

Cultural Resistance and the Politics of Memory in the Autobiography of Doris Kartinyeri

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<p>Received: 23 Oct 2025; Received in revised form: 21 Nov 2025; Accepted: 25 Nov 2025; Available online: 29 Nov 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords – cultural resistance, stolen generations, Aboriginal autobiography, indigenous identity, trauma and memory.</p>	<p><i>This paper analyses Doris Kartinyeri's autobiography, Kick the Tin, as a significant narrative of cultural resistance and identity reconstruction within the framework of Australian colonial history. The study emphasises the catastrophic effects of systemic assimilation policies enforced by European settlers, notably through the coercive removal of Aboriginal children referred to as the 'Stolen Generations'. The text shows how colonial institutions used Christianity, education, and language as weapons to undermine Aboriginal spirituality, kinship structures, and oral traditions. This made people believe that Indigenous people were inferior and that European culture was superior. The story follows Kartinyeri's traumatic childhood, which included being kidnapped, abused in institutions, feeling like she didn't belong to her culture, and later finding out about her Ngarrindjeri heritage. Her memories serve as a form of resistance, revealing the brutality of colonialism while restoring the dignity of Aboriginal identity and cultural continuity. By contrasting Aboriginal holistic and inclusive cosmology with the European worldview characterised by materialism and exploitation, the autobiography contests prevailing historical narratives and emphasises the importance of cultural memory, kinship solidarity, and spiritual connection to the land. Utilising a postcolonial theoretical framework, the paper contends that Kick the Tin surpasses individual testimony to emerge as a collective voice for Indigenous resilience, converting trauma into agency and positioning autobiographical writing as an essential arena for decolonisation and cultural affirmation.</i></p>

Colonialism operates through cultural oppression in addition to political and economic subjugation. It ingrains in the psyche of the oppressed the inadequacy of their culture and the superiority of the colonizer's culture. To effectively achieve the objective of colonisation, the education, habits, language, and practices of the colonised are undermined. Therefore,

the affirmation of cultural values and pride in cultural traditions are crucial elements of resistance, facilitating the reclamation of the sacred and pristine self, both individually and collectively.

The numerous heterogeneous Aboriginal tribes who lived freely and peacefully in Australia, were in for a rude shock when the European colonizers from

England started arriving in tranches and finally announced their occupation of the native land on 26 January 1788 by hoisting the British national flag. There was no looking back ever since and thence began the systemic assimilation and annihilation of the indigenous tribes. The full-blood Aborigines were callously exterminated and the 'half-castes', born out of the exploitation of native women, were hideously stolen by the authorities to be raised in government owned foster homes, to prepare domestic servants for British households and factory workers. The Aboriginal share in total population of Australia plummeted to about 3.8% and even today, they primarily continue to languish on the fringes. The few who have managed to improve their condition, primarily out of sheer hard work, patience and perseverance, take up the task of not only speaking up for themselves but for the entire community. Women have primarily held sway as Germaine Greer says, "Women do grief, men do rage." Doris Kartinyeri is one such brave woman.

Kick the Tin is the autobiography of Doris Kartinyeri, born on September 8, 1945. Her mother passed away a month later owing to medical issues. She was relocated to Colebrook Home without any information provided to the infant's family. She was collected from the Murray Bridge Hospital when the grieving family was arranging her mother's final rites. She remained at the mission school until the age of fourteen. She was kept uninformed on her family, her Aboriginal heritage, and the reality of her abduction. The government regarded these children and their families as inanimate or valueless entities that could be discarded at its discretion. Kartinyeri discovered her family's lineage and the suffering they endured via her sister, Doreen, whom she encountered later in life. Doreen was also removed at the age of 10 and placed in the Salvation Army Girl's Home at Fullarton, delivering a further shock to the already troubled family. Their grandmother and father were left bereft, forced to endure their grief and perish without their children by their side. Doris was removed under the pretext of civilisation and education, thereafter, put to servitude in white households, where she endured sexual exploitation with physical, mental, and emotional torture. The title of Kartinyeri's book alludes to a game

played with fellow inmates at the orphanage school, where youngsters formed a circle, kicked a tin, and then ran for cover, attempting to return without being apprehended. She employs it as a metaphor for her existence. The existence of youngsters such as Kartinyeri was characterised by maltreatment from white individuals, preventing their return home without the risk of capture. Years later, Doris ultimately reconnected with the Ngarrindjeri people, uncovering her cultural history and her role as an advocate for the stolen generations. The narrative is a bold exploration of a woman's psychology and emotions as she seeks meaning, origins, and identity in a world that has been inaccessible to her.

Discarding the elitist and exclusionary definition of 'culture' by Matthew Arnold, anthropologists and sociologists define culture more broadly to include ways of life, social beliefs and values, etc. Eating and dressing habits, customs, rituals, conventions, social, political institutions and hierarchies, are all embodiments of culture. In the post-colonial era, culture is also a site of political contest between the dominant sections of society and the resistance offered by the marginalized.

The term 'cultural difference' refers to the variety of cultures and the need to acknowledge this variety to avoid universal prescriptive cultural definitions. It emphasizes our awareness of the "homogenizing effects of cultural symbols and icons" and places the emphasis on a questioning attitude towards "the authority of cultural synthesis in general" (Ashcroft 61). Cultural studies encourage a cross disciplinary enterprise for analyzing the conditions that affect "the production, reception and cultural significance of all types of institutions, practices, and products. Its main aim is to specify the functioning of the social, economic, and political forces and power structures that produce all forms of cultural phenomena and endows them with their social meanings and their truth" (Abrams 53).

Therefore, activist authors like Kartinyeri take up this onerous task upon themselves to expose the treacherous lies conjured up the colonizers about indigenous tribes not having a religion and culture of

their own. They even painted a narrative of the natives being nomads without a connection to the land and in dire need of external aid. It was used as an alibi by the colonizers to occupy the Aboriginal territory falsely declaring it "terra nullius" (Bourke 1), that is, uninhabited. These tribes were described as savages and barbarous heathens needed to be civilized by Christianizing them. The Aboriginals possessed elaborate customs, laws, and spiritual beliefs that shaped their connection to the land for at least forty thousand years prior to the arrival of colonisers. The code of life was referred to as 'The Dreaming' or 'The Dreamtime', denoting the origin of life, earth, and the creative era since time immemorial. This spiritual wisdom has been transmitted across generations orally. It manifests in various forms such as music, dancing, rituals, sculptures, body art, and rock and sand paintings. Because of their oral tradition and different kinds of writing the Aboriginals were supposed to have no culture. Penny Van Toorn too says:

Few non-Aboriginal people recognized the richness of oral traditions, or considered the possibility that graphic signifying systems such as sand drawings, body scars, paintings, or carvings might be viewed as forms of writing. Most assumed that only literate societies were advanced, civilized and rational, and took orality to be a sign of the backward, primitive and ignorant. (20)

Besides containing the sacred and spiritual knowledge, the Aboriginal cultural repository also enlists the prescribed roles (social, cultural, religious, gender, kinship) and responsibilities of men and women, and other aspects of daily life like "homicide, sacrilege, sorcery, incest, abduction of women, adultery,

physical assault, theft, insult including swearing, and the usurpation of ritual privileges and duties" (Bourke and Cox 56).

After becoming literate in the European system of education, which was in fact imposed on them, the Aboriginals can now write about their culture, celebrate it in their works and reject/contest the lies circulated by the whites about the inferiority of the Aboriginal culture. Therefore, education is very important as Ashcroft et al too observe, "Education becomes a technology of colonialist subjectification in two important and intrinsically interwoven ways: it establishes the locally English or British as normative through critical claims to 'universality'... and it represents the colonized to themselves as inherently inferior beings - 'wild', 'barbarous', 'uncivilized'" (371).

The Aboriginals believe that the formless earth was a watery expanse and from under it emerged the spirit beings with human, animal and plant form. "The Spirit Beings on emerging from the formless substance moved over the surface of the earth . . . As they travelled, they and their tracks, artefacts and activities were transformed into the rocks, mountains, waterholes, caves, sand hills, trees, watercourses, stars and the other phenomena of the environment" (Edwards 80). Therefore, the entire cosmos and the entire expanse of land are considered sacred by the Aboriginals, and they worship nature like their mother as it protects and sustains them. Through the rituals enshrined in The Dreaming, the Aboriginals enter a direct relationship with the spirits and the past.

Such continuity between the past and the present is hard for the western school of thought to grasp, as Bill Edwards says that "Aboriginal creative epoch cannot be understood within a western framework of linear time . . . with the separation of past and present . . . The Aboriginal concept of time is therefore cyclic . . . the heroic time which existed in the past and still exists today" (79).

The Aboriginals believe that the correct practice of these sacred song cycles, dance forms, paintings and rituals are necessary for the maintenance of cosmos and society as the ancestral spirits left their essence in various manifestations of nature. This comprised the

most sacred and prized possession or knowledge of the
Aboriginals. On the contrary:

Western ideas about reality and religion are based largely on the general acceptance of dichotomies between natural and cultural, material and spiritual, past and present, secular and sacred, subject and object . . . In traditional Aboriginal thought, there is no nature without culture. The distinction between subject and object breaks down as people identify rocks, trees or birds as representations of their own beings, and not as things solely objective and external to them. (Edwards 81)

Aboriginal spirituality was organic, instinctive, and authentic, in contrast to the controlled, institutionalised nature of Christianity, which was imposed by settlers. 'Bible-bashing' and 'brainwashing' were religiously practised on children every day. As Doris Kartinyeri recalls in her autobiography, "I hated Sundays for we could not do a thing. It was sinful to involve yourself in any activities on Lord's Day. The Bible was read a lot . . . It was a day just for worship and no play . . . Is this called religion? We were just young children for God's sake." (31)

Kartinyeri further discusses the effect of institutional religion:

Being brought up as a strict Christian, I found it hard to express my personal feelings and had a great need to belong to someone. I had left Colebrook with a lot

of disillusionment because of the continued sexual harassment put upon me at an early age by a member of the staff and then later with the lay preacher. (69)

The Aboriginals always had great reverence for the land of their ancestors. The Aboriginals believe in spirituality, and it has a certain tinge of mysticism to it, at least from the non-Aboriginal point of view. Theories which questioned God and promoted agnosticism, like Charles Darwin's, *The Origin of the Species*, etc., came into being in the West besides various scientific and industrial revolutions and philosophies on atheism. The spiritual emptiness of the European people has been referred to by many social commentators and literary authors alike. For instance, T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* wonders that he didn't know that death had undone so many. However, the indigenes have a firm belief in the omnipotent and the omnipresent.

Another remarkable feature of the Aboriginal culture is their faith in the institution of family and kinship. An Aboriginal family is a cohesive unit and an organic whole just like a human body. Even if one part is severed, the entire body writhes in pain as the wholeness gets disturbed and disfigured. As Colin Bourke and Bill Edwards explain:

Aboriginal kinship and family structures are still cohesive forces which bind Aboriginal people together in all parts of Australia. They provide psychological and emotional support . . . even though they create concern among non-Aboriginal people who would prefer Aborigines to follow European social preferences for nuclear families with

few kinship
responsibilities. (100)

Doris Kartinyeri was stolen when she was just one month old and when her entire family was mourning her dead mother. Doreen, Kartinyeri's sister, says in the Preface to Doris Kartineyri's autobiography how for a long time their family were in tears, not only for the loss of their mother but also for the loss of Doris. "Connie and Ronnie were missing Mum and cried themselves to sleep every night. Grandmother Sally cried whenever she thought of Doris and kept asking where Doris could be ..." (xiv).

Two Aboriginals, who have never met before and accidentally bump into each other, can trace their relation within minutes of sharing their family name and the place of birth. Once Kartinyeri missed her school, and wandering, reached the house of an Aboriginal family and after the exchange of pleasantries, Kartinyeri was startled when the woman of the house introduced herself as Kartinyeri's cousin. "When I said shyly my name was Doris Kartinyeri, she knew all my family. . . and my cousin became excited as she welcomed me with a big grin" (58).

Just as fish is meant to live in water, birds on trees, similarly, Aboriginal tribes were living in a particular habitat with a particular lifestyle before the colonization. Not only were they driven out of their ancestral and sacred land, but families were broken as children were forcibly removed to orphanages for assimilation into the dominant white culture. Many families and stolen children could not survive the trauma and disruption. Kartinyeri was a victim too and says, "I felt unsafe and insecure. I wanted to leave . . . I did not have contact with any of my family, my uncles, my cousins, my father, my aunties, and my brothers and sisters at the time . . . How would anybody know what I was going through? Where is the guiding hand a child is meant to have?" (61).

Sharing is a very strong quality of aboriginal culture. It is no wonder that when even one Aboriginal goes up in the social ladder, the whole community feels proud of it.

Language is an important instrument of exposing, reconstructing, rejecting and subverting the

lies fabricated by the colonizers against the natives. Ashcroft et al are of the opinion that language is a fundamental site of struggle as colonization begins with language itself:

The control over language by the imperial centre - whether achieved by displacing native languages, by installing itself as a 'standard' against other variants which are constituted as 'impurities', or by planting the language of empire in new place - remains the most potent instrument of cultural control. Language provides the terms by which reality may be constituted. (261)

The Aboriginals are not a homogeneous tribe. There are several tribes with their own languages. Though diverse and varied in different aspects, kinship and solidarity are common to all.

The bonding among the Aboriginal tribes have always been very strong partly because of cultural similarity and partly because of shared history of colonization and dispossession. One can understand the full import of Doris Kartinyeri's words in the Acknowledgement,

My early childhood was shared with many brothers and sisters at Colebrook Home. This book is for them. For the living and the deceased. Many years shared with imagination, laughter and tears. The memories will always be with me... Throughout my life there are many friends who have inspired and strengthened me to go

on. One particular friend, Jannet Hannah Tooby, has given me strength by just being a friend. (ix-x)

The Aboriginal families were large and chirpy clusters, with considerable amount of talking and other household sounds quite audible, making it a lively neighbourhood. However, to the white neighbours in the city or suburbs that was a sore to the ears. They would call the police and get a warning issued to the Aboriginals who they thought were noisy and unruly. In sharp contrast to the individualism and materialism of the white Australians are the Aboriginals who believe in sharing and closeness within the family. This broad and inclusive worldview of the Aboriginals is contrasted with the narrow racial prejudices of the colonizers as Ashcroft et al observe,

The 'Difference' of the post-colonial subject by which s/he can be 'othered' is felt most directly and immediately in the way in which the superficial differences of the body and voice (skin colour, eye shape, hair texture, body shape, language, dialect or accent) are read as indelible signs of the natural inferiority of their possessors... since it is the body which is the inescapable visible sign of their oppression and denigration. (289)

As for the colonial government, it did not even consider the Aboriginals as humans of any worth and so no records were maintained about the birth, death or parentage of full blood Aboriginals.

Another significant aspect of Aboriginal culture highlighted in their autobiographies is their deep respect for life, nature, women, children and even animals. The

Aboriginals did not kill or separate even a young animal from its mother for food. By contrast, the colonizers had no qualms about removing young native infants from their mothers and families as if they were inanimate objects. Kartinyeri says, "I was stolen from my family . . . I stayed at Colebrook Home until I turned fourteen years old. I was never told I was removed from my family. I was never told that my mother had died. In all of my childhood, I was never taken back to my family" (6) and it was an unnatural act for any Aboriginal child to be separated from her family. The damage done to the child could not be undone ever, as Bird says,

We may go home, but we cannot relive our childhoods. We may reunite with our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunties, uncles, communities, but we cannot relive the twenty, thirty, forty years that we spent without their love and care, and they cannot undo the grief and mourning they felt when we were separated from them. We can go home to ourselves as Aboriginals, but this does not erase the attacks inflicted on our hearts, minds, bodies and souls. (114)

In traditional Aboriginal culture, women were afforded greater respect, significance, and equity in contrast to what was often observed in contemporary Western culture. The phrase that has been employed for centuries to refer to the indigenous peoples, 'hunters and gatherers', serves as a testament to the recognised interdependence and essential roles of men and women in relation to one another. While the extensive Aboriginal families operated as a cohesive unit, women were afforded certain periods and spaces solely for their own use, from which men were excluded. The revered

Aboriginal belief system encompassed specific songs designated solely for women, which were exchanged and performed within gatherings exclusively for women. Conversely, numerous wives of the colonial officers found themselves isolated in their lavish residences, abandoned by their partners. In addition to their roles in production, child-rearing, fulfilling the physical desires of their spouses, and overseeing the Aboriginal servants, their responsibilities were rather limited. Moreover, these unfortunate women found themselves as passive observers to their husbands' betrayals, who took advantage of the Aboriginal women in servitude, and to the tragic reality of children resulting from such immoral and coerced unions. In a bid to preserve the dignity of their families and spouses, these women fabricated narratives regarding the lineage of those children.

What to talk of women, even young and tender girls fell prey to the lust of men, and very often 'religious' men. As Kartinyeri says, "As an individual child with no family there to protect me, and being black, naive and vulnerable, I was easy prey for sexual predators. Colebrook seemed to be a haven for sexual deviants. It was a terrible place to live for a lot of children" (54).

CONCLUSION

Indigenous peoples have consistently demonstrated a profound connection with nature. Conversely, the European settlers, influenced by their imperialist and capitalist ideologies, regarded Mother Earth and, indeed, all of nature as mere commodities to be maximally exploited for profit. Their actions reflect a profound disregard for the sustainable management of natural resources, as they extracted and exploited these gifts far beyond their actual necessities, in stark contrast to the indigenous populations who engage with nature in a manner that aligns with their genuine needs. The Aboriginals have always been an integral part of nature and Kartinyeri uses the imagery of a tree to describe the close-knit structure of the Colebrook Home or orphanage. She says, "The Roots represent the many tribes the children originated from. The trunk represents the love and devotion of Sister Hyde and Sister Rutter.

Their caring formed us into a strong family unit. The Branches indicate the family branching out into their individual lives. The leaves represent the many Colebrook offspring . . ." (28).

The existence and way of life of Aboriginal people reflect an innocence and clarity, devoid of pretence, avarice, and duplicity, in stark contrast to the insincere, troubled, neurotic, materialistic, and self-serving behaviours often exhibited by those who consider themselves educated and progressive within the colonial establishment. The Aboriginals were unfamiliar with concepts such as hostility and suspicion. In the year 1788, as the initial wave of colonisers began to arrive, the indigenous population sought to integrate them into their existing societal framework. The indigenous people guided them through the landscape, imparting their understanding of the abundant natural resources and diverse ecosystems essential for survival. Nevertheless, the indigenous population gradually came to understand that the European settlers harboured no genuine affection for them but rather sought to extend their dominion and exploit the natural resources of Australia. Prior to contact, the indigenous community was largely unacquainted with alcoholism and diseases such as cholera, typhoid, syphilis, stress, and mental disorders. However, following colonisation, many individuals became susceptible to these afflictions, a consequence of the actions of the colonisers. Kartinyeri too was diagnosed with Bi-Polar Affective Disorder and recuperated after many years of frustration and loneliness.

Fish cannot be made to live on land just as cats, dogs, and birds cannot live under water. Mother Nature has provided every species with its unique habitat. Even voluntary immigrants of different nationalities always feel the connection with their motherland and her unique culture though they may have migrated for different reasons. Each civilization and its cultures are special and rich in their own way. An uprooted mango tree cannot be planted in the hills. Similarly, the forced removal of Aboriginals from their land and the imposition of western culture did them no good. Rather, it destroyed them. Kartinyeri questions, "We had our own rules, our own ways of living. We had our own

creation stories, our spirituality. What right did they have to crush our spirituality, our language, our kin? What right did they have to crush our spirit and replace it with their myths and stories and rules which they did not live up to . . ." (110).

Olga Gostin and Alwin Chong differentiate between the two world views. In respect of the indigenes they say, "The Aboriginal world view is essentially inclusive or holistic. Humans and all species of human endeavour, as well as nature and all natural phenomena, including animals and plants in all their diversity, are seen as equal manifestations of timeless spiritual or cosmic order" (147). With reference to the European worldview, they say,

The European quest for knowledge . . . is essentially an individual search driven by specialist interests backed by open access to the accumulated knowledge of past generations stored in written form. The cosmic order has itself been secularized and the quest is to establish verifiable facts and theories in an atmosphere of detached critical analysis and intellectual debate. (148)

These differences in culture and experiences leave an imprint on both the form and content of the literary artefacts of the two civilizations as Penny Van Toorn says,

. . . Aboriginal autobiographies tend to be less introspective. They often move quickly from event to event in a transparent, perfunctory prose, reminding us perhaps that

introspectivity is a luxury enjoyed primarily by leisured elites who assume their thoughts and feelings are important and unique. In Western tradition, the past is often pictured as far away, elusive and elaborately meditated, whereas in Aboriginal autobiographies certain past experiences are so painfully present and immediate that it is extremely stressful for the writer to put their memories into words. (36)

The contrast between the Aboriginals' and the colonizers' culture and its political implications, as illustrated in these autobiographies, can be best summed up in a poem by Dianna Rose Yoka, "Who is Stone-Age?":

I was talking to a friend
The other fine day
I commented on many things
And then she had her say.

'Aboriginal people
Are coming out of stone age'
She finally said to me.
'Why is it that
White man's view is always
Taken as truth!
Who are they to label?'

Two hundred years ago
We had an affluent society

We knew our place
In the scheme of things.
And then 'they' came to this fair land
To rape, pillage and plunder.
They tore the sacred land apart
and made the stock exchange instead
Their sacred site and wonder.

They used only the intellect
And in their rapacious greed
They pitted science against religion.
They change the laws every year
For some new fancy, whim.

So who is stone age now, my friend.
Is it white man who is prehistoric?
He cannot find the answers yet
Because he only lives in
Rhetoric. (151)

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