

RECENT AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL STORIES OF IMPOSITION, DISPLACEMENT, AND ALIENATION

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Postcolonial studies have brought into focus the dispossession that the West exercised upon its colonies through a series of «intrinsicly spatial strategies». This has been extreme in the case of Australian Aboriginal people. As Hodge and Mishra specifically declare in «Land as Theme», «Dispossession to some degree is their «universal experience»»¹. And to understand this experience of exile, which most Australian Aborigines continue suffering, we must be as cognizant as possible of the meaning that «homeland» has for them. Michael Dobson, Aboriginal and Torres Islander Social Justice Commissioner, says that to understand the law, culture, and spirituality of Aboriginal people, and their relationship to the physical world, one must begin with the land as such:

Everything about Aboriginal society is inextricably interwoven with, and connected to, the land. Culture is the land, the land and spirituality of Aboriginal people, our cultural beliefs or reason for existence is the land. You take that away and you take away our reason for existence. We have grown the land up. We are celebrating the land. Removed from our lands, we are literally removed from ourselves².

Dobson proudly demonstrates the complexity and richness of the link of Aboriginal people with their homeland by quoting Professor Stanner's declaration when the latter says that there is no single word in English that can

¹ Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream. Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind*, Allen & Unwin, 1991, p. 92.

² Michael Dobson, «Land Rights and Social Justice» in Galarrwy Yunupingu (ed.), *Our Land is Our Life. Land Rights – Past, Present, and Future*, University of Queensland Press, 1997, p.41.

express these links thoroughly. To do so, Stanner asserts, the word would have to contain the meanings of «camp», «heart», «country», «everlasting home», «totem place», «life source», «spirit centre» and much else all in one³.

On the other hand, for the first European settlers, the remote land of Australia was initially thought of merely as a land of exile for them. It was neither perceived nor understood at all as a world meaningfully developed by its original inhabitants. In a recent article Ann Curthoys, after discussing the stages of the Biblical narrative of «Exodus», considers whether the Europeans' journey to Australia was in fact an exodus towards liberation, or an expulsion from Paradise. She concludes by saying: «In the Australian case both stories sit together, the story of the fall and expulsion from Eden, and the story of the exodus from Egypt for the Promise Land »⁴.

In fact, European people, while lamenting their being in exile, were, by settling and taming the Australian continent, forcing the native inhabitants to leave their territory, displacing them and dispossessing them of a land they had inhabited for over 60,000 years⁵. Curthoys states that in Australia, as in other settler societies, «the trauma of expulsion, exodus and exile obscures empathetic recognition of indigenous perspectives, of their trauma of invasion, institutionalisation and dispersal»⁶. We can state that even though «for most of his five-year rule [Captain] Phillip pursued an energetic policy of amity with the local population»⁷ the results of that encounter turned out to be disastrous. The historian Inga Clendinnen tells us that the spring of 1794 «saw the first murderous «dispersals» of the original inhabitants which were to scar [Australians'] shared history»⁸.

With the arrival of the white settlers, the map of Australia changed. The concept of the territory as a network for communication was upset by the artificial boundaries, and the previous natural and dynamic harmony turned into strain between north and south, centre and periphery. The space was reorganized on the basis of two policies, one of segregation and another of forced miscegenation, through dispersion and assimilation. These policies gave origin to a diversity of landscapes of exile that are physically and emotionally described in a number of Aboriginal life stories.

³ Qtd. in Michael Dobson, *op. cit.*, p.42.

⁴ Ann Curthoys, «Constructing National Histories», *Frontier Conflict. The Australian Experience*. Bain Attwood & S.G. Foster, eds. National Museum of Australia, 2003, p.189.

⁵ The Europeans were forcing the Aborigines into physical, emotional, and spiritual exile, in a more generalized way between 1788 and 1920.

⁶ Ann Curthoys, *op.cit.*, p.199.

⁷ Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*, Melbourne, Text Publishing Melbourne Australia, 2003, p. 93.

⁸ Inga Clendinnen, *op.cit.*, p. 258

Traditionally, when Australian Aboriginal people refer to one's own territory or country, the concept of ownership «is circumscribed by extensive and intimate knowledge of particular places»⁹. As regards Aboriginal women, this affinity and closeness to the land is vividly demonstrated when they perform a wide range of rituals and ceremonies in their specific territory. One of the most important rituals involves childbirth.

Alice Bilari Smith and Doris Pilkington, in their respective life stories *Under the Bilary Tree I Born* (2002) and *Under a Wintamarra Tree* (2002), share with readers their love and veneration for their birthplaces. Alice Bilari begins by saying: «I am Alice Smith, but my real name Bilari, because under a *bilari tree* I born, on Rocklea Station»¹⁰. Doris Pilkington, speaking for herself, explains:

The wintamarra tree of my birthplace is a permanent reminder of the beginning of my life, and of the wonderful lady who gave birth to me here on the ground in the traditional way, so my connections to the land are very strong.¹¹

Alice Bilari also tells us how, at a given time, the white authorities interfered in their traditional ways of giving birth, forcing them to change settings and landscapes and thus destroying their perfect communion with nature. Customarily, Aboriginal women had withdrawn into the bush at the moment of bringing a new life. But, in the Reserve of Roebourne, we are told, they were required to enter a hospital and have the “help” of a doctor (in those days always a man), something which was radically against their tradition¹².

Nevertheless, the determination of Alice to continue with the Aboriginal ways is such that when in 1967 her ninth, and last, baby was born, she was able to be again a woman of nature, just as she wanted. She triumphantly recalls: «Angus was born on Pyramid Station, in the bush...I had nobody to boss me around then! I was out in the sand...We know what to do ourself in our culture way»¹³.

⁹ Paddy Roe, «How Shall We Write Hisory?» *Reading the Country. Introduction to Nomadology*, Drim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke, and Paddy Roe, eds. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1996, p. 147.

¹⁰ Alice Bilari Smith, *Under a Bilari Tree I Born*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2002, p. 15

¹¹ Doris Pilkinton, *Under the Wintamarra Tree*, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 2002, p. 208.

The area around the Rudall River is known as «the land of the Jilla» and the people as «people of the Rainbow Snake».

¹² In aboriginal communities, men were never allowed to be present at the moment of childbirth.

¹³ Alice Bilari Smith, *op.cit.*, pp. 168-69.

Jackie Huggins in her book *Auntie Rita* (1994) also makes reference to the importance of this first contact of the newborn with the earth. She says:

The land is our birthing place, our cradle; it offers us connection with the creatures, the trees, the mountains and the rivers, and all living things. ... We are born of the earth and when we die our body and spirit go back there.¹⁴

As a number of life stories attest, it was not only at the moment of giving birth that many Aboriginal women and their babies were surrounded by a hostile and imposed landscape. Throughout their lives they were taken to camps, institutions, and buildings in which they felt totally alien. All over the Australian territory, white authorities designed and built landscapes of exile for Aboriginal people in the form of stations, missions, reserves, and training schools.

In general the authors of the eight life stories studied in this article remember their lives in stations or settlements as better than in missions or houses of the "whites." Aboriginal people say that in stations they could at least live in communities and have jobs, usually building fences. However, the contracts offered by station owners to the Aboriginal people who carried out that task imposed on them a kind of nomadic life which was no longer regulated by nature, but rather by the interests of a few white men. Alice Bilari Smith names some of the stations where she lived and worked: Rocklea, Wyloo, Kooline, Red Hill, Juna Downs, Mulga Downs, Pyramid, and Cherratta. Furthermore, fencing contributed to the destruction of the environment, first, because it meant chopping down trees and, second, the fences meant barriers and impediments, preventing the free movement of wild animals and Aboriginal people.

Margaret Tucker in *If Everyone Cared* (1977) tells us how her people, who from time immemorial had roamed along the Murray River, the Edwards and the Murrumbidgee, were put into Mission Settlements, first Moonahculla and then Cummeragunga. And how, later on, she and her sisters were taken away from their family and sent to the Domestic Training School at Cootamundra¹⁵. That school is described as an unfriendly, desolate building with «a long, wide, big room in the centre, with rows of beds each side and a row of beds end to end up the middle of the room»¹⁶. The feeling of rejection was so great among the thirty resident girls, that a group of nine took the risk of

¹⁴ Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins, *Auntie Rita*, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994, p.13.

¹⁵ The Missions and the Training School were situated in the territory of New South Wales.

¹⁶ Margaret Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, London, Grosvenor, 1987⁵, p. 97

trying to escape. They were, unfortunately, eventually caught, sent back to the school, and punished. Margaret Tucker remembers:

We were all locked up in different parts of the home. Beatrice and I had a bathroom each, with a leaden-looking floor and one blanket. It was freezing and a frightening experience, because we all believed in ghosts ¹⁷.

In the territory of Western Australia, it was A.O. Neville¹⁸ who controlled the landscapes of Aboriginal people by sending the Aboriginal children with white fathers to either of the two institutions established by the state government: Carralup Settlement¹⁹ and Moore River Native Settlement²⁰.

Alice Nannup and her sisters were among the children sent to Moore River Native Settlement in the 1920s (1922), and she relates her experience of exile in the book *When the Pelican Laughed* (1992). Alice tells of her forced journey towards the south and her wandering from one inimical place to another.

What the adult Alice thinks of her years in the settlement and of her first work destination is manifest in the following sentences: «When I left Moore River I went to Lenora to work on a station called Ida Valley. I jumped out of the frypan and into the fire when I got there!»²¹. She remembers that she and other girls «were just worked and worked»²². The situation was unbearable and some of them decided to ran away. When they were intercepted and told that they would be taken to jail because the police were «on to [them]», Alice reacted with determination: «We'll go to jail--we are in jail here so we might as well go to jail over there!»²³.

Her case is full of irony because when, after serving in several stations, she was considered to be well trained as a domestic, it was precisely A.O. Neville who hired her for a job that Alice describes as «cap'n'apron»²⁴. She was forced to share the private family space of the person who had deprived many Aboriginal people of their own private and communal landscapes.

In the biographic story *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), the reader learns about the experience of three girls, Molly, Gracie, and Daisy, who were also sent to Moore River Native Settlement «to be educated in European

¹⁷ Margaret Tucker, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

¹⁸ A.O. Neville (1875-1954) was appointed Chief Protector of Aborigines in WA in 1915. He retired in 1940.

¹⁹ Located near Katanning in the south-west.

²⁰ Located north of Perth and 13 kilometres west of Mogumber.

²¹ Alice Nannup, Lauren Marsh, and Stephen Kinnane, *When the Pelican Laughed*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1993³, p.137.

²² Alice Nannup, *op.cit.*, p.141.

²³ Alice Nannup, *op. cit.*, p.143.

²⁴ Alice Nannup, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

ways»²⁵. Their homeland was Jigalong and they give account of the five-day trip from the landscape of Port Hedland to that of the Port of Fremantle, and of their arrival at a settlement, «shrouded in fine misty rain and lit only by lights in the centre of the compound»²⁶. Moore River certainly appears ghostly-like to the three girls, and when they reached the wooden building in which they were to stay, they noticed that the door «was locked with chains and padlocks», and that the dormitory had «bars on the windows...just like a gaol». We visualize these children in the exact way the author, Doris Pilkington, describes them «cold with their arms folded across their chests trying desperately to control shivering»²⁷.

Soon after, the three girls learned that there was a fence around the place, and that there was a little cubicle known as the «boob», where the captured escapees were locked up, after having been flogged²⁸. But, in spite of all these measures of deterrence and the warnings of other residents, Molly, the eldest girl, was determined to leave Moore River Settlement and return to Jigalong. Molly had no fear because «the wilderness was her kin» and it would always provide her with «shelter, food and sustenance»²⁹. Furthermore, she knew that once she reached the rabbit-proof fence³⁰, it would «stand out like a beacon» which would guide her back home. She said to her sister and her cousin: «'We gunna walk alongside it all the way to Jigalong'»³¹.

In the words of Doris Pilkington, Molly's daughter, «Molly outsmarted A. O. Neville in 1931»³². The critic Anne Brewster proclaims:

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.³³

²⁵ Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1996, pp.60-61.

²⁶ Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara (1996), *op. cit.*, p. 62.

²⁷ Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara (1996), *op. cit.*, p. 63.

²⁸ Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara (1996), *op. cit.*, p. 71.

²⁹ Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara (1996), *op. cit.*, p. 82.

³⁰ The rabbit-proof fence was constructed and completed in 1907. In Western Australia the fence covered a distance of 1,834 kilometres and ran from the Southern Ocean near the port of Esperance in the south to the tropical Eighty Mile Beach north of Port Hedland.

³¹ Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara (1996), *op. cit.*, p. 110.

News of the escape of the three girls appeared in *West Australian* on 11 August 1931: MISSING NATIVE GIRLS. «The Chief Protector of Aborigines, Mr A.O. Neville, is concerned about three native girls, ranging from eight to 15 years of age, who a week ago, ran away from the Moore River Native Settlement, Mogumber» (R-PF, p.102).

³² Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

Ten years after her remarkable first escape, on the 4th of October 1941, Molly once again fled from Moore River, this time, carrying her baby daughter Anna, but having left Doris behind. Doris's experience at Moore River Settlement is narrated by herself in the book *Under the Wintamarra Tree* (2002). One of the images of that «cold motherless building»³⁴ which still haunts Doris's mind is the overcrowded nursery with «bars on the windows»³⁵.

At the end of the 1940s and during the 50s, Doris Pilkington asserts, the settlements were closing down, becoming obsolete, and Christian missions were being established throughout the state under various denominations³⁶. In 1950, Doris Pilkington was sent to one of them, Roeland Native Mission, where, according to her account, they were treated as mere labour force³⁷.

It was also in the late 40s when the policy concerning the stations changed and people were sent away. Alice Bilari tells us that in the area of the West Pilbara they all «piled up in Roebourne» where there were no jobs³⁸. In these reserves the government had been committed to build houses, but Alice Bilari refers to the welfare houses in Roebourne Reserve as «Tin houses, just like a little portable house»³⁹. She specifically mentions «the old tin roof» which made the house so hot that they were forced to sleep outside all the time⁴⁰. In *When the Pelican Laughed*, Alice Nannup also mentions that the houses «were just tin shacks»⁴¹.

Another type of displacement with dire consequences, which occurred during the 1950s involved movements towards urban areas. Attracted by employment opportunities and «greater freedoms that emerged after the war»⁴², many Aboriginal people moved to the capital cities and whole families found themselves forced to lead a life of «urban itinerancy». Rita Huggins tells that they had to move to a new place «perhaps four or five times a year» because white neighbours and landlords had no tolerance of Black ways⁴³. Ruby Langford also describes urban wandering in *Don't Take your Love to Town* (1988), for example, her experience during the 1970s at Sadlier Green Valley, a

³³ Anne Brewster, *Aboriginal life writing and globalization: Doris Pilkinton's Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, p.3. <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-March-2002/brewster.html>.

³⁴ Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara, *Under the Wintamarra Tree*, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 2002, p. 75.

³⁵ Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara (2002), *op. cit.*, p. 74.

³⁶ Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara (1996), *op. cit.*, p. 68.

³⁷ Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara (2002), *op. cit.*, p. 143.

³⁸ Alice Bilari Smith, *op. cit.*, p.201.

³⁹ Alice Bilari Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-73.

⁴⁰ Alice Bilari Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

⁴¹ Alice Nannup, *op. cit.* p. 171.

⁴² Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁴³ Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

place that «reminded [her] of the missions». In her words: «These homes were the government's policy of integration»⁴⁴.

In *A Little Bird Told Me*, a book whose author regards as «a quest to know [her] heritage»⁴⁵, Lynette Russell explores the life of her great-grandmother Emily. During the 1920s and 30s Emily was secluded in mental asylums and, for her supposedly «troublesome and destructive» tendencies, she was occasionally put into «a restrain device» known as «birdcage»⁴⁶. A report of the nursing staff provides us with one of the saddest and most cruel pictures of Aboriginal people's landscapes of exile: «She, [Emily], insisted on 'climbing [the] wires and pulling at wires of [the] birdcage'»⁴⁷. The author at some point in her search for truth felt a need to visit the restrictive and violent landscape in which Emily was inhumanly kept. Lynette Russell went to Sunbury in an endeavour to locate the room where Emily was confined. The buildings had been modified and the cells had been transformed into modern offices, but the atmosphere of imprisonment was pervasive. She noted that «The windows in the asylum were up high, close to the roof...to prevent patients from breaking the glass and trying to escape»⁴⁸.

The white authorities were attempting to mould Aboriginal people's physical and mental landscapes by taking a series of steps: first by removing them from their roots and cultural communities, then by forcing upon them alien patterns, and finally by showing disapproval and disdain towards their habits and behaviour. The physical ordeal of the Aborigines was of extreme proportions and ostensibly visible; but the full mental, emotional, and spiritual damage is coming to light more slowly. Lynette Russell believes that the manifestations of tremendous anxiety and even guilt that some Aboriginal women suffered were taken unquestionably as signs of madness⁴⁹, and any type of defiance was reason to be committed to «lunatic asylums»⁵⁰. The sad irony is that, after learning about the experience of a number of Aboriginal women in their life stories, the asylum seems to be just one more type of gaol to add to the list of reserves, stations, missions, camps and hostile urban settings. We are by now convinced that life for many Aboriginal people was almost as difficult inside a mental asylum as it was outside, because for more than a

⁴⁴ Ruby Langford, *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, Penguin Books Australia, 1988, p. 174.

⁴⁵ Lynette Russell, *A Little Bird Told Me. Family secrets, necessary lies*, Crows Nest, Allen & Unwin, 2002, p. 133.

⁴⁶ Lynette Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁴⁷ Lynette Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁴⁸ Lynette Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

⁴⁹ Lynette Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

⁵⁰ Lynette Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

century these original natives of Australia were living in a world gone mad and they were made to feel outsiders in their own land⁵¹.

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⁵¹ Very recently, September 2006, a federal court decision granted the Nyoongar community a title claim over 6,000 sq. km. of Western Australia's South-West including the city of Perth. See http://www.sauer-thompson.com/archives/philosophy/2006/09/post_80.html. A precedent existed in the Mabo Case. In June 1992 Eddie Koiki Mabo won the right for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders to claim for themselves all remaining crown land in Australia, providing they could prove an unbroken chain of traditional ownership. However, in 1998 the Yorta Yorta people of Victoria were denied their right to Native Title.