Indigenous Life-Histories, Dreaming and Country

LINDA WESTPHALEN

Department of Women’s Studies

Abstract

Stories are central to the system of education in Indigenous society. Nganyintja Ilyatjari indicates that stories were (and continue to be) integral to understanding how one both collaborates with and affiliates to the external world, which, as Deborah Bird Rose outlines, is a sentient, participating terrain where subjectivities are co-located in a multiplicity of presences. Similarly, stories are used to discern and interpret the ‘internal’ world, how a person perceives their identity or subjectivity in relation to Dreamings, Country, other people and so on. Storytelling, songs, poetry and other verbal performances had, and have, an important function in all aspects of Indigenous life.

Introduction

However, many non-Indigenous academics have viewed Indigenous life-writing as something separate from Indigenous cultural discourses, as exclusively ‘histories’ and/or ‘autobiographies’. While Indigenous life stories exist as products of western discourses of autobiography, which has itself a context in the discourse of history, I argue that they exist also as part of the wider discourse of Dreaming. Indigenous women’s life-history writing is a converging discourse, genealogically part of the ongoing Dreaming, but harnessing the structures of the western institutions of publication in order to reinscribe both identity and history (hence autobiography as a genre is evoked), both of which in turn contest the impositions and structures of colonialism.

In a radio interview in 1992, Aunty Dr Ruby Langford Ginibi reflects:

I thought I should write these stories down, because nothing’s been taught in the school curriculum much about Aboriginal history or culture, politics or anything, so there’s a whole heap of people out there that don’t know a thing about us. If I wrote these stories and told them how it really is from our side of the fence, and like we really are today, in the twentieth century, approaching the twenty-first, it might promote a better understanding of Aboriginal people... It’s a good hope to educate people (Langford Ginibi 1992b).

This paper explores the junction between Indigenous stories, Country, life-histories and what Non-Indigenous people have come to call ‘Dreaming’. My focus is examining Indigenous life-history writing and recasting it in terms which take into account the Indigienality of the writers/narrators. I want to dispel the notion that Indigenous life-histories are Western constructions or, as Adam Shoemaker suggests, ‘unconventional’ responses (1995: 74) to the changing political climate with relation to Indigenous issues from the 1988 bicentenary to the present. These texts are not unconventional: they are products of an Indigenous convention. Once this context is understood, the richness and value of Indigenous life-history can be explored and appreciated.

While autobiography is, in part, a discourse centred on the life experiences through time of a narrating subjectivity (hence autobiographies are sometimes referred to as ‘life-histories’), Dreamings are often perceived as a separate discourse entirely - as biographies/narratives about the experiences of Ancestor figures which are intensely spiritual, but not connected with either ‘urban’ Indigenous people’s experiences and knowledges, or their writing. It is through Dreaming that Indigenous people are connected to what is termed, in Aboriginal
English, ‘Country’, an active, cognisant and multi-faceted entity. Perhaps the best description of the qualities of Country and its relation to human beings is outlined by Deborah Bird Rose:

Country is multidimensional: it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soil, minerals and waters, surface water, and air. There is sea country and land country; in some areas people talk about sky country. Country has origins and a future; it exists both in and through time. Humans were created for each country, and human groups hold the view that they are an extremely important part of the life of their country. It is not possible, however, to contend that a country, or indeed regional systems of countries, is human centred...

This is the created world, brought into being as a world of form, difference, connection and responsibility by the great creating beings, called Dreamings. The origins of country - its living things, its internal organization, and its relations to other equivalent countries - lie in Dreaming creation. In these terrains, consciousness and responsibility are manifested by all the participants in living systems. Subjectivity, in the form of consciousness, agency, morality, and law is part of all forms and sites of life: of non-human species of plants and animals, of powerful beings such as Rainbow Snakes, and of creation sites, including trees, hills and waterholes. Nourishing terrains are sentient (1999: 177-8).

Dreaming stories, then, testify to an interrelation of connected subjectivities; Country, in turn, is a kind of text for Dreaming, where ‘the main locus of social memory, and all associated discursive elaborations of it as exegesis, ...[including] stories are... retrieved from the country’ [sic] (Rumsey 1994: 127). Although stories of creation which indicate the origins of Country and its inhabitants, Dreamings transcend western understandings of time and history, existing as continuous and active in the past, present and future. W. E. H Stanner was perhaps one of the first Australian anthropologists to explore the Dreaming as part of philosophical and theological discourses, noting in particular that:

... The Dreaming is many things in one. Among them, a kind of narrative of things that once happened; a kind of charter of things that still happen; and a kind of logos or principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man [sic] (Stanner 1979: 24).

The Dreaming is, at the same time, ontological narrative, legal precedent, source of artistic inspiration and interpretation, and many other things. It has been called by anthropologists ‘folktales’, ‘child’s story’, ‘fable’, ‘superstition’, ‘legend’, ‘myth’, ‘just-so story’, ‘epic’ and ‘saga’, often interchangeably and without reflection.

One of the few papers to bring together contemporary Aboriginal peoples’ ‘research into their own pasts’ (Sutton 1994: 260) with both history and Dreaming (although he uses the word ‘myth’), is Peter Sutton’s ‘Myth as History: History as Myth’ (1994). Sutton, a linguist and anthropologist, begins by outlining the work of Les Hiatt, who summarised previous interpretations of Aboriginal ‘myths’ and suggested that they fell into four main categories, ‘myth as history, charter, dream and ontology’ (1975: 13) . Sutton determines that Hiatt ‘leans heavily toward a psychoanalytic approach to myth, and is sceptical about most other approaches’ (1994: 252). He disputes Hiatt’s view that Dreamings, as histories, merely record or memorialise actual things or events, such as eclipses, extinct megafauna, ancient customs, and topographical transformations, suggesting instead that ‘there are other, less ethnographically and logically shaky grounds for seeing myths as transformed history’ (Sutton 1994: 251). Equally, ‘myth as charter’ should not be viewed just as myth as ‘charter for a moral system’ as outlined by Ronald Berndt (1970, in Sutton 1994: 252), but also as ‘charter for rights

\[1\] I accept the term ‘epic’ since Dreaming Stories are usually narrative poems based on ‘heroic’ or creation figures. ‘Epic’ does not, however, convey the spiritual aspects of Dreaming which are vital to understanding its significance.
and obligations of possession, control and custodianship [of land]’ (Sutton 1994: 252).

In a sense it is also myth as history, since so many places in the Aboriginal landscape have specific mythic creation or transformation stories characterised as taking place in a distant past, or at least in a logically prior dimension of the timeless. Significantly, the entities which are called Dreamings over so much of north and central Australia are instead called ‘Stories’ in a large area of northeast Australia, and ‘Histories’ in northern South Australia. Their sacred sites are called Story Places and History Places respectively (Sutton 1994: 252).

There is a strong argument for seeing site-related Aboriginal myths - and most of them are so related - not merely as invented pasts, but as in many cases a combination of invention and memory (Sutton 1994: 253).

The last statement is very similar to critical discussions about the genres of both autobiography and history. As Jan Pettman proposes:

Meaning is constructed by position and relationship, rather than by what ‘really’ happened. This is not to say that memory is not true or accurate; rather that it is a reconstruction which speaks to where the person is now, and to the social setting within which that person now stands (1992: 142).

Sutton suggests that part of the function of ‘myth’ is to:

... provide an idiom, a legislative code in the third person, in which relationships between known people, their residential histories, their pursued claims to land attachments, and their totemic ‘selves’, must not only be ratified, but negotiated (1994: 254).

Fred Myers also notes that ‘for each individual, the landscape... [is] a history of significant social events’ (1986: 68), in that places are not only related to events in the Dreaming, but also events in the lives of human beings. This is similar to the function of Indigenous life-history writing, which draws on the relationships between people, places, knowledges and histories to establish and/or inscribe identity. The only difference is that, in the former context, the text is not a book: it is the land itself.

An individual’s association with Country is based on both personal history and knowledge of Dreaming history. Equally, Country (the sentient terrain) acts (sometimes literally) to embrace or deny people’s claims to it. It is a text cited (sited) to legitimate identity and responsibility, but one which can also cite (site) itself. Country is capricious, wise, jealous, fragile, commanding, resolute and mulishly stubborn. The narratives it generates, whether Dreamings or life histories, operate to order human association with it, as well as with all other non-human actors.

Sutton’s acknowledgment of the political act of constructing urban Indigenous history is recognition that it too, in one reading, is a negotiation about attachments and responsibility for land. Colonisation, which sought to delegitimize Indigenous people’s identities, obligations and responsibilities to Country and Dreamings, is challenged, and, at the same time, linked to Dreaming in that the contemporary Indigenous person who writes their history exists both in and beyond time. As Sutton outlines:

Urban Aboriginal history construction is a statement, moral and political, about the suffering, resilience and persistence of a colonised and displaced people, but it is also a search for a background and underpinning to what must now be assumed to be an indefinite state of future difference. In this sense it is the creation, as much as the explanation, of a separate identity.

In these terms, urban history construction is remarkably similar in function to the Dreaming. The past is also the present, as one of its aspects. The past is not transcendent or remote, but underpins and echoes present and continuing reality. Just
as the Dreaming is the person, in one facet of its complex nature, the Aboriginal person is likewise the historical Aborigine - not merely the survivor but the embodiment of the scarifying processes of conquest, dispossession, resettlement, missionisation and welfareism (1994: 261).

These scarifying processes are documented in Indigenous women’s life-history writing in which non-Indigenous people, likewise both transcending and existing in time, become the ‘historical’ invader, a ‘Captain Cook’ (Rose 1991: 15-19; Sutton 1994: 261-262). In these constructions where Dreaming and history are combined, Indigenous people have used ‘traditional... discursive forms to make sense of the unprecedented experience of colonisation’ (Rumsey 1994: 121). Ronald and Catherine Berndt suggest that:

...the European intruders were counterparts of the malignant spirits and monsters against which human beings pit their strength and ingenuity - with the difference that in the story context it is the Aborigines who mostly triumph (1989: 2)

which further connects Dreaming Stories to life stories where the processes of colonisation are resisted.

First Nations women’s life-history writing expose the processes of colonisation and disrupt the erasure and silencing which it generates (Rose 2001: 92). As a politics, life-writing (re)claims identity, authority, connection, tradition, presence, geographical and ontological space, renewal, example, survival. They invite reflection, recognition, and understanding. "I was there," they say. "This is how it was." "Learn from me."

Many Indigenous life-histories can be read as ‘reconciliation texts’, that is, not only stories of struggle, adaptation, continuity and tradition (Ryan 1986: 50), but rich sources of knowledge about Australia’s shared history which are impossible to disregard. They offer insights into the effects of policies institutionalised in Australian society which actively discriminated against a small group of people because of perceived racial and cultural differences. In this respect, they are educative in the same way that Dreaming stories aim to educate. Elders, through stories, teach the young and ill-informed how to live successfully in the face of great hardship, how to live according to Law, and how to maintain links with culture, land and identity.

Life-History writing by First Nations people is, I contend, part of an First Nations convention of cultural expression which, in Australia, has its impetus in Dreaming Stories and in oral expression. In the same way that Dreaming Stories are used to educate others, to identify people with (and in) their past and to connect people to each other and to the land, life-stories operate to teach, identify and connect. Thus, while the stories may be ‘fluid and creative’, they are only unconventional in the sense that they are not a ‘Western’ or ‘European’ convention. While colonisation is undoubtedly a contributing factor in the content, form and production if Indigenous life-histories, they are not per se products of it.

Writing life-histories is, in an Indigenous context, part of a complex matrix of discourses, born of association with Country, subjectivities, Dreamings and historical events in and through time. These are not separate entities, but coexisting, interwoven and, some would argue, synonymous.

\[3\] Hobbies Danayarri (1991: 17) presents a particularly good example of how ‘Captain Cook’ has become an ‘EveryMan’, symbolic of the processes and injustices of invasion, as well as the relationships between Aboriginal people and colonisers.
Bibliography


