

ALÈTHEIA

TRUTH OF THE PAST

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*After all, the ultimate goal of all research
is not objectivity, but truth.*
Helene Deutsch (1996)

There is no single uncontentious definition of 'truth'. Philosophers and academics have taken various approaches from subjective, relative, objective and absolute in discussions on truthfulness. However, in an intercultural context questions relating to the truth of the past can become even more controversial. One fundamental difficulty in evaluating truth that has become increasingly apparent in the 'history/memory wars' is the difference between historical and psychoanalytic truth, particularly in their respective relationships to temporality. For historians the past is most often seen as something separate from the present, which is not to imply a lack of causal relation, rather an immutable chronology. In discussions on truth in memory it is much more common to find the past and the present described as inextricably conjoined. These two approaches to the past provide different frames for discussion on truth; however, in many intercultural situations these differing evaluative standards can become confused because of terminological and conceptual ambiguity. At least since Stanner (1968) famously critiqued Australian history as a "cult of dis-remembering", Australians, along with academics and activists from around the world, have sought to correct imbalances in representations of the past related to Indigenous people in Australia. In trying to tell the 'truth' about history, researchers from a variety of disciplines have sought to restore the 'dis-remembered' parts of Australian history, like massacres, dispossession of land and the 'stolen generations'. It (almost) goes without saying that in this process it has become apparent that telling the truth about the past is not as simple as writing in forgotten stories, but also, and perhaps more challengingly, in being able to account for different relationships to the past which not only recall different stories but recall stories differently.

While historians like Bonnie Smith (1995) in 'Whose Truth, Whose History' decry omissions in Western histories which ignore women, minorities and economically and politically disadvantaged groups, anthropologists point out the irony of omissions in Aboriginal historical narratives. Michael Kenny (1999), writing about 'recovered collective memories' in Aboriginal Australian historical narratives, says that in some cases "it seems that dire events which should (we might think) be remembered are not, whereas things

that never happened become the object of collective recollection” (423). Some types of Aboriginal historical narratives differ in that they do not focus on the events which Western histories would mark as ‘dire’ or important: in Kenny’s case it was a massacre which killed at least 30 people. However, in many cases stories also differ in that they do not necessarily focus on an ‘event’. Historian Bain Attwood (2005b), commenting on Aboriginal stories of colonization in Australia, says “in many respects, these [Aboriginal Australian] oral histories differ markedly from the manner in which contemporary sources, or academic histories which draw on these, narrate the violent conflict of the frontier. They are often generic rather than specific in their reference to protagonists, times and events, if not place” (170-171). The generic, specific division is often used to ‘distinguish’ history and myth; myth is seen as generic, symbolic or representative while as anthropologist Austin-Broos (1994) says history is “concerned precisely with the level of particular relations among particular events” (252). Kenny follows anthropologist Nancy Munn (1973) in seeing these forms of Aboriginal historical narrative structures as being not primarily about events but rather intrinsically linked to particular places, with authorship of stories being correlated to a diverse collection of socio-cultural relationships.

In researching the role of culture in autobiographical memory I spent a year living in a community in the Northern Territory collecting ‘oral histories’ from older Aboriginal women. Rather than history or the Dreaming, the focus of my research is on personal recollection and reflection; however, many of the stories told to me during my fieldwork intersect with themes from contemporary Australian history, like the dispossession of land, forced removal from families and communities and unpaid labour. In studying autobiographical memory, I was conscious to listen for uses of the word ‘memory’ during my fieldwork. I had been living in the community for several months when I first heard the English word memory used in everyday conversation. I was sitting outside the community centre listening to stories from an older woman when a middle-aged woman who had been sitting with us rolled her eyes and said to me, ‘don’t listen to her, she is talken’ crazy. She is talken’ memory’. I furiously scribbled this in my notebook with notions of elaborating differences in the way the word ‘memory’ was used. What I actually found during my research was that people rarely used the words ‘memory’ or ‘remember’. The older women were much more likely to say things like ‘I been liven’ at Beantree now’ than to say ‘I remember when we lived at Beantree’.

Linguist Anna Wierzbicka (2007) has written an article titled ‘Is “Remember” a Universal Human Concept?’ where she examines the word remember in several different languages. In her assessment of two Aboriginal Australian words for remember, she says “while the words in question can be used to translate the English word *remember*, they do not actually mean ‘remember’ but rather, something like ‘think about something for some time’ without any obligatory reference to the past” (22). The word in Alyawarra which is typically translated as ‘remember’ is *iterl-areyel* (author’s phonetic transcription). This is a compound verb which literally translates as ‘to see in the mind’. ‘To see in the mind’ does not necessarily mean ‘to remember’: it could also mean to visualize or imagine because -- as with the Wierzbicka examples -- there is no *obligatory* reference to the past. When translating *iterl-areyel* to the English word ‘remember’ we need to be aware of any

anisomorphism taking place, and even when comparing the use of the English word 'memory' between contexts we need to be conscious of differing connotations.

However, what is often overlooked is that there is not one Standard Academic English into which these words can be translated, or within which these stories can be framed. One challenge for a researcher trying to discuss Aboriginal stories in a Western academic context is that much of our memory/history terminology carries implicit assumptions about truth which are often exclusionary of non-Western truth claims about the past. For this reason this paper is going to step back from the ethnographic material of anthropology and look at the terminological and conceptual ambiguity which surrounds intercultural and interdisciplinary discussions of the past. The particular focus here is on the intersections of memory and history in the use of the term 'oral history' across various disciplines with a particular emphasis on how this term is applied in the Aboriginal Australian context.

'oral history' as 'life story'

The Oral History Association of Australia defines 'oral history' as "the recording of memories of people's unique life experiences" (OHAA 2007). This use of the term 'oral history' is closely associated with autobiographical memory. Autobiographical memory could be defined as a person's distinctive representation of general or specific experiences along with personal facts. However, as philosopher John Sutton (2003) states, "neither the past nor the mind sits waiting" (148). Our autobiographical memories, our life stories, are not just stores of information waiting to be accessed; rather, they are shaped in relation to the context of recollection along with current motivations and goals. Sutton describes remembering as "a dynamic singularity rather than the reproduction of fixed contents" (151), and it is the very fixing of contents afforded through the recording process, whether audio-visual or transcribed for publication, that distinguishes 'oral histories' of this kind from 'autobiographical memories'. An 'oral history', in this sense, is not just the telling of a unique life story, but a unique telling of a life story.

In 'Against Nostalgia: place and memory in Myles Lalor's 'oral history'' anthropologist Jeremy Beckett (1996) sets up the genera of 'oral history' by explicitly linking it to biography. He says,

Myles Lalor called these memories his 'oral history;' we might also call them his biography - using this term in Thomas Luckman's 'extended sense to refer to any socially objectivated oral or literary scheme or model for the course of an individual's life'. (Beckett 163)

In this sense both an 'oral history' and a biography are 'objectivated' life stories. Like autobiographical memory, they are socially and culturally structured and situated accounts of the experiences and knowledge of a particular person. However, unlike autobiographical memory, once told, an 'oral history' becomes a static representation of a particular self as opposed to a 'dynamic singularity'. In this regard Beckett is careful to provide a context for Lalor's life story which he recorded and later transcribed and edited as *Wherever I Go* (2000). Beckett discusses a number of motivations for Lalor sharing his life story, including Lalor's desire for self-representation in light of misleading and demeaning portrayals of himself and other Aboriginal people. Beckett tells us that,

On the day he began his 'oral history' he had been in the archives of the by now defunct New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board, which had recently been opened up to people wishing to examine their personal files. (Lalor 313)

Lalor was incensed by what he found in his files, and the recording of his 'oral history' began that very night (313). The 'self' Lalor presents in this 'oral history' is autobiographical: it is a self-story located in a particular context and motivated by the desires of a situated person. However, while many see autobiographical memory as being intrinsically linked to self construal and self assertion, I would contend 'oral history' as life story captures a moment of self assertion, and so makes static the dynamic of autobiographical remembering.

In 'The Identity Function of Autobiographical Memory' psychologists Anne Wilson and Michael Ross (2003) say,

Personal memory plays an important role in identity construction because it provides pertinent and plentiful information. Also because the past is ephemeral, there is often little concrete evidence to contradict individuals' versions of their personal histories (although accounts may be disputed when they are publicly shared). (Wilson & Ross 147)

Life stories are not just about representation but also repression, inasmuch as they are selective, edited accounts of experienced lives. The evaluations made about 'oral history' as 'life story' tend to conform to the goals of self construal and identity production and projection; however, I maintain that a truthful life story need not be wholly veridical to be a story that makes sense of one's life for oneself and, in the case of 'oral history', for others.

'oral history' as 'collective memory'

In "Collective Memory: a memoir and prospect" sociologist Jeffery Olick (2008) points out that "in historiography, collective memory is often assimilated to oral history" (27). Olick focuses his attention in this paper on some of the terminological and conceptual ambiguity which surrounds 'collective memory'. As Olick points out in the same paper there is a vast literature on 'collective memory', however, if 'collective memory' is associated with 'oral history' within historiography, this points to an analogous openness or ambiguity for 'oral history'. Because 'oral histories' as 'life stories' are conceived of, structured and told within socio-cultural contexts, there are often no clear dividing lines between personal and collective remembrance. Our personal memories are selected, evaluated and narrated in social and cultural contexts which influence their structure and content. Similarly 'collective memories' depend on the idiosyncratic persons who make up a 'society' to hold, transmit and transform the shared memories and structures. One feature which links the use of the term 'oral history' in both the recorded 'life story' and 'collective memory' is the functional role of identity production and projection, in the first case at the personal level and in the second at the group level.

In their paper 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', Egyptologist Jan Assmann and historian John Czaplicka (1995) link 'collective memory' to 'oral history', by saying:

Through the practice of oral history, we have gained a more precise insight into the peculiar qualities of this everyday form of collective memory, which, with L. Niethammer, we will call communicative memory. Its most important characteristic is its limited temporal horizon. As all oral history studies suggest, this horizon does not extend more than eighty to (at the very most) one hundred years into the past, which equals three or four generations or the Latin *saeculum*. (Czaplicka 127)

Within this paradigm 'collective memory' is directly linked to the life span of the oldest members of the group; as older members pass away the shadow-line of 'collective memory' follows the younger generations, always staying three or four generations removed. Stories from beyond this timeline fade into the realm of history or myth as they are beyond the scope of 'living memory'; the events described will not be 'witnessed events', hence they cannot be remembered, only stored.

The 80-100 year span which marks the period of collective remembering is referred to in the Aboriginal Australian ethnographic literature, for example, as either "ordinary time" (Rose 1994:179) or "remembered time" (Sansom 2006:168), and is distinguished from the Dreaming or "time immemorial" (Sansom 2006:168). Because there is a correlated yet contentious relationship between collective memory and stories of the more distant past, I will discuss 'collective memory' in the next section along side of arguments about the Dreaming or historic past. Before moving on to the third application of the term 'oral history', however, I would like emphasize that 'collective memory' is generally linked to group identity in much the same way that autobiographical memory is linked to self construal. 'Collective memories' could be described as the shared experiences and knowledge which create group identity. Historian David Lowenthal (1997) says collective memories "resist correction by others...Like personal memory, it is valued for being opaque to outsiders" and by being opaque to outsiders it marks the boundaries of group identity. Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) say "a group bases its consciousness of unity and specificity upon this knowledge and derives formative and normative impulses from it, which allows the group to reproduce its identity. In this sense, objectivized culture has the structure of memory" (128).

'oral history' as 'the history of a people from an oral society'

Distinctions between history, myth and memory are not only contentious but also revised as new conceptual models come to be applied in various disciplines, and these distinctions become even more oblique when set within differing socio-cultural relationships to the past. Furthermore, 'oral history' is a term which is not only applied to 'collective memory' but is also used to describe stories of the more distant past--more than 80-100 years ago--by people in an 'oral society'. In his paper 'The Brief Reach of History and the Limitations of Recall in Traditional Aboriginal Societies and Cultures', anthropologist Basil Sansom (2006) tells how, in a recent land claim case, a lawyer provided evidence of what Annette Hamilton (1987) has called the 'notoriously shallow genealogies' in some Indigenous communities. The lawyer commented that this short genealogical reach was a result of orality; what else would we expect from a pre- or non-literate society (153)? In contrast Sansom's paper draws on a number of ethnographic reports demonstrating that in some 'oral societies', like the Nuer and the Bedouin, generational lines are not erased or

allowed to fall from remembrance as they pass from ‘collective memory’ into history or myth as happens in many Aboriginal cultures. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo's (1980) study of the Ilongot presents an interesting comparison to the Aboriginal context. Much of what he reports about memory and history speak to the primacy of place and witnessing in evaluations of truth, and have a great deal of resonance with the Aboriginal Australian ethnographic literature, particularly in that they also reflect short generational lines. What needs to be made clear is that oral societies do not necessarily share the same relationship to the recent or distant past simply by virtue of being oral. Rather I would argue relationships to the past are bound up in many socio-cultural processes and are not the result of any one specific cultural feature.

The relationship between ‘collective memory’ and stories which have passed on from living memory (in the Aboriginal context these stories are generally glossed as Dreaming stories) is particularly interesting. In her paper ‘Ned Kelly Died for Our Sins’, anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose (1994) says

in sum both Dreaming and ordinary [time] exist in real, named, local space. Both are grounded in the earth, and both ultimately derive their life from the earth. Ordinary time...is a period in which our western concepts of time have a certain explanatory power. Dreaming, in contrast, is marked most powerfully by synchrony. (Bird Rose 181)

She goes on to say that most Yarralin and Lingara people trace their genealogies back three generations at most, and where genealogy ends, Dreaming begins: “the point at which dreaming became ordinary then is about one hundred years ago” (180). The timeframe which Rose provides for ‘ordinary time’ crossing into the Dreaming directly corresponds to what Assmann and Czaplicka describe as the temporal span of ‘collective memory’ in a more general context.

There are a number of contentious issues in marking off ordinary time from the Dreaming. Academics drawing on Aboriginal Australian ethnographic literature have argued that Dreaming stories are not primarily located in time but rather in place; for example, in the history of anthropology Patrick Wolfe (1991) and in religious studies Tony Swain (1993) have both argued against the term ‘Dreamtime’—as opposed to the Dreaming—precisely because ‘Dreamtime’ implies a specific temporal frame. In Stanner’s (1990) classic description of the dreaming as ‘everywhen’ he makes clear that “one cannot ‘fix’ The Dreaming in time: it was, and is, everywhen” (225). Within this frame, the Dreaming is not just a record of stories from beyond living memory, but also includes today and tomorrow. Rose describes the temporality of the Dreaming as being synchronous, likewise Swain (1988) says “what links Dreaming ‘past’ and the present is, therefore, not time but place” (454). The proposed synchronous nature of this type of Dreaming story as recorded by anthropologists, their lack of focus on events and the temporal relationship between them, leads to conflicts in interpretations of historical truth. In many regards, this has led to the Dreaming being described as myth rather than history. Attwood (2005b) examines how modernist historians relate to Dreaming stories, saying “once we read these histories in another way – for example as myth – professional historians are readily able to accept them as the bearers of historical truth” (48). Unlike Western stories, which if retained beyond a span of 80-100 years are granted the status of history, Aboriginal stories are given the status of myth, legend, saga, or tradition, because

they are not seen as re-presenting an event; the truthfulness of the Dreaming is contrasted with the event based veridicality of history.

‘oral history’ as ‘oral testimony’

‘Oral history’ as ‘oral testimony’ could be defined as information provided orally, often, but not necessarily, recorded or transcribed, for a specific audience on a specific topic. Because this testimony is given within a specific framework, like a tribunal, reconciliation hearing or a trial, it is not necessarily inclusive of many elements or features which would be attributed to a full life story or autobiographical narrative. For example, as Aleida Assmann (2006) points out, “the economy of the trial demands that biographical aspects are invoked only to the extent that they help to probe and to ascertain the testimony” (266). Furthermore, because this testimony is given in a specific setting like a court room, it may not conform to more ‘natural’ story telling forms. Unlike ‘oral history’ as ‘life story’, what is being shared in ‘oral testimony’ is not the uniqueness of a person or self, but rather an articulation of a particular event.

In ‘Getting Talked Out of Native Title’, solicitor Carolyn Cerexhe (1997) highlights what have historically been some of the challenges for Aboriginal people in being recognized within the Australian legal system. She includes a description of a legal counsel for the Commonwealth Government who, in a 1965 trial about equal pay for Aboriginal people, was advised that “none of the Aboriginal stockmen were suitable for the rigours of giving evidence and being cross-examined”. Aboriginal testimony has also been disregarded or devalued in the land claims process. Attwood (2005a) discusses the role of Reynolds’ (1987) book *Law of the Land* and remarks, along with Rosemary Hunter (1996), that it was more influential in swaying the High Court judges in the *Mabo* decision than Aboriginal testimony because it was “a historian using scientific methods [which] showed the past as it really was and so produced an objective historical truth – the kind of history the law respects” (250). ‘Oral history’ as ‘oral testimony’ speaks about an event or events and therefore “the standards concerning the accuracy and reliability of the testimony are much stricter” than in situations like recorded life story (A. Assmann 2006: 265-266). As Aleida Assmann says of the post-war German context, testimonies are not “centred in an ego but in the Holocaust” (264).

The focus on an event rather than an ego is something that Attwood (2005a) discusses in his paper ‘Unsettling Pasts’, saying “any serious engagement with oral history involves an encounter with memory... memory serves to individuate where as history seeks to generalize”(252-253). This may seem to represent a conflict to Attwood’s previously mentioned position that ‘oral histories’ were too general rather than specific to be useful to modernist historians; however, his argument in the first instance was made in relation to Dreaming stories labelled as ‘oral history’, and in this case he is referring to ‘oral history’ as ‘oral testimony’ offered by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia in the reconciliation process. In the second case the ‘oral history’ as ‘oral testimony’ is too specific to be useful to a modernist historian because it is focused on an ‘ego’ or a person rather than on an event or sequence of events which is what, according to Attwood, would be the focus for this type of history making. In the case of the Dreaming stories they are too general in the sense that they do not focus on an event but rather places and geographic relationships. The contradiction in the problem

Attwood sees for modernist historians highlights some of the ambiguity in the application of the term 'oral history'

Discussion

'Oral history' as a term is used to refer to virtually every form of engagement with the past within Aboriginal culture: from personal to collective reflection, from memory to history to myth. The over application of this term in the Aboriginal context seems to reduce all forms of engagement with the past to one level. However, the truthfulness of 'oral history' is being evaluated differently depending on the context of application. In the case of recorded 'life story' and 'collective memory', 'oral history' is most often seen as a part of a process of self or group identity perception and projection. This is not to say that these forms of engagement with the past don't make claims on external events or realities, but rather that their selection, what gets remembered or forgotten, along with how and why stories are told, is primarily directed at the assertion of an identity and as such is accurate when asserting a 'true' self. However, this standard can be problematic in the Aboriginal context as Basil Sansom (2001) in 'In the Absence of Vita as Genre: the making of the Roy Kelly story' points out, "I asked Roy Kelly for [his] life story. From the outset, he told me that I was after something 'funny', which is to say a kind of thing he did not know about and didn't understand" (104-105).

The idea of a 'life story', a totalised self, is not necessarily a genre which can be imposed on the selves or identities of others in an intercultural analysis. Many have argued against Western individualism being applied to persons from other cultures but the use of 'oral history' for 'life story' can in some cases mask the imposition of Western notions of identity construction into contexts where an individual with a unique 'life story' is not an appropriate or applicable frame of reference. In relation to 'oral history' as 'collective memory', similar challenges arise along with problems of who is asserting the group identity. The question becomes are Aboriginal people asserting their own collective identity through shared stories, or is this identity and the description of stories as shared, an imposition of Western academics? In the case of 'history of a people from an oral society' and 'oral testimony' the veridicality of stories are measured in relation to their correspondence not to an identity or self, but rather to an event or sequence of events. This is not to say that contemporary history is not also seen as "interpretive narratives" (Attwood 2005a:248), but rather that the primary focus is not on the person but the event, and hence the stories deemed most truthful are those that accurately reconstruct the event. In both of these cases we find that many Aboriginal story forms are classed as 'oral history' rather than history precisely because they do not meet the criterion of describing an event or sequence of events. The focus of many of these historical narratives is not the event or temporal sequence but often on a place and geographic relationship. This form of veridical evaluation is not present in any evaluation of truth in 'oral history'.

These truth evaluations do not rest on the personal as opposed to shared memories or histories. Neither do they rely on subjective as opposed to objective motivations or methodologies. Rather, claims of truth are intrinsically linked to the value we place on a particular form of relating to the past. In situations where the past is seen to be shaped by the present and to be primarily related to the goal of self or group

identity the value of truth is in asserting a 'true self'. In situations where the past is seen as an event worthy of articulation the value of truth lies in the event rather than the person. However, the reduction of all forms of engagement with the past to one level in the Aboriginal Australian context is of paramount concern to the fact that neither the goal of self construal nor the goal of event articulation is necessarily the level at which Aboriginal people themselves assert the truth of their stories.

The ancient Greek word *alètheia* is generally translated to English as 'truth'. The word is formed from the root *lèthē* meaning 'forgetting' or 'forgetfulness' and the base root *lanthanō* 'to escape the notice of' in conjunction with the alpha negation (or technically alpha privativum) which expresses a want or absence like the English prefixes *un-* or *in-* (eg. *unwise*, *incapable*), so the literal translation of *alètheia* is 'that which cannot be forgotten' or 'that which cannot escape notice'¹. In its literal translation, *alètheia* presents a useful frame for the evaluation of truth in an intercultural context. Different cultures and societies may remember or record different stories of the past, but all societies remember, record and use their pasts. *Alètheia* allows us to look at different records of the past as equally truthful, in that they have not been forgotten, but does not privilege any particular relationship to the past, be it at the level of the self or event. In this way it gives us a frame for discussing relationships to the past in other cultures which need not reduce them to memory or myth. Intercultural memories and histories can be seen as intertwined and evaluated as truthful inasmuch as they are 'not forgotten' or perhaps even inescapable.

¹ Translation from personal communication, Rachel Yuen-Collingridge ancient history department Macquarie University.

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