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**Separation, assimilation and trauma in life writing by Doris Pilkington,
Shirley Sterling and Anna Lee Walters**

In: Horáková, Martina. *Inscribing difference and resistance : indigenous women's personal non-fiction and life writing in Australia and North America*.
First published Brno: Filozofická fakulta, Masarykova univerzita, 2017, pp.
115-119

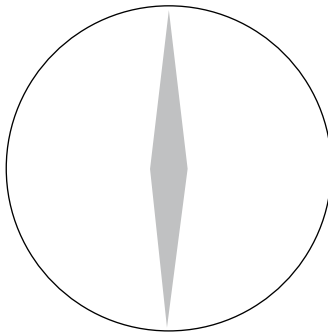
ISBN 978-80-210-8531-2

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/136906>

Access Date: 05. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

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Inscribing **Resistance**



SECTION II

Separation, Assimilation and Trauma in Life Writing by Doris Pilkington, Shirley Sterling and Anna Lee Walters

The act of life-writing serves as its own testimony and, in so doing, carries through the work of reinventing the shattered self as a coherent subject capable of meaningful resistance to received ideologies and of effective agency in the world.

Suzette Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (xix)

The second section of this book explores a subgroup of Indigenous women's life writing that differs in content and form from the texts of public intellectual writers such as Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins. The life writing narratives by Doris Pilkington, Shirley Sterling and Anna Lee Walters turn more to history and the impact of the colonization trauma on Indigenous peoples, and although they do transgress boundaries of genre, they seem less experimental and self-reflective. The title of the section reflects the thematic parallels these stories share: they present accounts of events that were most traumatic to Indigenous families and communities—separating Indigenous children from their families and sending them to boarding, residential and mission schools, as they were called in different parts of the world, with the single purpose of assimilating these children into the dominant settler society and infringing on Indigenous systems of kinship and family ties. Stemming from 19th-century scientific racism and the colonial belief that Native cultures were “dying out” as a result of their “inferiority,” “primitiveness,” and general “inability to adapt” and transform to “modern” civilization, assimilationist policies in North America and Australia in relation to



Indigenous populations went hand in hand with phrases such as “breeding out”—a term officially used in Australia during the politics of eugenics in the first half of the 20th century, as is evidenced, for example, in the meticulous documentation by the Chief Protector of Aborigines A. O. Neville in Western Australia (qtd. in Scott and Brown 26, 157). The separation of Indigenous children was executed in especially brutal ways and their treatment in these institutions was equally brutal, resulting in collective and transgenerational trauma impacting most of Indigenous families.

The terminology may differ in Australia, Canada, and the United States, but the core of this system is the same: be it the boarding schools to which Native American children were forcefully sent in the United States, or the residential schools, as they are called in Canada, or the missions, sometimes also called Native settlements, to which Aboriginal people in Australia were removed, all of these places were disguised as educational institutions but mostly served as training places for future cheap Indigenous labor—domestic servants, farm hands, manual laborers—and produced second-class citizens. In Australia, the Aboriginal people who were systematically removed as children between 1910 and 1970 are referred to as the *Stolen Generations*; more than one generation, up to 100,000 children, was affected by this government policy. In 1997, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission released the *Bringing Them Home* report, which amassed over 500 oral accounts of Aboriginal people affected by forced removals (Schaffer and Smith 95). A similar report was published in Canada in 1996 by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, under the name of *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, which provides an overview of the development of the residential school system in Canada and reveals its devastating impact on the First Nations. The residential school system in Canada started officially in 1879 and was usually administered jointly by the state and various churches. Most residential schools ceased to operate by the mid-1970s; the last one closed in 1985 (Kuokkanen 702). It is estimated that about 150,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people attended residential schools in Canada (Miller n. pag.). As in Australia, various projects attempted to collect and record oral accounts of residential school attendees. One such example, preceding the official *Report*, is a representative collection of 21 oral accounts of First Nation peoples in Canada who were affected by the residential school system, titled *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years* (1993) and edited by Linda Jaine. Both the Australian and Canadian governments have issued a formal apology to the Stolen Generations and First Nations residential school survivors, respectively; interestingly enough, both apologies were made in 2008, by the Labor Party Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in Australia and by the Conservative Party Prime Minister Stephen Harper in Canada. In the USA, Native American tribes, their land as well as their “education,” have been administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) since 1824. The system of boarding schools



in the USA, which started in 1869 and continued well into the 20th century, affected more than 100,000 Native Americans who were forced by the U.S. government to attend Christian schools (A. Smith, “Soul Wound” n. pag.). Although there are projects to record and acknowledge the experiences of Native American boarding schools survivors (e.g. the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition), the U.S. government has not, to my knowledge, issued a formal apology similar in the scope of public interest and media coverage to those offered in Australia and Canada.

The stories published by Indigenous people as a response to the public attention to the histories of colonial assimilationist policies in settler colonies have functioned as an important milestone in the recognition of the scale and impact of these policies on Indigenous peoples. It can be argued that this type of life stories, the Stolen Generations narratives in Australia and residential/boarding school narratives in North America, aims to come to terms with the suppressed histories of separation and assimilation and to bear witness to the subsequent collective trauma. This is accomplished not only through actual documentation of historical events and individual life stories from the Indigenous point of view, but also through employing resistance strategies in the narratives. The life writing narratives that will be analyzed in the following chapters, Doris Pilkington’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), Shirley Sterling’s *My Name Is Seepeetza* (1992) and Anna Lee Walters’ *Talking Indian: Reflections on Survival and Writing* (1992), inscribe resistance to the forced separation and the absolute government control over the lives of Indigenous children and their relationships to their families by rigorously recording the impact of these colonial policies and by textualizing the memories of times spent with the family in the community, recording daily activities, explaining the kinship relationships, and generally bringing happy moments back to life. This process becomes an effective, though double-edged way of coming to terms with the trauma from the separation and assimilation and signaling towards healing and reconciliation.

Doris Pilkington Garimara (1937–2014) was an Australian Aboriginal woman, community leader, researcher, and non-fiction writer associated mostly with Western Australia and the region of Pilbara. Pilkington was a member of the Stolen Generations, having experienced forced separation when she was taken away to the notorious Moore River Native Settlement, and was able to reunite with her family only later in her adult life. Her most well-known non-fiction work, which has become a classic in the genre of Stolen Generations narratives, is *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), part of a kind of a family trilogy, preceded by *Caprice: A Stockman’s Daughter* (1991) and followed by Pilkington’s autobiography *Under the Wintamarra Tree* (2002). In 2002 Pilkington also saw her most well-known story adapted to the screen in the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* directed by Phillip Noyce. In 2006, Pilkington adapted *Rabbit-Proof Fence* for children under the title *Home to*



Mother. Pilkington also contributed to *Many Voices: Reflections on Experiences of Indigenous Child Separation* (2002), edited by Doreen Mellor. Her publications received a number of awards and her achievements were recognized by the Order of Australia in 2006.

Compared to Doris Pilkington, the work of Shirley Sterling (1948–2005) is much less known. She was a member of the Nlaka’pamux First Nation of the Interior Salish of British Columbia, and like Pilkington and Walters, she had direct experience with forced assimilation when she was sent to the Kamloops Indian Residential School, in accordance with Canada’s Indian Act of 1876, where she remained for seven years (“Authors and Literary Work—Biography: Shirley Sterling”). Sterling then narrativized this experience in her autobiographical account *My Name Is Seepheetza* (1992) as part of her creative writing graduate class. Because Sterling adopted the narrative voice of a young adult, her book was initially categorized as young adult fiction, finding its way to official educational curricula in primary and secondary schools in several Canadian provinces (Episkenew 126). In 1997, she received a Ph.D. in Education from the University of British Columbia and was active mainly as a teacher and educational advisor. Sterling died prematurely from cancer in 2005 (Episkenew 132).

Anna Lee Walters (1946–) is yet another kind of Indigenous writer. A member of Pawnee/Otoe-Missouria, she attended Pawnee boarding school and narrativized this experience in her adult life, particularly in *Talking Indian* in which she acutely describes her own identity crisis as a direct result of the residential school system. She married into the Navajo tribe and worked for the Navajo Community College and Navajo Community College Press. She holds a degree in creative writing and has served as a teacher, lecturer, and public speaker on issues of Native American literature and education. Walters is a prolific writer who was active in the 1980s and 1990s, publishing mostly non-fiction but occasionally also novels and short stories. Apart from *Talking Indian: Reflections on Survival and Writing* (1992), which is analyzed here, her most well-known publications include the short story collection *The Sun is Not Merciful* (1985); the novel *Ghost Singer* (1988); and a number of non-fiction and ethnographic narratives, such as *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life* (1977), a combination of photography, oral stories told by elders, and history writing; *The Spirit of Native America: Beauty and Mysticism in American Indian Art* (1989), which relates art and Indigenous religion/spirituality while at the same time problematizing the collection and display of Native American art and religion as objects in American museums and private collections. Walters has also published two children’s stories, *The Two-Legged Creature: An Otoe Story Retold* (1993) and *The Pawnee Nation* (2000) which, as the titles suggest, educate children in both Otoe and Pawnee history. Her short prose and poetry have been widely anthologized. Rebecca Tillett characterizes Walters’ writing in the following way:



For Walters, a clear problem is the basis of both history and anthropology in the entrenched racism of nineteenth-century Euro-America: for example, the histories of American “conquest” that celebrated acts of genocide as legitimate “battles”; the federal policies that were informed by former military “educationalists” such as Captain Pratt of Carlisle; and the racial theories of early anthropologists such as Samuel Morton, whose “polygenesis” theory justified slavery through its promotion of ideas of biological inferiority (Tillett 85).

Walters, it seems, decided to counter the gradual disappearance of her people by actively reviving and promoting Native cultures, by producing literature in her tribal languages (Tillett 79), by explaining and passing on the oral storytelling tradition, and by detailing Native American political and religious systems.

The following chapters of this section examine the most distinguishing thematic and formal characteristics of each of the three narratives. The fourth chapter explores various ways of re-writing history, pointing out the techniques of working with and re-working the official, nationally accepted histories of settlement in Australia and North America, and of challenging the policies of separation and assimilation of Indigenous children. In addition, it analyzes the strategies that make it possible to define these narratives as sites of resistance, relating them to the concept of subjugated knowledges. The fifth chapter engages with the testimonial nature of the analyzed texts and looks at the ways in which the traumatic experience of separation and assimilation is inscribed in what I call *scriptotherapy*. The last chapter focuses on the collective subjectivities of the texts and the relevance of the often-discussed dichotomy between conventional Western auto/biographies with supposedly individual subjects and Indigenous life writing that is often characterized as typically promoting collective and relational, rather than individual, selves.

