Indigenous autobiography in Australia and the United States

by Tim Rowse
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Scholarship and teaching about a body of work such as ‘Indigenous autobiographies’ generates the practical need for a canon. Any field of study has to be defined. A course or a book is obligated to focus, to limit its view to a manageable quantity of material. These unavoidable processes of selection and exclusion, combined with the tendency of scholars to engage with one another’s work, help to form a restricted field of attention. Whether or not we make judgments of value, we may refer to the resulting short list of important materials as a canon. What is the emerging canon in the study of Indigenous Autobiographies by Australians and North Americans?

As a first approximation, we can infer a North American canon by listing the Indigenous authors that are mentioned and discussed most often in Lynne Woods O’Brien’s Plains Indian Autobiographies (O’Brien 1973), that Arnold Krupat selected for his 1994 anthology Native American Autobiography (Krupat ed 1994), and that H. David Brumble III and Hertha Dawn Wang gave space to in (respectively) American Indian Autobiography (Brumble 1988) and Sending My Heart Back Across the Years (Wang 1982). The Native American autobiographers that have become canonical (in the restricted sense that they are prominent in these academic commentaries) are:

Two Leggings
Aust
Black Hawk
Yellow Wolf
Geronimo
Black Elk
Plenty-Coups, Chief of the Crows
Charles Eastman
Luther Standing Bear
Sam Blowsnake
Maria Chona
Left-handed
N. Scott Momaday
Pretty Shield

I am not making any evaluation of the authors. These are merely the more recurrent names in a small number of book-length studies of Native American autobiographies.

By a similar procedure we can construct a list of Australian Indigenous autobiographers who are frequently discussed. I have used the following books: Joy Hooton: Stories Of Herself When Young (1990), Rosamund Dalziell: Shameful Autobiographies (1999) – each of which includes a substantial chapter surveying Indigenous autobiographies – and David McCooey: Artful Histories (1996) and Anne Brewster: Aboriginal Women’s Autobiography (1996). Brewster’s short (56pp.) book is the only Australian critical work devoted entirely to Australian Indigenous autobiographies. (This is a condensed and simplified version of her longer work Literary Formations: Post-Colonialism, Nationalism, Globalism: Melbourne University Press 1995 – that I have not yet read.) The Australian scholarship on Indigenous autobiography is in its infancy. Nevertheless, from my reading of these four works I distill the following canon-in-the-making.

Ella Simon
Elise Roughsey
Charles Perkins
Margaret Tucker
Ruby Langford
Sally Morgan
Glennyse Ward
Shirley Smith

Let me make three comparative points about the two lists, the US and the Australian.

Gender

First, in the Australian list women authors predominate; while in the US list males predominate. Lynne Woods O’Brien noticed that there were few women among the Plains Indian autobiographers. She speculated: ‘Perhaps because there was no native tradition of women’s autobiography, perhaps because the collectors were nearly always men, perhaps because whites were interested principally in tales of war or vision, only a few women’s autobiographies have been collected’ (O’Brien 1973, 31). The female bias in the Australian list could perhaps be explained if I point out that two of the critical works that I consulted to make this list – by Hooton and by Brewster – are explicitly dedicated to studying only books by women. Hooton values Aboriginal autobiographies because Australians, she writes, are in danger of forgetting what Indigenous Australians endured, and the best antidote to such forgetfulness is ‘a black woman’s autobiography’ (Hooton 1990, 313). Without denying the value of black women’s autobiography, I find nothing in Hooton’s book that would persuade me that black men’s autobiographies would not be equally powerful correctives to Australians endured, and the best antidote to such forgetfulness is ‘a black woman’s autobiography’ (Hooton 1990, 313). Without denying the value of black women’s autobiography, I find nothing in Hooton’s book that would persuade me that black men’s autobiographies would not be equally powerful correctives to Australians endured, and the best antidote to such forgetfulness is ‘a black woman’s autobiography’ (Hooton 1990, 313). Without denying the value of black women’s autobiography, I find nothing in Hooton’s book that would persuade me that black men’s autobiographies would not be equally powerful correctives to Australians endured, and the best antidote to such forgetfulness is ‘a black woman’s autobiography’ (Hooton 1990, 313). Without denying the value of black women’s autobiography, I find nothing in Hooton’s book that would persuade me that black men’s autobiographies would not be equally powerful correctives to Australians endured, and the best antidote to such forgetfulness is ‘a black woman’s autobiography’ (Hooton 1990, 313). Without denying the value of black women’s autobiography, I find nothing in Hooton’s book that would persuade me that black men’s autobiographies would not be equally powerful correctives to Australians endured, and the best antidote to such forgetfulness is ‘a black woman’s autobiography’ (Hooton 1990, 313). Without denying the value of black women’s autobiography, I find nothing in Hooton’s book that would persuade me that black men’s autobiographies would not be equally powerful correctives to Australians endured, and the best antidote to such forgetfulness is ‘a black woman’s autobiography’ (Hooton 1990, 313). Without denying the value of black women’s autobiography, I find nothing in Hooton’s book that would persuade me that black men’s autobiographies would not be equally powerful correctives to Australians endured, and the best antidote to such forgetfulness is ‘a black woman’s autobiography’ (Hooton 1990, 313). Without denying the value of black women’s autobiography, I find nothing in Hooton’s book that would persuade me that black men’s autobiographies would not be equally powerful correctives to Australians endured, and the best antidote to such forgetfulness is ‘a black woman’s autobiography’ (Hooton 1990, 313). Without denying the value of black women’s autobiography, I find nothing in Hooton’s book that would persuade me that black men’s autobiographies would not be equally powerful correctives to Australians endured, and the best antidote to such forgetfulness is ‘a black woman’s autobiography’ (Hooton 1990, 313). Without denying the value of black women’s autobiography, I find nothing in Hooton’s book that would persuade me that black men’s autobiographies would not be equally powerful correctives to Australians endured, and the best antidote to such forgetfulness is ‘a black woman’s autobiography’ (Hooton 1990, 313). Without denying the value of black women’s autobiography, I find nothing in Hooton’s book that would persuade me that black men’s autobiographies would not be equally powerful correctives to Australians endured, and the best antidote to such forgetfulness is ‘a black woman’s autobiography’ (Hooton 1990, 313). Without denying the value of black women’s autobiography, I find nothing in Hooton’s book that would persuade me that black men’s autobiographies would not be equally powerful correctives to Australians endured, and the best antidote to such forgetfulness is ‘a black woman’s autobiography’ (Hooton 1990, 313). Without denying the value of black women’s autobiography, I find nothing in Hooton’s book that would persuade me that black men’s autobiographies would not be equally powerful correctives to Australians.
As a hypothesis about the differences between autobiographies by Indigenous Australian men and women, this generalisation might turn out to be true, but for Brewster it is a fact so well established as to obviate empirical demonstration.

In her following paragraphs, Brewster confuses the issue (for me at any rate) when she contrasts ‘mainstream’ with ‘minority’ autobiography. She contrasts them in the same terms that she has used to contrast male and female autobiography, so that ‘the construction of the self in minority autobiography is seen as a social act which relates to and represents the experiences of the community rather than the individual’ (1996, 38). In short, unless I have misunderstood Brewster, she equates ‘male’ and ‘mainstream’ and says that ‘male’/‘mainstream’ autobiographies are written and read in such a way as to focus on the unique experience of individuals; and she equates ‘female’ and ‘minority’ and says that ‘female’/‘minority’ autobiographies are written and read as accounts of supra-individual entities called ‘family’ and ‘community’.

This tendency to equate ‘female’ with ‘minority’, and thus ‘female’ with ‘Indigenous’, is perhaps Brewster’s rather literal reading of a more playful and metaphorically worded theoretical statement by Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith in 1992. In their introduction to the collection Decolonising the Subject (Watson and Smith 1992) they set up a theoretical distinction between two ways of thinking about writing and reading autobiography. On the one hand, they evoke a received tradition of ‘Western autobiography… as an Eliza-like genre against which the ‘utterances of other subjects are measured and misread’ (1992, xx). The playful element of Smith and Watson’s influential theoretical statement is that they turn the binary ‘male/female’ into an allegory of the binary that defines map of literary history — dominating/subservient versions of the genre autobiography. However, Smith and Watson do not actually argue that men write one kind of autobiography (dominating) and women another (subservient). Nonetheless, their allegory seems to have encouraged some to believe that between the feminine and the colonised there is an elective affinity.

Anthropology and Indigenous autobiography

The second difference between my US and Australian ‘canons’ is that anthropologists, as mediators of Indigenous authorship, feature strongly in the US list but not in the Australian list. The US list includes a number of authors whose work would probably not exist as a readable ‘autobiography’ had they not been encouraged, recorded and edited by amateur or academic anthropologists or government interpreters: Two Leggings, Aua, Black Hawk, Yellow Wolf, Geronimo, Black Elk, Plenty-Coups, Chief of the Crow, Sam Blowsnake, Maria Chona, Left-handed, and Pretty Shield. Of 600 Indian autobiographies known to David Brumble in 1988, ‘some 43 per cent were edited and collected by anthropologists and another forty per cent edited by Anglos from many other walks of life’ (Brumble 1988, 72). In the Australian list Elsie Roughsey’s autobiography, enabled by Paul Memmott and Robyn Horsman, is an example of such collaboration.

In 1985 Arnold Krupat, a prominent US scholar of Native American writing, urged us to understand how the history of European-Indian interaction made possible such an autobiographical process. Among the conditions of its emergence were the defeat of the Indians, the conversion of some of them to Christianity and to ideologies of progress, and the rise of an ethnographic interest in cultures that were destined (it was thought) for extinction. These may be dismissal causes for Indian autobiography to emerge, but we can appreciate the genre’s strengths, says Krupat, when we compare it to the nearest alternative frontier genre — the biographies of Indians written by those who exterminated them. In those biographies, only the colonist is the author. In accepting the lesser role of editor, the colonist admits his dependence on the Indian voice, for a credible account of the frontier. In Krupat’s view, the very form asserted that the Indian was ‘neither vanished nor quiescent’ but speaking for himself (Krupat 1985, 73).

In contrast to Krupat’s upbeat reading of the mediated Native American autobiography, one Australian commentator treated mediation as a scandal. The Indigenous novelist and critic Colin Johnson (known also as Mudrooroo) argues in his preface to the survey of Aboriginal autobiography in 1987 in which he used the following metaphor for non-Indigenous mediation: capture, imprisonment, assimilation, surrender, barricade (Johnson 1987). He placed mediation under suspicion. More recently, Rosamund Dalziell has challenged that suspicion. Dalziell draws on the psychologist Erik Erikson’s work to argue that a shared emotional structure that she calls ‘shame’ is a widespread legacy of Australia’s colonial history. Blacks are ‘ashamed’ because the colonists treated their culture as worthless; they are also ashamed because they feel that so much of their heritages has been lost.

On the other side, Whites are ashamed when they face the truth of the manner in which Australia was made. Dalziell argues that in the recent florescence of Indigenous autobiography both sides are dealing positively with their shame. Whites are voicing what was once too shameful to say; Whites are overcoming their shame to listen, with sympathy, to their stories. As Dalziell points out, Elsie Roughsey’s is not the only book that has benefited from the recognition of the power of autobiographical work by a person (not an anthropologist) has been a common feature of Indigenous autobiographical writing. Mum Shirl was helped by Roberta Sykes, Ruby Langford by Susan Hampton, Charles Perkins by the Reverend Ted Noffs.

Dalziell’s presentation of Aboriginal autobiography differs from Johnson’s in another way. Johnson made it clear that unless an Aboriginal author conveys a certain critical understanding of his or her place in Australian society, he/she is not writing authentically. The mediation of Aboriginal writing, in Johnson’s view, is censorship, neutralising what he assumes to be an intrinsically critical authentic Aboriginal voice. For Dalziell, the value of Indigenous autobiography is that it reveals the diversity of Indigenous experience and point of view. Her view of collaboration as essentially productive (even therapeutic) and her refusal to judge Aboriginal writing according to a model of Aboriginal emotional pain, set in an historical narrative of the colonists’ genocidal public policies. In the second oral history, Many Voices (Haebich and Mellor 2002), there is still much Aboriginal pain, but a few Aboriginal voices speak positively of removal. In addition, Many Voices devotes a chapter to the interview process itself, evolving it as a cameo of learned empathy and a site of healing and reconciliation.

I have my reservations about Dalziell’s approach, though I prefer it to Johnson’s prescriptiveness. Gillian Whithall has pointed to a limitation imposed by Dalziell’s humanism: the capacity of the autobiographical text to be a reliable vehicle for the expression of emotion and truth by a narrating subject is not in question here (Whithall 1997). On the contrary, she argues, the discourses of autobiography are shaped by a past that is more accurately described as ‘colonial’ — a social historical context that both shapes and is shaped by such autobiographical discourses. Whithall’s and Tania Howard’s work has recently been expanded by the Australian researcher, Cheryl Aplin (2000) who argues that Dalziell’s opposition between ‘shadow’ and ‘voice’ is too simplistic.

In her essay, ‘‘The Intimate Empire” in which white men have been the exemplary authors; on the other side, they evoke, in rather abstract terms, ‘alternative and diverse practises of writing and reading autobiography’ (Whithall 2001, 143). Whithall’s essay is an example of such a theoretical statement by Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith in 1992. In their Introduction to the collection Decolonising the Subject (Watson and Smith 1992) they set up a theoretical distinction between two ways of thinking about writing and reading autobiography. On the one hand, they evoke a received tradition of ‘Western autobiography… as an Eliza-like genre against which the ‘utterances of other subjects are measured and misread’ (1992, xx). The playful element of Smith and Watson’s influential theoretical statement is that they turn the binary ‘male/female’ into an allegory of the binary that defines map of literary history — dominating/subservient versions of the genre autobiography. However, Smith and Watson do not actually argue that men write one kind of autobiography (dominating) and women another (subservient). Nonetheless, their allegory seems to have encouraged some to believe that between the feminine and the colonised there is an elective affinity.

Periodisation

The second difference between the US and Australian lists of prominent Indigenous autobiographies is perhaps the most obvious difference of all: the US list is much older. The range of birth dates for the US authors is 1767 (Black Hawk) to 1934 (N. Scott Momaday); for the Australians it is 1902 (Eila Simoni) to 1951 (Sally Morgan).

There is no mystery to be solved here. The European colonisation of North America (end of sixteenth century) commenced almost two centuries before the European colonisation of Australia (end of eighteenth century). Within each settler colony it took many years before the moment of Indigenous autobiography ‘arrived’ The conditions of that moment were not only that Indigenous people desired to express themselves, but also that colonists wished to hear or read them. The oldest Indian autobiographical narrative known to Brumble (in his 1988 book) was a 1762 work only a few pages long (and not published until 1882) written by the Mohican Samson Occom (1723-92). Note that Occom was literate; his writings are his writings, not a text created by another’s recording and editing. Occom addressed himself to a white readership. As David Murray writes in his discussion of Occom, "Anything that was published, at least until the point of widescale indiand literacy, was written to reflect the tastes of a white audience, and conform to a large extent to what at least some of them thought it was appropriate for an Indian to write. Indian writers are merely going to materialise, therefore, only when what they say meets a white need, as news, or chronicles or chroniclers of their own culture, for instance (Murray 1991, 57)."

In Australia, the first Indigenous autobiography is arguably Philip Roberts’ (aka Waipuldanya’s) ‘as told to life story’ I, the Aboriginal, published in 1962 under the authorship of the journalist Douglas Lockwood. I will have more to say about I, the Aboriginal in a moment. As you will see, not everyone would agree with me that I, the Aboriginal is..."
It is not hard to understand why the US tradition is long (over 600-700 works, by one count) and old, while the Australian tradition is short (I estimate 100 works, about 65 by women) and recent. Does this difference afford different interpretive possibilities? It does. The two traditions provide different opportunities for a historicizing reading.

Arnold Krupat's work will serve as an example of a North American periodising framework. Krupat pays attention to the kinds of autobiographical subject that he, infers, Whites wanted Indians to produce. Until the mid-nineteenth century, he suggests, Indians were seen as subjects to be saved, and Whites had an essentially religious conception of their being. This period of Native American autobiography is typified by William Apess's A Son of the Forest (published 1829) whose theme is the 'christianisation of Indian's relation to Euroamerican religion'. Apess's Christianity gives him the grounds upon which to judge the US colonists for their unconsolable treatment of the Indian.

During the nineteenth century the notion of Indian salvation became secularised, so that the Indian life-story was to be understood as displaying the problems of their transition from 'savagery' to 'civilisation'. The closing of the frontier (and the passing of the Dawes or General Allotment Act 1887), intensified the effort to assimilate Indians. Some Indians responded to this as an opportunity; their autobiographies evince pride in their own progress away from the Indian past and towards the colonists' civilisation. However, Krupat and others argue, these 'progressive' writers did not disdain their Indian traditions; indeed, they invoked Indian virtues in their critiques of features of American civilisation. In 1985, Krupat read the autobiography of Black Hawk in this context (Krupat 1985, 49-50).

Another impetus to Indian autobiography soon began to manifest itself in the second half of the nineteenth century – parallel to, but distinguishable from, the autobiographical imperative of the Indian 'progressives' to articulate a way to be both Indian and American. Social science, some of it sponsored by government, began to solicit life stories. Krupat calls the products of this development 'the anthropologists' Indians'. As anthropology flourished as an academic discipline in the decades up to the second world war, many Indian autobiographies were solicited from a representative or ordinary individual; they were welcomed because of what they told of a culture lost, or soon to be lost. This 'salvage' project gave rise to Indian autobiographies that informed an intellectual climate in which critics such as John Collier questioned assimilation's assumptions. The critical review of assimilation policy in the 1920s gave rise to a new era of Indian/USA relationships, marked by the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act which was intended to allow Native Americans more choice about their adjustment to colonial authority, economy and culture.

Some of the limitations of Krupat's periodisation become evident when he depicts Indian-US relationships after 1934 as a confusion of contradictory policy philosophies: 'self-determination' contrasted with a policy declared in 1953 – the 'termination' of all federal government treaty responsibilities towards Indians. Thus Krupat does not generalise about the themes of Indian autobiography produced in the 34 years from 1934 to 1968, when Congress passed the Indian Civil Rights Act. However, Krupat remarks of Lucullus Virgil McWhorter's Yellow Wolf: His Own Story that it displays both 'a full commitment to a plurality of voices combined with an unexamined commitment to Western forms.' It was thus 'homologous with the contradictions of the Collier Indian Reform program generally.' (Krupat 1989, 195).

There is a paradox in Krupat's way of reading Indian autobiographies historically; he draws attention to non-Indian demand, as the context for Indian supply. Thus Krupat risks implying that non-Indian wishes have determined what Indian autobiographers have said. In my opinion, in the sublity of his and others' readings of each autobiography, this risk of understating Indian agency is avoided. The leading question for these critics is that of identifying, within the autobiography, the Indian author's independent commentary on his or her times. In any case, when Krupat and others point to the context of production that enables Indian autobiography, they are not necessarily specifying a context fashioned wholly by the interests of US colonists. Krupat's final definable era of Indian autobiography begins in 1968 – the 'Native American Renaissance' in which literary arts (poetry, the novel and autobiography) have flourished under the stimulus of commercial success and academic support for Indian Studies programs. As well, this literary florescence owes something to the global phenomenon of literary modernism.

In the past twenty or so, the Native American autobiographies...that have been most noticed have presented themselves in relation to the category...of the esthetic, as art, adopting presentational techniques that derive more or less from types of literary modernism (1989, 142-3).

Is a periodising interpretive strategy available to readers of Australian Indigenous autobiographies?

Most of the corpus of Australian Indigenous autobiography has been produced in the era of 'self-determination', and most of these autobiographies recall and comment on the characteristic experiences of the eras of 'protection' and 'assimilation'. Sally Morgan's My Place can be read in precisely these terms, as Anne Brewster points out:

My Place is a testimony to the effects of the assimilation policy, introduced in the late 1930s, which attempted to bring about the absorption of Aboriginal people into white society, thereby erasing their cultural difference. The assimilation policy held sway until the 1960s when Aboriginal groups and their supporters criticised the idea that Aboriginal people should give up their identity in order to assimilate into white culture. During the 1940s and 1950s both Daisy and Gladys felt ashamed and fearful of identifying as Aboriginal. They denied their Aboriginality and attempted to repress their memories of the past. My Place is the story of the excavation of the family's history by a younger woman for whom Aboriginnality was a badge of pride rather than of shame (Brewster 1996,17)

However, although periodisation is a helpful reading strategy, we have to be aware of the limitations of a periodisation of Indigenous Australians history in terms of the major phases of public policy: protection, assimilation and self-determination. What are we to make of a substantial body of autobiographical writing about rural labour, in particular about the pastoral industry in northern Australia? These rural scenes seem to have their own historical rhythms and periodisation. In the Aboriginal autobiographies mediated by Bruce Shaw and by Jeremy Beckett, in the Kimberley, the Lake Eyre region, and western New South Wales, the characteristic features of the 'protection' era have been played out later (until the late 1960s). Rather than later (I'm not sure why assimilation-self-determination) scheme on such material, perhaps it is better to start reading the Australian Indigenous autobiographical corpus in regional, rather than temporal terms. The colonial context of each narrated life can be understood by thinking of the regional variation of the forms of colonial authority. In some regions, at certain times, the settlement or mission dormitory has been a defining institution; in other regions, the expanded domestic community of the pastoral station has been the setting for Indigenous lives. In some regions there may not be an easily definable colonial institution, only a wider labour market in which individuals and households take their chances. In this latter case, perhaps the most important regional distinction is whether the narrator is surviving in a city or in a network of rural towns, or moving between the urban and the rural context, as in Don't Take Your Love to Town.

Autobiography in history

Up to this point, I have been discussing the possible ways that history is refracted through Indigenous autobiographies, and I have been discussing the possible strategies for contextualising autobiographies – in periods, in places and in institutional milieu. However there is another level at which we must consider history and autobiography, and that is the history of the genre autobiography itself. That is, we have an opportunity, even a scholarly obligation, to think in formal terms about Indigenous autobiography, and to ask if its forms have their own history. Once again, I think that it has been easier to pose this question about the Native American than about the Australian Aborinal. The USA's longer tradition of writing has provided more opportunity for scholars to observe formal development and variation.

H.David Brumble III in his book American Indian autobiography draws on Karl Weintraub's The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography (1978). Through a canon of classic European autobiographies Weintraub traced the emergence of what he took to be the defining quality of autobiography: the author's historisation of his/her own unique development. For Weintraub, Goethe is the first truly modern exponent of autobiography. 'It was he who first wrote his own life as the history of an individuality. He saw his personal formation as the effective interplay of his self and his world' (Weintraub 1975, 847). Brumble has taken Weintraub's thesis about modern autobiography and self and biography and reinterpreted it in the context of North American colonial history. According to Brumble, the 'history of American Indian autobiography recapitulates the history of Western autobiography' (Brumble 1988,118). That is, the encounter with colonising Europeans has elicited, among Native Americans' many cultural responses, a growing tendency to think of the self in the same way that the fully evolved Western autobiographer does: as an individual being shaped by the contingencies of his or her experience.

Brumble gives some examples of Native Americans who have written in that way. One of them was Charles Eastman – a graduate of the Boston University medical School, and one of Krupat's 'progressives' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Eastman was enabled to think of himself as a product of history by his immersion in the Social Darwinist thought of his times. That is, he presented himself as 'a living embodiment of the Social-Darwinist theories of racial-cultural progression' (Brumble 1988, 138). Social Darwinism is not the only theoretical template offering a colonised person a way to historicise the self. Brumble gives the example of the Winnebago man Albert Hensley, the author of two autobiographical letters in 1908 and 1916. In both letters, Hensley writes from what Brumble calls 'a unified sense of self', so that the narrated episodes progress him towards the self that now writes. In the 1908 letter, the episodes contribute to the reader's understanding of Hensley's religious and moral development, drawing attention to the benefits of his induction into Christianity and Peyote; in the second letter (1916), we get a work and education history, his 'steady development through self-help', emphasising the opportunities provided by the Carlisle Indian school. Brumble argues that the letters exemplify two 'sub-genres' (though I prefer the term 'topic' to 'sub-genre'); the 'Peyote conversion narrative' and the 'Carlise success story'. Hensley can use both sub-genres, because he has learned to...
One would investigate what we might call the Weintraub/Brumble hypothesis: that indigenous peoples are stimulated, by their various experiences of being colonised, to produce an historized sense of a highly individualised self, just as in modern western autobiography. Is this true? Can we trace, over many decades of Indigenous autobiography, the consistency of what the Western autobiographical self? Would it be possible to give this question an evaluative dimension. That is, it would be easy to imply that Weintraub’s canonic was the standard against which all autobiographies should be judged, so that a text would be more or less autobiographical (the autobiographer good or bad at autobiography) to the extent that the text were more or less like Weintraub’s exemplary, self-historicising modern autobiography – that is, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. I would rather take Weintraub’s canonical sequence of development as no more than a possible trajectory for Indigenous authors to follow. I would rather not presume that Indigenous authors should follow (assimilation) or should not follow (resistance) that evolution. I acknowledge the pressures and opportunities for colonised people to be like those who have colonised them, but I harbour no preference about the kind of autobiographical self they try to produce. I make no argument and harbour no opinions about what is typically ‘Aboriginal’. I note Arnold Krupat’s argument (Krupat 1992) that the self of Native American autobiography is characteristically a self understood as exemplary of part of a whole way of life – that is, he sees limits to the Indian commitment to what Weintraub calls ‘individuality’. However, Krupat concedes that there are Indian exceptions to his generalisation, and he seems unwilling to characterise those exceptions as ‘less Indian’.

The second line of inquiry prompted by Brumble’s thesis would ask, to the extent that Indigenous people learn to produce an historized sense of self, a la Weintraub/Brumble, what characteristic themes have emerged? What are the tropes of ‘personal development’ that we find in such Indigenous autobiographies? To give a quick example of such a trope – in Stolen Generation autobiographies an outstanding (perhaps defining) trope is the sequence disconnection-reconnection of self to cultural heritage, a story told by an autobiographical ‘I’ that has at last found security of cultural self-definition. Note that if we pursue the line of inquiry prompted by Brumble, we are moving far beyond using autobiographies as evidence of what happened to people – valuable though autobiographies may be for answering the ‘what happened?’ question. Brumble and Weintraub point our inquiry towards a history of the changing possibility of Indigenous selves. For the writing of that history, autobiography is not merely a handy evidentiary supplement to other sources, it is the premium site for the development of Indigenous selves. A study of Australian Indigenous autobiography must have something to say about the prodigious solicitation of Indigenous autobiography in the last twenty years.

For example, Waipuldanya

I would like to end this paper with a short case study of the production and consumption of an Aboriginal autobiographical subject.

I, the Aboriginal was acclaimed when it appeared in 1962, and Douglas Lockwood received the (Adelaide)Advertiser's prize for a work on a Northern Territory theme. A quarter of a century later, this book was described as the ‘compromised’ result of a process in which a white journalist ‘mined an Aboriginal man for source material’ that was then ‘tightly controlled and rendered down into prose suitable for public consumption’. The critic making this accusation doubted that the Aboriginal man – Waipuldanya – ‘had any choice in the discourse used’ (Johnson 1987, 29-30). Douglas Lockwood dedicated I, the Aboriginal to ‘Waipuldanya…whose story it is’. He explained that Waipuldanya ‘sat with me during more than one hundred hours of interviews while he patiently told me the details of his life and explained the customs and rituals of his people. Then he listened and criticized through many more long hours as, together, we read and checked the manuscript’ (Lockwood 1962, 7). The result is what Arnold Krupat would call a bi-cultural artefact.

In Johnston’s judgment, this would be too kind a verdict. His metaphors – capture, imprisonment, assimilation, surrender, mining, barricading and putting in a museum – would lead us to dismiss a book such as I, the Aboriginal as unable to yield the reader any empathy with an Aboriginal subject. However, this would be a mistake. Johnson goes too far, I will suggest.

Before doing so, I want to make a concession to Johnson: Lockwood is certainly an intrusive mediator of Waipuldanya. A 1963 review of I, the Aboriginal also found this irritating. A.P. Elkin, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney and Australia’s most authoritative public intellectual on Indigenous affairs from 1935 to 1970, criticised Lockwood for giving ‘the impression of “unreality”.’ That is, Elkin found it ‘jarring’ that Waipuldanya is represented as using words and alluding to situations that he was extremely unlikely to have known or known of. ‘He even knows about the guillotine,’ complains Elkin, ‘and can hint at the iniquity of finding the House of Commons mace in the Palace of the Soviets – if that were to occur.’ It was jarring for Elkin when Waipuldanya – as rendered in Lockwood’s text – alluded to Albert Schweitzer in the Congo. Elkin wrote that he felt ‘relief’ when Waipuldanya’s words are simple English and even pidgin-English. And yet, notwithstanding these complaints, Elkin praised the book as ‘a true story’ (Elkin 1963, 294-5).

Elkin’s review thus implied a distinction between the truthfulness of a story and the ‘impression of “unreality”’ given by the style of its telling. As a reader, Elkin hoped not only that the story be true (as, for him, it was) but also that the telling of the story would conform to his idea about how an ‘Aboriginal’ man who grew up on the Roper River Mission in the 1940s would express himself.

Let us pause to consider the difference between these two expectations of an autobiography. In his book On Autobiography Philippe Lejeune identifies the reader commitment that defines the genre: the faith that an autobiography expresses a unified, intentional subject, a person in full possession of the knowledge of his/her life. This belief reminds Lejeune of a religious dogma.

The illustrous, or exemplary, person must be a full and complete subject. If God is, by definition, perfect, he must possess to their highest degree all possible attributes, including existence…What is important [to the reader] is the real presence of the body of Christ in the host (Lejeune 1989, 195).

Extrapolating from Lejeune’s evocation of the reader interpellated by the genre autobiography, we could say that what Elkin missed in I, the Aboriginal was the consistent literary presentation of exemplary Aborigibility. Elkin does not accuse Lockwood of falsifying Waipuldanya’s story of his life, but of making Waipuldanya, the evoked teller of that life, hard to believe in, an unrealistic authorial figure.

Lejeune argues that the notion of a singular, originating authorial consciousness is an illusion that the autobiographer must work to produce, because it is what the reader has been schooled by the genre of autobiography to expect and to want. He argues that this effect is as necessary and as contrived in a text with a single author as it is in texts in which two people have produced the authorial effect. As readers, we will test the effect created by the language of the text against the effect that we wanted when we embarked, as readers, on our project of empathy with the teller of his own life. In the case of Waipuldanya, Elkin made explicit what an Aboriginal should sound like or read like: simple English, a bit of pidgin, no guillotines, no Albert Schweitzer. The guillotines and the Schweitzer are not Waipuldanya; they are Lockwood’s showing off. In Elkin’s view, Lockwood violated the tact that literary realism requires. And yet, for Elkin, the absence of the tactics of realism does not falsify the book. As he wrote in his review’s opening sentence: ‘This is a grand story, and all the more captivating because it is a true story’ (1963, 294). So what might that truth be?

Elinck encapsulated the story as ‘the record of a full-blood Aborigine becoming a good mechanic, a very efficient and understanding “assistant medical officer”, a full-blood Aborigine who grew up the Roper River Mission in the 1940s would express himself. But the two texts produce two significantly different developed Indian selves.

In 1918, the Commonwealth had published the Aboriginal Ordinance. The Ordinance regulated interactions between non-Aborigines (mostly British-origin whites and Chinese) and Aborigines (not only ‘full-blood’ but many of mixed descent). This regulatory framework bore much more heavily on Aborigines, withholding from them many of the rights of white citizenship. In 1936 it became clear for Aborigines to apply for citizenship. If your life style was assessed as approximating that of a respectable white person, then the Chief Protector would exempt you from the provisions of the Ordinance. In a 1953 legislative change, the Commonwealth exempted all those residents of the Northern Territory classified as ‘half-castes’. Those who remained under restrictive legislation were known by the new term ‘ward’. The published register (1957) of the Northern Territory ‘wards’ was a list of all of the Northern Territory’s known ‘full-bloods’ – including Waipuldanya, his wife and their children. However, there remained the possibility of exemption for wards who passed the living standard test, and in 1959 or 1960, government officials who had a high opinion of Waipuldanya’s work as a medical orderly suggested that he apply. As the book’slogue tells it, after some hesitation, he agreed, and he and his family gained the same rights of citizenship as
This symmetry of start and end – which I would be happy to impute to Lockwood’s narrative finesse – has a point. It shows Waipuldanya’s ‘assimilation’ and its limits. The epilogue spells this out. It tells of Waipuldanya’s exemption from the Welfare Ordinance on June 15 1960, but it also carries Waipuldanya’s proviso that he is ‘an aboriginal first and a citizen later’. I, the Aboriginal thus challenges one way that ‘assimilation’ and ‘citizenship’ were usually understood around 1960. ‘Assimilation’ need not be a comprehensive ‘conversion’ to the ways of non-Aborigines; accordingly, ‘citizenship’ may be no more than a set of bicultural competencies, of calculated performance, with a limited purchase on the deeper loyalties and the habitual affections of the individual. This revised understanding of citizenship, performed by Waipuldanya – the narrative subject of the book – opens the space between ‘culture’ and ‘nation’ through which later walked the new national ideals ‘self-determination’ and ‘multiculturalism’, in the 1970s and 1980s.

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Indigenous Australians are people with familial heritage to groups that lived in Australia before British colonisation. They include the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia. The term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or the person’s specific cultural group (their mob), is often preferred, though the terms First Nations of Australia, First Peoples of Australia and First Australians are also increasingly common. Indigenous Biography and Autobiography. Peter Read. Frances Peters-Little. Published Indigenous Australian autobiographies have undergone considerable change over the last five decades.¹ From tentative beginnings between the 1950s and the 1970s, they saw tremendous growth during the 1980s and 1990s. Now, 50 years later, autobiographies have secured their place in overseas markets. National Indigenous Australians Agency. indigenous.gov.au. The Wirra Hub provides support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Western Australia who want to start, grow or sustain their business Continue reading. Local CDP teams support APY Communities during COVID-19. CDP teams in Far North West South Australia have been supporting normal operations in Anangu Pitjanjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) communities, as Continue reading. 3445. Indigenous disadvantage in Australia. The disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Disadvantage may have both immediate social, economic and cultural determinants, and deeper underlying causes. In 2008, the Australian government made a formal commitment to address Indigenous disadvantage in Australia, known as ‘Closing the Gap’, but what’s “the gap”? The gap refers to the the vast health and life-expectation inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This inequality includes: shorter life expectancy. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues estimates there are more than 370 million Indigenous peoples spread across 70 countries worldwide, each practicing unique traditions, retaining social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live. Many Indigenous peoples are the holders of unique languages, knowledge systems and beliefs, and possess invaluable traditional knowledge for the sustainable management of natural resources and have a special relation to and use of their traditional land, waters or ter... When used in Australia, the words Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are capitalised, as would be the name of any other group of people.