



Keynote address / Jackie Huggins

I wish to acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional owners of the land. Thank you to Alana and her crew for inviting me here today to speak.

No doubt the geneses of information passed on by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been through our stories and oral traditions. I would like to concentrate this morning on three things – firstly the aspect of what memory is and how it has been constructed and revived, secondly look at some work specific institutions of memory have undertaken and thirdly why it is a good thing to gather together institutions of memory so that perhaps in a co-ordinated way practitioners can be better informed about what each other is doing; and of course to improve upon services to the Indigenous community and other scholars and researchers.

Museums, art galleries, photographic institutions, war memorials and the like are also institutions of memory however for the purposes of time I will concentrate on some institutions of relevance pertaining to this conference. Indigenous writing, theatre, music and arts have flourished as cultural institutions also. They play a significant role in the larger social and political movements of our time in several directions: by opening windows to the culture and experiences of Indigenous peoples; building pride and esteem within Indigenous communities and contributing to national identity. So do our institutions of memory.

Rosh White who has written on holocaust testimony and history speaks of anguished memory which recovers the sense of being divided, of living in more than one world at a time. She speaks of humiliated memory which reveals a besieged self, who, as in the past is unable to act in the present because memory and the process of narrating offer no rescue from uncompensated and uncompensatable loss. (Sound familiar?) Unheroic memory reveals the diminished self with its deprivation of moral agency and its partially traumatized or maimed self-esteem. The long-term impact of which is a fractured, fragmented self. Within the historical context of colonialism, it is a testament to people's spiritual strength and tenacity that so much oral history still exists in our communities.(1)

Ethnohistorians are in the business of historical reconstruction. They seek to recover the history of events, movements, persons, and ideas that have been largely neglected by conventional scholarship. Indigenous history lies somewhere in this domain. Ethnohistorians' initial questions are seldom informed by experience, generational or direct and they begin their research in the archives and later on, if at all, end up in community.

For many Indigenous historians this is quite the reverse where their work begins in community and ends up in archives. For scholars doing Indigenous historical research a significant question to ask at the onset is, how the forms and content of their work

compare or contrast when the questions are framed in an archives and when questions are framed by community.

Students of Indigenous oral histories are well aware that each community has its own ways, forms and methods of keeping and transmitting knowledge about the past across generations. While the forms of its transmission have received considerable scholarly interest from folklorists, linguists, literary studies for example they are studied as objects rather than applied or adhered to. What very few recognize is that oral traditions are unique among peoples and can be used as templates for the textual representations of oral historical accounts. In communities where oral traditions are alive and strong we have a lot to work with. Not only we have templates for form, we also have direction on content. We have the community's point of view or determination of what constitutes a significant historical event or person which in many cases differs from the outside perspective. (2)

So, our old people are great story-tellers, and they want their book to be filled with great stories. Indigenous narrative memory is held in stories and life experiences. The old ones remember stories, songs, dances and live out their stories to try to live good lives. Thus Indigenous narrative memory is an organic process, which is a collective activity, and is essentially a map for possibilities of existence upon which people can draw to make sense of experience.

To summarise this part, Indigenous narrative memory has been held in "lived" experience and narratives and it is transmitted through kinship, language and humour. It is an organic process that is in a constant state of being negotiated. There is an ongoing dialect between the cultural framework and individuals. The dialect of this narrative memory is also manifested in the play between the present and the past. At the foundation of the cultural framework of Indigenous narratives and oral history challenge conventional approaches to history. The only way the Indigenous narrative memory can be properly understood is through the paradigms of Indigenous people.

How does creative memory work to contribute to the healing of survivors?

The need for Indigenous peoples to have their experience of the removal process heard and officially acknowledged continues to be an important priority. The Bringing Them Home Report identified the benefits of the hearings conducted by the National Inquiry Into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families and recommended that hearings continue for the purpose of restoring the balance to historical perspectives. Many good things flowed from this report. It recommended funding for "appropriate Indigenous agencies" to record, preserve and administer access to testimonies of Indigenous peoples affected by forcible removal policies who wish to record their history. It also recommended that Indigenous culture, language and history centres serve as repositories of personal information that individuals may place in their care. Private collections of records held by churches and other non-government agencies could be transferred to the centres.

Instead of funding Indigenous agencies, state and federal governments funded libraries and museums to conduct oral history projects on Indigenous family separation. The Victorian Government for example funded the Koori Oral History Program at the Museum of Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia took a similar approach. Only Queensland and ACT had programs that provide funding to Indigenous organisations for these activities.

The Central Australian Stolen Generations and their Families Corporation is one of only a few groups that provide a repository for records, testimony and other memorabilia of their members.

Community Forums conducted by the Victorian Koorie Records Taskforce in 2001 and 2002 provide a more appropriate forum for people to tell their stories. The aim of the forums was to consult with Koorie communities, to inform people about how to access their records, but also to give people a chance to share stories about their experiences in finding their family history.

Government and church responses to Bringing Them Home have focused on rehabilitation and restitution. The priority given to health and well-being, assistance with tracing family records and family reunion reflect the priorities of the stolen generations. These programs meet people's most fundamental desire – to know about their family and their own identity.

The failure of governments to meet the needs of the stolen generations has come to be known as part of the “unfinished business” of reconciliation, a reference to the work of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation during the 1990's. (3)

Governments and churches responded to the Bringing Them Home report with programs that focussed on areas of undisputed priority – access to personal and family records, family tracing and reunion and support for the emotional wellbeing of people affected by forcible removal policies.

The Federal Government provided funding for the National Library oral history project and this along with the National Archives work were regarded as complete in 2001.

State and territory governments have primary responsibility for programs in key areas such as access to records, funding for family reunions, oral history projects and policies affecting current Indigenous child separation.

Bringing Them Home made over 20 recommendations about the preserving of records, co-ordinating access to records and providing support for people during the process. Implementation of these recommendations has progressed well in some states and territories but not in others. The most advanced program for access to records was in Queensland, where the Community and Personal Histories Section of DATSIPD at the time of the Inquiry.

Managing records

An important aspect of managing records is to ensure that Indigenous peoples are among the librarians, historians and archivists looking after and interpreting the records. This surely must be a priority. As I look around the room I know there have been many who have been at this game a lot longer than I have but we need more, much more. I hope your institutions are taking steps to train and people in these vital roles.

Recently I was delighted to see Loris Williams as our first Queensland Indigenous archivist graduate. But still one or two is just not good enough we need our people across all fields where records are kept and stored.

And how do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their communities keep up in the ever changing world of globalization and digitization? Organisations like yours can surely assist to make sure that information is preserved for future generations and scholars who wish to pursue their interests in this field. Record keeping organization can make such a huge difference in the lives of so many. I know it did for me.

Leading the charge, AIATSIS Library and Audio/Visual programs hold the world's most extensive collections of printed, audio, visual materials on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander topics. These materials are used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, researchers, museums, galleries and many others including the general public. One of the exciting programs is the digitization program. This delivers electronic information resources and services to clients via the AIATSIS web site and the Mura catalogue. This and hopefully the Ara Irititja electronic archive about will be addressed later this afternoon.

You'll also hear about the Family History Unit and its programs. Genealogy is becoming increasingly important for all Indigenous peoples because of native title claims and the need to find out about family, home and country. If we look at the dynamic evolution of materials back to Indigenous peoples and communities in the last decade it is really quite staggering. It makes us feel proud that we can even name the "Mobs" we are from when once it was hidden from us.

CASL "Draft" Policy Framework for the Development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library Services and Collections is to guide progressive actions across National, State and Territory library institutions with their plans and approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander library services and collections. (4)

It states that the library and information sector are encouraged to assert in their plans to develop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library Services and collections that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander library services and collections are core business.

I wonder though how the plans are going for:

- . the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at all levels in the decision making process;
- . the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on library boards, steering/advisory/reference committees, and/or special interest groups;
- . broader consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and
- . input from the Indigenous professional association, ATSILIRN

(If you have ticked all the boxes then you are in good shape. If you haven't then please try harder).

State Libraries are doing a lot of work also. The State Library of Queensland for a number of years has established Indigenous Knowledge Centres. The Indigenous Library Service Strategy aims at improving service delivery to Indigenous peoples through public libraries, ensuring that Indigenous collections and culture are represented in public library spaces and further to increasing employment and training opportunities in libraries for Indigenous peoples. Living culture is most important for transmission of culture, skills transfer, access to technology and as a literacy tool.

What has impressed me along the years is the growing information of the fact sheets within Libraries for instance .

- . getting started
- . military records
- . Norman Tindale Collection
- . Norman Tindale Symbols
- . Aboriginal History
- . Aboriginal Language
- . Indigenous Time Line
- . Aboriginal and Torres Strait Flags
- . NAIDOC
- . Dewey Decimal Classification
- . Guide to Bibliographies

What a wonderful resource for anyone wishing to research and engage with primary source material.

At National Library level the work that Peter Read and I do is about preserving social history and the memories of Indigenous peoples. We have three projects which are Seven Years On, Eminent Indigenous Australians and the more recent ex Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Members.

CONCLUSION

So how do we “gather” Institutions of Memory? Like a spider’s web they are sculptured and finely tuned to match their own institutional craftsmanship. Conferences like these help us to forge alliances and work together on common purposes and goals they also remind us not forget the words from Lilla Watson so as not to repeat past mistakes:

And she states:

“Land was taken. Our women were taken. Many of our children were taken. The bones of our ancestors were taken, often as curios, without any record of their names or country. Stories were taken, and often embellished, modified and published without acknowledgement, without respect for confidentiality, or protocols of their secret status. Photos were taken, again, many as curios and often published without any consideration of the feelings of people featured in them.” (5)

During the conference you will be hearing from people who speak about their work with the passion and the flair that it deserves. If there is one thing that you can take away from the next few days is how perhaps you can learn new ways and to share ideas about how you could deliver your services better? As a practitioner in the area of information surely the Deadly Directions for you is just around the corner.

I wish you well in your deliberations over the next two days.

Thank you.

References

- 1) Naomi Rosh White, “Marking Absences: Holocaust Testimony and History” in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds, *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998) p, 176
- 2) Winona Stevenson, “Oral History Forum”, Canadian Oral History Association,

Vol 19-20, 1999-2000

- 3) Restoring Identity final report, PIAC, Syd, 2002
- 4) CASL Draft Policy Framework, Cairns, July, 2004
- 5) Lillian Watson, quote from Indigenous Libraries Strategy Document, State Library of Qld., 2004