



Aboriginal life writing and globalisation: Doris Pilkington's Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence

by Anne Brewster

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In 1999, after moving to Sydney from Perth, I was teaching Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* in a course and while reading the novel I came upon an interesting fact. Although *Coonardoo* is of course fiction, Prichard based the novel on her personal experience of living in the bush, as she states in her foreword, and I knew that the novel was set in Western Australia's North West. But I wasn't prepared for a reference in the novel to the 'Kurrimarra', described as one the 'families' in the Wyalalpa region to which *Coonardoo* belonged (21). I recognised that this word referred to contemporary Mardujara writer Doris Pilkington's skin group Garimara, an identification which links Pilkington to her maternal grandmother and which she now takes as her traditional name. I realised with a shock that not only was Prichard's novel set in the homeland of Pilkington's ancestors but that *Coonardoo* – which was published in 1929 – was set in the same period as Pilkington's book *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, a moving and powerful biographical story of her mother and aunts' removal as children from their families in 1931 and their subsequent absconding from Moore River Mission and two-month 2,000 km walk along the rabbit-proof fence back to their home in the Pilbara.

At this point I had to put the book down. I thought about the parallel universes of the two books. I had been deeply disturbed by *Coonardoo*, by the window it proffered onto the 'post'-colonial psyche of this period, and its belief, representative of the period, that Aboriginal people were bound for extinction. I had found this belief, which constitutes the tragic vision of the novel, both repugnant and all too hauntingly and intimately familiar. I struggled against being implicated in Prichard's racialised 'compassion', which I found profoundly offensive and patronising, but I simultaneously recognised my own inscription in the historicity of the novel's race politics and Prichard's left-wing inflected concern with social justice.

My students' reaction to the novel was also ambivalent. We talked about the protagonist Hugh's agonistic disavowal of his affiliative bonds (family, land, sex) with *Coonardoo* which we read as generally synecdochal of a denial of the mutually-constitutive relationship of coloniser and colonised and the difficulty contemporary 'post'-colonial Australians have with the acknowledgement of a shared history and mutually-imblicated pasts. We read Hugh as symptomatic of what was to become late-twentieth-century Australian conservatism as voiced by the current prime minister; Prichard had identified in the 1930s a psychopathology of whiteness which was to erupt 70 years later in John Howard's virulent resistance to Reconciliation. We talked further about the way Hugh conformed to a racialised social mores which militated against what we might today describe as a cross-cultural recognition of and respect for difference which indeed might have provided the site for the staging of an prime-ministerial apology and acknowledgement of pressing contemporary issues such as Aboriginal sovereignty and the need for a treaty. In *Coonardoo*, Hugh's demise was tragic; 70 years later Howard's will invoke the pathos of missed opportunities.

Doris Pilkington's book *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996) is a biographical account of the removal of three young girls, the oldest of which, Pilkington's mother, would have been the same age as the adolescent *Coonardoo*, from the north-west region of Western Australia, and their trek back to their homelands. It constitutes a 'writing back' to *Coonardoo*'s troubling and conflicted account of the intersubjective 'contact' zone of colonialism. I would like to offer some thoughts here on the impact of Pilkington's choice of 'documentary' life writing as a genre. Elsewhere I have discussed Aboriginal women's choice of life writing as their preferred genre (Brewster 1995). I would like to comment briefly on the textual and political conditions inherent in Prichard's and Pilkington's choices of genre.

Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence opens with a partly-fictionalised dramatisation of pre-contact Nyoongah life. (The Nyoongahs, who occupy the south-west corner of Western Australia took the brunt of colonisation in that state. Several of the characters in this early section of the book are based on historical resistance fighters; others are fictional.) As we see in much indigenous literature, the figuring of a decolonised, mythic space is an important political and imaginative act providing indigenous people with a sense of autonomy and solidarity and enabling their survival amidst a continuing legacy of dispossession and loss. The story then moves into a dramatic recreation of the traumatic encounter with the colonisers, the courageous resistance of the Nyoongahs and the eventual decline of their traditional lifestyle.

In Chapter 4 the narrative moves north to the Mardudjara in the Pilbara and into the twentieth century. In a narrative of interwoven oral history and fiction, Pilkington combines family stories of first contact with dramatised recreation to produce a ground-breaking counter-historical account of the diasporic migration of her ancestors from the Western Desert to the cattle stations and government depots of the east Pilbara. She creates a detailed record of the reasons for these epoch-making decisions, as passed down in the oral history of her family, and the Mardu people's first encounters with the strange customs, foods and animals of the Europeans, encounters mediated at each stage by other Aboriginal people working as stockmen etc. In Chapters 5-7 Pilkington introduces the characters of her grandmother, mother (noted on government records as 'the first half-caste child to be born amongst the Jigalong people' [P, 38]) and aunts and describes the removal of her mother and her two aunts to the Moore River mission, some 100 kilometres north of Perth. The second half of the book comprises an account of the three young girls' epic trek back to the Pilbara.

The thing that struck me on my first reading of *Coonardoo* was the absence of any reference to the elaborate and pervasive governmental management of the 'Aboriginal problem' which came to a head in the 1930s with the foundational formulation of the notorious assimilationist policies. The drama played out between Hugh and *Coonardoo* is of course gendered as well as racialised, and it is no doubt the intensely 'personal', domestic and everyday nature of this drama, characteristic of the discursive conventions of the novel, that impelled Prichard to locate it within a strictly bounded private sphere.

One of the most remarkable differences in the narrative of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, which makes use of various archival materials, is precisely this figuring of the invasion of the private by the public sphere, a fact of life for indigenous people since colonisation. The fashioning of the self in this account is post-romantic; a subjectivity unmediated by the trans/national public spheres of governmentality and global forces is unthinkable. (This postmodern understanding could be seen as the flip-side of the mythic decolonised space I mentioned earlier). I refer to both national and global arenas here since the assimilationist policies formulated in the 1930s were not an isolated regional blip in a former outpost of empire; the mobilisation of eugenics in the state management of minoritarian peoples during this period was a global phenomenon. Hitler became the Führer of the National Socialist party in 1934, for example, and, by 1943, 30 states in the US allowed the sterilization of individuals deemed genetically 'unfit' such as those in mental institutions (Bullock et al 289). If non-Aboriginal students in the classroom register these transnational connections with a sense of shock which betrays a cultural nescience as profound and as it is disturbing, Aboriginal writers have been only too well aware of the transnationality of instrumental terror and genocide. And certainly during the 1930s Aboriginal people read the policies of Aboriginal 'Protection' as being directed towards the 'extermination' of Aboriginal people¹ (the term 'genocide' itself was coined in 1944 [Reynolds 3]).

As I mentioned, the narrative of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* includes many excerpts from archival material including letters, telegrams, newspaper reports, the Aborigines Protection Act etc. The inclusion of these excerpts points to an awareness of the apparatus of the archive, not so much as a specific institution as an entire epistemological complex for producing a comprehensive knowledge within the domain of the British empire, and its subsequent legacy in the governance of the recently federated states of Australia. The archive was a prototype for global and national systems of dominance, an operational field for controlling territory by the production and

distribution of information about it in the forms of files, dossiers, censuses, statistics, maps, reports, letters, telegrams and memoranda. These technologies of surveillance were derived from the demographic and ethnographical practices devised by various disciplines of learning (geography, medicine, sociology, linguistics etc).

In its use of archival material *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* opens up cutting ironies. An article that appeared in the *West Australian* in 1931 casts the girls as vulnerable and disabled temporarily by fright: at Moore River Mission they were 'very timid' and 'scared by their new quarters'; the Western Australian Protector is quoted as saying 'we are very anxious that no harm may come to them in the bush' (102). Another police inspector reports that he 'fear[ed] for their safety' (113). Pilkington underscores this irony by describing the girls' constant vigilance and stealth on their long trek, their awareness that at every stage 'they were not safe from the authorities' (112), spelling out that it was the vast apparatus mobilised for their 'protection' that terrorised them, and which they were fleeing.

For this is indeed a story about escape, about resistance in the face of the prodigious effort to surveil, monitor, track and incarcerate indigenous people. The success of three young girls in evading the monstrous machinery of surveillance in a program of eugenics-driven genocide and finding their way back home takes on epic proportions. This alternative history of Aboriginal resistance is a history of heroism, triumph and survival against all odds. Pilkington explicitly endows this story of her mother and aunts with the status of history; in the first line of the narrative she describes it as 'a historical event' (xi) and later as 'one of the longest walks in the history of the outback' (129). These statements definitively rewrite a national history which has to date given European 'explorers' the monopoly on long heroic treks.

And if these young girls were escaping the state, their goal was to return to their mothers (89). I have argued elsewhere that the indigenous family, in its maintenance of a way of life, represents a major technology of resistance to assimilation and government coercion towards new forms of sociality and individuality (Brewster 1995, 40-7). In Pilkington's book the affirmation of family evokes the pathos of the stolen generations. The author's own separation from her mother (132) and her personal experience of Moore River Mission (xii) is an important narrative frame to Molly's story. Other framing devices such as Pilkington's dedication of the book to 'all of [her] mother's and aunt's children and their descendants' and her gesture of respect and observance of Aboriginal protocol in acknowledging and thanking her mother and aunt, foreground the embeddedness of this story within several generations, and indeed its ongoing role as a history of 'all [the mother and aunt's] descendants' [my italics].

Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence thus critiques the official version of history and creates a different way of reading the putative benevolence of the colonisers, the credibility of which is put under erasure as communications between government officials become increasingly strident. The decision to abandon efforts to recapture Molly represents a break with the rhetoric of duty-of-care: she has become a 'costly woman' and one who has produced 'undesirable publicity' (125). This critique of the administration of indigenous peoples provides a general rereading of the process of colonisation. Charity and 'goodwill' are read as 'insults' to indigenous pride and dignity (17); the use of indigenous labour, so indispensable, for example, to the foundation of the pastoral industry, is defined as 'exploitation' (19) as are the sexual relations of the colonisers with indigenous women (19); the police and other officials who removed children are described as 'abductors' (40); indigenous deaths are described as 'murder' (19) and the violence meted out on them, 'criminal acts' (19). The mobilisation of a radically different lexicon in framing the narrative of history has a profound effect on our understanding of the past.

Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence also creates a counter-archive of (formerly largely oral) Aboriginal knowledges and practices, such as hunting (8), birthing (38) and mourning practices (45), food, drinks and medicines (42), marriage and skin customs and spiritual beliefs (85). It also traces the patrilineal descent of family members and 'identifies' EuroAustralian fathers (38, 48, 78), names which are conspicuous by their absence in other archives, for example the station records (38). Also named is the Protector who took the three girls (44); this action is thereby given a human face and is more easily identifiable as a 'criminal act'. *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is thus pedagogic and informative for both indigenous and non-indigenous readers. It is not, however, an archive that confines a total knowledge under the purview of the state, but one that enables that knowledge to be mobilised in everyday life in the service of a resistant identity formation. Moreover, the humanist history of the state denies heterogeneity, cordons off Aboriginality as the 'primitive' and 'traditional' (where it is commodified in the name of national heritage), reterritorialises memory as archive (Biddick, 48), and erases the space of terror. Indigenous counter-histories and counter-archival construction, often constituted in the form of life stories and autoethnography, on the other hand, re-encounter the space of terror in order to perform a re-membering and remembrance or, in the terms of narrative therapy, to bear witness to the survival of a traumatised Aboriginality.

This performance also has a non-Aboriginal audience to whom re-cognition and co-memoration are made available. Life-story telling has occupied centre stage in the Reconciliation process, whether in the form of the burgeoning of literary life stories since the publication of Sally Morgan's *My Place* in 1987, the national *Bringing Them Home* report, or Mick Dodson's powerful oration at Corroboree 2000 where he paralleled his own life story with that of the current prime minister, half a dozen or so years his senior, in order to dispel the latter's claim that it was not 'this' generation that removed Aboriginal children from their families.

Many people have stated that 'talking face to face' is the main tool of reconciliation (Gratton) and others have emphasised the importance of listening/hearing (Olubas and Greenwell). Life story narratives have brokered the 'healing' and recognition of the past for non-Aboriginal Australians through the process of witnessing (Felman and Laub). The cognitive and affective process of Reconciliation has not to date, however, greatly benefited Aboriginal people for whom little has changed in material terms. Ostensibly a process 'for' Aboriginal people (the official body, set up under legislation in 1991 was the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation), it is in fact Aboriginal people who are brokering non-Aboriginal 'post'-colonial Australians' reconciliation with their own past; indigenous life stories currently function to 'inscribe what we do not yet know of our lived historical relation to events of our times' (Kumar, 215). They invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by chronological hierarchy (instantiated by social darwinism) and by an asymmetry of civil rights. They transform the space of terror into a contact zone (Biddick, 55) and affirm the spatial co-existence of memories previously quarantined by a humanist history. When these trajectories intersect, the 'shared remembering' that Aden Ridgeway calls for will be realised (Gratton).

In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* Pilkington recalls with a searing irony one of the more farcical projects of land management in the newly federated states of Australia. In 1907 a fence 1,834 kms in length was built from the Great Southern Ocean to the coast of the top end for the purpose of preventing rabbits invading Western Australia from the eastern states. Of course it did nothing of the sort. In fact, in a kind of carnivalesque humour, Pilkington contends that there were more rabbits on the Western Australian side of the fence than on the South Australian side. In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, however, the fence, for three young girls, is 'a symbol of love, home and security' (109) those most coveted and most mourned entitlements for generations of stolen people. Molly, the oldest of the three and the leader of the group, succeeded in delivering the three to their homelands as she was equipped with a range of essential survival skills, those learned from her white father, an inspector on the fence (78), and those learned from her step-father, 'a former nomad from the desert' and an 'expert' in bushcraft (82).

This felicitous conjunction of knowledges reminds us of the various localised forms of modernity dispersed across the globe. It also puts the lie to the equation of Aboriginality with primitivism, a reified concept of tradition, and passive recipience in a one-way cross-cultural exchange; this opposition privileges the coloniser as the exclusive agent of change, the harbinger of modernity, and figures Aboriginality as something that can only deliquesce. Despite expectations and concerted efforts to the contrary, indigenous people have survived and indeed await non-indigenous people in the project of fashioning a virtual world of co-inhabited space where memories, histories, futures and subjectivities co-exist non-hierarchically. As Walter Mignolo suggests, globalisation foregrounds the fact that 'there are no people in the present living in the past (as the Hegelian model of universal history proposed), but that the present is a variety of chronological circles and temporal rhythms' (37).

The recognition of alternative co-national cultural, spiritual and metaphysical ideals and modes of self-identification necessitates an undoing of the dominant understanding of the nation state and the administrative normalisation of multiculturalism. Indigenous culture performs the lived experience of cultural pluralism. Indigenous people in Australia have long been a cosmopolitan culture, one which was indeed multicultural *avant la lettre*. The contemporary surge of anti-cosmopolitanism to which the One Nation party appeals finds expression in the rhetoric of a minoritised, injured whiteness. We live in a period where constituencies struggle to occupy the moral highground of the victim. In appropriating the rhetoric of disadvantage, 'post'-colonial EuroAustralia disavows the restabilising of race categories in Australia and the relicensing of racism (Perera and Puglese). While avowing a disaffiliation with the morally discredited policies of assimilation, John Howard, for example, ensures an ongoing reconfiguration of white power.

Ours has been dubbed a post-traumatic age (Felman and Laub). The discourse of Reconciliation has been mobilised in a number of different global contexts to enable social reconstruction and national renewal in communities recovering from large-scale violence. Personal testimony is the most commonly used vehicle (eg the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commissions), though this process does have its pitfalls such as the commodification of 'victims', the depoliticising and domestication of violence, the medicalising and pathologising of trauma, the substitution of the language of the individualised choice and rights for that of social justice (Humphrey); this last situation is particularly marked in Howard's political discourse around 'Aboriginal' Reconciliation. Nevertheless, in Australia, the very public performance of indigenous life stories has been symptomatic of shifting relations between majoritarian and minoritarian groups within the circumference of the liberal democracy of the nation (Perera and Puglese). It has often been remarked that the nation's boundaries are not only policed at its periphery (through war, immigration etc) but also at its centre. The local 'inside' of the nation is, however, increasingly being linked to the global 'outside' (McCarthy, 180) and now more than ever we are aware of the need for cosmopolitical systems of justice.

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FOOTNOTES

1. See for example Patten and Ferguson: 'the purpose of your Aborigines Legislation has been, and now is, to exterminate the Aborigines completely so that not a trace of them of their descendents remains'. 'Citizen Rights for Aborigines', Official Statement on Behalf of the Aborigines Progressive Association', *The Publicist*, 1st January, 1938, p. 5.

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Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence is a novel written by Doris Pilkington and was published by University of Queensland Press in 1996. The book is based around three Aboriginal girls, Molly, Daisy, and Gracie, who are outcasts due to their mixed-race lineage and are therefore separated from their families by the government. They escape and journey back to their families, by following the rabbit-proof fence that crosses Australia. The book stems from true events and was based around the historical event, The Stolen Generation, where mixed children were removed from their parents. The characters, Mol — Doris Pilkington, Rabbit-Proof Fence: The True Story of One of the Greatest Escapes of All Time. tags: aboriginal-history, aboriginals, australian-history, tea. 0 likes. Like. "The colonists took advantage of the Aboriginal cultural beliefs to further their own gains. The Nyungar people who once walked tall and proud, now hung their head in sorrow. They had become dispossessed; these teachers and keepers of the traditional Law were prevented from practising it. They had to fight to find ways to return to their secret and sacred sites to perform their dances and other ceremonies that were cru

