian authors to publish governmental documents as evidence to racial discrimination, practiced in post-colonial Australia, Garimara came under immediate scrutiny. However, by punctuating her mother and aunts' testimony, regarding the child abductions, with documented evidence she raised public awareness by forcing her readers to acknowledge the reality of past events. Free to express facts and feelings, Garimara chose to mediate her family's testimonials, using the non-fictional biographic form. Thus, she followed in the footsteps of many Australian writers before her. In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Garimara seemed to employ this genre to the fullest extent. Liberated from the strictness of Christian doctrine (forced upon her at the mission) she was presumably faced with two options: either to indulge her preferences, exploring her new-found field of writing by extending the boundaries, or stay within the margins of the European canonical literature genres.

The first four chapters of the book serve as a long introduction to the history of the Indigenous language groups of Western Australia and serve both to intrigue and to explain. By addressing colonial and postcolonial abuse of her kinsmen, Garimara establishes a subplot within the adventure story. The political connotations are visible. In the postcolonial writings by Indigenous writers, the use of public documents as evidence for the reliability of the events, serves as confirmation of the author's writing abilities. The need for such interventions in the escape odyssey of Molly, Daisy and Gracie seems disputable, but on the other hand it creates suspense in the storyline as well as sympathy for the protagonists. In her attention to descriptive details of folk and fauna, Garimara manages to maintain a kind of light spirited optimism through out the story, though the author does not seem to be completely, emotionally distant. Using third person narration, the author may have managed to avoid conflicting upon the message - emotional comments. It could also be suggested that by this, Garimara is able

to distance herself for the benefit of the story. As a result *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* resembles a documentary, in some respect. By way of contrast, the non-fictional form gives way for public viewing of research materials and documented facts.

In Australia the non-fictional literary genre exceeds the fictional in popularity. Though this has not always been recognised by the authors themselves, the need to express feelings and emotions of past events in a documenting, biographical manner seems to be strong as the

Australians have been writing creative non-fiction in various guises for decades, but it has not been identified as such. The advent of the creative non-fiction label, however, means that there is now a meaningful way to group, discuss and publish writing as diverse as memoir, fictionalised biography, autobiography and other life writing. (Brien)

As a bestseller belonging to the above mentioned literary genre *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* presumably enabled many of the Indigenous people to cast the cloak of secrecy they had borne for over a century.

4.1. A Century of Silence

Silencing Aboriginal voices and preventing the practices of cultural traditions (by law) reduced the sense of identity for the Nyungar nation (among others) as “their pain and suffering remained hidden and repressed, silent and deep” (Garimara 16). With the regulations of the colonial power the Indigenous people of Australia became a voiceless, powerless minority group – the subaltern of society. The oral traditions were quieted and dance rituals forbidden. As a consequence, the “warriors with painted bodies and plumes of feathers on their ochre-covered heads would become faded images, buried in the past” and the “important dates on their seasonal calendars would be forgotten” (16). Translating her mother’s memories into a literary form gave Garimara the opportunity to shed a light on her own dimmed cultural memory. Conversely, the passage towards inner peace became intersected, as her mother’s oration redirected the pre-planned identity route to a pilgrimage against persecution. Realising after twenty-five years that she had been a victim of the racially discriminating regimes, herself, undoubtedly complicated the writing process. On the other hand, publishing the book may have strengthened her ability to give voice to other victims after a century of silence.

4.2. The Wintamarra Tree

After giving hope to thousands of searching souls, Garimara began her own journey of healing by writing her own biography - *Under the Wintamarra Tree*. Appearing in 2002, this book continues her mother's biography and combines it with her own story. Like a puzzle, she connects pieces of outside information with her own recollections to form a holistic picture of her past. Doris Pilkington was born, Nugi Garimara, in December 1936. Daughter to Molly Craig (Kelly) and Toby Kelly Burungu, though speculations were about her paternity. William Henderson (a Scotsman), a farm worker at Balfour Downs Station was suspected. As "the child's skin wasn't black" the general assumption was that the father had to be white (Garimara, *Wintamarra Tree* 30). In the files of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs she was "Doris Craig, the daughter of "Molly the Half-caste" of Balfour Downs Station" (29). Later she was issued with the birth date of 1 July 1937 in line with legislations of the day, regarding unregistered births of Aboriginal children (29).

Ten years after the great escape, Molly Craig repeated the scenario. Sent to Moore River again, and now with her two girls Doris and Anna, Molly managed to abscond with her younger girl, leaving Doris behind. Neither speaking the native language nor mentioning of family was tolerated at the settlement. The decision to become "a child without a past" was made with pain as the "forceful persuader" – the pain of punishment (88). Garimara suppressed all her native memories along with her fellow inmates "who now have no culture, no language, no history, no people" (87). The first years of incarceration were filled with anguish and despair followed by emotional numbness "like blazing fire that had burned so cheerfully, the memories flicker and the die, extinguished forever" (87). Garimara depicts the religious protocol of Moore River as brainwashing, and the main factor in her (native) identity loss. When John Bannister interviewed her for the *Bringing Them Home Oral History* Project, he asked if she knew about the assimilation procedures (Pilkington, int. 6). She said that "most of the children from the Stolen Generations learned about the removal policies later in life", some did not like what they read or heard "so they closed that chapter of life" (int. 6). "I was so young that I can't remember the removal, but it was like they wanted to clone us - I wanted to be an individual" (int. 5). Along with many of her fellow inmates at Moore River, she was, at the age of twelve, relocated and sent to Swanbourne refugee-camp in

Perth. There she was supposed to stay until a suitable position (work) became available. In *Under The Wintamarra Tree* Garimara describes how the children are introduced to modern hygiene as they see flushing toilets and showers for the first time, and are even treated with trips to movie theatres. In Garimara's recollection this resembled a holiday, on the other hand she notes that the illegal migrants were treated better than the Aboriginals at the camp; the attitude was different (Pilkington, int. 4). After several months Garimara was sent to Roelands Mission and there she remained until she was eighteen, when she began training as a nursing aide in Perth. In the city she meets her future husband, Gerard Pilkington. Pilkington, a young man of the Nyungar nation, had just arrived from the war in Vietnam. The couple settle down and have six children but life was no bed of roses for her.

Twenty-five years after her separation from her family, she decides to reconnect. Garimara reveals that the reunion turned out to be a traumatic experience, both emotionally as well as culturally. Living in Perth at that time, the living conditions at the reserve, in Meekatharra were her parents recited, seemed shocking. It took along time for Doris Pilkington to adjust to her native culture. *Under the Wintamarra Tree* concludes the author's journey from stolen identity to Aboriginality. In this book, the author confronts her demons from the past. Fighting depression, with six children and an alcoholic husband, her biography simulates many stories that include childhood traumas. Wanting to establish her roots she travels to Balfour Downs Station accompanied with her mother to search for the Mulga (Wintamarra Tree) under which she was born. As she describes the experience of returning to her birthplace after fifty years, Garimara explains that it has taken "lots of thought and courage to arrive at this exciting and moving point" in her life. (Garimara, *Wintamarra Tree* 203). She goes on to say that the "pilgrimage to her birthplace" has been a dream she has cherished in her heart for many years (203). It was an emotional moment for both women as they stood under the shady branches of her birth place - under the wintamarra tree. As a sign of peace and reconciliation the wintamarra tree is a "permanent reminder" of how her life began, and it has always awaited her return – to reconnect to her place of birth (208).

5. A Different Perspective

The road towards reconciliation between the Indigenous people and other Australians has been long and winding. Doris Pilkington Garimara, and her campaign for healing amongst her people, inspired other members of the Stolen Generations with her influential book *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. The Australian government postponed for years to deal with matters concerning Indigenous affairs. Meanwhile, members of the Stolen Generations were waiting for assistance. Appending issues were: finding biological families, physiological help, and acknowledgement of mistreatment in the past. Advocating reconciliation, Garimara compares the journey of healing and the healing process to her birthplace, the wintamarra tree. The old tree is dead but four other have grown from the roots.

When I was born here there was one tree, now, because over the years it died, four others have replaced it. This in fact the story of life – you lose one part of your life and you get others coming through, stronger. This is a message I give to the members of the Stolen Generation, [...] we’re going to be the leaders of the movement to heal our people. (208)

In an interview with Martin Kelrick in the online magazine *Headspace* in 1999, she states that with her writing she hopes that others that were stolen from their native environments, will be “encouraged to go back and reconnect” with their families; reclaiming their “language, culture and identity” (Martin)

In 1997, a year after the publishing of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the government responded with the publishing of *Bringing Them Home*; a report from a national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. Robert Manne, in his article *The Stolen Generations*, points out that many Australians “now accept that the practice of child removal was wrong” though others think it wrong to “condemn earlier generations for their role in this policy” (11). He goes on to say that although the policy can be seen as misguided but well-intentioned by some, the important question remains, “is it not all too easy to judge simply and harshly with the wisdom of hindsight” (11). In the interviews for the *Bringing Them Home Oral History Project*, Garimara viewed her opinions on the term “Stolen Generations” which she described as being “a too soft a word”. She acknowledged the political correctness of the term, but denied to be “marked by it if no

justice was to be done”, further stating that she was “a forcible removed child, one of those who got lost in the system” (Pilkington, int. 6). As a member of the abducted children she wants a “positive angle on the stories” to help others on the path of healing (int. 6).

5.1. Film: “Rabbit-Proof Fence”

Acknowledgement, reconciliation, and healing are words that became prominent after the world-wide success of the film adaptation of Garimara’s book. Five years had passed since the publication of *Bringing Them Home Report*. In the film review by Potter and Schaffer, in the *Australian Humanities Review* in 2004, the world premiere of Phillip Noyce’s *Rabbit-Proof Fence* in 2002, in the remote East Pilbara schoolyard in Jigalong “signalled the film’s attention and tribute to local, lived Indigenous experience.” The universal topic of ‘going home’ made audience around the world empathetic towards the three girls, who were forcefully taken from their families, and equally their long walk home (Potter and Schaffer). However, it was the controversial subplot that attracted the public’s attention. The clarity and precision of the narration caused emotional stir as it brought “non-Indigenous audiences in diverse locations into experiential proximity and empathic identification with a Stolen Generation experience” (Potter and Schaffer). Beginning the film with informative sub texts, and then images of Molly Craig and Daisy Kadibil in their old age walking into the pink Pilbara sunset, gave the tone for the historical relevance advocated within the storyline.

Two angles of the screenplay tie in neatly with Garimara’s story: the forceful removal of the Stolen Generations from their native families, and the heroic escape. By way of contrast, Noyce decided to emphasise on the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia, Mr. A.O. Nevill – known by the children as ‘Mr. Devil’. This contradicts Garimara’s neutrality regarding Mr. Neville as a person. On the other hand, casting Kenneth Branagh as the British born beurocrat gives the film a sense of historical authenticity, though Branagh “who waived his fee for the part, plays Neville in an under-stated manner” (McCarthy 7). Noyce gives Mr. Neville a face, and though he does not portray him as a monster the audience immediately abominate the person responsible for the racial abuse and suppression many Aboriginal children had to endure under the colonial and postcolonial governance. With this, the director gives those that

proclaimed that Mr. Neville had only good intentions, a good slap on the wrist. With the use of a hand-held camera the director plays on highly emotionally strung feelings as “the audience is sutured into an identificatory position” (3). The most dramatic part of the film is without a doubt the abduction scene, where the girls are torn from their mothers and thrown into a police car. Another scene involves Mr. Neville’s hands “looming into view as he reaches out towards Molly” dragging her closer as he “raises her smock to check the colour of her skin”; a visual image of racial discrimination, masked from the world – for a long time (3). Critics of the “empathetic and subjective immersion” deployed by Noyce imply that when confronted with their countries “historical complicity” the non-Aboriginal Australian might engage in “acts of wilful forgetting” (5). Nevertheless, as the recognition of the story grew so did the pressure for unilateral acknowledgement, public apologies, as well as long awaited reconciliation. Conversely, another film that addresses the same issues portrays a very different picture of the child removal policies, although the (symbolic) Colonial Cattle Station is the ruling power within society.

5.2. Film: “Australia”

On 13 February 2008 a public apology, the Sorry Speech, was released for the wrong doings in the past, later that year the film *Australia* in the direction of Baz Luhrmann was released. With the obvious agenda to “rewrite Australian national mythology, in which landscape, bushman, and Indigeneity come together to form a national multicultural identity” (Papson 1), *Australia* resembles a melting pot of ideas. Luhrmann abundantly embellishes the storyline with melodrama and clichés. The proud English aristocratic woman who faces all the extremities that Australia has to offer, but in the end falls in love with her Drover as well as the rugged Australian Outback. With signs of motherly love she even tries to change the Aboriginal orphan, Nullah into a “civilized” boy.

The romantic war epic has sign of the old Hollywood Westerns. The subplot of this film appears to focus on the racist policies “associated with the Stolen Generation” and indeed, Luhrmann calls that subplot a “narrative driver” (1). Employing Nullah as the narrator and allowing postcolonial views to sound through the voice of the innocent Indigenous Australian, Luhrmann evokes sympathy for both whites and Aboriginal

Australians. One of the central symbolic devices is the remarkable Australian landscape. In the first scenes we see Nullah for the first time as he begins his narration by saying: “This land my people got many names for – but whitefellas call it – Australia. But this story not begin that day. This story begin a little while ago in a land far, far away. That land called England.” In an effort to expose the Australian outback and its inhabitants with both: an aura of evil as well as ecstasy, the director portrays both sides of the country's climate and cultural history. Luhrmann alludes to the strength and courage of the cattle drovers and the earth-bound behaviour of the Aboriginal people while he smears the ruling classes with political criticism. In *Rabbit-Proof Fence* Phillip Noyce chose to begin his movie with historical referencing. So does Luhrmann, stating that Darwin was under attack by the Japanese after the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941. Describing the territory as inhabited by crocodiles, romantic cattle barons and adventures tribal chiefs, Luhrmann concludes with a notion on the Stolen Generation stating that Aboriginal children “of mixed race were taken by force from their families and trained for service in white society” (7). Thus Luhrmann, knowingly or unknowingly, readdresses the ongoing appeal for reconciliation tying his message of acknowledgement (of past events) to the film by Noyce, and consequently to the primary source of Stolen Generation unveilings – Garimara's book *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

6. Conclusion

To the Indigenous Australians time is of no importance, there is no beginning, no middle, and no end. Their cultural heritage is imbedded in the oral history – the Dreaming. The Aboriginal children, who were sent to Moore River and other settlements, were bereft of their biological and cultural identity, youth, families, language, and as a result they had no ‘dreaming’. Without their dreaming the Aboriginal people have no stories (to tell their ancestors), and thus now Aboriginal identity. It took Doris Pilkington Garimara twenty-five years to find her ‘stolen’ identity, but when she did she finally understood the traumatic effect caused by forceful separation. With the Aboriginal Laws, of 1905 and 1936, that advocated forceful removals of mixed-decent children from their families, the invisible umbilical cord between a mother and her child was damaged.

In an effort to get the message across, Garimara broke the circle of silence that had surrounded the Stolen Generations. With *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* in 1996, she was able to raise her Indigenous voice, and Australians listened – and acknowledged. The story symbolically ‘paved’ the way for other members of the abducted children, to come forward. National inquiry into the separation policies gave further encouragement to the many, still living in pain and anguish. When the book was published the Australian nation was divided and in need for reconciliation.

The exploration of Garimara’s writings and historical backgrounds now seems controversial. For the Indigenous Australians, as first natives of the colony, there is no post-colonial - they are still the colonised.

The decision to publish her mother’s story before she wrote her own gave Doris Pilkington Garimara the confidence to portray her native identity. However – though she employs the creative non-fictional biographical genre, used by so many Indigenous Australian authors, Garimara is not an Aboriginal author, just an author that happens to be an Aboriginal person.

By addressing social issues such as inter-racial relations, without prejudice, and the segregation within society with the solemn quietness of her own kin, Garimara dignifies the Aboriginal people. With respect for things from the past she reveals hidden pain, mental anguish, and identity destruction using her ancestors’ voices and language as she describes the features and fauna of her hot and dusty beloved land.

She manages to stay true to her cultural heritage as she threads lightly on the political pathway, when moulding her mother's memoir into an eye-opening experience for the reader.

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