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MARTINA HORÁKOVÁ

**ALTERNATIVE (HI)STORIES IN STOLEN GENERATION
AND RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL NARRATIVES: READING
INDIGENOUS LIFE WRITINGS BY DORIS PILKINGTON
AND SHIRLEY STERLING**

The article analyzes two life writing narratives by Indigenous women writers from Australia and Canada in order to demonstrate the ways in which they present alternative (hi)stories of removed Indigenous children. Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996) and Shirley Sterling's *My Name is Seepeetza* (1992) formulate an effective counter-discourse which undermines the power of the Australian and Canadian authorities to exercise absolute control over the lives of Indigenous children and their families. In her account, Pilkington celebrates active resistance in the form of a seemingly impossible escape from the River Moore Native Settlement, and records the symbolic journey home. Her alternative (hi)story consists in interweaving the pre-contact/early-contact history of Indigenous people in Western Australia and the nationally accepted history of European settlement in Australia, as well as in appropriating official archival materials and creating a counter-archive of traditional Aboriginal knowledge. Similarly, Sterling's narrator asserts her cultural identity through a series of juxtaposed contrasts between the abusive residential school regime and the harmonious, functional family environment at home, contrasts that bring to the foreground the memories of times spent with the extended family, the daily activities ensuring the survival of the community, and generally the happy moments outside the range of state intervention.

It has long been acknowledged that history plays a fundamental role in Indigenous writing worldwide, both fictional and non-fictional. Although "telling history" was a common practice in pre-contact Indigenous storytelling, it is primarily the history of colonization and long-term racist oppression that permeates, 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. Bain Attwood, an Australian historian working on issues related to Aboriginal history, notes that "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 2001: xii). Indeed, the notions of history, memory and survival are the key issues that have shaped Indigenous writing in general. Until recently, however, the mainstream population in the settler colonies has refused to recognize Indigenous versions of history and only the last few decades have witnessed progress in providing the other, rather unfavourable, side of the story of settlement in Australia and North America. In a 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 on paper. 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 in the gaps with previously repressed (hi)stories and/or provide alternative versions. In this way, such texts formulate a kind of historical counter-narrative that significantly problematizes the nationally accepted stories of European settlement and the myths of nation-building.

One of the most traumatic issues that have plagued Indigenous communities until today is the removal of Indigenous children, mostly of mixed parentage, by state authorities in the settler colonies in order to gradually assimilate the Indigenous population into mainstream society. These policies, based on the then widespread racist theories of the inferiority of Indigenous peoples, have founded a system of total control over Indigenous lives, the impact of which has led to cultural alienation, confusion of identity, internal conflicts and traumatic experience of Indigenous peoples. Educational institutions have played a crucial role in this system: with the help of state legislation, a network of the so-called missions (also known as Native settlements) in Australia, and residential schools in Canada was established.¹ Both systems have been “instrumental in the breakdown of the family, causing strain and mistrust as language barriers arose and children were taught to devalue their cultural traditions” (Young qtd. in Grant 1994: 46) and have remained part of a deeply embedded trauma among Indigenous peoples until today, with many survivors and eyewitnesses speaking out about the abuse and maltreatment they experienced.

Indigenous life writing plays a significant role in recording this process of family separation, the brutal treatment of removed children in the institutions, and their cultural survival in the face of assimilationist pressures. Specific types of Indigenous life stories – the Stolen Generation narratives in Australia and residential school narratives in Canada – have developed in order to both bear witness to and creatively re-work the repressed history. This is done not only through the actual presenting of historical events and individual life stories from the Indigenous point of view but also through employing a range of resistance strategies, from incorporating untranslated fragments of Indigenous languages, through celebrating traditional tribal knowledge, to inscribing cases of both open and latent resistance of the protagonists to institutional assimilation. Indigenous women’s life stories, in particular, have been successful in reframing the dominant society’s effort to break up Indigenous familial, kinship and communal bonds: frequently, even though not exclusively, they map the Indigenous family as what Anne Brewster (1996: 9)

calls a “site of resistance” which acknowledges Indigenous women’s “productive role in the process of nation- and economy-building and sustaining” (Grossman 1998: 178). Such stories, then, draw attention to the role that extended family and community play in physical and cultural survival. Doris Pilkington’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996) and Shirley Sterling’s *My Name Is Seepetza* (1992), which are the focus of this article, are the examples of Indigenous women’s life writings that formulate an effective counter-discourse with the intention of undermining the power of the Australian and Canadian authorities to exercise total control over the lives of Indigenous children and their families.

* * *

Doris Pilkington’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* helped bring about a second wave of interest in Aboriginal women’s life writing published in the 1990s and proved that the popularity of this specific genre has not yet waned.² Together with Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987), it is perhaps the most internationally recognized Aboriginal life story, partly thanks to a widely discussed transfer of the written narrative onto the screen under the title *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2001, dir. Phillip Noyce). Pilkington’s narrative is a generic boundary-crosser: it encompasses elements of an adventure story focused on an escape, of the author’s mother and aunts’ biography, of a collective pre-contact history of the Nyoongar people of Western Australia, and of a history of the Aboriginal-settler relationships from the earliest period until the 1930s. The text also draws heavily on oral traditions and storytelling techniques since Pilkington transcribed oral histories that her family had told her, attempting to negotiate Aboriginal oral traditions and European literary conventions. In addition, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* forms a kind of a preview memoir to Pilkington’s next book, *Under the Wintamarra Tree* (2002), which gives a third-person autobiographical account of Pilkington’s own separation from her family and how she was taken to the very same Moore River Native settlement that her female family members had managed to escape from decades earlier. In this way, Pilkington’s own story is already inscribed in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, lending it an autobiographical air.

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 – the history that is 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 the oral traditions and the stories told by Aboriginal people over 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 and scrutinizes the full impact of the Department of Native Affairs' policy of removing "half-caste" children in the 1930s, overseen by the notorious A. O. Neville, then the Chief Protector of Aborigines. As the last third of the account tells of the three girls' escape, their setting out on the journey home, walking along the rabbit-proof fence that runs north-south across the state, it celebrates the traditional knowledge that helps the girls survive in the bush and at the same time condemns the monstrous apparatus that is mobilized by the authorities in their persecution.

The technique that Pilkington draws on 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 Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra (1991), when analysing a play by the Aboriginal playwright Jack Davis, called "dual principle": "By using this dual principle of organization, Davis was able to fuse what have [sic] 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, the founding of military bases and government depots, and later also the correspondence and records related to the girls' escape. The other perspective is based on Aboriginal (hi)stories of the first contact, partly recorded via oral tradition, partly fictionalized by Pilkington. An example of such 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 19th century. The first description obviously relies on a European historiographical source, reminding readers of typical early colonial narratives, such as navy officers' journals:

Major Edmund Lockyer with a detachment of eighteen soldiers from the 93rd 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. (5)

Several paragraphs later, however, readers get to know the Aboriginal perspective of the same event, voiced through a group of Aborigines living in the area:

Suddenly they [Aborigines] 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. (5–6)

These “doubled” passages abound in Pilkington’s narrative, suggesting that such a strategy 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: 1) the Western source providing exact names and dates, and establishing “objective”, linear depiction; 2) the Aboriginal perspective, which is partly fictionalized and employs a dialogue – that is, simply told as a story. Pilkington alludes here to the common Western practice of privileging the former as a more credible account taken for granted and of excluding the latter version as lacking historical “evidence”.

Another example of the many ways of interweaving the explorers’ and Aboriginal histories is the theme of the entire narrative – the journey across the outback desert, through a difficult terrain that was often described by the first explorers as inhospitable, barren and unwelcoming. The trek the three little girls make is presented as a heroic deed and alludes to the journeys of the first European explorers, such as the famous 1860 Burke and Wills expedition to cross the continent from the south to the north, in which the two main protagonists died from starvation in the territory where Aboriginal people had lived for centuries. The fact that the Aboriginal girls, aged 8, 11 and 14, successfully completed a journey of some 1,600 km to their home after escaping from a government institution therefore offers an alternative perspective that counterbalances the celebrated expeditions of Australian heroes that led to the subsequent colonization of the area. The girls’ journey home, in spite of the distance, thus epitomizes the failure of the Department’s effort to deterritorialize Aboriginal people, in other words to destroy their bonds to land and kinship.

A specific strategy that Pilkington employs when presenting the two historical perspectives is her use and appropriation³ of the official archival materials. In her article on *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* and the effects of globalization, Anne Brewster (2002) characterizes the notion of the archive and Pilkington’s use of it in the following quote:

The inclusion of these [archival] excerpts points to an awareness of the apparatus of the archive, not so much as a specific institution as an entire epistemological complex for producing a comprehensive knowledge within the domain of the British empire, and its subsequent legacy in the governance of the recently federated states of Australia. The archive was a prototype for

global and national systems of dominance, an operational field for controlling territory by the production and distribution of information about it in the forms of files, dossiers, censuses, statistics, maps, reports, letters, telegrams and memoranda. These technologies of surveillance were derived from the demographic and ethnographical practices devised by various disciplines of learning (geography, medicine, sociology, linguistics etc).

In 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 movements, employments, family connections, relationships and marriages. This information was recorded in the files of the Department of Native Affairs in Perth and through the correspondence of the authorities. Throughout *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Pilkington uses documents' excerpts that are clearly a result of her research in the archive and incorporates them either directly or indirectly into her narrative.⁴ These include newspaper reports (17, 102), early 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 incorporating 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 this case, means employing the archival knowledge for the author's own purposes, in particular to show the monstrosity of the system of state intervention encoded in the policy of eugenics and to expose the inhuman treatment of the "half-caste" people by the government. 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 the Aboriginal point of view or the traditional knowledge helping the three girls to "read" the landscape around them and to survive in the outback, Pilkington successfully provides readers with the alternative to the system of surveillance.

Resistance to the official archive is also demonstrated through the language Pilkington employs, which again exposes the discrepancy between the Aboriginal and settlers' political systems. For example, a paradoxical ambiguity appears in the notion of "protection": on the one hand, the authorities, 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" (113) used in correspondence and newspaper reports, establish a sense that the girls need to be "protected". In this way, the mobilization of police in search of the three runaways is justified. 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 the environment to their advantage, know they must escape this "protection", which in their vocabulary stands for persecution. In other instances, Pilkington contrasts official euphemisms such as "native set-

tlement”, “school” and “students” with her own vocabulary, where the Native settlement is a “concentration camp” and the children are “inmates” (72). In addition, Pilkington frequently incorporates Mardujara words into her text, leaving them untranslated and so challenging the prohibition to speak Aboriginal languages.

Pilkington’s strategic use of the archive leads to the establishment of what Brewster (2002) calls a “counter-archive” that 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”. Brewster continues to assert that this counter-archive “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”. Thus the appropriation of the archival material and formation of the counter-archive in Pilkington’s narrative emphasizes the fact that this type of Indigenous women’s life writing combats the assumption that the archive completely defines 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 mobilised in the search for them. 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 extermination policies.

* * *

Shirley Sterling’s *My Name Is Seepetza* can be compared to *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* in its effort to juxtapose Canadian and Indigenous histories and to provide what Kateri Damm calls “an alterNative perspective of the history of Canada”, which means 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” (Damm 1993: 95). Using a genre untypical for Indigenous life writing – a diary form – and a child narrator, Sterling communicates one of the many accounts of the residential school system in Canada, established by the Indian Act in 1876 for the children of mostly mixed parentage (Kuokkanen 2003: 702). Although the narrative, set in the late 1950s, is strongly autobiographical, based on the author’s own experience in the Kamloops Residential School in interior British Columbia, Sterling also incorporates her sisters’ and friends’ experience of the same institution and fictionalizes the whole account. The persona of a twelve-year-old N’laka’pamux girl named Seepetza by her family but later renamed Martha Stone by the school staff, gives Sterling a vehicle for presenting the story through “innocent eyes” and reveal, seemingly unconsciously, the practices of the evil 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, Seepetza records the events and details of residential school life, in-

cluding the memory of her first day of grade one marked by the trauma of being parted from her family and having to succumb to the strict regime of the school.

From the very beginning, Sterling's narrative is presented as a series of contrasts that can be summarized under the heading "school versus home". The diary reveals a pattern in the structure of the entries, which frequently start with an event or detail from the school's life, which, in turn, triggers a memory of a similar event or activity from the family circle. In addition, these contrasts are not only implicitly encoded in the text but 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" (13–14). Similar passages show the depth of the narrator's trauma from the separation and the impossibility to justify 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 and neglected children. For example, 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 Native 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). Generally, Seepeetza's life at the Joyaska ranch is characterized by the circle of extended family members, by joy, freedom and various little incidents and humorous episodes. Such portrayal of an Indigenous family significantly resists some of the most common representations of dysfunctional Indigenous families that have become a target of both welfare policies and many literary representations. This deliberate strategy, i.e. depicting the harmonious family environment in *My Name is Seepeetza*, makes it all the more difficult for readers to comprehend the rationale behind the forced separations.

The images of home are placed against the strict, almost military regime at the residential school as the narrator moves back and forth in time and space. The contrasts between the two environments are found on all kinds of levels, from differences in food to physical violence. It is repeatedly suggested that the school provides insufficient, miserable and unhealthy meals and the children frequently suffer from hunger (87). This is juxtaposed with descriptions of home-made food which is abundant, healthy, rich in taste and always shared, for example when the meat Seepeetza's father brings home from his hunting trips is taken to old people in the community (66). While the work at home is meaningful, done for the benefit of all the family and in accordance with seasonal cycles, the work assigned to children at the school is hard and sometimes inadequate, consisting mainly of useless cleaning, polishing, scrubbing, waxing and washing. A contrast is also made between the mostly physical outdoor activity at the ranch (e.g. 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

labour 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 mission schools in Australia, 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 Seepetza’s family encourages emotional expression and provides freedom for children to run around and play together, the school’s environment is explicit in its lack of affection and care, signs of which are suppressed and eventually punished. Physical violence and corporal punishment become tools for maintaining control and the status quo in the school’s power relations. Against Seepetza’s firm statement that “My mum and dad never hit us” (83) stand repeated incidents of pushing, beating and “getting the strap” which are reported as so common that children even “get used to it” (18). It is precisely the recorded accounts of physical and psychological abuse that contribute to creating a powerful counter-narrative which questions not only the national account of the treatment of Indigenous people in Canada in the form, for example, of official reports from residential school principals, but also the image of the “beneficiary” impact of churches and missions which frequently ran the residential schools. In Seepetza’s narrative, four hundred Indian students are under the supervision of the school’s principal, Father Sloane, six other priests and the nuns who are responsible for teaching and managing children’s free time. Several times Seepetza illustrates both directly and indirectly the power relations in the school where the nuns and priests use humiliation and force to undermine the children’s connection 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.

When discussing Sterling’s critique of the residential school system and the complicity of the missionaries, it is interesting to note her use of the child narrator, which helps her to play down Seepetza’s brutal reality. One of the reasons for using this device may be the young readership to which the book is addressed⁵, another, that Sterling’s aim is to avoid a strictly historicizing mode of writing that is common in Indigenous life writings and present a more fictionalized account. So 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, leaving space for readers’ interpretation. Reading about the systematic oppression through the child narrator who has a limited knowledge of the impact of what is happening around her certainly offers a different angle, as the effect is often intensified precisely by subtle hints. 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 manifested by the frequency of his visits in the girls’ gym and by his teasing them (93), and the priests who are accused of “doing something bad” to several boys, who subsequently decide to run away (12–13) and are severely punished afterwards. The viciousness and hypocrisy

of the sisters is also evident, for example, in the description of Sister Superior who is known for carrying a strap in her sleeve all the time and hitting children's hands whenever "someone is bad" (18), or in situations such as when Seepeetza is humiliated by one of the sisters in front of others for bed-wetting (19). One of the supervising nuns, Sister Theo, is described as the "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 the sinister clicking of her rosary beads hanging from her waist, which makes all children run away at her approach (51). This fearful image of the nun is, however, suddenly dissolved in the next image depicting Seepeetza's mother, both in her physical appearance (her beauty, long black hair and big brown eyes) and kindness (she speaks softly, smiles a lot, and shows affection) (51–52). This contrast again places side by side atrocious reality and idyllic memory, asserting Seepeetza's ability to "see through" what has been imposed on her.

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 weaves together the concepts of resistance and survival in an effort to challenge "dualistic notions of dominance and victimhood" (Kuokkanen 2003: 700). Compared to Pilkington's account of open and active resistance in the form of escape, Seepeetza's resistances are more strategic, subtle and hidden. One of many examples concerns bringing aspects of Indigenous cultural practices to school, helping the children remain anchored in their own traditional culture. 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 from the school's pervasive regime.

Another set of examples relates to the issues of language and naming. It is well-known that children in mission and residential schools were strictly forbidden to use Indigenous languages. Both Pilkington and Sterling depict this strategy 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, either 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. In *My Name is Seepeetza*, the symbolic title 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. (18)

Seepeetza is therefore deprived of her traditional name, given to her by her father after a community elder, which reflects her Indigenous identity and anchors her existence in the community. At the same time, however, Sterling titles her narrative with the little girl's assertive statement, "my name is Seepeetza", and in doing so 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 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 favourite 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 not only put down her memories of happier times, but also record the names and wilful acts of the school staff. In this way she actually manages to provide a written "report" of the ideology upon which the residential school operates.

The use of the child narrator allows Sterling to undermine occasionally the grave tone of the whole narrative. Sometimes Seepeetza records in her diary various little humorous episodes and family jokes, stemming 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 Indigenous people by fusing the "sublime" of the Church and the daily routines of the school, such as when she comments on 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 humour. Yet, in spite of the narrator's honest, sometimes naive tone, the themes of the text are grave. Even though the narrative ends with a nostalgic and quite idyllic picture of Seepeetza's family's happy reunion 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 reach an optimistic conclusion. This aspect alludes to Pilkington's text since *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* in a similar way subverts its seemingly "happy ending": although the girls manage to return to their homelands and are reunited with the family, it is suggested that Molly and even her daughter Doris were repeatedly placed in the Moore River Native Settlement.

In conclusion, an analysis of Pilkington's *Stolen Generation* and Sterling's residential school narratives helps readers gain an insight into how contemporary Indigenous women's life writing constructs counter-histories that disrupt the homogeneity of Western historiography concerning the colonization of the "new" territories and how it foregrounds previously subjugated alternative (hi)stories. The narrativization of Indigenous women's personal/collective memories, together with its historicizing imperative, may also provide an alternative site for articulating histories of subaltern women who are still often excluded from the marginalized groups themselves. Pilkington's strategies of voicing alternative (hi)stories consist mainly of juxtaposing the nationally accepted and Aboriginal versions of historical events leading to the 1930s state policy of removing "half-caste" children. The discrepancy between the language of the state apparatus and reality is illustrated in Pilkington's choice of a different vocabulary register. Sterling's residential school narrative resists the policy of assimilation by showing the functional, non-stereotypical Indigenous family and its everyday activities – little details that, like a mosaic, make up a picture of a Native community in Canada in the 1950s. Her series of contrasts between the images of home and school manifests fully the uselessness and absurdity of the residential school system, in which children were supposed gradually to forget about their Indigenous background and assimilate into the dominant society, but instead developed an even stronger connection to their cultural heritage represented by the family, language and community-oriented life-style.

Apart from recording instances of open as well as latent resistance to the assimilationist system and in spite of being to a certain extent examples of resistance writing themselves, both narratives show, however, a significant synthesis of the two systems of knowledge, Indigenous and Western. Thus, for example, Molly can successfully find her way home not only through her traditional Aboriginal knowledge of the bush, but also with the help of the invention of Western technology – the rabbit-proof fence, which, paradoxically, becomes a symbol of homecoming. Pilkington also skilfully synthesizes the two different means of recording history by referring to official archival materials on the one hand and by textualizing oral accounts of her relatives on the other. Similarly, Sterling's narrator, as well as her family, acknowledges the importance of education for her future survival in mainstream society. In addition, Sterling's choice of the literary form and her play on the typically Western genre of autobiography suggest her intention to weave together both traditions of telling a story.

In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *My Name Is Seepetza*, as in many other Indigenous life writings, telling history and telling peoples' lives seems to be intrinsically related. Both forms 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" for Indigenous people (Schaffer and Smith 2004: 101). The confusion of the boundaries between historiography and life writing results in a genre which has become an important vehicle for both remembering the past and maintaining the storytelling tradition.

Since these types of life stories are frequently based on oral accounts, they struggle to be recognized by mainstream historiography recorded in written documents. Yet, as Hodge and Mishra (1991: 102) 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”. Therefore these accounts, even if they focus on individual life stories, actually reveal a collective portrait of the Stolen Generation in Australia and residential school victims in Canada. Most significantly, these stories are empowering because they tell of those Indigenous people who, in spite of having been separated from their families and forced to go through institutional systems imposing alien values, managed to resist the pressure, and, instead of assimilating, developed an even stronger connection to their Indigenous identities. Thus the analyzed narratives actually show cases in which the system of state intervention failed. As a result, these life stories perform collective resistance to the forced separation and assimilation policies regarding Indigenous people in Australia and Canada.

Notes

- 1 The terminology differs to some extent in Australia and Canada: while Aboriginal people in Australia refer to the institutions their children were sent to as missions, sometimes also called Native settlements, First Nations in Canada talk of residential schools. Both systems were originally disguised as educational institutions but mostly served as training places for future domestic servants and farm workers. In Australia, Aboriginal people who were systematically removed as children between 1910 and 1970 are referred to as the Stolen Generation, sometimes also Stolen Generations, to suggest that more than one generation, altogether up to 100,000 children, was affected by this government policy. The residential school system in Canada started officially in 1879 and was usually administered jointly by the state and various churches. Most residential schools ceased to operate by the mid-1970s (Kuokkanen 2003: 702). It is estimated that there are about 80,000 people alive today who have attended residential schools in Canada (see the Indian Residential School Resolution’s website <http://www.irsr-rqpi.gc.ca/english/history.html>).
- 2 For 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, see Anne Brewster’s *Reading Aboriginal Women’s Autobiography* (1996).
- 3 By the term “appropriation”, in the context of Pilkington’s narrative strategies, I understand the author’s effort to destabilize the power of the archive, reject its privilege as the official, nationally established body of knowledge, and at the same time re-work parts of it for new purposes. In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Pilkington appropriates specific archival materials with the intention of undermining their credibility in order to foreground the Indigenous perspective on the system of state surveillance which the archive helped to establish.
- 4 Many Aboriginal writers writing life stories present information researched in the archive, which was, however, for a long time inaccessible to them. Archival documents and records are frequently the only means for Aboriginal people in Australia to trace their ancestors and look up information about their relatives, since sometimes their removal to the farthest possible area from their own land meant severe rupture of family ties.
- 5 *My Name Is Seepeetza* 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, although the work has since then found an adult readership as well (Reder, "Shirley Sterling").

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