Surviving school and “survival schools”: Resistance, compulsion and negotiation in Aboriginal engagements with schooling

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Abstract

In Australia, Aboriginal peoples have sought to exploit and challenge settler-colonial schooling to meet their own goals and needs, engaging in strategic, diverse and creative ways closely tied to labour markets and the labour movement. Here, we bring together two case studies from the eras of official assimilation and self-determination to illustrate the interplay of negotiation, resistance and compulsion that we argue has characterised Aboriginal engagements with school as a structure within settler colonial capitalism. These engagements have been part of techniques for survival: existing on Aboriginal terms within, around and against the depredations of Australian settler colonial capitalism. Our first case study explains how Aboriginal families in Victoria and New South Wales deliberately exploited gaps in school record collecting to maintain mobility during the mid-twentieth century, linked to engagements with labour markets that enabled visits to country. Our second case study explores the Strelley mob’s establishment of independent Aboriginal controlled bilingual schools in the 1970s in order to maintain control of their labour and their futures. Techniques of survival developed in and around schooling have been neglected by historians, yet they demonstrate how schooling has been a strategic political project: both for Aboriginal peoples’ and the Australian settler colonial state.

Key words
Aboriginal labour, schooling, education, settler colonialism

Australian historians have long debated the nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagements with settler colonial capitalism. The debate has been animated by questions of coercion and agency, the importance of labour *vis-à-vis* land, and the value of settler colonial studies as an analytical tool.[1] Yet despite an understanding of schooling's importance for settler colonialism, scholars have largely neglected schools as sites to explore Aboriginal engagement with settler structures in Australia. The existing, slight, literature demonstrates that schools, since their rapid expansion in the twentieth century, have been variously driven by racist exclusion and segregation, attempts to impose forms of assimilation via surveillance, control and religious conversion, and training for a racialised labour market.[2] This focus on "damage" over "desire" has obscured the ways that Aboriginal peoples have sought to exploit and challenge settler colonial schooling systems to meet their own goals and needs as a technique of survival.[3] By exploring the complex history of Aboriginal navigations of schooling, we can deepen our understanding of how Aboriginal groups have met compulsion with forms of negotiation and resistance. Aboriginal actions around schooling have been closely linked with labour markets and the labour movement, and so offer new ways of understanding the settler colonial structures of schooling, and Aboriginal actions in, against and around this, that can enrich the new histories of Australian capitalism.[4]

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[1] Some early explorations include Raelene Frances, Bruce Scates, and Ann McGrath, "Broken Silences," *Labour History and Aboriginal Workers',* in T Irving (Ed.), *Challenges to Labour History*, (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1994); Bill Thorpe, "Aboriginal Employment and Unemployment: Colonised Labour," in C Williams and B Thorpe (Eds), *Industrial Sociology: The Work of Men and Women*, (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992); Raymond Evans, Kay Saunders, and Kathryn Cronin, *Exclusion, Exploitation, and Extermination: Race Relations in Colonial Queensland* (Sydney: Australia and New Zealand Book Company, 1975); Ann Curthoys and Clive Moore, "Working for the White People: An Historiographic Essay on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Labour," *Labour History: A Journal of Labour and Social History*, no. 69 (1995): 1–29; Jeremy Beckett, "The Torres Strait Islanders and the Pearling Industry: A Case of Internal Colonialism," *Aboriginal History*, 1977, 77–104; Henry Reynolds, *With the White People* (Sydney: Penguin Books, 1990). For settler colonial theory discussion, see, Shino Konishi, "First Nations Scholars, Settler Colonial Studies, and Indigenous History," *Australian Historical Studies* 50, no. 3 (2019): 285–304, J Kēhaulani Kauanui, "A Structure, Not an Event": Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity," *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016): 1–5, Penelope Edmonds, *Settler Colonialism and (Re)Conciliation: Frontier Violence, Affective Performances, and Imaginative Refoundings* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409; Lorenzo Veracini, "Defending Settler Colonial Studies," *Australian Historical Studies* 45, no. 3 (2014): 311–16; Tim Rowse, "Indigenous Heterogeneity," *Australian Historical Studies* 45, no. 3 (2014): 297–310.

[2] Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008); Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History since 1800* (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2005); Jim Fletcher, *Clean, Clad and Courteous: A History of Aboriginal Education in NSW* (Carlton: Fletcher, Jim, 1989); Beth Marsden, "'The System of Compulsory Education Is Failing': Assimilation, Mobility and Aboriginal Students in Victorian State Schools, 1961-1968," *History of Education Review* 47, no. 2 (January 1, 2018): 143–54; Sophie Rudolph, "To 'Uplift the Aborigine' or to 'Uphold' Aboriginal Dignity and Pride? Indigenous Educational Debates in 1960s Australia," *Paedagogica Historica* 55, no. 1 (2019): 152–65; Ian D Clark and Toby Heydon, *A Bend in the Yarra: A History of the Merri Creek Protectorate Station and Merri Creek Aboriginal School 1841-1851* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004); Rachel Standfield, "The Parramatta Maori Seminary and the Education of Indigenous Peoples in Early Colonial New South Wales," *History of Education Review* 41, no. 2 (2012): 119–28; Craig Campbell and Helen Proctor, *A History of Australian Schooling* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2014).

[3] Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 409–28; Amy Claire Thomas, "Bilingual Education, Aboriginal Self-Determination and Yolŋu Control at Shepherdson College, 1972–1983," *History of Education Review*, (online first), 2020.

[4] Following Campbell and Proctor (2014), we make a distinction between 'education' and 'schooling'. The term education, although defined by Western intellectual traditions, can be applied to teaching and learning in Aboriginal communities that took place before invasion and that continues today largely outside schools. It mistaken to use the term 'Aboriginal education' when discussing only formal Western schooling.

We introduce two historical case studies to illustrate this interplay between negotiation, resistance and compulsion in Aboriginal engagements with schooling. Our first case study shows that in the mid-twentieth century, Aboriginal families in Victoria and New South Wales deliberately exploited gaps in school record collecting to maintain mobility, enabling engagements with labour markets that facilitated visits to country. This was a strategy for evading school as a system tied to assimilationist desires to surveil and contain Aboriginal people. Our second case study explores the establishment of independent Aboriginal-controlled multilingual schools by the Strelley mob in the 1970s, a group emerging from the Pilbara social movement following the 1946-1949 strike, in order to maintain control of their labour and community. These schools were designed for the deliberate nourishing of Aboriginal education, alongside facilitating access settler knowledges to assist Aboriginal self-determination.[5] Both of our case studies exist as part of larger research projects, but we bring them together to highlight schools as a site where, via Aboriginal action, the contradictions and logics of settler colonial capitalism's processes of acculturation has been questioned and challenged. These case studies are representative of broader patterns where schooling has been a focus of Aboriginal concerns, and where demands for justice have often included control of "our own schools and homes", in the words of Fred Maynard.[6]

Settler colonial scholarship foregrounds capitalism's elementary processes of primitive accumulation via dispossession, and the linked logics of Indigenous elimination.[7] In our reading, the former forms the basis of material wealth and the latter the governance structures of the state in settler colonial societies. Those governance structures attempted to homogenise and assimilate via institutions such as schools.[8] New histories of capitalism can benefit from integrating this lens into their efforts to reintegrate the economic, political, social and cultural in history.[9] Building on this, and following materialist sociologists of education, we see Australian state and religious schooling systems as raced and gendered structures that *aimed* (and still aim) to reproduce settler colonial capitalism.[10] These logics worked against Aboriginal self-determination. However, such reproduction of capitalist structure was not easily assured. Schools have also existed as sites of contest over imaginations of the future, as sociological debates have long highlighted.[11] Here we focus on

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[5] In her history of two Native-controlled schools, Julie L Davis describes a tension that we bring to light here: that between surviving school as a settler system, and 'survival schools', those deliberating designed for Indigenous flourishing, often against settler systems. See: Julie L Davis, *Survival Schools: The American Indian Movement and Community Education in the Twin Cities* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

[6] Cited in Padraic Gibson, 'Did 'Protection' Protect?', *Arena Journal* (February 2019, p 54).

[7] J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "'A Structure, Not an Event': Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity," *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016): 5–1; Thalia Anthony, "Settler-Colonial Governmentality: The Carceral Webs Woven by Law and Politics," in *Questioning Indigenous-Settler Relations* (Springer, 2020), 33–53.

[8] Eve Tuck and Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández, "Curriculum, Replacement, and Settler Futurity," *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 29, no. 1 (June 18, 2013).

[9] Kenneth Lipartito, "Reassembling the Economic: New Departures in Historical Materialism," *American Historical Review* 121, no. 1 (2016): 101–39; Hannah Forsyth and Sophie Loy-Wilson, "Seeking a New Materialism in Australian History," *Australian Historical Studies* 48, no. 2 (2017): 169–88.

[10] Susan Ferguson, "Children, Childhood and Capitalism: A Social Reproduction Perspective," *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, 2017, 68–93; James Collins, "Social Reproduction in Classrooms and Schools," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 38 (2009): 33–48.

[11] Jessica Gerrard, *Radical Childhoods: Schooling and the Struggle for Social Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); Michael Marker, "Indigenous Resistance and Racist Schooling on the Borders of Empires: Coast Salish Cultural Survival," *Paedagogica Historica* 45, no. 6 (2009): 757–772; Henry A. Giroux, "Theory and Resistance in

sites of contest rarely explored by those same sociologists (predominantly occupied by class stratification and student action) or by historians—Aboriginal navigations of schools in a settler colonial context.[12] We highlight how dynamic and creative Aboriginal action exploited and challenged schooling systems, sometimes subverting their settler colonial aims. This paper makes the case for the importance of examining schooling as a strategic political project, both for government authorities, but also for Aboriginal peoples and communities.

Panning for gold

Searching for histories of Aboriginal engagements with schooling in the historical literature can feel a little like panning for gold: what does exist is spread through the history of education (and sometimes educational sociology), and within Aboriginal history (particularly labour-focused work, memoir and oral history).[13] Turning the little nuggets into ingots is our aim here, in order to better understand the rarely-recognised historical relationship between Aboriginal action, schooling, labour and capitalism in the twentieth century.

Historians attentive to Aboriginal schooling and children have predominantly sought to understand the impact of government policy and missionary conversion as a process of assimilation. Anna Haebich's epic *Broken Circles* highlights how in each state and territory, schooling institutions have been intimately tied to undermining and breaking up Aboriginal families.[14] Schools positioned Aboriginal children as future workers for the colonial project of land cultivation and homemaking.[15] Aboriginal youth were guided, pushed and forced into training and technical education, controlled and limited to serve the needs of the settler colonial economy. By the mid-twentieth century, the view that Aboriginal students were more suited to supposedly practical education was entrenched.[16] Farmers and pastoralists who relied on ready, cheap labour benefitted from this system.[17]

Yet at various times and in multiple ways Aboriginal families and communities created opportunities to subvert settler aims for schooling. A variety of literature hints at how strategic engagement in schools and the labour market was negotiated by Aboriginal people, who worked in and around settler schools to meet their needs, or sometimes rejected these schools in favour of models that more fully realised their desires. Aboriginal families' refusal to send their children to unsafe schools has received some focused attention in scholarship on

Education: A Pedagogy for the Opposition," 1983; Michael W. Apple, "Understanding and Interrupting Hegemonic Projects in Education: Learning from Stuart Hall," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 36, no. 2 (March 15, 2015): 171–84; Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (Haymarket Books, 2011).

[12] For exceptions, see Gerrard, *Radical Childhoods*; Amanda Keddie and Nicole Williams, "Mobilising Spaces of Agency through Genealogies of Race and Gender: Issues of Indigeneity, Marginality and Schooling," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 15, no. 3 (June 1, 2012): 291–309); Eve Tuck and Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández, "Curriculum, Replacement, and Settler Futurity," *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 29, no. 1 (June 18, 2013).

[13] Our focus here is work on the twentieth century. Other histories of schooling have primarily focused on schools in the early colonial era, such as Standfield, Parramatta Native Institute; Clarke and Heydon, *A Bend in the Yarra.*

[14] Haebich, *Broken Circles*.

[15] Campbell and Proctor, *A History*.

[16] Barry Down, ''A different, more practical education': Aboriginal education in Western Australian secondary schools after the Second World War', *Education Research and Perspectives*, 1994, 21, no 2:, 47-68.

[17] Rhonda Povey, and Michelle Trudgett. "There was movement at the station: western education at Moola Bulla, 1910-1955." *History of Education Review* (2019).

the forced removal of children.[18] School refusal was widely used as a form of resistance. Sometimes whole communities collectively boycotted schools, sometimes it was the individual decision of families and children.[19] Historians of missions and missionaries have on occasion demonstrated how Aboriginal peoples have challenged or exploited missionary schooling for their own purposes. Yet beyond mission, reserve and station boundaries, the history is lean.[20] Most references to how families and communities have responded to discrimination, not only in overt public campaigning but also through daily, seemingly small moments of contest and refusal, are found in Aboriginal authored works and oral histories.[21] One exception is JJ Fletcher's *Clean, Clad and Courteous*, which highlights campaigns fought by families and communities for improved school access in NSW, and also shows the close connection of these to local labour markets and economies.[22]

Stories of school resistance often link Aboriginal activism and the labour movement, where ideas of self-determination, control and community power have had common attraction.[23] The Black Community School in Townsville run by Eddie 'Kioki' Mabo, Bonita Mabo and Burnum Burnum, as well as Murawina, the independent Aboriginal preschool run by Redfern women in the 1970s, are occasionally cited as examples of Black Power activism.[24] Histories of Northern Territory's bilingual program, though mostly focused on pedagogy, give glimpses of how Aboriginal communities negotiated the program to realise their own aspirations, quickly coming into conflict with the NT government.[25] Historians of labour markets have examined some of the ways that Aboriginal people have utilised colonial economies.[26] Henry Reynolds argues that Aboriginal labourers' engagement with intermittent work provided a "flexibility" to seek "a stable and satisfactory synthesis between old ways and new". [27] Heather Goodall illustrates how this produced engagements with the labour movement.[28]

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[18] See Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing them Home Report*, (1997), see also Haebich, *Broken Circles*.

[19] Down, "'A different'"; Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 259.

[20] Joanna Cruickshank and Patricia Grimshaw, *White Women, Aboriginal Missions and Australian Settler Governments: Maternal Contradictions* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Sue Taffe, *A White Hot Flame: Mary Montgomerie Bennett, Author, educator and activist for Indigenous justice* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2018).

[21] Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell (eds) *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press Syndicate, 1991).

[22] JJ Fletcher, *Clean.*

[23] Bob Boughton, "Adult literacy, land rights and self-determination" in Laura Rademaker and Tim Rowse (Eds), *Indigenous self-determination in Australia: histories and historiography*, (Canberra: ANU Press, 2020).

[24] Noel Loos and Eddie Koiki Mabo, Eddie Koiki Mabo: His Life and Struggle (Brisbane, UQP, 1996), Johanna Perheentupa, *Redfern: Aboriginal Activism in the 1970s* (Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2020).

[25] Tess Ross and Wendy Baarda, "Starting out at Yuendumu School—Teaching in Our Own Language," in *History of Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory*, ed. Brian Devlin, N Devlin, and Samantha Disbray (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 247–57; Christine Nicholls, "Death by a Thousand Cuts: Indigenous Language Bilingual Education Programmes in the Northern Territory of Australia, 1972–1998," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 8, no. 2–3 (2005): 160–77; Thomas, "Bilingual education".

[26] For example, see Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*; Jeremy Beckett, 'Kinship, Mobility and Community among Part-Aborigines in Rural Australia', *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 6, no. 1, 1965, 7-23; Victoria Stead and Jon Altman (eds) *Labour Lines and Colonial Power: Indigenous and Pacific Islander Labour Mobility in Australia*, (Canberra: ANU Press, 2019); Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, Hannah Forsyth and Altin Gavranovic, "The Logic of Survival: Towards an Indigenous-Centred History of Capitalism in Wilcannia," *Settler Colonial Studies* 8, no. 4 (2018): 464–88.

[27] Reynolds, *With the White*.

[28] Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*.

Aboriginal mobilities also provided ways to evade the compulsions of settler structures. Linked to the study of mobilities is a methodological imperative—reading colonial records of Aboriginal mobility for Aboriginal purposes. Our second case study applies these methods to Aboriginal defiance of settler desires to use schools to surveil, reading from settler bureaucratic records a deliberate obfuscation of records to maintain freedoms.[29] Following Tracey Banivanua Mar's theory of imperial literacy, reading settler archives for evidence of Indigenous negotiation, resistance and manipulation of government agents, policies and practices allows us to see Aboriginal action between the lines of the settler archive.[30]

Writing about settler colonial capitalism and Barkindji strategies for survival in Wilcannia, Hannah Forsyth and Altin Gavranovic develop the concept of a "logic of survival" to illustrate how Barkindji developed "a heterogeneous selection of strategies for managing their relationships to settler structures".[31] We see these logics at play in Aboriginal actions around schooling, driven by a determination for more control over their lives, labour and communities. This helps to avoid a teleological account of settler colonialism, where it always already recuperates Indigenous resistance.[32] Around the compulsions of settler structures, we find negotiation, adaptation and resistance to secure Aboriginal survival on Aboriginal terms, unsettling social reproduction in settler colonial schooling.

Our interpretation of agency—we use the imperfect term *actions*—helps to move beyond fatigued agency-structure debates that have characterised discussion on settler colonialism in Australia.[33] In his critique of settler colonial studies, Tim Rowse focuses on its supposed neglect of Indigenous agency and heterogeneity: but perhaps this focus is reflective of continual surprise at its assumed discovery, a surprise that is shaped by, "the notion that it is up to settlers to inscribe Native agency as being a contradiction in terms".[34] Further, as Jane Carey has argues, the debate is also about how to understand settler colonialism.[35] For example, Rowse has recently argued that the task of historians is to pursue objective judgement by placing themselves in "the shoes of those who did those things" before decrying the "morally ugly" matters of Australia's settler colonial past.[36] Instead, we begin from understanding Australia as a still-settler colonial capitalist society shaped by dispossession and with a state governance propelled by settler colonial logics.[37] We understand Aboriginal agency as always already present; we work instead to locate and

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29 Rachel Standfield, 'Mobility, Reciprocal Relationships and Early British Encounters in the North of New Zealand', in Rachel Standfield (ed.) *Indigenous Mobilities: Across and Beyond the Antipodes,* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2018), 3.

30 Tracey Banivanua Mar, 'Imperial literacy and Indigenous rights: Tracing transoceanic circuits of a modern discourse', *Aboriginal History* 37, no., 2013, 1-28.

31 Forsyth and Gavranovic, "'The Logic".

32 Elizabeth Strakosch and Alissa Macoun, "The Vanishing Endpoint of Settler Colonialism," *Arena Journal*, no. 37/38 (2012): 40–40.

33 We refer to Aboriginal 'action' rather than 'agency', as agency can be reductive in understanding the diverse and creative ways Aboriginal groups have toed, crossed and rewritten lines.

34 Patrick Wolfe, *Recuperating Binarism: A Heretical Introduction*, Settler Colonial Studies 3(3-4) (2013): p 274; (Taylor & Francis, 2013); see also Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 113–24.

35 Jane Carey, "On Hope and Resignation: Conflicting Visions of Settler Colonial Studies and Its Future as a Field," *Postcolonial Studies* 23, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 21–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2020.1719578.

36 Miranda Johnson and Tim Rowse, '*Indigenous and Other Australians Since 1901*: A conversation between Professor Tim Rowse and Dr Miranda Johnson', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 42 (2018), 129.

37 Anthony, "Settler-Colonial Governmentality."

understand the strategic actions and techniques that have shaped and challenged the structures of capitalism—not to fill the shoes of the colonial official, but to enrich our understanding of how to contest capitalism today.[38]

Destination "Interstate (Bush)": school systems, records and labour markets

Throughout the mid-twentieth century, rural labour markets in Victoria were an important source of employment for Aboriginal people. Rural industries were also influential to the ways many Aboriginal families engaged with schooling. Bean picking was one such industry and a key source of employment on Gunaikurnai country, the vast region of Gippsland, until the 1970s, as well as for families on Yuin country, on the New South Wales south coast. Along with employment in the timber milling industries operating on both sides of the border, seasonal harvesting also created a way to be mobile and to maintain family connections, with whole families working picking beans and followed the harvest south each summer, catching up with family along the way.

In Victoria, the Education Department was responsible for the education of Aboriginal children from 1901, a form of mainstreaming that was in line with the assimilatory legislation of the state.[39] While many Aboriginal children attended schools away from missions and reserves, the history of how Aboriginal children experienced Victorian state schooling has not been examined in detail, with most focused case studies concerned with mission and reserve sites.[40] In south-east Australia, as elsewhere, Aboriginal memoir and oral histories offer rich first-hand accounts of creative and dynamic engagements with schooling.[41] These accounts counter and often contradict assumptions of the success of settler imperatives, showing settler schooling's failure on its own terms or its strategic exploitation by individuals and groups for their own ends. They are key in addressing both the subjectivity of government records, and the brevity of historiography. Often connected to histories of place, memories of childhood include education that took place outside of the school system with family.

Using the records of Victorian State Schools in Gippsland, and published oral history accounts of Aboriginal people who were involved with the seasonal work of bean picking and timber milling, this research examines the complexity of the relationship between Aboriginal people, local labour markets and the school system. It shows that Aboriginal families utilised labour markets to remain on their country, and to resist and avoid government interference, and that this mobility at times intersected with school systems. A careful reading of the records being generated by about Aboriginal children suggests they were controlled or co-authored by Aboriginal families, who, at times, made strategic choices about what information to withhold, to manipulate, or to freely give to school record keepers.

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[38] Noelani Goodyear-Kaʻōpua, "Protectors of the Future, Not Protestors of the Past: Indigenous Pacific Activism and Mauna a Wākea," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 184–94.

[39] Ann R Shorten, 'The Legal Context of Australian Education: An Historical Exploration', *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Law and Education*, 1, 1996, p. 2-32.

[40] See, for example, Clark and Heydon, *A bend in the Yarra;* Bain Attwood *The Making of the Aborigines,* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989).

[41] Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History;* Kate Harvey (ed) *Aboriginal Elders' Voices: Stories of the 'Tide of History'*, (Melbourne, ACES, 2003); Lois Peeler, *RiverConnect, An Aboriginal Oral History: The Cultural Landscape of the Flat* (Shepparton, Prominent Press, 2008); Lee Chittick and Terry Fox, *Travelling with Percy: A south coast journey,* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1997).

While such instances can be understood as moments of negotiated engagement with schooling and settler colonial economies, this research shows that the traces of mobility (sometimes) captured in the records was for Aboriginal purposes and was representative of strategic engagement. It also argues that mobility afforded by bean picking created some opportunities for learning outside of the school system.

Victoria did not develop a formally segregated schooling system for Aboriginal students. School meant the local (often rural or bush) state school. One room, one teacher schools opened and closed in response to fluctuating enrolment numbers connected to local industry in rural areas. By the early 1960s, the Education Department and the Aborigines Welfare Board were working together to monitor school attendance, often sharing a vehicle to visit remote timber mill towns where Aboriginal families were living, working and attending school in East Gippsland.[42] The Chief Attendance Officer informed the Board of his "intention to check up on some of the schools before the bean picking commenced, so that movement of children may be better checked".[43] The Board's staff readily shared information with the Department when they perceived seasonal work causing problems with schooling: "families have been moving about following the bean picking. I have again warned all the parents I have met and told them that unless there is a distinct improvement matters will be brought to the notice of the Education Department".[44] For Aboriginal families who moved across the border for seasonal work, crossing the border disrupted paper trails created by school records and interrupted surveillance.

The limits of state-based legislation and authorities was well used by Aboriginal people along the New South Wales-Victorian border, most notably through the overtly political action of the Cummeragunja Strike in 1939.[45] The Yorta Yorta community living there had long turned the colonial boundary to their needs, with children swimming across the Murray River to avoid the threat of forced removal, as well as crossing on the punt to attend school in Victoria.[46] The border was also used in this way in East Gippsland and the New South Wales south coast. Families knew that crossing from one legislative jurisdiction to another, or even by suggesting a move interstate, they could exploit the weakness of the administrative reach of each state's Welfare Board and Education Department. The movement of Aboriginal families across the state border in the 1950s and 1960s is shown in the school records, with students arriving to East Gippsland schools from Bega, Wallaga Lake, La Perouse, Bomaderry, Bombala, Moruya and Palestine Creek.[47] Like their Victorian counterparts, the NSW authorities had limited capacity for monitoring the school attendance of children interstate. They threatened families who left the Wallaga Lake station for work "of a casual nature, consisting of pea picking and corn pulling" noting that:

> Unsatisfactory attendance of children at the Station Aboriginal School has constituted a problem. Both parents of many of the children engaged in seasonal work… The District Child

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[42] National Archives Australia (NAA), B357, Item 166.

[43] NAA, B357, Item 127.

[44] NAA, B357, Item 166.

[45] Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy,* 247-255.

[46] Aunty Ellen Atkinson told Diane Barwick that 'Our people are all good swimmers: we were all taught to be able to swim across the Murray!' in Diane Barwick 'Aunty Ellen: The Pastor's Wife', in Isobel White, Diane Barwick, Betty Meehan (eds) F*ighters and Singers: The Lives of Some Australian Aboriginal Women*, (Allen and Unwin, Sydney) 1985*,* 194; see also Lettie Nicholls in, *Living Aboriginal History,* 110; PROV, VPRS 14419.

[47] PROV, VPRS 9332; VPRS 9328.

> Welfare Officer has interviewed parents concerned and spoken in strong terms concerning school attendance of the children. It is anticipated that the position will improve as a result of such talks.[48]

The mobility of Aboriginal families for seasonal labour, and to visit family, was considered by government to be incompatible with the demands of assimilation (to work, live and go to school in one place) in Victoria and in New South Wales.[49] The benefits of seasonal labourers to settler capitalist agricultures, complicated the assimilatory aims of both governments. At the same time, this reliance was utilised by some Aboriginal people to access greater freedom of movement and economic independence.[50]

Seasonal and connected: bean picking and timber milling

> Workin' in the mills, we had a little freedom. I was lookin' at my free spirit, being able to stay out and work.
>
> Max Harrison, 1997[51]

The connection between schools and industry in rural and remote areas of Victoria was close, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century. At Cann River, the closure of the local timber mill for a half-day holiday meant the same closure for the Cann River State School, a decision endorsed by the Education Department.[52] Yet the influence of local industry labour markets was also considered problematic to school attendance. One school inspector noted: "The greatest problem of this school is the fluctuating school population … Children are from families employed in the four mills. Movement of parents from one mill town to another is frequent and children's schooling suffer from the changes."[53]Aboriginal children enrolling in schools in East Gippsland were often registered in the care of a "mill worker" or "mill hand".[54] Shared surnames are common in school registers, and are evidence of the

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[48] *New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board Annual Report*, 1958, p. 9.

[49] This impossible bind is described by Aunty Olive Jackson, who grew up on the move in NSW and recalled that 'I'd missed so much [school] earlier on, travelling around to avoid the welfare. They'd kidnap us if we weren't going to school, but we were always on the move to avoid them and so getting pulled out of school anyway. Then when we got started at the next school, we'd be coping with the racism that new Koorie kids always copped.' Aunty Olive Jackson, 'Growing Up Running from the Welfare,' *Aboriginal Elders Voices,* 28.

[50] John White, 'Peas, Beans and Riverbanks: seasonal picking and dependence in the Tuross Valley', in Ian Keen (ed.) *Indigenous Participation in Australian Economies: Historical and anthropological perspectives,* Canberra, ANU Press, 2010. Chicka Dixon's reflections on his youth at Wallaga Lake include the equation of low education to 'a cheap pool of labour' for local farmers at the reserve, quoted in C Tatz and K McConnochie (eds), *The Aboriginal Experience: Black Viewpoints*, (Sydney: Australia and New Zealand Book Co., 1975). Pepper and De Araugo, *What Did Happen to the Aborigines of Victoria: The Kurnai or Gippsland*, (Hyland House, 1985), p. 256. In *What Did Happen to the Aborigines of Victoria: The Kurnai or Gippsland*, (Hyland House, 1985), Philip Pepper and Tess DeAurugo examine the usually ineffective attempts of government to control farmers hiring practices and Aboriginal people's engagement with agriculture labour markets in Gippsland.

[51] Max Harrison, *Travelling with Percy*, 128.

[52] Seasonal work affected school attendance for Aboriginal children around the state. Faye Carter recalled that when she was young, 'Us kids would sometimes get pulled out of school to go tomato or fruit picking. There was no way we couldn't go. It didn't worry the school in those days. They didn't think it was very important for Aboriginal kids to get an education. All the family worked, 'Fay Carter *Living Aboriginal History,* 180.

[53] PROV, VPRS 9332. Similar comments are repeated in the records of schools located on the river flats of Gippsland and in the Goulburn Valley, reflecting how closely connected seasonal work was to school attendance in first half of the twentieth century.

[54] PROV, VPRS 9332.

strength of families and kinship networks, and the potential for collective employment at mills mirrored by the opportunity for children to attend school with family.[55]

For Max Harrison, working in mills meant freedom away from the restrictions and regulations of life under a manager at Wallaga Lake station.[56] Uncle Albert Mullett saw participation in the timber industry of Gippsland as a way of maintaining connections with country: "working in the forests and making a living, that's the continuous connection with the forests".[57] Joining a predominantly Aboriginal workforce, Uncle Albert had left school because he "wanted to learn more from my own people and my own cultural heritage. So I was part of the work force from a young age".[58] John Maynard, writing on Aboriginal involvement in the Newcastle steel industry, suggested that this was "co-operative work practices" of "continuing to maintain association with sites of natural and cultural significance", and to "re-establish the ties and Dreaming tracks to the region".[59] Like the Strelley mob who (as we will see) chose to create something new with their labour, participation in these industries created new ways for families to work, live and learn together, in ways that went beyond formal schooling.

While timber mill jobs provided more regular employment for men, participation in the seasonal bean picking was (undoubtedly hard work in the heat of summer) the chance for women and older children to make comparatively good wages, to work with family and to move around, catching up with more family along the way.[60] When the harvest season coincided with the school holidays, whole families relocated. Travelling to Bodalla with her family each summer, Lorraine Brown fondly recalled that "you'd meet all your old mates down there, all the other kids from the other places. It was a big get-together … Travelling around, that's what we used to do."[61] Dale Donaldson recalled that "picking work was hard work but paid off because a lot of time was spent amongst one's family."[62] This travel generated opportunities for learning that had little to do with formal schooling. Sandy Patten said "there was an education in that old lifestyle. It was about unity and caring and sharing and respect".[63] Max Harrison also remembered that when he was excluded from school or was otherwise unable to attend, then "schooling would then start with the home… That sharing experiences was very valuable to me".[64]

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[55] PROV, VPRS 9332; VPRS 9328.

[56] Harrison, *Travelling with Percy*, 128.

[57] Uncle Albert estimated that the mill at Jackson's Track was staffed by around 90 per cent Koori men, drawn from the thriving community living there. Uncle Albert recalled: 'We were the key people in the sawmill.' 'Oral History of Jackson's Track with Albert and Collon Mullett', Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, KABAILA_P03: Taped Conversations with Aboriginal Community Members in southeastern Australia, 029252/55B.

[58] Uncle Albert Mullett, 'Oral History of Jackson's Track.'

[59] John Maynard, 'Muloobinah (Newcastle) an Aboriginal industrial presence: past and present', Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society, 2001, 87:2, 248.

[60] Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 273. Romaine Moreton's film *The Farm* depicts how the colonised landscapes of the bean paddocks positions Aboriginal workers as 'strangers' or 'outsiders' and the characters are displaced even as they 'provide their labour to the colonial economy.' Maria Nugent, 'Tracing lineages: The working of remembering, mourning and honouring in Romaine Moreton's *The Farm*', *Studies in Australasian Cinema*, 7:2-3, 181; 187.

[61] Lorraine Brown, *Travelling with Percy*, 99.

[62] John White, 'Peas, Beans and Riverbanks: seasonal picking and dependence in the Tuross Valley', in Ian Keen (ed.) *Indigenous Participation in Australian Economies: Historical and anthropological perspectives,* Canberra, ANU Press, 2010, 120.

[63] Sandy Patten, *Travelling with Percy*, p. 135.

[64] Harrison, *Travelling with Percy*, 128.

Destination: "Interstate (Bush)"

While physical movement was key to government avoidance, Aboriginal families had additional means of subverting the surveillance enacted through the school records that were created about their children. These records were susceptible to manipulation because they were generated from self-reporting by families upon enrolment, particularly when a "transfer note"— completed by the teacher at the previous school and holding information such as age, grade level, attendance rates—had been "lost". Aboriginal families could manipulate the records being created about their children, and could perform compliance with the compulsory school system by providing changed, incorrect birthdates, for example. Other information about Aboriginal students is sometimes missing from the register, replaced with the words: "unknown", or a question mark, or simply left blank. Entries were sometimes vague, such as "interstate?" and were difficult for Education Department staff to follow up.[65] The frequency with which information about Aboriginal children's destinations was ambiguous, or missing, in school records in East Gippsland and elsewhere along the border, show that families were cognisant of government attempts to use school record keeping systems to track families and children. The strategy of keeping on the move was underscored by manipulation and control—in effect, a form of co-authoring government records—to complicate and confuse processes of surveillance.

Some entries show assertions of the intention of families to move in ways that were beyond the capacity of the records to know. The destination of one student, upon their withdrawal from the state school located in a small timber mill town school in the early 1960s, was noted as: "Interstate (Bush)".[66] The decision to provide this information to be entered in the school record is distinct from false trails or other manipulated information. Instead, it is an assertion of familial control and choice, and a declaration that engagement with the compulsory school system could be made on Aboriginal terms. Taken together with the strategic choices made to work in industries that allowed continued connection to family and country, these subtle manipulations of the information entered into government records demonstrates just one way that the structures of school systems were negotiated by Aboriginal families. The seemingly small actions show that Aboriginal families exerted a measure of control over where, when and how their children engaged in with the settler institution of Victorian state school system. It also shows that what families did outside of schools— including what labour markets they participated in—was important to surviving, utilising, complying with and countering the settler institution of the Victorian state school system.

Envisioning the future: independent Aboriginal schooling at Strelley

A group of Aboriginal people in the Pilbara and a handful of White supporters launched a ground-breaking independent, Aboriginal-controlled multilingual schools in the 1970s. Sambo Bina took tourists through the main school campus at Strelley, always ensuring to tell visitors that the Pilbara strikers like himself had never gone back to work—instead, they had

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[65] PROV, VPRS 9332.

[66] PROV, VPRS 9332.

created something new with their labour, a crucial plank of which was taking command of children's education.[67] The school campus at Strelley came to be after decades of agitation for a school for the Pilbara strikers' children, and it was crucial to the Strelley mob's vision of a self-determining community that provided a place for Aboriginality to flourish.

Primarily desert people encompassing language groups including Nyangumarta, Manyjilyjarra, and Warnman, they had concretised as a mob, self-identified, after a split in the post-Pilbara strike community amidst the struggles of surviving through self-sufficiency.[68] The White leftist and sometime communist Don McLeod was a crucial part of their work, and helped to establish connections with influential and outspoken labour activists and southern sympathisers. This network joined with the mob to establish a charitable organisation called the Nomads, forming in the 1960s to facilitate the campaign for self-determined community, including a school.[69]

Shortly after the Nomads' formation, the mob purchased the Strelley station (Yurtingunya) and Warralong station (Karntimarta) and began a series of enterprises, drawing on their skills as labourers. Profits were shared collectively as part of the vision of community control. This independent model of community-building generated through the Pilbara strike and then social movement concretised an archetype of Aboriginal self-determination that subsequently became an inspiration in the era of campaigns for land rights.[70] By the time of self-determination-as-policy under Whitlam and the Woodward Commission into land rights, the mob had been through 30 years of battles to establish themselves as independent from assimilationist controls using their own land, labour and education.[71] The movement of Aboriginal students and families over borders and country discussed in the previous case study provides an exemplar of negotiation through exploiting labour market opportunities in order to connect to country and family while evading settler surveillance through covertly disrupting record-keeping. The Strelley case highlights another technique: overt resistance and confrontations with settler structures, bolstered by the wider labour movement.

The mob's efforts to establish a school started in the 1950s, and had created "certain conflicts with established authorities", as the Nomads wrote in a submission to then Aboriginal Affairs minister Les Johnson in 1975.[72] Through the twentieth century, the WA state government had largely ignored the schooling of Aboriginal children, favouring the pastoral industry's want to keep Aboriginal people on stations as free or cheap labour.[73] And when children did go to school, it usually involved separation from family, mob and country. Pilbara striker Pit Pit explains:

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[67] John Bucknall, "Strelley memoir" (unpublished manuscript, 2017), typescript.

[68] Inge Kral. Interview by Amy Thomas. Oral history, Alice Springs, 2018.

[69] Deborah Wilson, *Different White People: Radical Activism for Aboriginal Rights 1946-1972* (Apollo Books, 2015).

[70] Sarah Holcombe, "Indigenous Organisations and Mining in the Pilbara, Western Australia: Lessons from a Historical Perspective," *Aboriginal History*, 2005, 107–135; Heidi Norman, "'What Do We Want?': A Political History of Aboriginal Land Rights in New South Wales" (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2015).

[71] Ray Butler. "Education, the state and the Indigenous minority: a case study from Western Australia." Masters thesis, Murdoch University, 1985. Don McLeod to Department of Education, 16 December 1948, SROWA, 1947/0594/79-82.

[72] Nomads Group of Aborigines (1975, 3), Application for a special grant to establish a bilingual school at Strelley station, Western Australia, Call no Q 371.829 NOM, State Library of Western Australia, Perth, Western Australia.

[73] Most notably, Haebich, *Broken Circles*, see, pp. 238-268; 273-277; 395-397; 511-527. See also Povey and Trudgett "'There was movement'", Down, "'A different.'

> Government say, we take this kid to read and write English and help you. But they done and they never come back … Then we start tryin to put the kids in government school, but the kids are learning the whitefella way … not proper Aboriginal history, they go live with a white family, they only know English.[74]

Aboriginal families and communities had long fought these racialised exclusions and forced separations. An independent Aboriginal school came to be seen by the Strelley mob as bulwark against settler colonial controls.[75] They were further encouraged by over a decade of WA government opposition to registering the Nomads charity, and refusing requests to provide funding for school buildings and teachers. The WA Department of Education opposed setting up permanent schools on sites of Aboriginal choosing, fearing this would lead to Aboriginal permanence on land.[76]

The idea for a school started via the strike. A long-running strike camp school was led by mission-educated Tommy Sampie at Twelve Mile Camp. He focused on basic reading, writing and arithmetic in English, but the school also acted as an information centre, with teachers reading aloud newspaper reports and correspondence about the strike, using this to develop adults' English literacy.[77] The WA Department of Native Affairs sought to undermine what they saw as a Communist-style of education, but the mob were persistent. After the strike ended, the community continued to agitate for the WA Department of Native Affairs to fund teachers and establish a larger school which could take in more children from surrounding areas.[78] The end of the strike provided a mixed sense of victory, as demands for equal wages were promised but not delivered. However, many years of dispersal, dispossession, labour and resistance had brought together diverse groups of Aboriginal people who used their skills and experience to pursue self-determination.[79]

In the early 1970s, the mob and the Nomads seized on the political opening provided by official the federal Australian Labor Party's support for self-determination and bilingual education, and after the 1972 election, lobbied the Whitlam government continuously.[80] At the launch of a film *The Jigalong Mob* in 1975, Whitlam's Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Les Johnson, was approached with a detailed proposal for funding.[81] The funds were set in place mere days before the Fraser government took power in December 1975.[82] The schools finally began as a single school based at the Strelley station in 1976, and have subsequently moved to Warralong station, where the main school building remains today.[83]

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[74] Pitpit [Billy Thomas], transcript of oral history conducted 1993, translated 2007, AIATSIS MS 5010.

[75] Butler, "Education."

[76] Butler, "Education."

[77] Michael Hess, "Black and red: The Pilbara Pastoral Workers' Strike, 1946" *Aboriginal History*, 1994, 65–83.

[78] Scrimgeour, *On Red Earth Walking*, 348.

[79] Anne Scrimgeour, "'To Make It Brilliantly Apparent to the People of Australia': The Pilbara Cooperative Movement and the Campaign for Aboriginal Civil Rights in the 1950s," *Journal of Australian Studies* 40, no. 1 (2016): 16–31.

[80] Bucknall, "Strelley memoir", Butler, "Education".

[81] Gwen Bucknall and John Bucknall. Interview by Amy Thomas. Oral history. Brisbane, 2018.

[82] Bucknall and Bucknall, interview.

[83] Though it is based at Warralong, it retains the name Strelley school. See Strelley Community School, https://www.strelleycommunityschool.wa.edu.au/ (accessed 1 March 2020). Numerous outstation schools were established through the 1980s, as discussed below. Inge Kral. Interview by Amy Thomas. Oral history, Alice Springs, 2018.

The post-strike movement for self-sufficiency has been of some interest to anthropologists interested in exploring syncretic Aboriginal communities.[84] In most work, however, the vision for schooling is missing from the story; the only published scholarly material focuses on pedagogical innovations.[85] Nomad Ray Butler's valuable thesis, detailing conflicts with the WA government prior to setting up the school, is an exception, and experiences of the school's formation, governance, and politics are scattered throughout memoir and cognate histories.[86] Using these sources, archival material such as school newsletters, and interviews with former Strelley educators, this case study tells the schools' remarkable history and the mob's determination to reimagine settler schooling to serve their own interests.

Imagining a new type of schooling

Monty Hale was a child during the strike who became a towering figure in the school leadership, along with Pit Pit, Jacob Oberdoo, Snowy Jittermara and Crow Yougula. The Strelley Elders felt that education in mainstream schools would be futile and damaging—they wanted children to have an education controlled by their interests and needs, on their ancestral country. Teaching in Nyangumarta, and later other languages of the mob, was viewed as a means to maintain control over education as well as over group identity.[87]

Monty Hale recalls the arrival of white Southern sympathisers John and Gwen Bucknall.[88] John was then a lecturer in Aboriginal education at Mt Lawley College of Advanced Education in Perth working alongside John Sherwood, head of the Aboriginal Teacher Training Program preparing student teachers for work in Aboriginal communities. John and Gwen had taught at the Milingimbi school and briefly Shepherdson College at Galiwin'ku, both in North East Arnhem Land, where they were involved in preparing for the Gupapuyngu bilingual program which would later be run at both schools. When at Milingimbi, John and Gwen read a newspaper article on the Strelley mob's desire to set up a school. They both remember thinking this was a "magnificent situation", and were excited by the opportunity of establishing "a school with Aboriginal control". [89] Shortly after they returned to Perth, they got a chance to participate in that opportunity. The Nomads contacted

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[84] Holcombe, "Indigenous Organisations"; Robert Tonkinson, "Aboriginal 'Difference' and 'Autonomy' Then and Now: Four Decades of Change in a Western Desert Society," in *Anthropological Forum*, 2007, vol. 17, 41–60; Myrna Tonkinson and Robert Tonkinson, "The Cultural Dynamics of Adaptation in Remote Aboriginal Communities: Policy, Values and the State's Unmet Expectations," *Anthropologica*, 2010, 67–75; Jamie Peck, "Polanyi in the Pilbara," *Australian Geographer* 44, no. 3 (2013): 243–264.; John Wilson, 'Authority and leadership in a 'new-style' Australian Aboriginal Community: Pindan, Western Australia'. Masters Thesis (UWA, 1961).

[85] John Bucknall, "Community and Curriculum: Some General Observations on the Strelley Experience from a European viewpoint", *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, vol 10, issue 1, (March 1982), 16-23; John Bucknall, "Strelley: An Alternative in Aboriginal Education," *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, vol 4, issue 2, (April 1976), 30–32; Gwen Bucknall, "Nyangumarta: Alive and Adapting," *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* 20, no. 1 (1997): 43–56; Richard O. Routh, "The Strelley Community School Nyangumarta Language and Cultural Maintenance Program," *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 25, no. 2 (1997): 27–32; Kenneth B Liberman, "Aboriginal Education: The School at Strelley, Western Australia," *Harvard Educational Review* 51, no. 1 (1981): 139–44.

[86] Kinglsey Palmer and Clancy McKenna, *Somewhere Between Black and White: The Story of an Aboriginal Australian* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1978); Ronald M Berndt and Catherine H Berndt, *Aborigines of the West: Their past and present* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1980); Peter Biskup, *Not Slaves: Not Citizens: The Aboriginal Problem in Western Australia 1898-1954*. (Brisbane: UQP, 1973); Monty (Minyjun) Hale, *Kurlumarniny: We Come from the Desert* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2012).

[87] Bucknall and Bucknall, interview;

[88] Hale, *Kurlumarniny.*

[89] Bucknall and Bucknall, interview; Thomas, "Bilingual schooling".

John Sherwood to help set up the Strelley schools, and as a result both Johns and Gwen were invited to visit Strelley.[90]

At the mob's pastoral stations, the old pastoral bosses' houses had been taken over. It in a meeting at the old house at Strelley that he and Gwen were met by the mob and their supporter, Elsie Lee. They were told of the mob's desire to establish an Aboriginal-controlled school, and John recalls the symbolism was "not lost on him", and "to gather where the Aboriginal station workers had once received their daily orders from the white boss and to be lectured on the sins of the past by three Aboriginal leaders was spellbinding."

The mob made a decision that Monty Hale, alongside Fred Bradman, would work together with Gwen to develop Nyangumarta and English literacy, and Gwen assisted Monty and Fred to teach Nyangumarta classes were held every afternoon.[91] Gwen recalls the swift take up:

> anyone who could read up to about a grade three level or some general initial literacy, could actually read and write Nyangumarta in about three weeks. People who knew the names of letters off the backs of powdered milk tins, it took them about a term, about twelve weeks.[92]

After a year, the community told them to start the school.[93] The initial school building was an elevated concrete slab with a corrugated iron shade, placed in the centre of the community. Many of the teachers had been to other remote schools such as Jigalong and Warburton and noted how there, the school was physically separated from the community, and so, from local control.[94] Community meetings came to act as the school's highest authority. They elected the Aboriginal-only school committee, of which John Bucknall acted as Secretary. That committee controlled the hiring and firing of teachers, decisions about who would go in what class, how classes would be arranged to maintain appropriate avoidance relationships (Strelley station had three camps, based on language groups, family and kinship relationships), and all decisions about learning and teaching materials. White teachers were accountable to this structure, to make sure that appropriate materials and information were displayed. Elders and senior family members would sit in on lessons to maintain child discipline, as it was not considered appropriate for white teachers to discipline the mob's children.[95] Don McLeod wrote that the board running the schools were not "paper tiger" institutions but genuinely controlled the school, noting that "the linguists hired by the Nomads are the servants of traditional language authorities, not their masters".[96] Inge Kral recalls how the school schedule was organised around and with community life, such as funerals and ceremony.[97]

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[90] Bucknall and Bucknall, interview.

[91] Hale, *Kurlumarniny.*

[92] Bucknall and Bucknall, interview.

[93] Bucknall and Bucknall, interview.

[94] Kral, interview.

[95] *Mikurrunya*, Strelley Community Newsletter, published by the Strelley Literature Production Centre, Vol 8, No 3, November 1986. AIATSIS RS 29.6/1; Strelley Community School's statement of Principles, published by the Strelley Literature Production Centre, no date, AIATSIS RS 29.6/1.

[96] Don McLeod, *How the West.*

[97] Kral, interview.

The concept of Aboriginal control and an Aboriginal curriculum did not mean recreating a 'pre-contact' cultural context, but re-establishing and re-founding a new identity bringing together different language groups through their contemporary experiences of dispossession and resistance during the strike. The school day itself was transformed from a Western model by the mob. Monty Hale writes:

> We often took the children to show them how we used to work in the old days. We also taught the young people how to kill animals and cook them in the ashes, showed them where the waterholes and soaks were, and told them who owned the different parts of the country.[98]

The history of the strike and the story of the mob were educational tools. The filming of *How the West Was Lost* was a school project, with staff and children painstakingly recreating the key historical moments for the cameras.[99] The school's leadership saw understanding the strike and the movement for self-sufficiency as central to raising the next generation as part of an independent community.

In the 1980s, several small outstation schools were established. To some extent this was about returning to ancestral lands. It meant expanding the bilingual program from Nyangumarta to a multilingual program involving Manjilyjarra and later Warnman.[100] Inge Kral became a teacher at Camp 62 outstation in this period, and she described how the multilingual nature of the schools was tied to self-sufficiency. She explains:

> The Strelley mob's philosophy was 'we are still on strike' … that period was the heyday, with this solid philosophy about who they were and own their identity … There was a very vibrant Literature Production Centre. The older strike leaders came in every day and wrote stories, and recorded stories … This was as much a part of the core curriculum as the cultural aspects of Nyangumarta life.

Perhaps surprisingly, once the school was established, an immediate confrontation with the WA government was not forthcoming. The mob's initiative had taken some heat of the state government's obligation to provide education. Inge Kral recalls that by the mid-90s the mob were "really struggling" with schooling, as accelerating movements for standardisation and mainstreaming in Aboriginal education created difficulties.[101] The movement of children in and out of Port Hedland was part of the reason the school shifted to teaching Nyangumarta as an enrichment program rather than as a language-of-instruction. However, the school retains its Aboriginal-controlled board and funding has continued to be provided federally by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.[102]

The achievements of the Strelley mob were remarkable. A syncretic group of Aboriginal people who had long been excluded from Western schooling used skills built through the pastoral industry, and the Pilbara strike and its networks of solidarity, to reimagine their future: building an independent community based on collective control over their labour, at the centre of which was a vision for education to hold strong this way of

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[98] Hale, *Kurlumarniny*, p 115.

[99] *Mikurrunya*, Strelley Community Newsletter, published by the Strelley Literature Production Centre, Vol 8, No 3, November 1986. AIATSIS RS 29.6/1. *Mikurrunya*, Strelley Community Newsletter, published by the Strelley Literature Production Centre, Vol 7, No 4, November 1986. AIATSIS RS 29.6/1.

[100] Kral, interview.

[101] Nicholls, "Death by a Thousand Cuts".

[102] Bucknall and Bucknall, interview.

being. The Strelley mob fought a terrific battle to manage their own lives, a key part of which was controlling schooling. In doing so, they openly challenged settler colonial refusal to engage their mob in schools by creating their own.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper argues that attending to Aboriginal engagements with schooling can broaden and deepen historical understandings of Aboriginal techniques of survival in Australian settler colonial capitalism. While settler state school systems have had an assimilationist function, designed to acculturate Aboriginal peoples and train for the labour market, Aboriginal groups have responded to this coercion with multifarious strategies of negotiation and resistance, evading and manipulating mechanisms of control, and reimagining the purpose of settler schools for their own goals and needs. We have sought to show not what schooling has 'done' to Aboriginal people but how Aboriginal people and communities have responded to, interacted with, developed, resisted, rejected, and negotiated with settler colonial schooling systems. While much literature on Aboriginal schooling specifically has focused attention on missionary designs, we have instead focused on Aboriginal desires, and actions that have upset and challenged the settler structures of schooling.[103] In our case studies, strategic engagement with labour markets provided sustenance, while solidarity from the labour movement provided fuel for resistance and refoundings—schools and schooling were exploited and reimagined. Understanding the interplay of negotiation, resistance and compulsion that has characterised Aboriginal engagements with schooling provides a way through weary debates on settler colonialism and agency, highlighting Aboriginal a "logic of survival" and emphasising strategic action for Aboriginal futures.[104] This means recognising self-determination enacted within and around settler colonial structures, while not closing off the possibility of more radical imaginings of a future beyond a kinder colonialism.

In two case studies that take us from the period of official assimilation into the era of self-determination as an official federal policy, we see great contextual differences—but a unity of strategic intent. The Strelley mob desired to stay and build a community on their own terms, while on Yuin and Gunaikurnai country it was movement that sustained. While Aboriginal families practiced strategic evasion and thumbed their noses at control measures exercised via schools, giving settler society little insight into their movements as a technique of survival, the Strelley mob publicised their case for their own school, and their actions drew support from well-resourced white sympathisers linked to the labour movement and the left. Some families in Gippsland used labour markets that relied upon mobility and flexibility as a way to maintain kinship networks, and to disrupt record-keeping processes used by schools, while the Strelley mob repurposed skills learnt in the pastoral industry and strike to develop self-sufficiency and foster sustainability.

These case studies disrupt damage-centred approaches to histories of Aboriginal education. They also shed light on the importance of schooling as a political project, both for government authorities and their agendas, but also Aboriginal people and communities. They each demonstrate Aboriginal control of schooling. The first is through seemingly small, covert, micro-level actions, evident in single word entries into pupil registers, a question mark, a blank space in the government record. The Strelley mob's struggle was a deliberately

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[103] Tuck, "Suspending Damage."

[104] Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, "Protectors of the Future"; Forsyth and Gavranovic, "A logic of survival".

public and political act of resistance to labour exploitation that grew into a struggle for determined autonomy and self-sufficiency. Educational choices made by Aboriginal communities and families in these two case studies were based on economic needs and aspirations, but they were also strategic engagements with settler colonial economies to serve Aboriginal purposes. These case studies show how some families and communities subverted the role of the school system in controlling the economic position of Aboriginal people in positions of low-paid labour that benefitted colonial economies. Aboriginal families engaged with schools in measured, strategically advantageous ways. They show that school systems have been historically contested sites, and are spaces in which political aims were pursued, government interference negotiated, and resistance played out.

This understanding, we think, can create new perspectives on the histories of Aboriginal engagements with settler colonial systems. By foregrounding the settler colonial character of Australian capitalism and the associated functions of state governance, we can see how social reproduction in schooling reproduces particular settler colonial logics. We posit that this research, highlighting the actions of the "unruly component" of settler colonial capitalism—peoples and their actions—can help us unravel how settler colonial capitalism has been subverted in the past, and how it may be subverted in the future.[105] By attending to how Aboriginal people have engaged with institutions of settler colonial governance, rather than focusing on the aims of settler colonial school systems, we can generate new ways of understanding how Aboriginal groups and their supporters negotiated and resisted settler controls, highlighting strategic and diverse ways that Aboriginal people have nurtured their own needs and desires.

[105] Tithi Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (Pluto Press, 2017).