

## CHAPTER 4

# ALTERNATIVE (HI)STORIES, INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE AND SUBJUGATED KNOWLEDGES

As an interpretation of the past, trauma is a kind of history. Like other histories, it attempts to square the present with its origins. The past can be personal or collective, recent or remote: an artefact of psychoanalysis or an act of witness; a primordial myth or a use of ancestral spirits to account for misfortune or violation.

Kirby Farrell, *Post-Traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties* (14)

History and its representation play a fundamental role in fictional and non-fictional Indigenous writing worldwide. Although “telling history” was a common practice in pre-contact Indigenous storytelling, the various forms of the impact of the history of colonization and oppression permeate, implicitly or explicitly, most Indigenous life writing narratives today. From the very beginning of the colonization of Australia and North America, Indigenous peoples of both continents have attempted to tell their experiences of history. As Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan note in their introduction to *Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand*, “Indigenous people have often worked up histories—historical interpretations—in order to explain their plight to themselves, and so helped themselves to survive” (Attwood and Magowan xii). Indeed, the notions of history, memory, and survival are key issues that have shaped Indigenous writing in general. Until recently, however, the mainstream population in the settler colonies refused to recognize Indigenous versions of history and only relatively recently has there been a progress in providing the other, sometimes very different and rather unfavorable, side of the history of settlement in Australia and North America. In reaction to the invisibility and silenced voices of Indigenous peoples, contemporary Indigenous life writing is driven by the desire to have the hidden histories written down on paper—histories that in spite of being part of colonial history have never been acknowledged



(Attwood and Magowan xii). As a result, these narratives frequently communicate perspectives that displace official histories of white settlement and re-write history in the sense that they fill the gaps with previously repressed (hi)stories and/or they provide alternative versions of the settlement. Some well-known examples include alternative histories of the “discovery” of the two continents which portray Christopher Columbus and Captain James Cook as anti-heroes, challenging the myth of *terra nullius*—a concept largely applied in Australia where it became part of historical and legal discourse but which could also apply in this sense to the settlement practices in North America. *Terra nullius* refers to empty, unoccupied land, open to claims of European imperial powers, “without negotiation or compensation to its indigenous occupants” (Schaffer and Smith 86). Aboriginal writer and poet Alf Taylor, a member of the Stolen Generations himself, provides one of the many “Captain Cook yarns” in his short story “The Last Drop” in which Cook’s celebrated landing in Botany Bay is depicted as the accidental result of a drunken stupor and being lost at sea:

... Captain Cook got lost in his ship and landed in this country. He was that pissed from all the rum he’d been drinking, that on seeing land, he told his convicts to put a dingy down. He staggered into the boat with some flag and when he touched land he put this flag down to steady himself and the fuckin’ thing stuck in the ground, thereby claiming this country while asleep under the flag. (Taylor 125–126)

Anne Brewster argues that this reversal “problematizes the triumphalist, teleological narratives of settlement, discovery and nationhood” (“Humour and the Defamiliarization of Whiteness” 434). Similarly, in “A Coyote Columbus Story,” Cherokee writer Thomas King reconfigures Columbus’ discovery and his hero status by having Old Coyote conjure the European colonizers, depicted as “some people on the beach with flags and funny-looking clothes and stuff” (King 123), in order to have someone to play ball with. Significantly, Columbus, described as a greedy fool “sailing the ocean blue looking for China” (123), is also depicted as someone who is lost (both literally and metaphorically speaking) and thus the randomness and accidental character of European overseas adventures is foregrounded. In addition, the narrator, whose argument with trickster Coyote about the genesis of the New World frames this as a story-within-a story, voices the preoccupation of many Indigenous writers today: “We’re going to have to do this story right” (122), he explains to Coyote and begins to tell “what really happened” (122). In this way, such narratives formulate historical counter-narratives that significantly problematize the nationally accepted stories of European settlement and unmask them as myths of nation-building.

For many Indigenous writers/storytellers, telling history and telling peoples’ lives, including their own, seem to be intrinsically related. Both these activities



originate in the tradition of storytelling which has been a primary mode of “passing knowledge, maintaining community, resisting government control, and sharing the burden of hardship” (Schaffer and Smith 101) for Indigenous people in both Australia and North America. The interconnection between historiography and life writing has therefore become an important vehicle for remembering the past and was crucial in the storytelling tradition, the main function of which was to educate the next generation. However, Sam McKegney, writing about residential school narratives in Canada, warns against an overly strict focus on historicization, which “(alone) dangerously orients our thinking away from the present and future, binding us in a reactive manner to the power dynamics of the past” (6). McKegney argues that it is precisely the imaginative renderings of the past that are essential to ensure plausible futures for Indigenous peoples by “affording the Indigenous author interpretive autonomy and discursive agency while transcending the structural imperatives of proof and evidence embedded in historical paradigms” (7). In other words, Indigenous life writing, in particular the Stolen Generations narratives and residential and boarding school narratives, invoke a significant part of colonial history, but they do so in a creative manner, offering visions of hope, healing, and change (McKegney 7).

Indigenous women’s life writing under inspection in this section contributes to re-writing the history of coexistence between Indigenous and settler populations in Australia and North America by challenging the official policies of cultural genocide, assimilation, and total governmental control over Indigenous lives. Narratives such as *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *My Name Is Seepetza*, and *Talking Indian* reframe these policies designed to break up Indigenous kinship and communal bonds by piecing together individual stories of Indigenous children of mixed parentage who have been taken away and mapping their traumatic experiences, their resistance and survival strategies, and their successful or unsuccessful reunions with their relatives. These stories are often based on oral accounts, therefore struggling to be recognized by the dominant historiography preserved in written documents. Yet, as Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra observe, “their cumulative weight has carried a particular grand narrative into general circulation, as a theme that the dominant history for many years ignored but now acknowledges as valid” (Hodge and Mishra 102). So these accounts, even though telling individual life stories, actually reveal a collective portrait of the Stolen Generations in Australia and residential and boarding school victims in North America. Most importantly, these stories are empowering because they tell of Indigenous people who, despite having been separated from their families, having gone through the institutions, and having been forced to accept the dominant society’s values, managed to resist the pressure; instead of assimilating, they held even more tightly to their Indigenous origins. As a result, these narratives often show cases in which the surveillance system and assimilation policies failed in the end. Therefore, it may



be argued that these life stories, no matter how different in their representations of the Stolen Generations or residential and boarding school experiences, voice a collective resistance to the forced separation and assimilation policies towards Indigenous peoples in Australia and North America. The ways of expressing this resistance are the focus of the following paragraphs.

The notion of resistance is a complex term and as such can be employed in a number of ways, in various discourses not always in agreement with each other, and with increasingly ambivalent definitions. Essentially, resistance is linked to domains of power and operates on several levels. For the purposes of dealing with textual, literary resistance, Bill Ashcroft's general characteristic proves useful: he describes resistance as a discursive practice which "appropriat[es] forms of representation, and forc[es] entry into the discursive networks of cultural dominance" (Ashcroft 19). However, this raises a number of questions: How does a piece of writing appropriate forms of representation and whose representation is it? How does one resist effectively in literature? What are the strategies of writing resistance? Does resistance happen only on the level of content or also on the level of form? When considering Ashcroft's observation that "the concept of resistance literature arises from the central role of cultural expression of political struggle" (28), it is clear that Indigenous literary production, including life writing, exemplifies this characteristic. A number of Indigenous writers, scholars, and intellectuals, as well as non-Indigenous critics, have commented on the resistant and political nature of Indigenous writing (Monture-Angus 31; Tuhiwai Smith 4; Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up* xxiii). Indigenous life writing therefore plays the role of what Penny van Toorn calls "tactical histories;" she comments on the resistant nature of Aboriginal life stories being produced and disseminated through non-Indigenous institutions, invoking de Certeau's terms of tactical and strategic writing:

Whether called forth in colonial institutions such as missions, reserves, courtrooms and prisons, or edited, mass produced and packaged by today's commercial publishers, indigenous testimonies remain for the most part 'tactical' in Michel de Certeau's sense of being made and deployed in cultural territories predominantly or officially under someone else's control. (van Toorn 2-3)

The Indigenous women's life writing that is discussed here, i.e. published texts aimed at both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readership,<sup>22</sup> must necessarily take part in the institutional production of texts, conforming to its laws of power. At

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22 There are many life narratives by Indigenous writers and storytellers that are aimed entirely at family, relatives, and friends in the larger Indigenous community, often produced locally, outside the domain of non-Indigenous publishing institutions. As products of Aboriginal agency, these narratives do not need to conform to criteria imposed by a "foreign power," for example in language, content, and form choices (van Toorn 3).



the same time, however, they perform resistance to this power in the form of subversion, “blindspots, interstices and fleeting, opportune moments,” exploiting the “play within and between the institutions through which the dominant group routinely asserts and perpetuates its power” (van Toorn 3). As for the nature of resistance strategies in Indigenous women’s life writing, it is imperative to take into account their multifaceted nature. In terms of the diversity of such strategies and their characteristics, Moreton-Robinson notes: “Our resistances can be visible and invisible, conscious and unconscious, explicit and covert, partial and incomplete and intentional and unintentional. They are profoundly political acts that are neither one dimensional or fixed and they do not always lead to conflict or self-destruction” (*Talkin’ Up* xxiii). This suggests that the various kinds of resistances inscribed into life stories are not, due to their tactical, strategic, and shifting character, easily detectable.

In the originally oral Indigenous cultures, writing itself becomes an act of resistance in the sense that in order to gain a voice and be heard it appropriates the colonizer’s means of expression in order to “write back to the center,” as the famous phrase goes. By writing and publishing their stories, Indigenous authors resist the official state policies of silencing or distorting Indigenous voices, histories, subjectivities, and representations. Also, by writing in English—a language imposed on them by the settlers—Indigenous writers and storytellers try to seize some of the power from the dominant society and challenge and shape its discourse. On another level, Indigenous writers have often appropriated conventional European literary genres and at the same time resisted them by employing non-European techniques that are characteristic of the Indigenous practice of storytelling. In Indigenous life writing, the genre of autobiography, conventional in European tradition but considered foreign in Indigenous cultures (Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin* 55; Wong, *Sending My Heart Back* 12), is used to tell the story of colonized people as a collective entity, rather than the story of an individual, unique self; it is often a collaborative project with multiple authorship, incorporating other voices and genres, therefore resisting and transgressing genre conventions. On the thematic level, by deliberately choosing to depict extended familial relationships and foregrounding domesticity, Indigenous women’s life writing significantly resists the intended goals of the government policies of breaking up Indigenous families. In addition, the depiction of traditional cultural practices and the foregrounding of Indigenous identities resist assimilationist policies. Finally, on a stylistic level, life writing narratives often integrate elements (words, phrases, or entire sentences) from Indigenous languages, sometimes without translation, as well as the narrative techniques of fragmentation and repetition, adopted from storytelling traditions.

In Australia, Aboriginal life writing has been fundamental to the process of resistance to colonialism. Gillian Whitlock emphasizes the importance of resistance



against assimilation organized by Aboriginal intelligentsia between the 1960s and 1980s, the result of which was a new concept of Aboriginality with a “strategic sense of united identity” that became “fundamental to the development of an effective counter-discourse, which could challenge the principles of white nationalism” (Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire* 155). This concept of Aboriginality arises from two bases: first, it is formulated in relation to the dominant white society and second, it is increasingly “tactical and contingent” (Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire* 156). These tactics and contingencies, Whitlock argues, characterize Australian Aboriginal life writing, together with two opposing processes that are crucial to resistance and are also activated in the narratives analyzed in this section: the process of articulation in the form of identity formation and the process of disarticulation, i.e. a critique of it (156). In other words, Indigenous women’s life writing is significant because it gives importance to tribal, regional, familial, and generational affiliations while disrupting the fixed and singular idea of Aboriginality and turning to more mobile, diversified, and plural notions of Aboriginality (Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire* 156). As is shown both in the feminist texts by Allen, Maracle, and Huggins and in the historical narratives by Pilkington, Sterling, and Walters, these texts explicitly resist genre boundaries and language codes, as well as conventional representations of Indigenous women and their histories.

Indigenous life writing in North America certainly shares these elements of resistance with Aboriginal life writing in Australia. Patricia Monture-Angus, for example, identifies resistance as a common denominator in Native American writing: “What is common among many Native American writers is our desire to write our resistance. This desire might sometimes be described as ‘decolonization’” (Monture-Angus 31). While she characterizes the first wave of Native American literature, quoting Greg Young-Ing, as “protest literature, political in content and angry in tone,” Monture-Angus asserts that the more recent writing by both Native American and First Nations women is resistance writing rather than the protest literature of previous years (31). In her influential study of Native women’s writing in Canada from feminist and postcolonial perspectives, Julia Emberley also argues for reading Indigenous women’s writing as resistance literature, drawing on Barbara Harlow’s theoretical work *Resistance Literature* and emphasizing that literary texts produced by “third-world” women are not “supplement[s] to political events but a constitutive element[s] in the political process” (Emberley 21). Resistance in various forms is a crucial element of Indigenous life stories and counteracts their marginalization in the sense that it is shared across diverse Indigenous communities (Tuhiwai Smith 2).

If Indigenous feminist personal non-fiction was related to strategies of inscribing difference and framed in terms of resistance to the totalizing tendencies of the mainstream (feminist) theory, the Stolen Generations and residential and boarding school narratives analyzed in this section textualize resistance to mainstream



historiography. *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *My Name Is Seepetza*, and *Talking Indian* stress their protagonists' resistance to the policy of state intervention imposed on them and by extension the power of colonial history that swept over their communities and families. They manifest the uselessness and absurdity of the mission, residential, and boarding school system in which the children were supposed to gradually forget about their Indigenous background and assimilate into the dominant society. The removed children in the selected life writing narratives are individuals who, although torn from their original environment, develop an even stronger connection to their communities, represented by the family, Native languages, and traditional life-style. This resistance is significant when considered in the context of the other experiences among the majority of separated Indigenous children affected by the system. Most of the children's lives were, in fact, crushed by the system: the outcome was trauma, internal conflicts, loss of identity, and/or sense of alienation, all of this leading to dysfunctional relationships later on and generally unhappy lives. It was certainly hard to resist openly, with few opportunities to escape the predetermined fate and break the cycle. Cases of children's escapes from the institutions were scarce and mostly unsuccessful; many were not able, or not allowed, to connect with their relatives in adulthood, many assimilated into mainstream society and denied their origins in the hopes of protecting themselves and their own children.<sup>23</sup> In this context, the life writings by Doris Pilkington, Shirley Sterling, and Anna Lee Walters gain special importance because they tell stories of resistance, of the survival of the few who managed to escape, both literally and metaphorically, the colonizing power.

Writing resistance in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *My Name Is Seepetza*, and *Talking Indian* proceeds basically on two levels. First, there is the resistance that the author inscribes into her text. This includes techniques permeating the language, such as subverting Standard English by integrating Indigenous words and phrases; narrative strategies, such as combining and/or reflecting oral traditions and storytelling; and the content, such as challenging official narratives by voicing alternative stories. But resistance also takes place within the life stories: in the form of the protagonists' resistance to the state policies of separation and assimilation, especially in the mission, residential, and boarding schools. Some protagonists run away, as in Pilkington's account, some seemingly succumb to the institutional regime but are determined to return to their communities and affirm their Indigenous identities, as in Sterling's and Walters' cases. All these strategies of resistance are intertwined, sometimes in a more, sometimes less traceable way.

Apart from inscribing resistance, Indigenous women's life writing produces differences also by inscribing subjugated knowledges. Moreton-Robinson claims

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23 More detailed accounts of people removed as children are available in Carmel Bird's *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, the *Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal People*, and Linda Jaune's *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years*.



that in their life stories, Indigenous women “speak of the practical, political and personal effects of being ‘other’” and they express their difference through “accumulating and producing subjugated knowledges which reflect their world view and inform their social practice in Indigenous and white domains” (*Talkin’ Up* 3). In the following paragraphs, I want to argue that the notion of subjugated knowledges, introduced by Michel Foucault, is particularly useful for exploring Indigenous women’s life writing in the critical framework of strategic resistance, and that these subjugated knowledges create a counter-archive of knowledge through which the life stories help the writers resist the pressure of non-Indigenous cultural practices and allow their positioning to differ from that of dominant discourses.

In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault defines subjugated knowledges as “those blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematising theory and which criticism ... has been able to reveal” (82). A further elaboration on the definition reveals that subjugated knowledges may be “disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity;” more specifically, Foucault continues, it is “particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity ... which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it” (82). It is this oppositional character, I believe, that may relate Foucault’s concept to Indigenous discourse and its commitment to bringing suppressed histories to the surface while relying on tactical resistances. For Foucault, subjugated knowledges are concerned with a “*historical knowledge of struggles*” (83, original emphasis); in other words, with the conflicts, clashes and hostile encounters, “confined to the margins of knowledge ... by the tyranny of globalizing discourses with their hierarchy and all their privileges” (83). In my understanding, Foucault’s theory of the genealogy of knowledge—a product combining “an erudite knowledge and a popular knowledge” (83)—may be applied to the complex ways in which Eurocentric epistemology, particularly the colonial discourse, has been placed at the center of the foundational national narratives of settler colonies and, in order to do this, marginalized and “disqualified” Indigenous knowledges of history, land, social structures, and cultural practices. It can be argued that Indigenous life writing is one of the means that can, at least partially, disrupt the linearity and homogeneity of mainstream historiography by unfolding the previously subjugated Indigenous knowledges, by, in Foucault’s words, “entertain[ing] claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects” (Foucault 83). In this way, subjugated knowledges can foster the group’s self-definition and self-determination (Collins 299).





Brewster applies Foucault's notion of genealogy of knowledge, which may arise out of the decolonization process as a "historical knowledge of struggles that might be used tactically," to Aboriginal discourse in Australia (*Literary Formations* 47). Brewster asserts that this genealogy of subjugated knowledges is embedded in Aboriginal women's autobiographical narratives,<sup>24</sup> and that these narratives articulate "knowledges that have been repressed and denied by the dominant group" (*Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* 34). Among the various thematic levels of subjugated knowledges, she identifies the notions of family, spirituality, survival skills (allowing for survival both in the remote bush and within the urban poverty trap), Aboriginal languages, and the practice of storytelling which together create an oppositional discourse (*Literary Formations* 48–52; *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* 34–36). Therefore, as an example of subjugated knowledge within the site of Aboriginal family, Brewster mentions the representations of extended family, kinship ties, and domesticity shown in the practices of home-making, cooking traditional meals and health remedies. In the realm of spirituality, the communication with dead people's spirits, spiritual practices, and frequent readings of "signs" such as bird calls as an indication of a misfortune or tragedy, is considered incommensurate with the Western rational belief system (Brewster, *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* 35). Aboriginal subjugated knowledges are also embodied in the traditional knowledge of the bush and of living off the land. Together with the use of Aboriginal language, these knowledges were perhaps most severely suppressed by government policies.

In accord with Brewster, Moreton-Robinson foregrounds relationality and spirituality as the primary sites of subjugated knowledges in Aboriginal life writing in Australia, which she defines as "disguised and hidden but ... present in inter-subjective relations" (*Talkin' Up* 20). In this perspective, Indigenous women are identified as the bearers of these knowledges (20). It is interesting to note that Moreton-Robinson shifts Foucault's original concept, which emphasized that subjugated knowledges were revealed mainly through the work of criticism and academic scholarship. Moreton-Robinson argues differently: subjugated knowledges are revealed in the "inter-subjective relations," suggesting that it is rather up to the "bearers" of the "hidden" and "disguised" knowledge to reveal the oppositional knowledges (20). At the same time, Moreton-Robinson is aware that the concept of subjugated knowledges is not meant to simply complement the Indigenous/Western binary in terms of epistemology and subsequently problematizes the argument in a series of questions which are, in her opinion, raised precisely in

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24 Brewster designed the term "autobiographical narratives" in her 1996 study *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* to distinguish Aboriginal women's life writing, with its oral and collaborative nature, from the written and individualistic "autobiography" of the Western literary tradition (9). In the recent re-edition of Brewster's book, the title reflects the more accepted term today—*Reading Aboriginal Women's Life Stories*.



Indigenous women's life narratives: "How does one know when subjugated knowledges are operating in a particular cultural context where two subjects may speak the same language but position the world in distinctively different ways? How can one be reflexive about knowledge that one does not know? And what is the extent of the indeterminacy?" (20) Although Moreton-Robinson suggests in her answer to these questions that there will always be communicative incommensurabilities and only partial dialogues, she adds that while Indigenous women have no other choice than to be conscious of the colonizing systems of knowledge and to carefully negotiate their subjectivities in the process of cross-racial dialogues, there has never been such an imperative for reflexivity for the dominant white society (21). The solution called for by many Indigenous scholars is to develop gradually an Indigenous system of knowledge which would allow for an alternative critical framework and research methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith 4).

Although the theoretical concept of subjugated knowledges has been mostly applied in the Australian context, particularly by Brewster in *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography*, in which she applies the notion of subjugated knowledges to Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988), and Aileen Moreton-Robinson in *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*, it can be extended to the Native North American context. The suggested examples of subjugated knowledges in Australian Aboriginal women's life writing find many counterparts in the life writings of Indigenous women in North America. The extended family, household management, negotiation between traditional religious systems and Christianity, and the use of Native languages in spite of their prohibition at residential and boarding schools have certainly been important sites of resistance for Indigenous people in the US and Canada. Traditional knowledge of the land, medicines, hunting, gathering food, and cooking are depicted predominantly in the cultural maintenance narratives as well as in the residential and boarding school narratives, in which they reveal subjugated knowledges in opposition to the Western system of knowledge enforced by the official assimilationist policies of the government institutions and church missions. Often the traditional tribal knowledge in these narratives is presented with a kind of pre-colonial nostalgia and awareness that it is gradually disappearing due to the encroachment of the white settler society. This is seen, for example, in *Honour the Sun* (1987), an autobiographical novel by the First Nations writer Ruby Slipperjack, which recounts a diary-like life story of the main protagonist's childhood and teenage years in a small Native community. The more urban life stories of North American Indigenous women, such as Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* (1973) or Lee Maracle's *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* (1990), reveal, in turn, a modified version of the archive of subjugated knowledges that takes the form of urban survival skills in an alienated city environment, showing ways of battling racism, poverty, unemployment, high incarceration rates, alcoholism, and drug addiction.



## Doris Pilkington | Counter-(hi)story

In their grief the women asked why their children should be taken from them. Their anguished cries echoed across the flats, carried by the wind. But no one listened to them, no one heard them.

Doris Pilkington, *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* (48)

Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* helped bring about a second wave of public interest in Aboriginal women's life writing in the 1990s and proved that the popularity of this specific genre has not yet reached its end.<sup>25</sup> Together with Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is perhaps the most internationally recognized Aboriginal life story, thanks in part to a widely discussed adaptation of the written narrative to the screen, entitled *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2001).<sup>26</sup> Pilkington's narrative is a boundary-crosser in the sense that it draws on several genres. First and foremost, the author documents the history of her people since pre-colonial times and re-writes the history of Aboriginal-settler relationships from the earliest period until the 1930s in Western Australia. In these terms it is a resistance story—resistance to white control, to physical and psychological limitations—and a story of survival. It is also a biography of her mother and two aunts, as well as of her ancestors. Further, the story can be read as an adventure story, a story of an escape or a quest. Lastly, it draws heavily on oral traditions and storytelling techniques as Pilkington collaborated on eliciting and recording the oral accounts of her mother and aunt Daisy. This made Pilkington negotiate Aboriginal oral traditions and European literary conventions. In addition, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* can be read as a prequel to Pilkington's next book, the memoir *Under the Wintamarra Tree* (2002), which provides a third-person autobiographical account of Pilkington's own separation from her family and of how she was taken to the very same Moore River Native Settlement that her female family members

25 An exhaustive overview of Aboriginal women's life writing published in Australia since the 1970s and the suggested reasons for the popularity of the genre is provided in Anne Brewster's *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* (1996) and Oliver Haag's article "From the Margins to the Mainstream: Towards a History of Published Indigenous Australian Autobiographies and Biographies" included in *Indigenous Biography and Autobiography*.

26 Directed by Philip Noyce, an Australian filmmaker who worked his way to filming in Hollywood, and backed by Doris Pilkington herself as a consultant on the film script, the film was positively accepted and reviewed worldwide. However, in Australia it triggered a debate among scholars about the film's commodification of the Stolen Generations narrative which was universalized and marketed for an international audience. Detailed discussions are offered in three crucial articles published in *Australian Humanities Review*: Tony Hughes D'aeth's "Which Rabbit-Proof Fence: Empathy, Assimilation, Hollywood" (2002), Anne Brewster's "Aboriginal Life Writing and Globalisation: Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*" (2002), and Emily Potter and Kay Schaffer's "*Rabbit-Proof Fence*: Relational Ecologies and the Commodification of Indigenous Experience" (2004).



had managed to escape from decades earlier. In this way, Pilkington's own story is already inscribed in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is primarily a historical account of Aboriginal lives, both collective and individual. As such, it redresses the long-term invisibility of local Indigenous groups and supplies a previously missing perspective. Pilkington contributes to the re-creation of Aboriginal history in Western Australia as she starts her narrative with a mytho-fictional account of the pre-contact and early-contact history of the Nyungar people, portrayed as idyllic, imagined, and decolonized space. Interestingly enough, this part is not re-told as an "objective" historical account in the Western tradition but rather offers a dramatized history including fictional dialogues, referring to stories told by Aboriginal people across the generations. The result is a picture of Aboriginal history "as it might have been." The larger portion of the narrative, however, follows the lives of Pilkington's mother, Molly, and her two cousins/sisters, Daisy and Gracie, who were together removed from their home in Jigalong in north-eastern Western Australia to the infamous Moore River Native Settlement at the other end of the state. This part shows the full impact of the Department of Native Affairs' policies of removing "half-caste" children in the 1930s, policies championed by the notorious A. O. Neville, then the Western Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines. The last third of Pilkington's book recounts the three girls' escape from the Native settlement, setting out on the journey home and walking 1,600 km along the rabbit-proof fence that runs north-south across the state. This part celebrates the traditional knowledge that helps the girls survive in the bush and at the same time condemns the monstrous state apparatus that is mobilized by the authorities during the girls' persecution.

The technique that Pilkington employs when re-writing the history of colonization in Western Australia is mainly the principle of synthesis, which allows her to combine effectively both Aboriginal and European historical sources and to echo what Hodge and Mishra, in their analysis of a play by the Aboriginal playwright Jack Davis, call a dual principle: "By using this dual principle of organization, Davis was able to fuse what have been seen as the two opposing kinds of history—linear European and circular Aboriginal—to represent both the continuities across time and the different possibilities offered by different circumstances" (103). In my view, Pilkington's text gets close to this principle in the sense that it "fuses" two historical perspectives and two means of recording history: one is based on archival, written materials, such as documents describing the first landings on the Western Australian coast, the early expeditions, and the founding of military bases and government depots, and later also the correspondence, official records, and newspaper reports related to the girls' escape. The other perspective is based on Aboriginal (hi)stories of the first contact, partly recorded from oral accounts, partly fictionalized by Pilkington herself. One example of this historical synthesis appears early in the book, when Pilkington juxtaposes two means of recording



one event—the establishment of the first military base on the Western coast in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first description obviously relies on European historiography, reminding readers of conventional early colonial narratives, such as navy officers' journals:

Major Edmund Lockyer with a detachment of eighteen soldiers from the 93<sup>rd</sup> Regiment and fifty convicts were sent to King George Sound (where Albany is now situated) by Governor Darling in New South Wales, to establish a military base. Their aim was to deter renegade convicts, whalers and sealers. They sailed in the brig *Amity* and had been anchored offshore in King George Sound for over a month. On a hot summer day in 1826, Major Lockyer and two of his officers went ashore and climbed the cliffs and explored the harbour. They were delighted with the beauty of the coastal region but were not impressed with the soil. (*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* 5)

Several paragraphs later, readers are confronted with the Aboriginal perspective of the same event, voiced through a group of Aborigines living in the area:

Suddenly they heard voices of men shouting loudly and yelling back and forth. Kundilla and his sons became alarmed. They clambered up the cliffs and hid behind the thick bushes on the rocky ledge. Lying on their stomachs they peered over the edge. They were not prepared for the sight that greeted them. They were confronted not with shouting, cruel men, but different men wearing strange scarlet jackets and others in white, coarse cotton suits. All these men were very pale. 'Surely they must be gengas,' whispered Kundilla, as he moved closer to the edge of the cliff. (*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* 5–6)

These “doubled” passages abound in Pilkington's narrative, suggesting that such a device may offer a true synthesis of the two histories. By placing these two segments side by side, the author draws attention to two different modes of recording history—the Western archival source supplying exact names and dates, depicting events in a seemingly objective, linear way, while the Aboriginal perspective is fictionalized and told as a story. Pilkington alludes here to the Western practice of privileging the former as a more credible account that is taken for granted as normative, and of suppressing the latter as lacking historical evidence and thus credibility.

Another example of the many ways in which the explorers' and Aboriginal histories are interwoven is the main theme of the entire narrative—the journey across the desert, across a difficult terrain that was often described by the first explorers as inhospitable, barren, and unwelcoming. The trek the three little girls undertake is presented as a heroic deed and presents a juxtaposition to the journeys of the first Anglo-Australian explorers, such as the famous 1860 Burke and Wills expedi-



tion across the continent from the south to the north, in which the two explorers died from starvation and exhaustion in a territory where Aboriginal people had lived for centuries. The fact that in Pilkington's story the Aboriginal girls, aged 8, 11, and 14, make a successful journey of about 1,600 km towards their home, escaping a government institution, therefore subverts the celebrated expeditions of Anglo-Australian heroes and the subsequent colonization and settlement of the region. The girls' journey home, in spite of the distance, also challenges the Department's effort to deterritorialize Aboriginal people with the aim of diminishing or destroying their bonds to land and kinship.

A specific strategy that Pilkington employs when presenting the two historical perspectives is her use and appropriation of the official archival materials. I use the term "appropriation" here to mean rejecting the privilege of the official, nationally established archive, seizing its power and using the material for new purposes. In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Pilkington appropriates archival materials and uses their credibility in order to make the victims of the system of surveillance visible. In her article on *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* and the effects of globalization, Brewster characterizes the notion of the archive and Pilkington's use of it in the following way:

The inclusion of these excerpts [from archival materials] 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.). (Brewster, "Aboriginal Life Writing and Globalization" n. pag.)

In Pilkington's narrative, the archive is depicted as an important means through which the colonizers exercised power in the form of controlling Aboriginal people's lives by monitoring their movement, employment, family connections, relationships, marriages, and reproduction. This information was recorded in the files of the Department of Native Affairs in Perth and in the correspondence of authorities. Throughout *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Pilkington uses these documents from her archival research and interweaves them either directly or indirectly into her narrative.<sup>27</sup> These documents include newspaper reports (17, 102), early

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27 Many Aboriginal writers writing life stories present information researched in the archives, which were inaccessible to them for a long time. Archival documents and records are sometimes the only means for Aboriginal people in Australia to trace their ancestors and find information about their rela-



settlers' diaries (16), station reports addressed to the Department of Native Affairs (39, 41), police records (46, 105, 112, 124), original photocopies of telegrams sent back and forth by the authorities (51, 53), transcripts of correspondence between A. O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines, and his informants (124–26, 128, 129), and the map of the girls' journey from Jigalong to the Moore River Native Settlement and the trek back home (x). The motivation for such incorporation of the archival materials is at least two-fold. First, Pilkington uses the archive to do what Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls “researching back” (7), which in her case means employing the archival knowledge to expose the monstrosity of the system of state intervention encoded in the policy of eugenics and for revealing the inhuman treatment of the “half-caste” people by the state authorities. Second, by showing histories and life experiences which inhabit the space *outside* of this archival material, for example the life at the Moore River Native Settlement from an Aboriginal point of view or the traditional Aboriginal knowledge that helps the three girls to “read” the landscape around them and thus survive in the outback, Pilkington points to the blind spots that the system of surveillance could not have encompassed.

Pilkington's usage of the official archive leads to establishing what Brewster calls a “counter-archive” which consists of “(formerly largely oral) Aboriginal knowledges and practices, such as hunting, birthing and mourning practices, food, drinks and medicines, marriage and skin customs and spiritual beliefs” (“Aboriginal Life Writing and Globalization” n. pag.). Brewster explains that “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” (“Aboriginal Life Writing and Globalization” n. pag.). Thus the appropriation of the archival material and formation of the counter-archive in Pilkington's, as well as Sterling's and Walters' narratives, emphasizes the fact that this type of Indigenous women's life writing combats the assumption that the official archive can completely define Indigenous people. After all, in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* the Aboriginal girls manage to escape against all odds, in spite of the entire official apparatus that is activated in their search. From an Aboriginal point of view, the story of the three girls' escape can be read as a story of outwitting the dominant power and as a celebration of Aboriginal abilities to survive in the face of policies of extermination.

Pilkington's strategies of resistance and of revealing subjugated knowledges in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* are highlighted most prominently in three areas: first, in Pilkington's use of Mardudjara words within her narrative in English; second, in her appropriation of the official archive through re-naming and subverting the

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tives, since sometimes their removal to the farthest possible area from their own land meant the severe rupture of family ties. Jackie Huggins comments on the difficulties of gaining access to the archival documents in *Sister Girl*, particularly in the chapter “Auntie Rita's File” (131–134).



vocabulary of the period documents; and third, in the ability of both the author and the main protagonist, Molly, to combine their traditional Aboriginal knowledge with the practices of the colonizers, forming a kind of hybrid knowledge. These three areas are explored in more detail in the following paragraphs.

The role of language as one of the main tools of colonial domination has been postulated for some time by postcolonial scholars. In settler colonies such as Australia, Canada, and the U.S., the focus has been on the process of using English as a source of creative subversion of the dominant power by marginalized groups, including Indigenous people (Ashcroft et al. 37). It is also Indigenous people, it has been argued, who exemplify one of the richest developments of what Hodge and Mishra call “antilanguage strategies” (206) which stem from the people’s strong attachment to their traditional languages and their enormous efforts to keep the languages alive. Therefore Indigenous life writing sometimes incorporates Indigenous languages into the English text, ranging from individual words and phrases to entire passages such as poems or stories. In addition to bonding the community and reviving the lost language fragments, this strategy also encodes the text and to a certain extent excludes outsiders, which is the fundamental characteristic of antilanguages (Hodge and Mishra 206). The exclusion of the non-Indigenous readership does not have to be, however, complete: Indigenous writers frequently provide a translation either within the text or in a glossary at the end, which is the case of Pilkington’s narrative. Therefore it is possible to say that while partially encoding parts of the texts, the writers also provide decoding clues. If the reader is a cultural outsider, however, the translations are often not enough: rarely do they offer explanations of social concepts linked to kinship, religion, economies or various communal policies. The linguistic translation thus creates the illusion for cultural outsiders that they can fully understand what they can in reality understand only partially.

As an example, Pilkington’s text relatively often uses the Mardudjara word *dgudu*, by which Daisy and Gracie, the younger girls, address the oldest Molly. *Dgudu* is translated in the glossary as an “older sister” and throughout the text there are ambivalent references to the kinship relationships among the three girls. Strictly speaking, according to the Western social structures, Molly, Daisy, and Gracie are cousins, not sisters. However, in the kinship structures of the Mardudjara people, the three girls would be considered sisters due to their close relationships and their growing up together. Similarly, words linked to a different system of beliefs, such as *gengas* (translated as “spirit of the ancestors”) or *marbarn* (“object of magical powers for healing or finding lost items”) may be intelligible but conceptually challenging or even misleading for non-Indigenous readers. It is interesting to note the areas in which Pilkington actually uses Mardudjara words in her narrative. From a simple analysis of the glossary, it is clear that the words and phrases in the traditional language relate to several groups: the first one includes kinship-related words and words describing relationships between people,





both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal; the second area covers concepts related to the belief system; and the third area depicts practical, everyday objects, such as the names of clothes, body parts, food, and animals, but also things important for survival in the desert, for example cardinal points and seasons of the year. This overview shows that Pilkington's strategy is to encode concepts important for the traditional Aboriginal cultural practices and to record the counter-archive consisting of Aboriginal subjugated knowledges.

Pilkington incorporates the official archive into her text and subsequently appropriates this archive while at the same time creating a counter-archive of knowledge. The resistance to the official archive is also demonstrated through the vocabulary Pilkington employs, exposing the discrepancy between Aboriginal and settlers' political systems. For example, a paradoxical ambiguity appears in the use of the word "protection." On the one hand, it is used by the authorities in the correspondence and newspaper reports to justify the mobilization of the police apparatus in the search for the three runaways through rhetoric such as "we are very anxious that no harm may come to them in the bush" (102) or "I fear for their safety" (*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* 113). On the other hand, there is the reality in which the girls, quite capable of not only surviving in the outback but also of turning their knowledge of the environment to their advantage, know they must escape this "protection" that in their own vocabulary equals dangerous persecution. In other instances, Pilkington contrasts the official euphemisms for the oppressive treatment of Indigenous children, such as "native settlement," "school," and "students," with her own vocabulary, where the Native settlement is a "concentration camp" and the children are "inmates" (72). The image of jail is further invoked by Pilkington's description of the girls' dormitory in the settlement, stressing the bars on the windows and padlocks on the doors (63). Finally, Pilkington does not hesitate to call the removal of the three girls from their families an "abduction" (45). Significantly, neither does Pilkington shy away from referring to the sexual relationships between white men and Aboriginal women. At the beginning of her account, she describes the practices of the whalers and sealers: "Those cruel and murderous men came ashore and stole Aboriginal women and kept them on board their ships as sexual slaves, then murdered them and tossed their bodies into the ocean" (4). Later, when describing the early settlements and pastoralists' stations, Pilkington exposes the names of Molly and Gracie's white fathers (48). This has become an important strategy in Indigenous women's life writing through which authors confront the often prominent descendants of the Australian "founding fathers," as is most strikingly done in Sally Morgan's *My Place*.

The concept of subjugated knowledges in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is related mainly to the counter-archive of traditional Aboriginal knowledge which surfaces particularly at the beginning of the story in the pre-contact and early-contact history of the Nyungar and Mardu people, as well as during the girls' journey during



which the traditional knowledge helps them survive. Revealing this knowledge has a didactic function as the narrative provides information on various aspects of Aboriginal life, from everyday practices, such as hunting and cooking, to beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, kinship systems, and so on. Pilkington, for example, gives a complex account of Aboriginal codes related to covering their naked bodies. In a passage describing Aboriginal people's adoption, both voluntary and involuntary, of certain products and everyday practices of the settlers, she mentions how Aboriginal people who came to live near white settlements were made to cover their naked bodies. She depicts the initial puzzlement of the Aboriginal families coming from the desert at the incomprehensible embarrassment of white people because of their nakedness. She then goes on to explicate a set of Aboriginal practices connected to the body and skin, such as covering their bodies with a mixture of red ochre and animal fat to protect them from evil spirits during ceremonies or to disguise human odors when hunting (25). In this way, the subjugated knowledge, i.e. both ceremonial and everyday practice, is revealed in the wake of describing a custom imposed on the Aboriginal population by the settlers.

It was noted earlier that Pilkington combines Western historical sources, going as far as quoting directly from major Australian historians such as Robert Hughes and his *The Fatal Shore (Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence 12)*, with transcribed oral accounts collected from her relatives. Pilkington juxtaposes not only the public and the political with the private and the personal, but also the two systems of knowledge: "I have though worked to synthesize these different forms of knowledge to give readers the fullest insight into this historic journey," explains Pilkington in the introduction to her text (xiv). Indeed, she manages to interweave the two frameworks in a kind of hybrid knowledge which draws on both Indigenous and Western epistemologies. This hybrid knowledge proves vital even for the protagonists themselves. Molly, for example, can successfully find her way home only through using the traditional Aboriginal knowledge of the bush *and* her knowledge of the geography of the rabbit-proof fence—a Western technology. In this sense, the rabbit-proof fence, paradoxically, becomes a symbol of homecoming. Another example of cultural hybridity is echoed in the passage in which the three girls are taken south on a boat and, approaching Fremantle, the sight of the wheat flour producer's logo—a dingo—immediately brings back memories of home and family gatherings:

As the red dingo became more visible, Molly, Daisy and Gracie felt an acute pang of homesickness. How many ration bags had their mothers, grandmothers and aunts used with that red dingo—midgi-midgi dgundu—on them? Scores and scores when you think of all the dampers they cooked. When the bags were empty the women made them into bags for carrying food and other items or filled them with old rags and used them as pillows. Bloomers and shifts were also cut out of the flour bags. Yes, they had grown



up with the red dingo. Tears welled in their eyes as they remembered their families.  
(Pilkington, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* 56)

This scene is worth quoting at length because it reveals inscribed resistance and subjugated knowledges in a complex way. First, it shows hybrid knowledge in the combination of a Western concept (producing flour) that is symbolized, interestingly, by a native Australian animal (dingo), an important element of Aboriginal life. But paradoxically it is not the dingo itself that signifies home for the girls; rather, home is symbolized by what the dingo represents in the white world—dozens and dozens of flour bags that Aboriginal families used, which prompts the girls to remember their Aboriginal identity. Secondly, the passage uncovers an important set of strategies which appropriate a Western product for other purposes. Thus the used flour bags cover the basic needs of an Aboriginal family who were made dependent on the rations provided by the government and forced to gradually succumb to the settler way of life. Finally, the passage also reveals resistance to assimilation as the girls spontaneously recall their memories of the community of women cooking meals at home. This is something that provides a link between and a transition from Pilkington’s narrative to Shirley Sterling’s life writing.

## Shirley Sterling | AlterNative (Hi)story

Sometimes at dusk  
When Shadowtime steals souls,  
I listen at the nighthawk  
Screams and falls.  
I search the clouds for moonlight. ...

Then somewhere in the pines  
Coyote laughs—  
Transforming night,  
And welcoming the little star  
That follows Moon.

Shirley Sterling, *My Name Is Seepetza* (n. pag.)

Shirley Sterling’s *My Name Is Seepetza* can be compared to *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* in its effort to confront settler history with Indigenous history and provide what Kateri Damm, in her analysis of Maria Campbell’s and Beatrice Culleton’s autobiographies, calls “an alterNative perspective of the history of Canada,” which is intended to “affirm and preserve Native views, Native realities, and Native forms of telling, while actively challenging and redefining dominant concepts



of history, truth and fact” (95). In her portrayal of the residential school system in Canada, Sterling follows a tradition of similar narratives, most prominently Basil Johnston’s *Indian School Days* (1988). With a technique that is atypical in Indigenous life writing—a diary form—and a child narrator, Sterling’s story represents one of the many accounts of the residential school system in Canada in the late 1950s. Although the narrative is strongly autobiographical, based on the author’s own experience in the Kamloops Residential School in interior British Columbia, Sterling also incorporates and fictionalizes her sisters’ and friends’ experiences from the same institution. The persona of a twelve-year old N’laka’pamux girl, named Seepeetza by her family but later renamed Martha Stone by the school staff, provides Sterling with tools for presenting the story through a child’s innocent and naïve eyes. Using a child narrator allows Sterling to unmask and criticize abusive practices perpetrated by the residential school system. The heroine is separated from her family at the age of six to spend each year, with the exception of the two summer months, at the fictional Kalamak Indian Residential School. In her diary entries, Seepeetza records the events and details of residential school life, including the memory of her first day of grade one, marked by the trauma of unwanted parting from her family and having to succumb to the strict regime of the school.

From the very beginning, Sterling’s narrative is told in a series of contrasts that can be summarized under the heading “school versus home.” The diary structure reveals a pattern in the organization of the individual entries which frequently begin by recording an event or a detail from the school’s life that is immediately followed by a memory of a similar event or activity that is done in the family circle, and vice versa. These contrasts are not only implicitly encoded in the text; they are consciously placed side by side by the narrator herself, as in the following quote: “When we’re at home we can ride horses, go swimming at the river, run in the hills, climb trees and laugh out loud and holler yahoo anytime we like and we won’t get in trouble. At school we get punished for talking, looking at boys in church, even stepping out of line. I wish I could live at home instead of here” (Sterling 13–14). Similar passages show the depth of the narrator’s trauma from the separation and the impossibility of justifying in any way the officially established assimilationist system, especially since the story foregrounds a picture of a functional Native family which is loving, caring, and self-sufficient, devoid of stereotypical images of domestic violence, alcoholism, or neglected children. Seepeetza’s family is provided for by the father who, apart from having a job as a court interpreter due to his knowledge of six Indian languages, is also a hunter and rancher working on his own farm (67, 65), and it is implied that he is also involved in activism promoting social justice for Indigenous people (67). Seepeetza’s life at the Joyaska ranch is characterized by a circle of extended family members; by joy, freedom, and various little incidents and humorous episodes.



This portrayal of an Indigenous family is very important as it resists the common representations of dysfunctional Indigenous families that have become a target of state welfare policies as well as the subject of many literary accounts. In *My Name Is Seepeetza*, however, the passages depicting the harmonious family environment make it all the more difficult for the reader to comprehend the rationale behind the forced separations.

As the narrator moves back and forth in time and space, images of home are positioned against the strict, military-like regime at the residential school. The contrasts between the two environments can be found on various levels, from differences in food to exercising physical violence. The descriptions of home-made food, which is abundant, healthy, tasteful, and always shared (Sterling 66) are juxtaposed with the lack of food at the residential school; it is repeatedly suggested that the school provides insufficient, miserable, and unhealthy meals, and the children frequently suffer from hunger (87). While the work at home is meaningful, done for the benefit of the whole family and in accordance with seasonal cycles, the work assigned to children at the school is hard and sometimes pointless, consisting mainly of endless cleaning, polishing, scrubbing, waxing, and washing. A contrast is also made between the mostly outdoor activities and labour tasks at the ranch, when Seepeetza helps her father with haying, rides horses, takes care of domestic animals, and generally spends most of her free time outdoors, and the strictly indoor, domestic labor at the school. In this respect it is necessary to take into account that one of the aims of residential schools in Canada, similarly to the mission schools in Australia and the boarding schools in the U.S., was to train Indigenous girls in domestic service so that they could be later employed in white families or various institutions.

Another stark contrast concerns the emotional development of the children and the methods of “educating” them. While Seepeetza’s family encourages emotional expression and provides a safe environment for the children to run around and play together, the school’s environment explicitly demonstrates its lack of affection and care, any sign of which is suppressed or punished. Physical violence and corporal punishment become tools for maintaining control and the status quo in the power relations at the school. Against Seepeetza’s firm statement—“My mum and dad never hit us” (Sterling 83)—stand repeated incidents of being pushed, beaten, and “getting the strap” which are reported as so common that children even “get used to it” (18). It is precisely this record of physical and psychological abuse that contributes to creating a powerful counter-narrative that challenges the national account of the treatment of Indigenous people in Canada in the form of, for example, official reports from residential school principals, and also undermines the image of the “beneficiary” impact of the churches and missions that frequently ran the residential schools. In Seepeetza’s narrative, four hundred Indian students are under the supervision of the school’s principal Fa-



ther Sloane, six other priests, and the nuns who are responsible for teaching and managing the children's free time. Seepeetza repeatedly illustrates the power relations in the school, where the nuns and priests use shame and force to destroy children's ties to their culture. The children are forbidden to speak their own languages, denied the right to be called by their traditional names, and prevented from maintaining emotional ties with their siblings.

Sterling's critique of the brutal reality in the Kamloops Residential School and of the complicity of the missionaries is veiled by her use of a child narrator. One of the reasons for using this device may be the young readership to which the book is addressed. It was originally published for the juvenile market: it won the 1993 Sheila A. Egoff Children's Book Prize and was short-listed for the Governor General's Award for Children's Literature. Since then, however, the book has found an adult readership as well. Jo-Ann Episkenew explains that Sterling chose the genre strategically, since as an educator and teacher she was well aware of the invisibility of the history of residential schools in school history books and therefore "motivated by socio-pedagogical objectives" (125). Another reason for using a child narrator might be Sterling's desire to avoid a strictly historicizing mode of writing and present a more literary and less historical account. While the narrative does reveal the trauma of separation and the sense of alienation and loneliness at the residential school, it never actually describes openly the physical and sexual abuse the children suffered. Instead, the descriptions of the systematic oppression and abuse through the child narrator who has a limited knowledge of what is happening around her take the form of dramatic irony and subtle hints. In fact, this subtlety of the descriptions even intensifies their impact. Nobody from the school staff is spared the author's critique and latent accusations. Examples include Father Sloane, who is said to be "interested" in girls, which is demonstrated by the frequency of his visits to the girls' gym and by his teasing them (Sterling 93), and other priests who are accused of "doing something bad" to several boys who subsequently decide to run away (12-13). The viciousness and hypocrisy of the nuns is also evident: for example, Sister Superior is known for carrying a strap in her sleeve all the time and hitting the children's hands whenever "someone is bad" (18); or, when Seepeetza wets her bed, she is publicly humiliated by one of the sisters (19). One of the supervising nuns, Sister Theo, is described in Seepeetza's diary as a "wicked witch in the Wizard of Oz," which is underscored by the detailed description of her black robe and veil, big nose, and small shiny eyes, and by the sinister clicking of the rosary beads hanging at her waist which makes all the children run away at her approach (51). This fearful image of the nun, however, suddenly dissolves in the next memory-image of Seepeetza's mother, who is depicted in both her physical appearance (her beauty, long black hair, and big brown eyes) and her kindness (she speaks softly, smiles a lot, and shows affection) (51-52). This contrast yet again places side by



side the atrocious reality and the happy memories, asserting Seepeetza's ability to "see through" what had been imposed on her.

The use of the child narrator also allows Sterling to occasionally undermine the grave tone of the whole narrative. Sometimes Seepeetza records in her diary various humorous episodes and family jokes that she recalls mostly from the periods spent at home playing with her siblings and cousins. At other times, Seepeetza, in her childhood naivety, unconsciously subverts the imposition of Christianity on Native people by fusing the sublime of the Church and the everyday, such as when she comments on the obligatory attendance at Sunday Masses: "On Sunday morning we go to High Mass. The girls have to wear navy blue tams. At home the women wear kerchiefs. Father Sloane wears gold and white vestments. I like Sunday mornings because we get cornflakes for breakfast" (26). As in many Indigenous narratives, Christianity and missionary activities are treated with suspicion, but also with a sense of humor. But in spite of the narrator's honest and naive tone, the themes of the text are earnest. Even though the narrative ends with a nostalgic and quite idyllic picture of Seepeetza's family's happy times together during summer, it is acknowledged that the narrator will be returning to school to face yet another year. This makes it difficult for the reader to form an optimistic conclusion—a feature that links Sterling's narrative to that of Pilkington's: *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* also subverts the seemingly "happy ending" of the separated family's reunion by foreshadowing Molly's and even her daughter's forced return to the Moore River Native Settlement.

Sterling's narrative is most instrumental in combining the strategies of resistance and adaptation to the residential school system in what Rauna Kuokkanen, drawing on the Native American writer and critic Gerald Vizenor, calls "survivance" which, as a theoretical concept, weaves together the notions of resistance and survival in an effort to challenge the "dualistic notions of dominance and victimhood" (Kuokkanen 700). Compared to Pilkington's account of open and active resistance in the form of the girls' escape, Seepeetza's resistances to assimilation are more strategic, subtle, and hidden. On one level, they relate to language and naming. It is a well-known fact that children in mission and residential schools were strictly forbidden to use Indigenous languages. Both Pilkington and Sterling depict this policy as a traumatic experience for the children and a severe cultural loss. However, both narratives also provide many instances of strategic uses of Indigenous languages, in situations when the children do not want to be understood by others or when they want to deliberately reminisce about their homes and families. The symbolic title of *My Name Is Seepeetza* alludes to one of the first internal conflicts Seepeetza encounters at school:

After that Sister Maura asked me what my name was. I said, 'my name is Seepeetza.' Then she got really mad like I did something terrible. She said never to say that word



again. She told me if I had a sister go and ask what my name was. I went to the intermediate rec and found Dorothy lying on a bench reading comics. I asked her what my name was. She said it was Martha Stone. I said it over and over. (Sterling 18)

Seepeetza is therefore deprived of her traditional name given to her by her father after a community elder, a name which reflects her Indigenous identity and anchors her existence in the midst of her family. At the same time, the fact that Sterling titled her narrative with this assertive statement by a little girl confirms Seepeetza's connection to the culture that the residential school system tried to deny her. In addition, Seepeetza remembers not only her own traditional name, but also the names of her siblings, and she occasionally uses Indigenous words to name important concepts, such as *shamah* for a "white person" (100), rituals such as *potlatch* for a big gathering (121), or favorite pastime activities such as *lahal* for a stick game (123). Similarly, writing the journal is itself an act of resistance for Seepeetza, as she can put down her memories of the happier times, and at the same time spell out the names and willful acts of the school staff. In this way she actually manages to provide a written "report" of the ideology within which the residential school operates.

Seepeetza's resistances to the residential school regime and its pervasive control over her every movement are, as it has been pointed out, subtle and hidden, mostly kept secret from the nuns. The variety of these resistances ranges from individual acts, such as holding hands with her sisters when walking outside (12) or writing one diary for the class and another one in secret (12), to the collective resistance of all the school children who were ordered to laugh at the run-away boys after they were caught and brought back in order to publicly humiliate them, but nobody, as if in support of the boys, makes fun of them (13). Occasionally, Seepeetza resists openly when one of the Sisters crosses an imaginary line and Seepeetza is driven to threaten suicide should the Sister insist (83). But examples like these are rare; resistance more often happens in the sphere of Seepeetza's fantasies of home while she accommodates herself to the regime.

One of the many examples of revealing subjugated knowledges in the form of traditional tribal cultural practices concerns bringing aspects of Indigenous culture to school, which helps the children to maintain their Indigenous identity. When the girls have to peel corn after classes, this simple domestic task immediately evokes the memory of Native women doing similar work at home and the joking, laughing, and storytelling it is related to, while it also strengthens the solidarity among the residential school attendees: "Then we all started to get happy, even the big girls. We started joking and laughing like Mum and Aunt Mamie and Yah-yah do when they're cleaning berries or fish together at home. They tell stories and laugh all day while they're working" (14). In this case, instead of complying with the school rules, the girls spontaneously imitate what they were exposed





to at home and saw as natural, and in this way they manage to slip away, if only for a moment, from the school's pervasive controlling regime.

Through Seepeetza's memories of home, Sterling's account also makes more visible the traditional Indigenous knowledge that has been suppressed in the children attending residential schools. This is most evident in passages where Seepeetza unconsciously compares the two educational systems, describing the Indigenous ways of transmitting knowledge, such as storytelling and generational learning from family elders. For example, Seepeetza reminisces about her mother making a fish trap in the way that her grandmother had taught her, just as she had taught her about "Indian medicine" (89). Indeed, skills like weaving, making clothes, gathering food, and collecting herbal medicines are presented as typically women's set of knowledges "inherited" from the elder family members. In this light it is a great paradox that this traditional knowledge, including speaking the Native language, is kept hidden from Seepeetza and her siblings by their parents, who themselves have suffered a similar trauma as a result of their experiences in a residential school or in the clash with the settler culture. In spite of this, the children cannot be totally kept away from traditional knowledge as it is a part of everyday life and naturally they come into contact with it. This includes communal activities, such as seasonal camping trips filled with berry picking and hunting, through which Seepeetza, in spite of the seeming innocence and simplicity of the activities, learns important principles, such as sharing food, labor division, and the naming of things in Indian language. The following quote summarizes everything that the Indigenous system of teaching and learning provides:

The old people like Yah-Yah smile at you and tell you something about the trail you're following or show you how to cover your berries with leaves so they stay fresh. They know where to find the biggest berries and how to cook delicious food over the campfire. They notice how many berries you pick, who sneaks off to go fishing, and what everybody likes to eat. They tease you around the campfire if you don't pick many berries. Next day you pick lots. (Sterling 91)

This passage also shows, in addition to the methods of educating the young, the system of social control exercised by the elders who watch over the younger members and punish those who do not comply with the rules by teasing. The scene also invites a comparison with the residential school's educational methods based on physical punishment, humiliation, and control of every single movement. Through the activities described above, Seepeetza develops a strong sense of belonging to land and her people, including her awareness of the positive exceptionality of her Indigenous identity. Seepeetza says: "There is something really special about mountain people. It's a feeling like you know who you are, and you know each other. You belong to the mountains" (91). This assertion of her identi-



ty is certainly very different from the internal racism and negative perception of Indigenous identity among most of the residential schools' victims, as well as from some urban characters in the works of Maria Campbell and Lee Maracle.

On the whole, the major contribution of Sterling's narrative to writing Indigenous women's resistance to assimilation is the non-stereotypical portrait of a functional Native family and its everyday activities depicted in fragments and details that together comprise a mosaic depicting a small part of a Native community in 1950s Canada. This image is particularly strong towards the end of the book, where Seepeetza is back home at the Joyaska ranch during her two-month summer holiday and records the everyday events that make up the precious time spent with extended family. This section is important as it communicates the complexities of hybrid knowledge consisting of two elements: on the one hand, there is the traditional Indigenous knowledge represented especially by the grandparents and partly by the parents who, however, wish to keep it hidden from their children in order to protect them; on the other hand, there are the children who must develop certain survival skills in order to "make it" in a modern world where the dominant settler society threatens Indigenous cultural values. The result is to make various compromises, such as sending children to the residential school and not teaching them Native languages. The next generation then become the bearers of this hybrid knowledge, combing the two epistemologies and worldviews and trying to make the best of it. The ending of Sterling's narrative is imbued with sad nostalgia and a sense of loss: Seepeetza's brother Jimmy leaves to study at a university, while Seepeetza's father predicts the destruction of the valley and the ranch in the face of commercial development. His advice to his children is clearly a resigned one: "You kids want to get yourself an education. Get a job. That way you'll be okay" (125). This kind of ending is disturbing and ambivalent when compared to Seepeetza's assertion of her Indigenous identity, since it suggests that Seepeetza's future lies, after all, somewhere other than in the center of her Indigenous community. In her last entry, Seepeetza is clearly aware of the pressure to leave the past behind: "I think I'll leave the journal at home in the attic inside my dad's old violin case. If Yah-yah is in the mountains where we go to pick berries, I'll ask her to make a buckskin cover for it. I'll ask her to bead fireweed flowers on it" (126). These last words refer to the borderline between the past, symbolized by the grandmother as the keeper of Seepeetza's diary, and the future which, through spending more years in the residential school, may also bring further alienation from the traditional Indigenous culture.



## Anna Lee Walters | Tribal (Hi)stories

So we sing, have reason to sing of our peoples' lives and experiences. By our very existence, our birth—individual and collective, we cannot help but sing.

Anna Lee Walters, *Talking Indian* (220)

Although Anna Lee Walters' *Talking Indian: Reflections on Survival and Writing* can be categorized as a life writing narrative, it is also a piece of non-fiction with fictional elements in the form of short stories that are incorporated into the narrative. It can also serve as a link between the personal non-fiction analyzed in the first section and the life writing explored in the second section: its essayistic, self-reflective nature and personal observations on various aspects of Native American life relate Walters' text to the narratives of Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle and Jackie Huggins, while the themes of re-writing history, inscribing resistance to assimilation and depicting the traumatic experience of separation can be compared to those in Doris Pilkington's and Shirley Sterling's narratives. Walters' account, however, is concerned less with the boarding school experience and more with the history of the author's two inherited cultures, Otoe and Pawnee. In addition, while Pilkington's and Sterling's texts reveal the strategies of re-writing history and resisting mainstream historiography through actual, partly fictionalized life stories, Walters frequently provides interpretations of her own writing about the meanings of history, survival, and memory, and of her short stories that are either included in *Talking Indian* or have been published elsewhere.

Like Pilkington and Sterling, Walters is interested in exploring the contrasts and discrepancies between Western historiography and what she calls "tribal" history (*Talking Indian* 75). Above all, she is disturbed by the misleading representations of Native Americans in U.S. literature and history, which she perceives as negative and often uninformed. At the beginning of the third part of her book, called "History," Walters asserts:

Eventually I saw the literary treatment of tribal peoples by non-tribal writers as a way of maintaining the status quo of mainstream society. And the absence of individual Native voices interpreting their own identities and histories appeared as a form of censure, as a form of suppression that was deeply rooted in American society. I began to evaluate tribal histories versus American history, and to study what history means to tribal societies, as compared to what history is to American (mainstream) society. How do tribal histories vary from American history in their perspectives, structure, and content? And how do tribal people relate to their own respective histories? (*Talking Indian* 75)

This quote suggests Walters' main strategies in *Talking Indian*: she fills in the gap of the missing Native American voices by adding them to the American histori-



cal discourse; she interprets her tribes' histories and her tribal identity; and she evaluates the meanings of history in Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. In fact, her overview of the conceptual differences between Indigenous and American historiography, such as the emphasis of tribal histories on family lineage, "pre-human" existence, shared responsibility for recording history, and the preservation of history in other than written documents (ceremonies, storytelling, prayers, songs), points to an alternative approach to history which is comparable to Pilkington's and Sterling's strategies and provides a methodology for interpreting Indigenous tribal histories distorted by Western interpretations.

While Pilkington's tactic of re-writing settler history is a synthesis of the two sources of history and an appropriation of the official archive, and Sterling's approach stresses more the contrasts between the two social environments, Walters foregrounds Indigenous oral tradition and techniques of storytelling. Following a specific pattern, in the first half of the book Walters offers non-fictional, explanatory, and educational passages about various aspects of tribal life (the first four parts include "Oral Tradition," "World View," "History," and "Identity") and then complements each of them with a fictional short story. This structure makes it possible for her to make implicit as well as explicit references to traditional storytelling. The purpose of the fictional stories accommodates both the author's respect for tribal traditions, especially storytelling, and her creative potential. The short stories themselves are partly fictional works, but at the same time they are modelled on the collective sources of oral stories handed down by the community members. This is the case, for example, of the John Stink story from Walters' earlier collection of short stories *The Sun Is Not Merciful* (1985), which Walters admits was inspired by many informal versions of the same tale but is entirely fictional in its written form: "I thought of my tale as simply another in the tradition of John Stink storytellers—except that mine was *written* as fiction. In other words, I made most of it up!" (*Talking Indian* 22, original emphasis). This self-interpretation suggests that Walters, and the tribal society for that matter, perceives authorship and credibility very differently from Western conventions. Walters takes on the role of a modern storyteller, scribe, and chronicler, using contemporary methodology (i.e. writing fiction in various genres) but relying on the old, tribal sources.

In contrast to Pilkington, who in her narrative integrates archival materials from mainstream historiography, including citations and references, Walters' strategy is to present a genuine counter-history, relying only on the Indigenous worldview, in particular the tribal histories of the Otoe and the Pawnee (her parental tribal cultures) as well as the Navajo (her husband's tribal culture). Although she is obviously well-read in the mainstream historiography, she mostly refers to its misinterpretations and distortions of Indigenous history. Settler history is completely marginalized in her account, present only through vague and undefined



allusions and phrases such as “We [Indigenous people] have read that ...,” “Indian people today ... have often been told that ...,” “They said that ...,” “This is what we were taught repeatedly” (*Talking Indian* 134), or “We have all heard it said that ...” (135). This is a subtle, yet powerful critique of the dominant historical and educational discourse which has turned Indigenous people into mere spectators of their own history, playing no active part in its constitution on the national level. Then, as if to prove the suggested statements wrong, especially those pointing to the disappearance and extermination of the “real Indians,” the “inevitable” destruction of tribal life styles, and the invisibility of Indigenous cultures in formal educational curricula (134–35), Walters sets out on a journey to uncover what has been hidden, i.e. the physical and cultural survival of her people, as reflected in the counter-histories of her tribe and family.

Writing and history are inseparable for Walters, as for many other Indigenous writers, including Pilkington and Sterling. Walters admits that because the histories of her tribes inform her entire worldview, naturally they must also find their way into her writing. The following quote expresses what writing history means for her and at the same time foregrounds the interconnectedness between the history of a tribe and the history of a family:

Today, my occupation as a writer is related to what my grandfather and grandmother did when they repeated family history in the manner of their elders, leading the family all over this sacred land, this continent most recently called America in the last five hundred years. ... In the same way, I repeat their words to my children and grandchildren. In tribal society, this is who history is for, after all, in a very personalized version of time. (*Talking Indian* 86)

Again, the stress on repetition, on passing on the (hi)stories onto the next generation, refers to Walters’ strong awareness of storytelling techniques. This knowledge serves her well when in the second part of the book she reconstructs the tribal histories of the three Indigenous cultural groups, which becomes her most significant strategy for re-writing history.

In the chapter dedicated to the Pawnee, Walters’ maternal tribe, for example, the author starts off with a brief overview of the pre-contact history of the Pawnee and goes on to present a Pawnee perspective on the subsequent historical events. These include the making of formal treaties with the U.S. government, the recognition of the tribe as a whole and its placement under the guidance of the U.S. in 1825, the constant relocations and compensations paid for the land taken, but also the wars with other neighboring tribes and the smallpox epidemics (*Talking Indian* 137–40). In this section, Walters is obviously relying on archival documents to provide historical data in the Western sense. Her narrative voice, in contrast to the first part of the book in which she includes autobiographical and fictional



elements, becomes very detached and objective, recalling mainstream history writing: her sentences are short and matter-of-fact; the account is strictly linear. This detachment, as if to evoke an “objective” critical distance, resembles the way in which Jackie Huggins employs “the historian’s” voice, as opposed to the voice with which she addresses her mother and her people. Similarly, when Walters later gets to the more recent history, her voice becomes more engaged: she starts incorporating tribal sources and introductory phrases such as “it is told,” or “in the words of an old man,” now referring to Indigenous voices, not mainstream historiography (143). There are also informal stories, including humorous ones, relating, for example, animosities between the neighboring tribes; such stories seem to circulate through the oral tradition. Similarly, in another example from the history of the Otoe, against a sober statement that the Otoe were relocated from Nebraska to the Indian Territory in 1881, Walters carefully places the transcribed story of the removal as told by her grandfather, who was born in 1873. The passage, written in italics and as direct speech, evokes not history textbooks or documents but a very personal, emotional, and deeply human account of the difficult journey (25–26), not dissimilar from Pilkington’s narrative of her people’s journey from the desert region. Another aspect that connects Walters with Pilkington’s account of the Nyungar and Mardudjara histories is the gradual progress in telling the tribal histories, moving from the general, more distant, and collective accounts to the histories of a specific clan and kinship, to the life stories or biographies of family ancestors, ending with an autobiographical and highly personal touch.

The introduction to this chapter suggested that the strategies of re-writing history are frequently intertwined with the educational purpose of the life writing narratives, and the three narratives analyzed in this section are no exception. In the same way that writing is inseparable from telling history, telling history is inseparable from passing on knowledge of tribal history. Doris Pilkington’s account seems to be directed mainly at the non-Indigenous readership as it attempts to translate the experience of the Stolen Generations as well as the early history of her people in Western Australia. Shirley Sterling’s autobiographical portrait is also educational as it is addressed to a juvenile market. Because of its accessible form, young people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, can empathize with Seepeetza’s sadness, alienation, confusion, and internal conflicts, and through her desire to go back home to her family they can see the injustice and cruelty of the residential school system. Walters accomplishes the same effect by foregrounding the tribal histories of specific Indigenous groups largely based on oral forms of recording historical events in order to counterbalance the common misrepresentations of Native Americans in the popular media. All three narratives essentially draw upon traditional Indigenous strategies of recording history; at the same time, they use Western genres in order to gain the power to tell their own versions of history in contemporary political arenas.



Although *Talking Indian* differs from Pilkington's and Sterling's texts in many ways, one of thematic and formal elements that they all share is inscribing resistance strategies and revealing subjugated knowledge in the context of the boarding school experience. The very last chapter of Walters' book, titled "The Fourth World," focuses more on Walters' personal life, the memories of her childhood and growing up among Indigenous families before being separated and placed in the formal educational institution provided by the government. Like Sterling, Walters draws on the technique of foregrounding the idyllic, harmonious childhood spent with her grandparents in the traditional Indigenous community and then contrasting this image to the sense of alienation, oppression, and abuse experienced in the boarding school.

In her youth, Walters was very much influenced by the Otoe world of her paternal grandparents, who taught her tribal culture such as songs and the meaning of ceremonies. Walters describes this period of her life in a romanticized, nostalgic way, putting stress on the educational aspect and tribal knowledge:

I thought the whole world was Indian, was Otoe. They opened my eyes and formed my first words with me. No, they did not put words into my mouth, and even if they did, I did not taste them. They filled my mouth and belly with wild berries me and Grandpa picked from a slow moving wagon. They filled me with old dreams they or their ancestors had dreamed collectively hundreds of years before. They made me see things only I could see, and hear the old stories and songs they told with exaggerated animation and sang with such haunting emotion. Maybe that is the same thing as putting words into my mouth. (*Talking Indian* 189)

This and the subsequent passages in Walters' account portray the grandparents as sources of tribal power, traditional Indigenous knowledge, and affirmative Indigenous identity. On a formal level, these passages also present a very poetic language underscored by storytelling techniques such as repetition. The early separation from her parents shortly after Walters' birth does not seem to have disturbed Walters' harmonious childhood in any way; rather, it is taken for granted that growing up with one's grandparents is common in Native communities. Walters dedicates a lot of space to the detailed depiction of both her paternal and maternal grandparents, especially the grandmothers, joining the two histories—the life stories of the two tribal families—together in a family saga-like narrative.

This peaceful period in Walters' life is suddenly disrupted by the traumatic experience at the boarding school. Here Walters' account resonates most with Sterling's and Pilkington's: humiliation and shaming are depicted as common, through practices such as delousing, cutting the long hair, issuing uniform clothing and shoes, assigning useless work and hard domestic tasks, forbidding Native languages, imposing a military regime on the children, and denying their Indigenous



identity. Like the other two narratives, this particular chapter in *Talking Indian* resists the ideology behind the state policies of separation and assimilation of Indigenous people in the United States. This is confirmed by Tillett who points to Walters' "direct resistance to ongoing and pervasive forces of assimilation which, through an imposed Indian education system, taught her and other Native American children that 'all the real Indians are gone: conquered, subdued, extinct, assimilated'" (Walters qtd. in Tillett 80). Walters' boarding school experience, although it results in alienation from her grandparents after her return home, is a far cry from ensuring her assimilation into the mainstream society. Walters' resistances against the boarding school system and the school staff are similar in character to those shared by Sterling's and Pilkington's protagonists. As a child, Walters keeps her cut braids in a shoe box in protest (*Talking Indian* 206) and talks back to the matron when the reasoning for some activity runs against her Indigenous beliefs (206); she also participates in collective resistance when the children manage to escape the staff's control and immediately slip back into their suppressed selves: "We listened to the stories of each other's family and people that all of us told. We heard how so-and-so's grandmother could turn herself into a snake, how someone else's people were buried in trees, the stories of Deer Woman, and countless other tales" (207). It is clear that Walters reminisces about the subjugated cultural practices in the same way that Seepeetza does when the children slip away from the school's surveillance. Rather than making them forget their Indigenous identity, these moments of resistance are used by the children to affirm it.

One of the more complex strategies for resisting the boarding school system in Walters' account points to the failure of the state to recognize traditional animosities between certain tribes—something that, according to Walters, "each child was thoroughly aware of" (*Talking Indian* 206). As the children were "well-versed" in their tribal histories and naturally knew who their traditional enemies were, they transplanted this knowledge to the boarding school environment too: "[T]he children knew that the tribes had different philosophical concepts, social relationships, and organization, and that certain tribes fought each other since the beginning of time" (207). As a result, the children know perfectly well where they stand when being insulted and they know equally well how to defend themselves effectively, in contrast to their helplessness in the face of the school staff's physical and emotional abuse:

[T]here were children who called all the Pawnees "horse thieves" in their own language. ... We Pawnee children knew we were being called a derogatory name, and of course would have to make some reply which was appropriate to the history of another child's tribe. We knew that some tribes practice sorcery, that others in the past had practiced cannibalism, that one of our ancestors had fought face-to-face with another child's great-great-grandparent. (207)





This quite complex awareness of not only one's own tribal history but also the entire network of relationships and histories can be classified as subjugated knowledge since it is "disqualified" by official discourse but nevertheless still present and kept alive by the young generation; it is a knowledge of tribal history, land, and social structures, knowledge that has been, like a layer of a palimpsest, covered and concealed by the dominant society's policies. Walters, in this case, serves as a mediator between this suppressed knowledge and the mainstream reader as she helps to decode the discourse. Therefore, while Walters' narrative exposes her own resistances to the boarding school system, the process of "decoding" and re-writing history becomes a resistance strategy for Walters the writer.

Just as Pilkington undermines vocabulary employed by the official discourse, Walters also subverts the rhetoric of the state assimilation policies when she compares the government promises and the reality. With dramatic irony, she ridicules the state's attempt to turn vices into virtues when she talks of the school's message delivered over and over to the children, the message that "we ought to be grateful to be at the school which the government so graciously provided for us. We should be glad that there was this fine old institution which would take us in and delouse us, and cut our hair, and give us shoes, and feed us, and let us sleep in its army beds" (206). In this angry tone, which directly denounces American federal policies of extermination and assimilation, Walters echoes, through mockery and irony, what so many Indigenous writers have expressed before and after her: the boarding and residential school system was successful in severing ties among Indigenous parents and their children who, as a result, suffered a significant identity crisis. McKegney even argues that the residential school system in Canada was designed for Indigenous people to slowly disappear from the site/sight of Canadian nation-state while at the same time making it possible for settlers to shed the burden of culpability: "It allowed the non-Native majority to witness the death of Indigenous impediments to 'progress' without seeing themselves holding the trigger" (McKegney 4). In this sense, all three narratives analyzed in this chapter function as testimonies to this cultural genocide, as will be examined later in detail. On the other hand, the system also provoked various more or less visible resistance strategies which ensured cultural survival, resistance strategies that are also reflected in the narrative forms of Indigenous writers. Thus these narratives also demonstrate a *failure* of residential schools to "kill the Indian, save the man," to echo the expression with which Richard H. Pratt founded the infamous Carlisle Indian School. They remain important survival narratives which, as McKegney argues, "document the perseverance of certain raw materials of cultures against the relentless undertow of genocide; they reinvigorate what survived, recreate what didn't, and re-imagine the place of the creative Indigenous individual in relation to her or his community ..." (McKegney 8). In this sense they provide the necessary counter-narrative: hope in the face of oppression, cultural memory in the face of assimilation, and survival in the face of annihilation.

