

A Place in the Past: Pilkington and van den Berg on the Moore River Settlement

Julia Ravell

In the ABC's 1968 Boyer Lectures, W.E. Stanner told a nationwide audience that Aboriginals since 1788 had been given 'no place in our past'.¹ More than thirty years later, that message is still relevant, although an increasing amount of biographical and autobiographical work has been published. Projects such as the Aboriginal Biographical Index are also providing unprecedented access to fragmentary materials written by Aboriginal writers across a variety of genres. While many postcolonial theorists are turning towards ever more nuanced identity politics, based on a reflexive critique of whiteness, Aboriginal auto/biographical writing continues to assert the political efficacy of communally-sanctioned life-histories as a means of binding the present to counter-historical pasts. Aboriginal infant mortality, deaths in custody, alcoholism, domestic violence, unemployment and a host of other depredations usually deemed too minor to make the pages of the daily news, reaffirm the necessity for Aboriginal counter-histories, for strong claims to truth. Aboriginal oral and written histories reconstruct cultural identity. As Sonia Smallacombe has said of her own oral history project, 'Aboriginal people telling their own stories in their own voices is an important way for members of the Stolen Generation to openly maintain and pass on their cultural heritage'.²

Doris Pilkington (Nugi Garimara) frames her narrative about a defining moment in her family's history by rewriting first contact in Western Australia from an indigenous perspective. The opening chapter of *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* takes readers back to 1826 and Major Edmund Lockyer's survey of WA's usefulness for English colonisation. Pilkington's imperial chronicle of names – Lockyer, Stirling, Fremantle, Carberry, Canning and their various ships – flags what follows as a narrative of historical realism, at the same time as it parodies the taxonomic language of European history with its glorified accounts of founding 'fathers', triumphal landings, 'discoveries' and heroic battles (recognised today as bloody massacres). Lockyer's measuring gaze translates the land into a series of cartographic observations in a familiar moment in the colonial adventure. But this time the narrator, Kundilla and his family disturb the convention of European omniscience. They return the white man's curious look, observing the observer without his knowledge, thus making *him* the object of an anthropologising scrutiny. Kundilla's is the commanding look, and the Englishmen's predilection for worshipping monuments to themselves becomes a ludicrous, out-of-place ritual. Lockyer's commoditisation of the land and its inhabitants, and his ignorance of local culture, differentiates interconnected Aboriginal time and tradition from its colonial counterpart. Pilkington underlines this point in her introduction:

Numbers, dates, in fact mathematics of any kind, have little or no relevance in our traditional Aboriginal society. Nature was their social calendar, everything was measured by events and incidents affected by seasonal changes... the days of the week were named according to which domestic duties were carried out: Monday was referred to as washing day, Tuesday was ironing day, Wednesday was mending day, and so on... seasonal time and the features of the natural environment are more important to recounting this journey than are the western notions of time and distance.³

Colonisers relied on written sources, the ‘whitewashed’ chronicles that have dominated knowledge transmission in European cultures and excluded Aboriginals from mainstream Australian history. More than just nostalgia for the Edenic harmony of pre-modern innocence lost, Pilkington’s version of first contact reclaims a place in the past for her ancestors. Her narrative inverts colonial stereotypes. In the mutual misunderstandings that characterise early ‘deals’ between whites and Aboriginals, the settlers are irrational, brutal, duplicitous, promiscuous and thieving. The Aboriginal people are lawful, honourable and generous compared with the sealers and colonists, who treat them as part of New Holland’s vegetation: either as a resource for over-exploitation or as in-eradicable pests. Despite their dehumanised status in later Western Australian law as part of the country’s flora and fauna, Pilkington’s ancestors are more ‘civilised’ than those who sought who to civilise them. Their cooperative, communal lifestyle compares favourably with the Englishmen’s rationalised brutality, and disproves the social Darwinian philosophies of the day that deprived indigenous people of their humanity to justify the seizure of their land.

Follow the Rabbit-proof Fence and Rosemary Van den Berg’s *No Options, No Choice* are set in a bleak period in Australian colonial history, a time when assimilationist policies sought to complete the genocidal work begun by settler vigilantes at first contact.⁴ With the commencement in West Australia of the Aborigines Act of 1905, indigenous people were no longer ‘wildlife’ under the law, but slaves to the pseudo-scientific whims of a ‘Chief Protector’. A Chief Protector had wide-ranging powers, including the authority to forcibly remove children from families in order to assimilate them into the lower orders of white society. In the words of Chief Protector A.O. Neville, indigenous children were to be trained for a future of menial service to white society by a department of native affairs that stood ‘in *loco parentis* to all the coloured people’, as their ‘guide and aid until time proves them able to fully take care of themselves’.⁵ Government legislation separated children from their parents, prevented them from speaking their own languages, denied their culture and sent many into a kind of slavery. In the report on the Stolen Generations – *Bringing Them Home* – it was estimated that the number of indigenous children abducted by government fiat was between one in three and one in ten over a period of a century (no distinction was made between part Aboriginal and wholly Aboriginal children). ‘Most families,’ the report said, ‘have been affected by the forcible removal of one or more children.’⁶

The price of ‘protection’ was high: complete submission to colonial authority in every sphere of life. Aboriginal children, and ‘half-castes’ in particular, were ‘rounded-up’ by authorities and forced to live under white people’s supervision in missions set up to deal with the ‘native problem’ (more than forty missions were established in WA alone). ‘Mission’ was a loose term used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reserves set up by the government and various Christian churches. To facilitate the colonial takeover of the country, many indigenous people were imprisoned in these poorly run, often disease-ridden prisons. When he was six, Rosemary van den Berg’s father was taken from his Aboriginal mother; he knew only the institutional life of a State ward until he married Rosemary’s mother. He never saw his mother again, and did not meet his extended family until half a century later. Rosemary recounts these stories in her writings.⁷

Moore River Native Settlement, where van den Berg's parents met and married, was typical of a mission system that survived in Australia until the early 1970s. Situated on the outskirts of white communities in order to discourage racial mixing and to position Aboriginals in radical alterity to white society, these settlements were often over-crowded and, in many cases, brought together traditional groups of people whose cultures proscribed contact. As Susan Maushart describes it, life in the Moore River compound was 'dreary, and at times downright degrading'.⁸ Children in the barred dormitories slept two and three to a bed on bug-infested mattresses of coconut straw, frequently soaked with urine. The diet consisted of sour bread and fat, watery stew and unsugared black tea. There were no toilets and only a few buckets, so many used sinks and toilet floors (which were covered with sand for the purpose). Military-style routines made for senseless order that aimed to discipline inmates' lives. Alarm bells rang for wake-up at 6.30am, breakfast at 7.30am, roll call at 8.30, dinner at 12.05, roll call at 1.30, tea at 5pm and dormitory confinement at 6.30pm. There was nothing for the children to do after they were locked in the dormitory in the evening. Education and training were rudimentary or non-existent. Based on a report by a government psychologist, education was restricted to 'practical lessons' including how to make a bed and a fire, to cook, use cutlery, and how to blow one's nose ('nose drill'). Authorities considered teaching children beyond the level of third grade as 'impossible in 75 per cent of cases', because of the children's alleged inferior mental capacities: it was 'unrealistic to think that they can compete with whites' (62). In the official language of assimilationist policy:

[T]he long term objective of native education [was] education for living in full citizenship as part of the Australian community. Education must embrace the spiritual as well as the cultural, provide for training in health and hygiene, and should include preparation for work and other useful endeavours to fit the individual to maintain a position of independence in and service to the community.⁹

Handicapped in the Darwinian race for limited niches, van den Berg's and Pilkington's ancestors were oppressed by the colonising discourse of scientific racism – psychologists' and police reports, welfare assessments and bureaucratic memos – which identified them as part of a degenerate population unable to govern themselves. In her father's voice, Van den Berg writes that the relationship between her parents was restricted by the authoritarian, paternalistic surveillance that was a hallmark of assimilationist policies at the time:

Aborigines had to account for their every action otherwise they got into trouble. Although I was now an adult Aboriginal man, I still had to account to Mr Neal at the settlement, who in turn passed it on to the powers-that-be in Perth. This constant monitoring made it hard for me to see Rose.¹⁰

In 'Problematizing Aboriginal Nationalism', Julia Martinez comments on the irony of this situation: these harsh aspects of the government's 'protection' policy produced the first seeds of Aboriginal nationalism: 'In keeping with the White Australia Policy, it enshrined the principle of racism which gave the Aboriginals no choice but to consider themselves as a "race apart"'.¹¹

According to Neville Aboriginal people were ‘outcastes’, ‘unducated, untrained, ill-nurtured weakly people’ unfit to ‘fight against life as it [was] today’.¹² In *The Making of the Aborigines*, Bain Attwood argues – as Martinez does later – that the harsher aspects of segregation and assimilation were integral in uniting disparate Aboriginal groups in opposition to institutionalised racism:

The more consistently and rigorously authoritarian and oppressive colonial racial policy and practice has been, the more the conditions for a common Aboriginal identity have grown.¹³

For van den Berg, the extended family is the strongest foundation for this common identity: ‘Both my father and my mother were orphans, which is why they put so much value on family life with their 10 children.’¹⁴ I would also argue that Christian values and gender identification also played crucial roles in van den Berg’s representation of her fathers sense of self. In *No Options, No Choice*, Thomas Corbett describes his relationship with some of his more considerate white bosses as those of equals, ‘man-to-man’. He tries to apply reason to the institutions of white society and institutionalised racism – government policy – but fails. Gender acts as a bond between men whose Christian decencies allow Corbett to forget their part in his imprisonment and the genocidal diminishment of his masculinity and cultural pride:

It seemed to me that, though paternal in his attitude toward the Aborigines under his care, Neal (then Protector of Aborigines) knew more of their ways and culture than did Brodie (the former incumbent) who was a tyrant. The new superintendent was more approachable but that did not make him a weak man... To me, he was a firm, fair man who did try to help the Aborigines in his charge.’¹⁵

Neal’s male firmness, sense of justice, strength and decency earn him Corbett’s respect despite his role in diminishing him as a man:

I remember asking Mr Neal if I could travel to see her (Rose) at Quairading. I had nothing to do and was just hanging around the settlement waiting for any casual job to turn up. I had just received a letter from Rose and wanted to go and see her. My request was denied. Mr Neal was very sorry, but he could not let me go traipsing off around the countryside just to conduct a love affair, or a romance, to put it in its right perspective. I was so down-hearted, dispirited and tempered-up. I thought Mr Neal was my friend and confidante, but he wasn’t at this time. (162)

He describes how the ‘adventure and camaraderie’ of travelling together brought him closer to a white truck driver on a working trip to Meekatharra:

He wasn’t snobbish or racist, but spoke to us man to man... The driver wasn’t afraid of telling us yarns and eating and sleeping in our company – not like some white men who treated Aborigines as inferior to themselves. No, this bloke was a decent and straightforward person who was glad of our company and our help. (169)

Here, Corbett subsumes race to gender to appeal to the humanity-as-masculinity of his readers. Shared responsibilities and experiences, as well as Christian decency, replace what his anger tells him should be shared authority.

At the University of Wollongong's 'Com(prom)ising Postcolonialisms' conference in 1999, Ruby Langford-Ginibi described how the experiences of colonialism and institutionalisation had emasculated many Aboriginal men. Strong women were able to work within the limits imposed by racist policies, and in some communities power shifted from patriarchal to matriarchal.¹⁶ Corbett's Palyku identity is intricately tied up with his masculinity. Both are mediated by his absorption of Christian-capitalist values, such as salvation through hard work. Christianity promised Aboriginal people equality under God, a sense of community among fellow supplicants and a utilitarian belief system. Corbett describes how he was confirmed, became an altar boy and even considered entering the priesthood. His Christian beliefs were strong. Religion taught him a sense of right and wrong that seemed more rational than the arbitrary rules of distant white authorities.

Although intermittent, farm and station work offered the men of Moore River some connection to the land and way of life they had lost. Some station owners (such as the Forresters) allowed Aborigines a measure of freedom to live as they wished. Station work was also a road to a kind of salvation. Its goal-oriented lifestyle, physicality and wages – albeit meagre – offered hope for an independent future. It is the persistence of this hope in spite of alienation from self and society that makes *No Options, No Choice* an inspiring book.

Contact with 'full-blood' Aboriginal people living on camps on the outskirts of Moore River, as well as participating in church services, football matches, work and family obligations, helps restore Corbett's sense of belonging to a supportive extended family. Material conditions were bad, but Tom and Rose had each other and they were happy.¹⁷ The Moore River experience failed to strip him of his Aboriginal identity. Instead, its polyglot of disparate dialects and customs combined with common hunting and gathering lore and shared spiritual beliefs socialised him as part of a new pan-Aboriginal generation united in opposition to colonial oppression. He spent his summers with other young men who taught him how to name birds, plants, fish and flowers; which were edible, which poisonous and which had medicinal qualities (77). They taught him to respect his ancestors and to avoid the sacred places where ancestral spirits dwelled. He hunted for bush tucker such as kangaroos, beehives, birds and fish, and distributed it with communal largesse. After years of separation from his home and family, these experiences of 'caring and sharing'¹⁸ facilitated Corbett's reclamation of his Aboriginality. Kin-oriented social networks restored his cultural and spiritual identification with the land.

Full-time work was also a means to comfort, security and autonomy – an escape from the invasiveness of the state and its racist ideologies. Young Aboriginal men had this option if they could get work in the 1930s Depression era, but the prospects of Aboriginal women at Moore River depended entirely on those of the men. Whereas the boys at the mission hunted and contributed to everyone's welfare, the girls were put to work in the sewing room – if they were lucky. Residual colonial values measured femininity in idleness and meaningless tasks. Women who lived outdoors on the land were considered coarse and uncivilised, anathema to a culture that reified

England as 'home' and valued a strict separation of spheres as an index of gentility. Life at Moore River was often a more traumatic experience for Aboriginal women than it was for the men. Imprisoned indoors with nothing to occupy their 'inferior mental endowments', they were officially expected to become nineteenth century-style ladies and unofficially given up as whores. It is little wonder that the majority of escapees from the settlement were young girls.

Doris Pilkington was taken to Moore River by the authorities when she was four years old. Although her mother accompanied her on the journey, the two of them were separated when they arrived and never lived together again. Pilkington's early years at the settlement were spent in the 'protected' environment of the kindergarten, which was strictly segregated from those in the campgrounds and from the older children in the dormitories. The young children in the kindergarten were chosen for their whiteness to be thoroughly assimilated into the 'lower echelons' of the non-Aboriginal mainstream; they were forbidden from speaking their language.¹⁹ According to Maushart, officialdom at Moore River saw Aboriginality as a kind of communicative disease:

The settlement was designed to function as an isolation ward, cordoning off the infected from the wider community. But institutional policy also acknowledged degrees of infection. There were the terminal cases – that is to say, the older youths and adults who inhabited the humpies and sheds of the camps. But there were others who were regarded merely as 'carriers'. These were the compound children, especially those who had been snatched from their families at a tender age. Their exposure to the disease of Aboriginality had been minimal; their prognosis was therefore excellent. It was believed that, under proper conditions of quarantine and rehabilitation, they might even survive to lead productive, European-style lives. (167-68)

If Aboriginality was a contagious disease, it was one (along with flu, typhoid and VD) that was regarded by white authorities as fatal to a genetically weakened stock of 'half-breeds'. Half-caste Aboriginal women were at the forefront of combating this disease. They were sent as prisoners into domestic service where they were often sexually abused by their white masters. The 'quarter castes' that resulted from these encounters were often more light skinned than their mothers and were promptly separated from them; the women were often returned in disgrace to Moore River. Aboriginal women were the victims of white men's sexual lust, but they were blamed when raped because the racist attitudes of the day equated blackness with bestial sexuality and permissiveness. According to the authorities and the unequal legal system, it was the women's fault that they tempted their white masters and returned as fallen women. Separating them from their children was considered a social service because they were considered incapable of being good mothers. Regulations relating to Aboriginal people living in the 1930s gave them the status of illegal, or rather, sub-legal aliens. They were denied their humanity by being prevented from marrying whoever or whenever they wished; social-Darwinian notions that prohibited racial inter-breeding circulated. A 'half-caste' woman, for example, who married a full-blood Aboriginal, was betraying that part of herself which promised intellectual, moral and social advancement – her whiteness.

Set against this context, Molly, Daisy and Grace's escape from Moore River – depicted in *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* – might be another in a series of wholly understandable, but hardly remarkable escapes, signifying rebellion against omniscient state authority. What makes their story different is the length of their 1000 km journey to freedom, and its partial success. They make it back to their home, Jigalong, and their families. For one of the girls, journey's end is a permanent homecoming. Molly and Grace are both eventually recaptured and transported back to Moore River, but Molly later escapes with one of her daughters and returns permanently to Jigalong using the same route she had taken nine years earlier.

Yet theirs is no mere rebellion from authority, a peccadillo of girlish searches for husbands from neighbouring missions, as Maushart describes it. Commonly such escapes lasted for 24 hours at the most, and were treated with paternal leniency by the authorities. After few dreadful nights in the dark, unsanitary tin-shed which served as Moore River's solitary confinement prison, the miscreants would be returned to the institutional community. But the three girls eluded under-resourced authorities for a far more significant period. Because no one but themselves thought they were going to make it, their achievement gave their people, still imprisoned, a kind of legendary hope.

We see this same hope operating in van den Berg's book. She relates a tale about a tribe of hostile-looking, proud, incommunicative Aboriginal people who camp at Moore River for months to be near their abducted children. This group frightens the Moore River inmates, indoctrinated by ideas of savagery, noble and otherwise. Nevertheless, these people group together and succeed in stealing their children back from the institution, disappearing, magically, back into their own country.

Molly, Daisy and Grace also make it back to their homes and re-establish their connection to their ancestral land. In doing so, they also make an explicit statement to white authority: theirs is no mere rebellion from the norms, cruelties and hierarchies of mission life; it is a statement of preference for a way of life denied. It is this achievement of freedom that inspires those still in thrall to everyday authoritarianism. It is also a statement of the durability and continuity of Aboriginal culture. Family, home and even work are viable alternatives to Moore River's degrading life. Although *Rabbit Proof Fence* ends with the girls' arrival at their home: it is the journey that is crucial, not its conclusion. Although an Eden in the bush and the ever-ideological notion of 'Home'(land) is as powerful a *telos* as any in the western Christian canon, the journey valorised and the goal achieved suggest the genre of epic romance. The allegorical implications for the collective, endless, and impossible journey of colonised peoples to imaginary homelands are also suggestive of national literatures.

Yet Pilkington and van den Berg both retain authority over historical truth clothed in realist prose. History, biographical narrative and epic are more closely aligned than they are in traditional, and often abstract, European allegorical fables. In this marbled generic structure, legend-as-history serves a didactic function. *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* is Doris Pilkington's foundation story, just the endurance of the Wintamarra tree symbolises the persistence of Pilkington's family traditions despite her authorised abduction from Balfour Downs station.²⁰ It is an example of many migrations that made her people who they are. These migrations ground claims for

custodianship of a land occupied for millennia. Home is living from the land, wherever and however that may be. Pilkington's story is also about reclaiming territories and overcoming arbitrary, and ultimately inefficient, boundaries like the white men's fences and absurd institutional rules. It is about putting such boundaries to subversive uses, against the intentions of those who built them. The rabbit proof fence, and the way the girls use it as a guidepost back to their former lives, makes metaphoric the undermining of authoritarianism as an end in itself. Both Pilkington and van den Berg appropriate the resources of dominant society and combine them with Aboriginal traditions to produce novel cultural forms. In writing, they prove that theirs is a vibrant, changing culture and that there can be life for Aboriginal people beyond and outside colonial institutions.

In the tradition of *When the Pelican Laughed* by Alice Nannup, *Over My Tracks: A Remarkable Life* by Evelyn Crawford, and *Auntie Rita* by Rita and Jackie Huggins,²¹ each of these books is both typical of the lives of Aboriginal people in a particular historical period, but also extraordinary in that individualistic courage, cultural loyalty, principled compromise, quest and eventual success function didactically in relation to both white and black audiences. To Aboriginal groups in general, these texts are allegories for an unrecognised post-colonial nation; they will a strong Aboriginal identity into existence in the mutual imbrication of 'race' as a determinant of class which is in turn coded as shared experience. Although biography is an individualistic genre, these novels are documents from a collective history yet to be acknowledged by Australia's majority population. Each privileges the social function of biographical writing over its individual function. As Amanda Nettlebeck says, these life stories offer direct testimonies of the recent national past:

Such life histories are educative in numerous ways because they offer, of course, not only testimonies of individual experience but also accounts of mission life, government surveillance, stolen childhoods, and other forms of twentieth century race politics which are the inheritance of every Australian.²²

Pilkington's and van den Berg's explorations of Aboriginality re-establish their attachment to land and kinship and negotiate the tensions between notions of inherited Aboriginality and the need to master its contents. They articulate what Kevin Keefe describes as 'a new model of Aboriginal nationalism', one which emphasises 'loyalty to clan, [and] to family and this reflects the many Aboriginal nations'. It is this 'federation of Aboriginal nations, 'each with its own sense of community' which Keefe believes provides a strong base for a national 'imagined community' that enriches rather than replaces earlier pan-Aboriginal identity discourse.²³

Julia Ravell has a PhD in English and Cultural Studies from Melbourne University and is a journalist and former lecturer.

¹ Qtd. in Diane Smith and Rod Lucas. 'Aboriginal Biography: Research and Resources'. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2 (1988): 119.

² Smallacombe, Sonia. 'Oral Histories of the Stolen Generation', *UTS Review* 2.1 (1996): 41.

³ Pilkington, Doris. *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996: xiii.

⁴ Pilkington *Follow* and Rosemary Van den Berg, *No Options: No Choice: the Moore River Experience. My Father, Thomas Corbett, an Aboriginal Half-caste*. Broome: Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation, 1994.

⁵ 'Aborigines Inquiry. Alleged False Statements. Protector Replies to Critics'. *The West Australian*. May 5 1934.

⁶ Qtd. in Peter Howson. 'Rescued from the Rabbit Burrow: Understanding the Stolen Generation'. *Quadrant*. June (1999): 11.

⁷ 'The Changing Years: The Pinjarra Experience'. *New Literature Review* 31 (1996): 62.

⁸ Susan Maushart. *Sort of a Place Like Home: Remembering the Moore River Native Settlement*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1993: 200.

⁹ The first resolution of the Native Welfare Conference in Canberra in 1951. Qtd. in Howson 'Rescued': 12-13.

¹⁰ van den Berg, *No Options*: 162.

¹¹ Julia Martinez. 'Problematising Aboriginal Nationalism'. *Aboriginal History* 21 (1997): 136.

¹² Maushart, 317.

¹³ Bain Attwood. *The Making of Aborigines*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989: 150. Qtd. in Martinez 'Problematising': 136.

¹⁴ Rosemary van den Berg. 'Extract from The Changing Years: The Pinjarra Experience'. *New Literature Review* 31 (1996): 59.

¹⁵ van den Berg, *No Options*: 128.

¹⁶ 'Compr(om)ising Postcolonialisms'. University of Wollongong, February 1998.

¹⁷ van den Berg *No Options*: 61.

¹⁸ In 'Aboriginality: Resistance and Persistence', Kevin Keefe comments on the centrality of the concept of 'caring and sharing' in Aboriginal identity discourse. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (1988): 69. According to Ruby Langford Ginibi, in 'In Conversation with Elizabeth Guy': 'We were the first communists because our culture was based on caring and sharing', *New Literature Review* 31 (1996): 55.

¹⁹ Cited by Maushart, 171.

²⁰ Doris Pilkington. *Under the Wintamarra Tree*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2002.

²¹ Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1992; Penguin, 1993; and Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994.

²² Amanda Nettelbeck. 'Telling it their way: Presenting Aboriginal Women's Life Narratives'. *New Literature Review* 34 (1997): 43.

²³ Keefe 'Aboriginality': 46.