# Linda C. and the Terrors of the Rabbit-Proof Fence

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### **Postcolonial Repetitions**

Something is frightening Linda C. Linda C. is a non-Indigenous student teacher at an Australian university. The following episodes give some clues as to what this thing might be—and why we should care.

In the 1920s near Deniliquin in rural New South Wales Margaret Tucker was stolen from her mother by a policeman who came to take Margaret and several other children while they were at school. The head master's wife tried to delay their theft by insisting that they eat before their journey, thus giving Margaret's aproned mother time to run the one and a half mile distance from her home. She arrived in time and told the policeman that she would not allow him to take her daughter. The policeman patted the pouch on his belt and said if she refused he would have to use its contents. Margaret, fearing he would shoot her mother, said she would go willingly. Margaret heard years later that her mother had wandered off into the long grass after she left and had cried for days. In recounting the story in her book, *If Everyone Cared*, Margaret Tucker wrote that the policeman was probably only doing his duty.

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lectures in Indigenous Studies and Sociology of Education at the University of New England in Australia. Her book, Rethinking Indigenous Education (2000, Post Pressed, Flaxton) examines the regimes of othering of colonial and postcolonial Australia. She is currently researching the dilemmas of ethical witnessing with rural teachers.

In 1931 in Jigalong in Western Australia, thirteen-year-old Molly Craig was stolen from her mother and taken with her sister and cousin to a distant mission (Garimara 1996). The girls escaped the harsh regime and, although tracked by police, Molly carried her younger sister 1,500 miles through the desert following the rabbit-proof fence-erected to prevent the spread of rabbits throughout the continent—to guide them home. Years later as a young mother Molly and her baby were once again forcibly taken to the same mission. As she had done years before Molly escaped and walked the same route home. The story of her incredible life journey was told by her daughter, Doris Pilkington Nugi Garimara, not the child who had been carried, for this child was once again taken back to the mission. In 2001 Garimara's book was made into a film called Rabbit-Proof Fence by Philip Noyce. Molly was present during the making of the film and kept inquiring of the crew if anyone had seen her stolen daughter. In 2004 Molly Craig died, never again having seen her stolen child.

In the 1960s in Brisbane thirteen-year-old Veronica B. was stolen from her mother while her mother was in hospital with pneumonia. Veronica was taken before the courts and then spent three years in a juvenile detention centre for delinquent girls. As an adult she became the first law graduate at one of Australia's universities. Unable to gain employment as a lawyer, she took up casual employment for several years as a lecturer in Indigenous Studies at a regional Australian university.

On 15 February 2004, seventeen-year-old T.J. (Thomas) Hickey was riding his bicycle home from his aunty's house on The Block in Redfern, Sydney when he was chased by a police car. The brakes on his bike were faulty and at high speed he crashed and became impaled through the neck on a metal fence. He died several hours later. On hearing this, in their grief and outrage at the persistent police interventions in their lives, residents of The Block took to the streets. John Pilger has estimated this police intervention at an average of sixty per day in the small inner city housing estate. Forty people were injured that night including members of the police. The Block is a 1970s housing complex in inner Sydney that is described variously as a ghetto of irreparable social decay that should be bulldozed (Canberra Times 10) and a significant cultural meeting place for diasporic Indigenous communities (Block Community Speakout Web). During the long days of the coronial

inquest into the cause of T. J.'s death, Gail Hickey, T. J.'s mother, sat quietly in the back of the courtroom, listening to the police give contradictory, confused and altogether careless testimony about the events surrounding their alleged pursuit of the boy. It had been, they implied, a case of wrongful identity.

What is striking about these episodes that span nine decades of Australian contemporary history is their similitude. The stories of Margaret Tucker, Molly Craig and her daughter, and Veronica B. are the type of story that constituted the National Inquiry into the Removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From Their Families. Hundreds of testimonies were gathered to provide irrefutable evidence of the terrors that invaded the lives of not only the children taken, but the lives of several generations following, many of whom continue to exhibit the debilitating symptoms of this intergenerational trauma. Despite the evidence and despite the many recommendations for compensation and reparation, the Australian Government has always refused to make an apology, claiming that the current generation of non-Indigenous Australians should not bare the guilt of the actions of the past. That is, despite the repetitive nature of Australian colonial traumas and their continuation from the past to the present, there has been a powerful and sustained effort by many Australians to estrange themselves from this trauma and to refuse to see its repetition compulsion.

Sigmund Freud observed that trauma has a "compulsion to repeat." Trauma, he argued, was by definition unspeakable: the origins of traumatic experience are repressed through a variety of means including defences, transferences and the like. Thus rather than the possibility of remembering trauma, the traumatised subject "is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience" (Beyond 111, original emphasis). Hence, the repetition of a symptom or form of hysterical behaviour could signal some experience of trauma. If Australian colonialism is characterised by such a repetition compulsion, what symptoms and behaviours are evidence of trauma, and what is the precise nature of this trauma? In this paper I want to suggest that one of the major challenges facing pedagogues in Australian universities is not only in discovering the nature of colonial trauma that resides in the lives of the survivors, but in also attending to the deep psychic structures that continue to terrorise the perpetrators of these postcolonial repetitions. Such terrors prevent the admissions of shame and guilt and the reparation required for these traumas to heal.

## Linda C. and Rabbit-Proof Fence

In May 2004 Veronica B. introduced the film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, to a large group of first year student teachers. Linking the film to the text by Margaret Tucker and to Veronica B.'s own life story, she presented the stories in a compassionate and kindly tone. One third of the students walked out of the lecture theatre as the film started. Linda C. remained. Veronica B. had been worried that the students would need to debrief after the film and prepared a number of questions to aid in the healing process. This is what Linda C. wrote in response.

Write down a few of your thoughts about the film, Rabbit-Proof Fence.

Controversial, a bit dramatised, I could see the pain but not empathise with it.

How did you react to the film?

I watched the film from a distance, but not having children of my own I do not see the emotion.

Did you enjoy it? Why or why not?

No and yes. The way the film was made was good. I didn't like it because of the issues—I disagree with a lot of them, eg., making the aborigines so dependent on white handouts they have no other options.

What did you learn from viewing the film that you did not know before?

Not from the film but from the speaker, a few things.

How does this help you understand Indigenous Australians today?

I still don't see an excuse for the riots in Redfern, in this day and time, back then—with no education on white society and thrown in to it, but now, growing up and going to school, crying victim all the time.

What do you see as the best approaches to healing the scars of this experience and helping all Australians move forward in harmony?

Acknowledge it happened and forgive and forget. Start fresh.

Many Australians support the notion of an official apology for the removal of the children, while others resist the idea. Make

a list of the arguments in support of the idea and those against it. What is your opinion?

An official apology is needed, however, I believe that I don't need to apologise because I haven't done anything wrong.

#### **Postcolonial Terrors**

In his book, Terrors and Experts, Adam Phillips writes that our terrors are always familiar to us. "The frenzy of a baby, the tantrum or phobia of the older child, the panic of adolescent self-consciousness: the demonic—possession by alien meanings starts at home" (xi). Something is frightening Linda C. She does not want to empathise with the pain that she sees in the film. She estranges herself from the events of the film, choosing the viewing position of the child (the innocent) rather than the adult (the responsible). Thus, she argues, in this innocence she does not see the emotion. She is ambivalent about the film, choosing to comment on her objections to Indigenous welfare dependency, a subject not directly raised in the film. None of this trauma, she argues, can excuse the riots in Sydney following the death of T.J. Hickey. She would prefer to move on—start fresh; be forgiven, rather than encounter the on-going pain, grief and anger of dislocated lives. And besides, as an innocent child she is not responsible: without an acknowledgement of guilt there can be no reparation. Linda C. feels no shame. She is not the one to be shamed by the gaze of the film—rather, it is they, the rioters, those who take our hand-outs and who don't know how to behave with our education who should be ashamed. Linda C. is an accuser.

Forgive and forget. Does Linda C. fear she will not be forgiven? Does she fear that one day she could have to bear the brunt of the anger of the rioters? In her text Linda C. is making public her private knowledge, private knowledge that Phillips argues selects from particular stories favoured in our families. As with the intergenerational traumas experienced by Indigenous Australians, the terrors of older generations of non-Indigenous Australians, those for whom there could only be anxiety about their forcible and violent presencing, are passed on as the terrors of the young. We learn our relationship to stories—the alien, demonic meanings—in our families. Is the crisis of white presence the source of the intergenerational terror that renders both the Prime Minister and Linda C. unable to bear the burden of guilt of the nation?

When does anxiety become terror and what precisely is the source of the terror which fuels Australian postcolonial repetitions? Phillips (xi) suggests that we are terrorised by an excess of feeling and the impossibil-

She is not the one to be shamed by the gaze of the film-rather, it is they, the rioters, those who take our hand-outs and who don't know how to behave with our education who should be ashamed.

ity of desire. Who could forgive what Molly Craig lived through? Molly couldn't forget her stolen child. The stolen children, Margaret Tucker and Veronica B. couldn't forget. Perhaps as Linda C. suspects, the trauma is everywhere, too deep to be healed. Faced with this excess of trauma and the impossibility of forgetting, what is one to do? When faced with unbearable terrors Freud observed that we tend to develop defences as a way of (not) dealing with them. Denial, repression, and turning a blind eye are our responses to dangers and "muddles registered as threats" (Phillips 13). Linda C. will not see, will not feel the pain. She wants to forget. Such defences are, as Freud would argue, clues to what it is we fear. They are expressions of "our passion for ignorance" (Phillips 13). In addition to becoming attached to our defences, the other thing we tend to do with the unbearable, the terrors in our lives, is to seek out experts.

### **Postcolonial Experts**

Linda C. claimed that she didn't learn much from the film, but that she did learn something from Veronica B. Experts—doctors, teachers, analysts—make our terrors and symptoms more interesting (Phillips xii). On two separate occasions following the film screening to the group of students Linda C. sought out another lecturer in the course to ask that the lecturer pass on Linda's thanks to Veronica B. In making our terrors known to experts, the experts become the masters of our misery—they tell us persuasive stories about where they come from, what to do with them, and what they might mean to us. Phillips writes of the experts, "by punctuating our unhappiness they make it legible" (14). What secrets about herself did Linda C. reveal in her text? Revealing our secrets—through symptoms and texts—is one way that we can ask for something forbidden (Phillips 33). Fear orientates us to the things we want and value. Indeed, fear is a form of intelligence, knowledge by which we come to know the self. Linda C. felt grateful to Veronica B. for something. It would appear that something about Veronica B.—her performance, her manner, her story—was able to console Linda C.'s fears in a way that text, film, and print, could not. Perhaps Veronica B. helped Linda C. to know herself a little better, legitimated her secret fears and forbidden desires, helped Linda know what it was she valued and wanted from the future. If Linda C. feared the unruly native, the rioting, angry, unforgiving stolen child, here was Veronica B.—cool, calm, well educated—and forgiving. With Veronica B. Linda could feel that someone—not her, but a responsible adult—could safely feel guilt, express remorse, and apologise for Veronica B.'s trauma. Veronica B. allowed Linda C. to connect with her fears about being engulfed by the trauma of

Australian existence, about herself being the stolen child, about the difficulty of carrying the shame and burden of guilt, although this connection is made ambivalently so. Did Linda C. enjoy the film or learning anything from it? Yes and No. Through her ambivalence Linda C. presents herself as split between being the accuser and the accused, between reproach of others and self-reproach (Freud Mourning 247). The antagonisms that beset her, terrorise her, are not only those of rioting postcolonial Australia but those within.

Fears guarantee a predictable future; indeed, "fear is one of the ways we keep the future going" (Phillips 54). We construct our defences around what we fear may happen and in so doing narrow the options for the future. But, as Phillips argues, if the objects of fear are the future, they can only be derived from the past. The postcolonial expert—the Indigenous survivor—allows us to connect our past to our future. To Always Indigenise, as Len Findlay (this volume) suggests we must, in this instance is to punctuate our passions for ignorance and our defences against unbearable terrors. The postcolonial expert, the one presumed to know, carries the burden of being master of the miseries of both the terrorising and the terrorised.

In June 2004 Veronica B.'s casual teaching contract was not renewed. On 30 July 2004, during a pre-dawn raid by two hundred and fifty police, thirty-four residents of The Block in Redfern, Sydney were arrested on suspicion of drug trafficking. Something should be frightening Linda C.

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