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Listening to Grandmothers

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LISTENING TO GRANDMOTHERS

If you want to know about the history of racism, look for grandmothers. This was suggested to me by the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

When my wife and I sat down to watch *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, we were moved. The film tells the story of two young girls, Molly and Daisy, two “half-castes,” and their improbable trip home across the wilds of Australia. As the film opens, the girls are forcibly removed from their home and sent to boarding school as part of Australian government policy instituted by Chief Protector of Aborigines, A. O. Neville (a despicable Kenneth Branagh).

The boarding school is supposed to improve the girls’ lives as well as control their racial in-betweenness. However, when Molly and Daisy decide they don’t like the harsh, loveless treatment and rigid structure at the school, they run away. There’s one problem: the boarding school is more than a thousand miles away from home. Cleverly, the girls follow a “rabbit-proof fence” that stretches more than a thousand miles across Australia’s interior, elude trackers, and live off their wits to finally return home.

The film has much magic to it. Particularly disturbing is the scene where the girls are carried off: when powerful adults inflict their will on children, it’s not easy to watch—although what could be more important to think about? Most of the film has you falling in love with Molly and Daisy (played by Everlyn Sampi and Tianna Sansbury) and getting carried away with their spirit and quest. And their homecoming is as feel-good as film gets.

However, the part that sticks with my wife and me is the final scene: footage of the actual Molly and Daisy, now grandmothers. Molly and Daisy’s weathered brown faces, their imperfect smiles, and their indomitable posture—that’s the real power of the film.

The mistake in watching *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is to think it’s an Australian story when it’s an indigenous story the world over. The land we live on is a contested place, be that Jigalong, Australia, or Aleppo, Syria—or Sioux County, Iowa, where I work.

Sioux County and the Big Sioux River, which runs through the county’s western half, both take their names from the Sioux people. I have not met any Sioux people—who are really Dakota—in Sioux County. Census data says that as of 2010, .013 percent of the population was Native American.

What happened to the indigenous people of Sioux County? The same thing that happened to many tribes. The Dakota of the area had largely been confined to small reservations along the Minnesota River Valley to the north when several young braves, unhappy with food shortages and treatment by government agents, started a bloody local war. When all was said and done, more than five hundred people lay dead, and the Dakota were forced to resettlement on reservations farther west in South Dakota, out of the way of white settlers. Their removal is a story of concentration camps, a forced March in cold weather, disease, and death. Their expulsion made way for my own grandmothers and, a generation later, my wife’s grandmother, a refugee fleeing the contested landscape of Laos.

Beyond this removal to reservations, however, both the United States and Canada, like Australia, used boarding schools as part of a strategy to “kill the Indian and save the child.” Children were sent far away to schools where their braids were cut off, their native dress was replaced by uniforms, and their native language was banned. The results were most often devastating. In recent years, Canada has founded a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to begin the difficult task of facing this ugly heritage of “cultural genocide”; the United States has not followed suit.

Of course, despite these conscious and programmatic attempts at removal, and despite Sioux County’s lack of Native Americans, native people survived. This is important to recognize as it’s a common and harmful myth
to think of native people as gone the way of the buffalo. Native Americans abide, often deeply tied to local landscapes, despite the fact that many of us remain unaware of or even blind to their presence.

Several winters ago, a severe ice storm knocked out power to rural South Dakota for weeks. Not surprisingly, the reservation there got hit hard, perhaps the same reservation to which the Dakota were driven. The local news channel got a sound bite from one of the grandmothers there, who chuckled about the ice and lack of electricity. “Well, I’ve been here this long,” she said. “It’s going to take something more than this to move me.”

That grandmother reminded me of Molly and Daisy, and reminded me of my wife’s grandmother, who married a Chinese man in Laos, had one daughter, and took in her sister’s son when she could no longer care for him. She became a widow, and followed those children when they fought on the losing side of a war and fled their country to the United States, where she never did manage to learn English.

All these grandmothers were heroic for the way they simply endured.

Let the image of these grandmothers tie us to history. Let them represent all the forces and ideologies and war and desire for land and wealth that forcibly removed young girls from their homes. Let’s look at our grandmothers and wonder: Where are the grandmothers who lived here before us—or who endured and may still be here, right under our noses?

To counter racism in our communities we must begin to tell better stories about the places we live, more honest stories about the grandmothers who heroically endured in those places or who are missing from them. Our family has stopped at “Slaughter Slough,” the site of a gun battle where a group of Dakota surrounded settlers in one of the skirmishes of the 1862 war. And we’ve stopped at Reconciliation Park, a small, out of the way park where the “Dakota 38,” the men who took the blame for that war, were hung in the largest mass execution in U.S. history. My wife and I have been to a newly rediscovered burial grounds and taken part in joint ceremonies between native, white, and Asian people to rededicate those grounds. I know of another local landmark, the Hiawatha Insane Asylum, where native people lived and died in often deplorable conditions. Today the site is mainly covered over by the fairways of Hiawatha Golf Course.

What places where you live bear the names of native culture and civilizations? What indigenous names has American society laid hold of to create attractive-sounding names for golf courses, housing developments, retirement homes? What grandmothers are missing from your community? Where are the heroic grandmothers who have endured? What stories do they have to tell?

To counteract racism, let’s treasure grandmothers, especially those who have had to simply endure. Of course, first we need to find those grandmothers, to learn to see them, to meet them where they are, to build relationships. Only then can we take the first step of reconciliation: listening to their stories.