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Beyond the Rabbit-Proof Fence:
audience response and an ethic of care

Kay Schaffer and Emily Potter

The release of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) report, Bringing Them Home (1997), sent shock waves through the Australian nation. The commission received over 585 submissions from witnesses, institutions and interested parties in every state and the territory that documented the history, effects, and consequences of the forcible removal of mixed race children from their families between 1910 and 1970. During that time it is estimated that between 50,000 to 100,000 children, mainly girls, were removed and placed in orphanages, mission schools, and foster care for the purpose of gradually assimilating them into the White population. Witnesses to the commission gave evidence of the trauma of removal, and how children, referred to in the report as the Stolen Generation, typically lost their language, cultural knowledge, and connection to family and cultural heritage. The HREOC Inquiry, in recognition of the gross violations of human rights that had occurred under the guise of assimilation, made fifty-four recommendations 'directed to healing and reconciliation for the benefit of all Australians'. These included the pursuit of measures to restore land, language, and culture and to ensure Indigenous self-determination and non-discrimination in line with international standards. The report also proposed an annual Sorry Day to commemorate the history of forced separations and their effects, and called for a national apology as a gesture towards reconciliation.
The HREOC not only presented the testimony of witnesses within a human rights framework, it also called for an active ethical engagement on the part of its readers to become involved in a process that might bring about justice by acknowledging the loss and harm that had been done to Indigenous witnesses and their families. The national government, under the leadership of John Howard, refused to apologise, arguing that people in the present were not responsible for what had happened in the past, and that the policies and practices of assimilation, whatever their consequences on the lives of the children, were 'well intentioned'. Although his remarks sparked outrage from many parts of the community, in the years since the release of the report widespread public sympathy for the plight of the children and their families has waned as the country, under continued Liberal Party leadership, turns increasingly towards denial and wilful forgetting.

The premiere in 2002 of the internationally acclaimed film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, directed by Philip Noyce with a screenplay by Christine Olsen, proved to be a remarkable exception to the general trend. Not only did the film capture widespread media attention in Australia, it also attracted enthusiastic audiences from around the world. The film, based on Doris Pilkington Garimara's intergenerational narrative of forcible removals, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, traces the journey of Doris's mother, Molly Craig and her sister Daisy Craig Kadibil who, with their cousin Gracie Fields, escaped from the Moore River Native Settlement in Perth in 1931—the mission settlement to which they had been forcibly removed as wards of the state under the Aboriginal Protection Act.³ The girls undertook a journey of some 1600 kilometres, following the rabbit-proof fence in order to return to their home country in the East Pilbara region of Western Australia.

**From Pilkington's narrative to Noyce's film**

The film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* came to stand for, and to represent, not only that experience, but the entire history of the Stolen Generations. Given its reputation, both at home and abroad, it is important to note a number of differences between the book and the film as they represent the historical circumstances of the children. Doris Pilkington Garimara's narrative, published while the Stolen Generation inquiry was taking place, begins in a mythical
Indigenous time before White invasion. It records the first gunshot fired and the steady dispossession of the Nyungar people from 1826, when Captain Lockyer established a military post at Albany in southwestern Western Australia. The British influence eventually spread north to the area that is now Perth, up the Canning River and into the Pilbara region. The Canning Stock Route, established 1906–09, brought more permanent White settlers, who spread into the Pilbara. Doris’s community, Jigalong, in the north west of the state, was established in 1907 as a government depot where displaced people congregated and officials handed out blankets to the ‘natives’, as the community suffered a gradual dispossession of their lands, customs and cultures. Doris’s mother, Molly, was the first ‘half-caste’ child to be born at Jigalong, and her father was the first White man appointed to Jigalong to be the fence inspector: ‘none other than the boss himself’. Contrary to the filmic direction, he actually accepted paternity and grieved for her loss from the community after her abduction by White authorities.

The separation of the children from their community, the key event in the film, is less central to Doris’s narrative. Neither is the removal as violent as depicted in the film; rather it is presented as an accession to a long-held expectation. In Doris’s narrative, the whole community awaits the arrival of the authorities who abduct the children in 1930, and the whole community grieves for the children whereas the film focuses on the relationship between the women (in which men are largely absent): the children, their mothers and grandmothers. The narrative also details conditions at the Moore River Native Settlement where the girls were incarcerated, not for a matter of weeks as the film suggests, but for a year and a half before their escape on the 31 August 1931.

In part because of the government inquiry, Doris Pilkington Garamara had access to archival materials including newspapers, telegrams, Department of Native Affairs files, and letters written by the Chief Protector A O Neville, police and interested humanitarians protesting against the practice of child removal, much of which she included in the narrative, which was nonetheless framed by her own experience and its meaning to her now. Doris acted as a script and cultural consultant for the film. She noted, however, at the premiere of the film, which took place on her land at Jigalong, that the film didn’t tell the whole story. Although the film alluded to a history beyond its framing, Doris pointed out that it all but
ignored the story of her own two abductions: she was taken once as a child, and later after the birth of her two daughters, one of whom became permanently estranged from her.

In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Doris Pilkington Garamara describes conditions at Moore River as 'more like a concentration camp than a residential school for Aboriginal children'. There were no sheets on the bed, food was scarce, and the children were locked up for minor violations. If they attempted escape, their heads were shaved. Although Pilkington describes the conditions as 'degrading and inhumane', Anna Haebich describes the appalling conditions of the missions of Western Australia in detail in her history of child separation, *Broken Circles*. There were over 70 missions established in Western Australia alone between 1842 and 1971. Under the Aboriginal Act of 1905, mission authorities held control over all aspects of Indigenous life, work, living conditions, and privileges, and dictated who they could marry and where they could live. Indefinite detainment without access to or knowledge of family and community was one of the worst aspects of existence for children at the settlements. Haebich details the appalling conditions of the institutions, especially in the 1930s when the Indigenous population of Stolen Children peaked but funding dwindled, health inspections were rare, and the standard of care was minimal. Moore River (1918–1954) was one of the most populous settlements. She describes it thus:

As the population at Moore River continued to increase into the 1930s, conditions deteriorated rapidly. The 1934 Moseley Royal Commission [set up in response to community pressure to investigate abusive conditions] described the settlement as a 'woeful spectacle': the buildings were overcrowded and vermin ridden, the children's diets lacked fresh fruit, eggs and milk, and their health had been seriously affected. The Commissioner concluded that in its present condition Moore River had 'no hope of success' in its work with the children.9

These were the conditions from which Molly, Daisy and Gracie escaped after being detained, not for a matter of weeks as depicted in the film, but after a year and a half. Haebich reports that A O Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines, saw himself as a personal guardian of the Aboriginals. When the Moseley Commission issued its critical report, he retaliated by intimidating
the witnesses who had testified against him. Clearly, Neville considered himself to be above the law; his chief aim was to ‘make the children white’. His powers grew through the 1930s until he retired in 1940 and the nation’s eugenic assimilationist policies turned sour with the rise of Nazism. What little money had been available to the missions was now channelled into the war effort.

A further difference between the film and the history to which it refers is that the film represents the girls’ escape as a unique event, and it directs their return ‘home’ after a massive test of endurance in triumphalist terms. In fact, as Carolyn Wadley Dowley recounts in *Through Silent Country* while doing research on another party of escapees, she found ‘story after story of people escaping from imprisonment’. Her account pays tribute to a group of eighteen Wongutha people, including a blind man, a deaf and dumb youth, and a woman with a baby, who absconded from Moore River, and, over a six-week period in 1921, walked a distance of over 1000 kilometres following a pipeline to their country near Laverton. These comparisons are not meant to detract from the power of the film, nor to suggest that the film should have represented these historical details with more accuracy. We detail them to indicate to audiences unfamiliar with the historical context that conditions were in fact far worse than the film allows; that intergenerational histories of abduction were far more complex; and that there were many escape stories of Indigenous groups utilising their considerable bush skills to perform remarkable feats of endurance. In selecting certain elements from Doris Pilkington Garamara’s narrative, the film translates a complex narrative of multi-layered historical experiences into a singular and triumphant event.

The film premiere

The premiere of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002) reinvigorated public interest in Stolen Generation narratives. It profoundly affected audiences around the world as it paid homage to the girls’ incredible journey of survival and resistance against a destructive state practice. Extravagantly promoted and internationally packaged, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* was a politicised film and a Hollywood commodity. The attendant constraints and frictions in this ambiguous identity raise questions about the efficacy of such a
product to advance a politics of reconciliation in Australia. But they also indicate possibilities for an ethics of care to operate in the milieu of globalised media.

The world-wide premiere of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* did not take place in Hollywood, or even an Australian capital city, but instead was held in the Jigalong community schoolyard on 28 January 2002. When *The Sunday Age* reported on the film's premiere, it punned that 'the stars were out in force' that night—stars in the night sky that is. And yet the motions of a blockbuster premiere were in some way reproduced that night, as cast and crew waved at the waiting media, cameras flashed, and the real-life Molly and Daisy appeared in new dresses bought for them by Noyce and scented with new perfume—Calvin Klein's 'Escape'. The strangeness of the spectacle of a major movie premiere staged before a regional community before its international release calls attention, even in an ironic juxtaposition, to not only a complex relation between the local and the global, but also to the importance of international marketing for the film. In part, this reflected the increasingly high standing of Australian films, settings, actors, and directors in America and Noyce's previous success there.

*Rabbit-Proof Fence* received the international media attention that proved its status as a Hollywood production, and it was marketed with all the paraphernalia of a blockbuster, including numerous publicity interviews with Noyce and his actors, the compilation of behind-the-scenes documentaries, and the republication of Doris Pilkington Garimara's book upon which the film is based, repackaged with a film-still publicity photo on the cover. In these ways the commodified *Rabbit-Proof Fence* entered a diverse, global field with multiple modes of appeal and cues to interpretation: as a true story of Indigenous forced removal, a re-enactment of a shameful historical event for White Australians, a cross-cultural story of innocent children designed to shock a post-colonial audience, a story of gross human rights abuse calling for an empathic engagement and response, and an international spectacle marketed to entertain.

At the same time, and as the Jigalong premiere attests, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* was released as a filmic narrative self-consciously aware of its immediate environment and filmed with some gestures towards Indigenous cultural sensitivity. The decision to stage the premiere for the local community signalled a desire by Noyce and
the South Australian Film Corporation to pay tribute to the community and to the three women in particular: the film was their story that the producers and director now delivered back to them before its release to an international audience. The presence of the actual, grown, aged, and frail women, Molly and Daisy, at the premiere (the women also appear onscreen at the end of the film where they attest to its accuracy) connects the fictional narrative of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* to one of a singular, authentic, locally grounded, and historically authentic, lived experience—a lure for audiences around the world, invited to identify with the plight of the children.

**Critical responses to the film**

Many critics in Australia welcomed *Rabbit-Proof Fence* as a film that would confront those White Australians who did not know or refused to admit the stories of the Stolen Generation and, in doing so, re-affirm the flagging cause of reconciliation in the nation. Reviewers lauded the film as a reminder of ‘an unresolved and still divisive issue’¹⁶, ‘a tragic humanitarian riddle that still eludes a fathomable answer’.¹⁷ Some identified a healing or reconciliatory power in its story—”Three small pairs of feet span a great divide”¹⁸—while others intuited a broader ‘humanistic’ relevance to the film that communicated beyond a particular politics.¹⁹ The film was further embraced as signalling ‘the beginning of a new depth and maturity previously untapped in Australian cinema’.²⁰ ‘It strips back our often dressed-up history and leaves it standing in the middle of the outback for all to scrutinise’, writes reviewer Scott Abrahams, acknowledging that overseas reactions to Australia’s hidden past would put the nation’s shameful record of oppressive racist practices under an international spotlight.²¹

These views of the film’s currency and import seemed to be affirmed by its box-office success both in Australia and overseas. When the film screened abroad, it received equally enthusiastic responses from critics who extended their interpretations of the film into their own national frameworks and universalised its narrative in the process. In the United States, for example, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* was praised as a powerful film of incarceration and ‘the desire for freedom’ that demonstrated the ambiguities at work in the notion of care: ‘Nothing is quite so offensive as the hypocrite who “helps” people by force’.²² A *Washington Post* critic identified the
universal instinct to 'return home' as at the heart of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*—a human commonality that made the state practices of child removal undertaken across colonised countries so cruel. Russell Ebert, one of America's foremost film critics, lauded the 'emotional power' of the film as revelatory. 'Not since the last shots of *Schindler's List*', he wrote, 'have I been so overcome with the realization that real people, in recent historical times, had to undergo such inhumanity'.

Across the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and South Africa, critics responded appreciatively to *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Many described it as a postcolonial story, one with which their countries could also identify. American critic Craig Roush, for example, comments that '[c]ountries all over the world, including the United States have enacted similarly racist policies'. James Berardinelli reminds his home audience that 'while the background of [the colonisers in] Australia and America were vastly different, the results were similar: native populations diminished and oppressed, then reduced to second-class citizens in the re-shaped lands that were once theirs'. For Canadian Carmen Daniels, 'the parallels between the “Stolen Generation” and Canada’s own residential school generation is so great, so close to home. The story of Molly Craig … brings you into her world, but also hits home on a number of very personal levels. Our stories are so similar and the pain is the same'. Similarly, South African reviewer Barry Ronge refers to the 'historical framework' of the film as 'one that every South African will recognise'.

Indeed, for many critics *Rabbit-Proof Fence* transcends its historical specificity to attain international status as a universal narrative of loss and human rights abuse. UK reviewer Christopher Fung makes the link between the Stolen Generation and 'British evacuee children who were sent to live in Australia during World War 2', while Russell Ebert and several other film critics connect the practice and policies of Indigenous child removal in Australia to the ideologies of Nazi Germany. The global impact of the film thus reflected back to its Australian context not just a narrative that connected to transnational experience, but also a negative image of the nation in the eyes of an international community. As Fiona A Viellalla commented, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* 'arrives at a time when sensitivity to, and awareness of, Australia’s colonial history and how Australia defines itself as a nation are greater than ever'.
Importantly, both audiences and critics overseas applauded the film, which won the Audience Award at the 2002 Edinburgh Film Festival.\textsuperscript{31} Many international airlines added \textit{Rabbit-Proof Fence} to their in-flight schedule on flights to and from Australia. The film aroused so much curiosity amongst passengers that Malaysian Airlines added the remote desert town of Jigalong to its in-flight map of Australia. This kind of global interest in the story of Molly, Daisy and Gracie has made it possible for Doris Pilkington Garimara to set up a Stolen Generation research centre in Jigalong, in a location next to the fence itself, ‘where tourists and indigenous people can journey for a different re-education’.\textsuperscript{32} Accordingly, Jigalong has experienced a modest tourist boom since the film’s release, with the majority of visitors journeying from overseas, according to Hughes D’Aeth, to undertake a kind of pilgrimage to the rabbit-proof fence.\textsuperscript{33}

\textbf{The fence as icon}

As they turn the fence into a pilgrimage site, travellers register its iconic status and their empathic identification with the girls and their story in ways that exceed the visual limits of film narrative. In this experience of pilgrimage, the fence takes on the figure and function of a newly historicised symbol that mediates a number of possible new relations to the story, the women, and the film. While the fence in general, and this one in particular, as material reality and as metaphor, enables reflection upon division, boundary, separation—the rabbit-proof fence was constructed in the nineteenth century, literally with the failed intention of keeping destructive rabbits on one side and productive farmlands on the other—it also brings into proximity the cultural symbolism of the girls’ stories and the conflict between two cultures that marks and mars Australia’s myth of nationhood. Both physically and metaphorically, as Lesley Instone argues, fences are points of ‘communication and exchange’\textsuperscript{34}, as much as they exclude or contain. To the girls, the fence symbolised love, attachment and security, in as much as it connected them to their community; to European settlers living in close proximity, it separated wild from domesticated space; for modern filmgoers, it symbolises the triumph of the weak over the strong, the powerless over powerful oppression. And this subversive potential in the fence unsettles it as an icon of European settlement.
Within the film, the rabbit-proof fence reveals some of these ambiguities: it signifies the linear logic of imperial law, history and geographic expansion, but also the co-presence and interaction of different knowledges, different cultures, different temporalities, and the discomforting, irresolvable conflicts between them. The film itself attends to these contradictions through its techniques which unsettle viewer certainties and estrange non-Indigenous audiences from their perspectival comfort zones. Attempts by the filmmakers to present a sympathetic view of the past that challenges dominant narratives, knowledges, and ways of seeing are notable. For example, Noyce directed the film to emphasise indigenous oral and aural traditions over Western narrative techniques, and employed empathic filmic techniques of storytelling as opposed to the construction of an epical history narrative in the White man’s mode.

**Indigenous cultural agency**

Far from being objectified as hapless victims of Australia’s removalist policies and assimilationist ideologies, Indigenous people are presented with cultural agency and authoritative voices that are not eclipsed by the discourses of White power, co-present in the film. This is evident from the opening seconds of the film in which viewers confront a black screen while aurally the rising strains of Indigenous women’s ceremonial singing build gradually until, punctuated—not by White speech—but by two bold, black and white slides of stylised newsprint that convey historical information. These initial frames set the story to come in Western Australia, in 1931; make reference to Indigenous resistance to invasion, the Aboriginal Act, and A.O Neville’s role as Chief Protector. They also explain the legal power of the government to remove half-caste children from their families. As viewers register the historical background provided by the printed text, sounds of thunder intrude upon the rising volume of the women’s song before the screen cuts to a close-up, brown patterned surface that fills the screen and is yet to be identified as a Pilbara desert landscape.

The narrative begins with the voice-over of the now 85-year-old, Molly Craig, introducing her story in her language. There are subtitles provided:

This is a true story—story of my sister Daisy and my cousin Gracie and me when we were little. Our people, the Jigalong mob, we were
desert people then, walking all over our land. My mum told me about how the white people came to our country. They made a storehouse here at Jigalong ... They were building a long fence.

As we hear her voice, we 'see' with her eyes (or rather through the imagined vision of the soon-to-be introduced child of the filmic narrative, Molly) as the camera’s gaze follows the ground at her feet. As she walks the country, conveyed in an aesthetic of earth tones and pebble forms—suggestive a traditional Aboriginal dot painting—a bush comes into view, then footsteps on a contour that fills the screen in a wide panorama, of now-recognisable landscape for a non-Indigenous viewer. This opening sequence concludes with the older Molly’s words that end her opening story: ‘they were building a long fence’. Thus, the visual opening invites the viewer to approach the land from an Indigenous point of view, while also obscuring vastly different spatialities and temporalities—the then and the now, the remembered and recreated past, the nature of everyday life experience of children before separation, and the viewer’s contemporary historical knowledge of the effects of that separation, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, knowledges, and attachments to land to and history. The fence becomes the iconic referent that both separates and holds these visual, aural, textual, temporal, spatial and cultural contradictions together.

**An ethics of care**

The storytelling mode employed by *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, and its emphasis on an ethics of telling, listening and healing, resembles the 1997 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s *Bringing Them Home* report on the Stolen Generations. The report suggested that the telling and listening process of storytelling could provoke listeners to accept an ethical responsibility to acknowledge the story and the veracity of the teller and take responsibility for advocating social and political change. But responses by different listeners, with different investments in the story, vary, qualifying the issue of care with the question of ‘on what terms?’ Dialectical engagement with the stories of Stolen Generation survivors can activate recognition of different histories of colonial race relations, as reviewers in the United States, Canada, the UK and South Africa noted in their responses. The story, transposed to other places, connects
Australian history of racialised oppression with similar operations of power elsewhere. The viewers' identification with the plight of the children places them in the position of a secondary witness. This position can engender empathy and political awareness for victims. However, even an empathic response will obscure the teller's otherness, her alterity or difference, if the exchange motivates the listener to imagine the teller in terms of the self, thereby confining the teller's alterity to the limits of the respondent's own experience, knowledge, and feelings. Significantly, in both the Bringing Them Home report and Rabbit-Proof Fence, the emotive force of identification is directed to the figure of the child (as the rhetoric in American advertising for the film makes clear) who then becomes the archetypal victim of state oppression—an (acceptable) subjectivity, with a particular kind of history. The child, Hughes D'Aeth suggests, is the least confronting of victim identities (perhaps paralleled only by the frail and aged grandmother figure—another archetype through which the figure of Molly can be read at the introduction and conclusion of the film), and the most certain kind of subject to evoke an emotive response from an audience, particularly in Rabbit-Proof Fence where the lines between good and bad, innocence and blind arrogance, are contrasted so strongly.

Throughout the film, the audience is invited not only to identify with Molly and the experience of being stolen, or of having one's own child taken away, but to actually stand 'in [her] shoes'. As a result, many scenes are shot as though the audience is looking through Molly's eyes. Yet, while these scenes claim a different point of view and enable audiences to feel themselves into and therefore empathise directly with Molly's experience, they collapse a recognition of the singularity of the trauma of Indigenous forced removal into a self-recognition of witnessing. The invitation to feel her pain, and thus enter the filmic trajectory of her escape and celebrate the triumph of her return home, asks that the audience—the majority of whom, as Hughes D'Aeth reasonably argues, have no direct experience of the Stolen Generation/s—make an unproblematic imaginative leap of identification. In this sense, pain and the trauma of a specific practice in a localised modernity is universalised. The particular story of one is thus empathically communicated as the story of all—at least, a universalising 'all' that is produced and addressed in order to generate understanding and response. Such a conditional ethics signals the ambivalence of care,
which has historically haunted Indigenous policy and Black/White relations in Australia. As Haebich has noted, the very foundations of the system of Indigenous child welfare predicated “care and protection” on the maintenance of social control and White privilege\textsuperscript{37} which, at its worst, ‘resulted in a convenient “double speak” of stated humanitarian concerns and agendas of segregation, assimilation, genocide and profound neglect’.\textsuperscript{38}

Empathic identification of audiences with \textit{Rabbit-Proof Fence} signals other dangers, if on a more symbolic than structural scale. An overwhelming number of critics reacted to the film in highly emotional, and deeply depoliticised, ways. In so doing, they reduce the story to a homogenic trauma tale and then transform it into an ultimately uplifting narrative of suffering and triumph. Typical comments include: ‘this is a film that just can’t be critiqued by merely what happens on screen … but only by what you feel’\textsuperscript{39}; ‘one of the most emotionally charged films you’re likely to see’\textsuperscript{40}; and ‘no wonder there have been tissues provided at premieres around the country’.\textsuperscript{41} These remarks centralise the working of affect in \textit{Rabbit-Proof Fence}, but in a way that connects the story to a generic ‘profound humanity’\textsuperscript{42} at the core of the film, beyond the specific and local conditions it addresses. The evidence of so many highly emotional, empathic reviews that address the traumatic pain in witnessing the effects of removal and dissolve into a cathartic release of ‘good feeling’ with the girls’ triumphant return threatens to dissipate a politics of advocacy necessary to an ethics of care.

This returns us to the ground of Jigalong and the Hollywood-meets-desert premiere where the interactions of the local, national, and global are displayed in what can be seen as another product of the marketing industry: ‘Hollywood in Jigalong’ is a great by-line, after all. In these terms, \textit{Rabbit-Proof Fence} operates as a commodity, one shaped to suit White Australian and overseas audiences within acceptable frames of reception and response. Hughes D’Aeth, in particular, is highly critical of the Hollywood-isation of the film because, for him, it sanitises the history and collapses the practice of child/parent separation into a single story, thus reducing the local and specific complexities of the historical event it purports to represent. Certainly, the conventions of Hollywood dramas that represent adversity only to resolve its effects are in evidence here in ways that stylise the film and promote a revisionist political agenda only so far as it can be contained within what is familiar, knowable,
resolved, and closed off in the past. Noyce is aware of these commodifying processes, and his reference to Everlyn Sampi, who plays Molly, as having the necessary ‘cross-over appeal’ to ensure her sympathetic favour with audiences at home and abroad, is particularly revealing in this respect.\textsuperscript{43} Demonstrating Noyce’s pragmatic operation within the system of marketable commodities, his comment leads Birch to wonder ‘what will happen when Aboriginal stories do not have the beauty, charisma or vulnerable appeal of young girls to sell them?’.\textsuperscript{44}

**Beyond the rabbit-proof fence**

The circulation of story as a safe and acceptable commodity unsettles the ethical imperatives that *Rabbit-Proof Fence* simultaneously conveys. Noyce seems to embody in the figure of Molly the key characteristics of individualism and universalism that the market of narrated lives in the West demands and validates. As difference is packaged and distributed as sameness, the political force of affect is devalued, but not, we argue, rendered valueless. There is still force in ambiguity. Whether the film provokes tears or outrage, empathy or identification, knowledge or emotion, it brings its narratives into the public domain in a local and global register, and these narratives cannot be ultimately controlled by any determined set of responses. The circulation of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* in a multitude of venues, and the possibilities of response that are both encouraged by and yet can move beyond the film’s modes of address demonstrate that the effects of film as commodity are diverse and never predictable. Political value, ethical responsibility and responsiveness are not lost in the interactions between global and local, but are rendered indeterminate, and cannot be pinned down as either specific or quantifiable. Hughes D’Aeth expresses as much when he recalls a friend describing ‘how she saw fellow passengers weeping on the Qantas flight on which [the film] was screening’. ‘There must be a value in this’, he writes, ‘and a value too in the reclamations made by the people of Jigalong on the screening of the movie in their schoolyard’.\textsuperscript{45}

Similarly, the tourists who now visit the rabbit-proof fence enact this ambivalence as they come into both embodied and imagined contact with the story. The mutability of the film as narrative presence offers no neat patterns of response—not for White
Australians desiring to absolve their guilt, not for Indigenous Australians celebrating the film as a recognition of their past experience, not for those caring audiences seeking either escape through the discharge of emotions or for those desirous of a more mobilising political critique, not for international viewers new to the story and satisfied by the girls’ triumphal return home, nor for those critics who discredit the possibility that a global commodity might also have an indeterminate number of local effects as it mediates the local and the global, the technological and the real. But in this ambiguous mixture, an ethics of response can still be traced.

The last poignant shots of the film direct viewers to a different time, space, history, and experience. The closing sequences confound the commodified boundaries of the narrative, offering viewers a multiplicity of perspectives. As Aboriginal Protector A O Neville caps his pen at his desk, he brings the historical filmic narrative to closure with a nostalgic, paternalistic regret: ‘if they would only see what we are trying to do for them … ’. The camera lingers on Neville as Molly’s voiceover takes up the story that opened the film, and the camera cuts away to a melancholic, blue-black screen, featuring the young Molly and Daisy moving away from the audience and returning to country with their mother and grandmother. The camera bookends in reverse the panoramic-to-close-up perspective of the opening scenes. Where in the opening sequence there were footprints in the desert, two Aboriginal Aunties now walk side-by-side, independent of filmic direction but briefly meeting the gaze of the camera. The final still identifies the two women as Molly Craig and Daisy Craig Kadibil, confronting viewers with the actual, contemporary presence of the characters portrayed as children in the film. As credits role, the haunting painting songs of the Warlpiri, Amatjere, Wangajuka women connect the story to another plane beyond Western modes of understanding. This hybridised sequence provides yet another opening, another kind of ethical call for recognition, and another force of becoming as a future of connection and difference opens up, incomplete and indeterminable, with the movement of this story into the world.
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