

Aboriginal Storytelling and Writing

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Indigenous writers have opened up a whole new concept in Australian writing. Readers are getting a different perspective on Aboriginal life because stories are coming from an Aboriginal point of view, recorded and written by Aborigines from their own experiences of being Aboriginal. And they are having more say in what is being written about them. Aboriginal people are rewriting Australia's history through their literary input. They are writing autobiographies and biographies, poetry, fiction, drama, the short story, academic papers and children's stories. As with Aboriginal theatre, dance and music, it is only within the last two or three decades that Aboriginal literature has really been accepted in this country. Since colonial times, Aboriginal art has been recognised for its curiosity value, having been collected by museums, art galleries and private collectors. Nowadays Aboriginal art is sold and collected for its aesthetic and monetary value. It is a booming business, unlike Aboriginal literature, which has only been accepted as a legitimate genre within Australian society over the last thirty-odd years. Aboriginal literature has revealed more personalised accounts of Indigenous Australian life, instead of readers gaining their perspectives from historians, anthropologists and others from academia. With that said, it would be useful to trace Aboriginal storytelling prior to recorded history, and then through the written word which underscored the natural, albeit slow progression of colonisation, to the present time.

Story telling in traditional times

Aboriginal culture is an oral culture and for forty thousand years or more, it has been passed down from generation to generation. Traditionally Aboriginal story telling had many functions, and it still does. It reinforced the Aboriginal people's ideological beliefs in the Dreamtime – their Creation and other cultural stories of the Rainbow Serpent and their environment.¹ They told of how the rivers and lakes, hills, mountains and plains were formed and why the birds, animals and marine creatures act like they do. These stories tell of how the magpies and crows are deadly enemies and how they came by their colouring; why the kookaburra has a raucous laugh; why the djitti djitti (wagtail) lures children into the bush to become lost and the meaning of other bird calls, animal behaviour and why Aborigines could eat some reptiles and not others (Collard: Oral histories, 2002).² All these stories referred to the Aborigines' environment or the practices of their everyday life. Children had to listen to their elders and obey them for their survival. In a sense these stories were parables that children learned from, much like the Bible stories in Christian culture. Aboriginal story telling gave information of where the best game and water sources were to be found; where people could venture and where they weren't permitted to go, such places as sacred sites and where men's and women's businesses were conducted that was off-limits to the uninitiated. So storytelling was a learning process – children learnt from an early age how to survive their environment by listening to their elders.³

Children practised their culture from babyhood. They learnt every aspect of their specific Aboriginal culture – the history, geography, weather patterns, food productivity and fire management, as well as the social constructs of behaviour and familial ties. They learnt, that is, their place within the family unit, their extended family and their friends, their totems and other culturally-related identification. They learnt about marriage the right way – who they could marry, and who they could not marry. Marriage the wrong way could cause dissension and sometimes death to the perpetrators.⁴ It was a learning process and it empowered them, for they knew they belonged within the social order of their group. They were individuals and were recognised as such. How did children learn the intricacies of their culture? They learnt through storytelling, dance and music.

Aboriginal dance and music (the corroboree, didgeridoo and clapping sticks), art (traditional rock art and sand drawings) are cultural forms that tell stories that are interpreted by the listener or viewer (in the case of art). At ceremonies, like trade meetings, marriage ceremonies or other rites of passage, there would inevitably be storytelling where people would relate the events of the past days while out hunting. These stories would also be played out in dance.⁵ However, after trade or perhaps marriage and other serious business pertaining to the group was settled, the people gathered around campfires and this is when the art of story telling would emerge.

Many Aboriginal people are raconteurs; skilled storytellers. I have had the pleasure of listening to many Aboriginal storytellers and by their words and actions they bring the listener into the story, that is, they listen and visualise the story and become a part of the process of storytelling. These gifted people have a charisma that captivates their audience with their words and actions and their facial expressions. A friend of mine, Alf Taylor, an Aboriginal writer and poet comes to mind when speaking of Aboriginal raconteurs. His book of short stories *Long Time Now*⁶ captures the essence that is Nyoongar storytelling. But there are many more like Alf, who bring light and laughter into the harsh struggle of daily living for many Aboriginal people. After listening to people like Alf tell his stories, his audience invariably goes away laughing and feeling happy, even to the point of trying to imitate the raconteur. These stories are informally told around other campfires or at other gatherings where people meet and share yarns. Aborigines are notorious for seeing the funny side of life and being able to laugh in the face of adversity.⁷ Perhaps the ability to laugh at each other and themselves was what enabled Aboriginal people to survive the holocaust that was colonisation.

But storytelling was not all fun and laughter. Aboriginal Elders, the Holders of their Culture, or Keepers of the Stories⁸ both men and women, passed their knowledge on to the younger generations and because Aboriginal cultures were oral cultures, retaining what they learned was just as important as the learning process. Aboriginal people have phenomenal memories. With no written material to refer to, Aborigines relied on memory to store all the information they gathered. Through learning and retaining what they learned through memory, they became expert in surviving their diverse environments. From the cool temperate zones of the south, to the harsh desert country of the hinterland and the lush sub-tropical northern regions, Aborigines throughout this continent and Tasmania learned the art of survival. Aboriginal oral tradition and memory retention

enabled the people to become self-reliant in a land where one mistake could cost them their lives. There weren't any written laws – the oral traditions of the Aboriginal people taught them from an early age the art of listening and remembering.

An example of maintaining memory and the oral traditions of Nyoongar Aboriginal culture could be found in the reading of Richard Wilkes book *Bulmurn: A Swan River Nyoongar*.⁹ Bulmurn, the main character, is based on the oral traditions of the Nyoongar people and was passed down through generations and generations of his family. Richard was able to write his book based on the oral stories and the memories such stories evoke. So memory retention was paramount in Aboriginal story-telling. Even in this modern day, when Aboriginal people have the ways and means of gaining an education according to the dominant culture's policies and practices of the written material, memory is still a fundamental basis in Aboriginal cultures.

Storytelling in contemporary times

Over the last few decades, Aboriginal people have found a new 'voice' for keeping their stories alive and that is through literature: printed storytelling. Most Aboriginal people still maintain their oral traditions of storytelling but many are turning to the written word to keep the Aboriginal experiences alive. They are writing biographies and autobiographies, short stories, poetry and drama, academic papers and children's stories – usually in the form of Dreamtime parables. In fact, Aboriginal writing is now encompassing a whole new range of literary genres. As well, Aboriginal writers are turning their talents to film and television, which are recognised mediums for transforming Aboriginal oral traditions into the visual concepts. But while these are areas of a new form of storytelling – telling by seeing – the literary genre or the written word is still the most widespread form of telling stories to, not only an Aboriginal audience as in traditional times, but encompassing a wider sphere of reader in Australia and overseas.

Aboriginal women writers are at the forefront of Indigenous writing. Sally Morgan¹⁰, Glenys Ward¹¹ and Ruby Langford Ginibi¹² opened the floodgates for Aboriginal people who endeavoured to write their life stories, thereby shedding new perspectives on the Aboriginal experience. While these three writers could be called the doyens of Aboriginal women's writing in the 1980s, however, other women writers, such as poet and social commentator Oodgeroo Noonuccal/Kath Walker¹³, Margaret Tucker¹⁴, and Shirley Smith remained the vanguard of Aboriginal writing. Aboriginal women wrote more prolifically than the male writers of life stories during the same period. The 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century saw many Aboriginal writers, both women and men, writing biographies and autobiographies, poetry, children's books and fiction, as well as theses and other papers for academia. Their literary input can also be seen in Aboriginal and mainstream Australian anthologies and conference papers. In effect, Aboriginal writing has progressed from a mere trickle in Australian literature to becoming a recognised genre in its own right

One aspect of Aboriginal writing not mentioned yet is oral histories transcribed into the written word. Transcribing oral histories can be difficult and time-consuming. Not every manuscript gets published. With oral histories, transcribing the oral into the written is

difficult because of the local idiom, the different dialects, and it's hard when the compiler has to separate the intended meaning and the words that are not necessary or superfluous. Many Aboriginal people do not use formal English when telling their stories. They tend to use idiom and repeat themselves or give a very long drawn-out, detailed account. Recording oral histories is much like editing stories in Aboriginal anthologies. One has to separate 'the wheat from the chaff', so to speak, without losing sight of the original meaning. When I had the pleasure of working with Len Collard and Sandra Harben at Murdoch University researching oral histories of Nyoongar people, they had given me written copies of the raw taped material to edit. This work was a challenge and one that I readily accepted because these stories were passed from the participants' old people who were no longer with them. It was a monumental task but the results can be seen in the end product of *Nidja Beeliar Boodjar Noonookurt Nyinning: A Nyungar Interpretative History of the Use of Boodjar (Country) in the Vicinity of Murdoch University*.¹⁵

In this text, care was taken to retain the voice and idiom of the speakers. Below are examples of two different generations and gender of Nyoongar people telling their oral stories about the Nyoongar sacred serpent, the Wagyl or Waakal. The first is by a Whadjuck/Balardong man who was the Keeper of the Stories, the late Mr Tom Bennell:

The *Waakal* – that's a carpet snake and there is a dry carpet [snake with white markings] and a wet carpet snake [purple colouring]. The old *Waakal* that lives in the water, they never let them touch them. Never let the children play with those. They reckon that is *Nyungar koolongka warra werniti warbanin, the Waakal*, you're not to play with that carpet snake, that is bad. *Boorda noonook mighty minditch andwernitj*. That means you might get sick and die. They never let them (the kids) touch them [carpet snake] when they go out. *Nidja barlup Waakal marbukal nyininy* – that means he is a harmless carpet snake. He lives in the bush throughout Nyungar boodjar. But that old water snakes; they never let the touch 'em. They are two different sorts of carpet snake. If anybody ever see them, the old bush carpet, he got white marks on him. But the real water snake oh, he is pretty, that carpet snake... the Nyungar call him *Waakal kierp wernitj*. That means that carpet snake, he belongs to the water. You mustn't touch that snake; that's no good. If you kill that carpet snake *noonook barminyiny* that *Waakal ngulla kierp uart*, that means our water dries up – none. That is their history stories and very true, too. They [the Nyungars] never let their children touch or mess around with those carpet snakes. If they come down here to *Mindjarliny*, the old Nyungar call that *Mindjarliny, noonook Mindjarliny koorl nyininy, Nyungar wam. Waakal carrungupiny* – that means that carpet snake is going to get savage. *Mulgariny Waakal koorliny noonar mar yirawal billariny*, see – they reckon that carpet snake could make a storm come. Make it rain for them. Mandikan, that's a spring pool down west of Beverley. They call that Mandikan, that is *wernitj kierp* for *djinangany noonook kierp barlung*. It is fresh water, just like rainwater. When we were carting water from there, one time, one old Nyungar come and said, Oh, *koorlongka noonook kierp nartcha buranginy djennagar Mandikan*. That is *warra wernitj*, he said. "Nidja kierp ngarda mar koorliny benang – this water underneath sky going tomorrow [it's going to rain tomorrow]". Well, that night it did [rain]. Thunder and lightning, a lot of it and it was a miracle. Whether it's true or not, but that's how it happened. We had a big thunderstorm. We were clearing there, right alongside the water at the time, and all that clearing, it washed the logs right out. We had to wait a week for it to dry out before we could burn it... [but] by jove, it was true. Anyway we all packed up and left.¹⁶

The second story is by a Nyoongar woman, Mrs Dorothy Winmar, who says:

They [Nyoongars] believe in the *Waakal* very dearly. They reckon without the *Waakal* they would have no water. They would not let the kids go and torment the *Waakal*. They would drive them away. There is a *Waakal* in the Swan River and he very rarely shows himself. If the water was muddy, the old grannies used to say, “Don’t swim there because he is having a feed. Don’t swim (*warra wirrin* or bad spirit) wait until the water is clear then you can go and jump in (*quop wirrin* or good spirit)”. He was very important to their lives because they believed in having fresh water. They wanted the water, so they wanted the snake to stay alive.¹⁷

These two stories show that Aboriginal oral stories are kept alive by the different generations of Nyoongar people. Tom Bennell, *The Keeper of the Stories*, gives a more in-depth telling. His generation of Nyoongars were more attuned to their old people and lived more closely with the Dreamtime stories that were a part and parcel of Nyoongar life back in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. Mrs Winmar’s story of the *Waakal* is more contemporary, makes more use of the English language and uses less Nyoongar words. The question is – whose story is more authentic? The answer is that both are. Both stories were told by Nyoongars and both have an authenticity because both were passed on to younger generations of Nyoongars, both are parables, and both depict the ideologies of the Dreamtime tenets handed down through generations and generations of Nyoongar people for countless millennia.

If oral stories such as these examples were recorded by more Nyoongars and other Aboriginal people, then the Indigenous people could recapture the ideologies of their own Dreamtime. It is imperative that these stories are passed down and kept alive for the younger generations. There are so many aspects of Aboriginal cultures throughout Australia that are unwritten or untold. Let us not leave it too late to for Aboriginal people to write their stories. The people of Australia would be the poorer for it.

In conclusion, Aboriginal storytelling is as old as the cultures themselves. Based on the Nyoongar practices of storytelling, it is not presumptuous to say that Aborigines all over mainland Australia and Tasmania kept their respective cultures alive by passing on their beliefs, and their social and spiritual, cultural and economic practices to the younger generations. Storytelling is an integral part of Aboriginal oral cultures. Not only were stories entertaining, but they enabled a learning process whereby the matter of survival became the basis of their telling. Children had to listen and learn; not to do so meant certain death. Consequently for thousands of years Dreamtime and survival stories were passed to the next generation. In contemporary times, with Aboriginal people becoming more educated by white standards, the next step is to write their stories for all Australians to read. Some Aboriginal books have been published overseas so that people of other countries and cultures can read about the Aboriginal experience or their Dreamtime stories. Perhaps it will help more people understand the uniqueness of the Aboriginal people and cultures from the Dreamtime pre-colonial eras, through the process of colonisation up to the present day. Readers can learn of the transition Aborigines have

had to make to survive in post-colonial Australia. These stories are real because they come from the heart and soul of Australia – the Aboriginal people.

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- ¹ Winmar, Ralph. *Walwaliny: The Hill That Cried*. West Perth: Nyungar Language and Culture, 1996.
- ² Collard, Len. *Nidja Beeliar Boodjar Noonookurt Nyinning: A Nyungar Interpretative History of the Use of Boodjar (Country) in the Vicinity of Murdoch University*. Murdoch University, 2002.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Hammond, J. E. *Winjan's People: The Story of the South-West Australian Aborigines*. Victoria Park: Hesperian Press, 1980: 55.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Taylor, Alf. *Long Time Now*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2001.
- ⁷ Van den Berg, Rosemary. *No Options No Choice: The Moore River Experience*. Broome: Magabala Books, 1994: 70.
- ⁸ Collard, *Nidja*, 2002.
- ⁹ Wilkes, Richard. *Bulmurn: A Swan River Nyoongar*. Nedlands: University of Western Australia, 1995.
- ¹⁰ Morgan, Sally. *My Place*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987.
- ¹¹ Ward, Glenys. *Wandering Girl*. Broome: Magabala Books, 1987.
- ¹² Ruby Langford Ginibi. *Don't Take Your Love To Town*. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1988.
- ¹³ Walker, Kath. *We are Going*. Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1964.
- ¹⁴ Tucker, Margaret. *If Everyone Cared*. London: Grosvenor, 1983.
- ¹⁵ Collard, *Nidja*, 2002.
- ¹⁶ Bennell, Tom. Oral Interview, 1978a, Transcribed Oral Tape. Murdoch University, 2002.
- ¹⁷ Winmar, Dorothy. Oral Interview, 2002. Transcribed Oral Tape. Murdoch University, 2002.