Indigenous autobiography in Australia and the United States

by Tim Rowse

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 obliged 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 1990). 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 McCoey 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 1996 – 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 distilled 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 forgetfulness.

Brewster offers more of an argument for privileging Indigenous women’s autobiographies, but I think that it is a confused and unconvincing argument. Brewster quotes Ruby Langford who describes Aboriginal men as ‘people with no hope, no pride, no nothing’ (cited in Brewster 1996, 34). Brewster finds in Langford’s Don’t Take Your Love to Town a story of family and community survival through the strength and knowledge of women. ‘As keepers of the family Aboriginal women are the bearers of subjugated knowledges, a resistance-discourse to white culture….Don’t Take Your Love to Town articulates experience and knowledge that can be identified as female. And in turn, the specificity of this female experience means that the narrative is different from the male tradition of autobiography’ (1996, 37). Brewster cannot sustain this point, however, because she does not examine the ‘male tradition of autobiography’ nor does she refer to any studies of autobiographies written by Indigenous males. Instead of offering a reading of autobiographies by Indigenous men, she refers to a conventional distinction between men’s and women’s autobiographies that says that ‘where men’s autobiographies construct a notion of the solitary and privileged individual, women’s autobiographies invoke not so much personal and individual histories as collective cultural histories’ (1996, 37).

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In her following paragraphs, Brewster focuses 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 playfully 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’ in which white men have been the exemplary authors; on the other side, they evoke, in rather abstract terms, ‘alternative and diverse practises of autobiography and potential’ (p. 3). They then invoke as an archetypal author whose work is to be compared with Western autobiography: 'the woman, the poet, the painter, the native author whose identity is not determined by the social order, whose work and potentiality name “Man”, whenever they refer to the actual or possible authorship of the unorthodox autobiographies, they use feminine pronouns and lower case. The relationship between them is that ‘Western autobiography... as functions as an exclusionary 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 their map of literary history – dominating/subversive versions of the genre autobiography. However, Smith and Watson do not actually argue that men write one kind of autobiography (dominating) and women another (subversive). 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 eugenicist interest in cultures that were destined (it was thought) for extinction. These may be dismal 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 conquered them. In those biographies, only the colonial 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 vanquished nor silenced’ 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 Johnstone (known also as Mudrooroo Narrogin) wrote in an early survey of Aboriginal autobiography in 1987 in which he used the following metaphors for non-Indigenous mediation: capture, imprisonment, assimilation, surrender, barricade (Johnson 1987). He placed all mediation under suspicion. More recently, Rosamund Dalziel has challenged that suspicion. Dalziel 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 shamened when they face the truth of the manner in which Australia was made.

Dalziel argues that in the recent fin de siècle of Indigenous autobiography both sides are dealing positively with their shame. Blacks are voicing what was once too shameful to say; Whites are overcoming their shame to listen, with sympathy, to their stories. As Dalziel points out, Elsie Roughsey’s is not only the book that has benefited from her encounters with theранколониста but it is also an example of her collaboration with Indigenous authors. The work Mary Gidney collaborated with was a shared document of Indigenous autobiographical writing. Mum Shirl was helped by Roberta Sykes, Ruby Langford by Susan Hampton, Charles Perkins by the Reverend Ted Noffs.

Dalziel’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 Dalziel, 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 a typically Aboriginal point of view, seem to me to be two sides of the same coin. Perhaps Dalziel’s is becoming the more common approach in Australia. We have recently seen the publication of a second oral history of the Stolen Generations. The first, Bringing Them Home (HREOC 1997), was overwhelmingly dominated by stories of Aborigines’ 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 Voicesdevotes a chapter to the interview process itself, evoking it as a cameo of learned empathy and a site of healing and reconciliation.

I have my reservations about Dalziel’s approach, though I prefer it to Johnson’s prescriptiveness. Gillian Whiting has pointed to a limitation imposed by Dalziel’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’ (Whiting 1989, 45). I hope she will show in her final section. This is not an anthropologist (not an anthropologist) has been a common feature of Indigenous autobiographical writing. Mum Shirl’s ambitious The Intimate Empire (Whiting 2000) has reinforced my confidence in this measure of anti-humanism.

Before going on to discuss the third difference between the Australian and the US lists I want to say something about the first two. Neither of my comparative propositions would be more true (or more attention-getting) if more attention were paid in Australian scholarship to the material or potential (subversive) effects in the reading of autobiographies. Whitling’s admirable The Intimate Empire (Whiting 2000) has reinforced my confidence in this measure of anti-humanism.

I, the Aboriginal...
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 ‘Christianised Indian’s relation to Euramerican religion’. Apess’s Christianity gives him the grounds upon which to judge the US colonists for their unconscionable 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 ‘savage’ 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’ contended 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 54 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 subtext of his and others’ readings of each autobiography, this risk of underestimating 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 history. 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 years 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, 149−50).

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 Aboriginiility 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’ and ‘assimilation’ phases are not so much foregrounded: they are bracketed between (say) the 1880s and the 1960s. Rather than later (I’m not sure why) try to impose the ‘protection-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 Aboriginal corpus. 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 historicisation 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 European autobiography as a model, and applied it to the self and autobiography of 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 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.
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 historicized 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 trajectory of what the Weintraub/Brumble hypothesis would be? It would be possible to give this question an evaluative dimension. That is, it would be easy to imply that Weintraub’s canon was the standard against which all autobiographies should be judged, so that a text would be more or less autobiographical (the author good or bad at autobiography) to the extent that the text were more or less like Weintraub’s exemplary, self-historicising modern autobiography — that 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 Kuwat’s argument (Kuwat 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, Kuwat 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 what extent that Indigenous people learn to produce an historicized sense of self, as in 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 investigation 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. He then listened and criticized through many more long hours as, together, we read and checked the manuscript’ (Lockwood 1962, 7). The result is what Arnold Kuwat 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. Johnston 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 guillotines’, complains Elkin, ‘and can hint at the incoherence of finding the House of Commons 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 pidjin-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 illustrious, 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 Aboriginality. 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 authoritative 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 authoritative 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?

Elkin encapsulated the story as ‘the record of a full-blood Aboriginal becoming a good mechanic, a very efficient and understanding “assistant medical officer”, a full citizen of Australia, a knowledgeable Christian, and yet remaining true “Blackfellow”, true to the beliefs, rituals and social demands of the “Dreaming”’ (1963, 294). This is not a bad summary, but what makes it ‘true’ for Elkin is not merely that Waipuldanya really was a good mechanic, etc. In combination, these facts exemplify a deeper truth that Elkin spells out in his review. It is the truth of biocultural citizenship. ‘The successful full-blood Aboriginals of the centre and north for generations to come will draw on two worlds, modifying and blending what they inherit and learn of two cultures; for that reason, they will enrich Australian life’ (1963, 294). So that is what Waipuldanya exemplifies: his story substantiates Elkin’s ideal of biocultural citizenship.

I prefer Elkin’s reading of I, the Aboriginal to Johnson’s dismissal of it as ‘compromised’ and as the product of an exploitive relationship. I, the Aboriginal can be read as a comment on what ‘assimilation’ meant, in practice, in the Northern Territory in the early 1960s. Let me set the scene.

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 cultural and social benefits of citizenship that the Ordinance had been intended to give to the white settler. In 1906 it became compulsory for Aborigines to apply for licences, and in 1922 the Ordinance provided that the Chief Protector could 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 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 motor mechanic confirmed his right to exemption. As the book’s epilogue tells it, after some hesitation, he agreed, and he and his family gained the same rights of citizenship as all other Australians.
most Australians then enjoyed. Waipuldanya’s concluding words are that he remains ‘an aboriginal first and a citizen later’; he hopes that he will never be in a situation in which the demands of the two statuses are in conflict.

The book’s plot gives force to this evocation of Waipuldanya’s dual allegiance. The opening chapter is a memory of his childhood, when he was the victim of sorcery and almost died. As Lockwood/Waipuldanya narrates his life story, he gives us several passages about the menacing salience of occult powers in the Aboriginal domain, evoking the fear and respect that sorcerers arouse among Aboriginal people such as himself. At the same time, Lockwood/Waipuldanya gives us episode after episode in which a male mentor imparts to Waipuldanya a significant skill: the skills of hunting, of working with horses and cattle, of fixing cars and, finally, of fixing people — when he receives training as a medical orderly. Once he is medically trained, Waipuldanya’s life is told as a series of scenes in which his behaviour manifests the power of western medicine. However, as the story has already made clear, it is not only western medicine that is powerful. Waipuldanya evokes, as central to his sense of himself as an Aboriginal adult, a surviving Indigenous hierarchy founded in ritualised powers and responsibilities. Lockwood/Waipuldanya invites us to see in Waipuldanya’s actions the manifest co-existence of all the skills, knowledge and authorities that he has acquired. When visiting a community, he is proud to demonstrate, against the scepticism of the local Aborigines, that he is no less an effective hunter for being a practitioner of white man’s medicine. In another episode he tells us how easily he switched back and forth between two different hygiene regimes. One is the camp where he is sitting in the dirt eating with his patients, and the other is his field ‘surgery’ for which he scrubs up in order to suture the cuts and to medicate the sores of those with whom he has just been eating. These passages celebrate his role-switching facility.

The book’s climactic story recalls to the reader the opening chapter, in which Waipuldanya, as a child, had been at the mercy of sorcery and counter-sorcery. He is again on medical patrol and he becomes aware of a sorcerer, or ‘Witch-doctor’, who has a severely ill child, but who is too proud to bring him to the clinic where Waipuldanya is working. When Waipuldanya visits the camp of the stricken boy, he does not miss the opportunity to point out to the old man what his intervention means — that ‘my medicine is stronger than yours.’ More diplomatically, he then describes his anti-biotic needle as ‘proper Doctor Blackfelllow magic’ that will force the devil out of the boy’s body (1962, 233). On hearing this explanation, the boy’s father, the man of supernatural powers, ‘was satisfied and nodded happily for me to go ahead, convinced that his own profession and not mine was at work. I might have lost his cooperation by telling him that the syringe contained penicillin which would fight infection in the leg’ (1962, 234). Thus the narrative of Waipuldanya’s life begins and ends with emblematic confrontations with the most awesome occult powers that Aboriginal culture can command. In the first chapter, Waipuldanya is a child at the mercy of those powers; in the final chapter, he is a man, trained in a superior knowledge, and possessed of sufficient guile not to vilate the scene of its application.

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 competences, 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 I, the Aboriginal — 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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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. In Australia, as in Sweden, indigenous people do not enjoy any constitutional or treaty recognition, unlike in New Zealand, Canada and the United States where treaties have been signed, or in Norway where an outline of the state's responsibilities with respect to the Sami has recently been inserted into the constitution. Australia also has a poor history of indigenous representation in Federal Parliament, unlike New Zealand where seats are reserved for indigenous people, or Canada where the geography has been used (as it could in Australia) to create some low population electorates which Autobiography and Memoir. Biography. Disability.  With growing support for movements such as the campaign to abolish Columbus Day and replace it with Indigenous Peoples’ Day and the Dakota Access Pipeline protest led by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States is an essential resource providing historical threads that are crucial for understanding the present. In An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States, Dunbar-Ortiz adroitly challenges the founding myth of the United States and shows how policy against the Indigenous peoples was colonialist and designed to seize the territories of the orig Today in the United States, there are more than five hundred federally recognized Indigenous nations comprising nearly three million people, descendants of the fifteen million Native people who once inhabited this land. The centuries-long genocidal program of the US settler-colonial regimen has largely been omitted from history. Acclaimed historian and activist Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz offers a history of the United States told from the perspective of Indigenous peoples and reveals how Native Americans, for centuries, actively resisted expansion of the U.S. empire. In An