Awareness that the form of the narrative is part of its meaning has been a
significant thread in research using oral evidence in Australia, especially for
Aboriginal Australians. Three areas of discussion have been especially vibrant
in recent years. Firstly, the impact of English as a language that shaped the
colonial reality. The work of linguists, anthropologists and oral historians
shows clearly that speaking one of the 600 or so local Indigenous language
made possible ways of seeing relationships among people and between people
and the environment that did not translate easily into English. This has
significance both for Aboriginal Australians from groups where the language is
threatened or lost, as well as for settler Australians who brought with them
languages that were the product of other landscapes. Secondly, the significance
of (and conservative resistance to) including oral evidence and Aboriginal
memory alongside documentary sources for Australian history. The hard-
fought debate on interpretation of the Australian national story that raged
especially from 1996 onwards, had at its heart the question of how to hear and
value the oral testimony and Aboriginal memory of dispossession. As work
continues that demonstrates the need for scholarship of compassion and
commitment, the third strand of the conversation is increasingly rich. This area
recognizes the reality that telling, recording and working with oral accounts is a
deeply relational process that requires an existential commitment from all
involved.

Keywords: Aboriginal Australia, oral tradition, oral history, landscape,
Australian historiography.

1. At the beginning his award-winning historical novel That Deadman Dance, Kim Scott reflects on the storytelling of
Aboriginal Australians and the movement under nineteenth-
century colonial rule from spoken to written language. Scott, a
contemporary Aboriginal writer who lives in the suburbs of a small
Australian city, captures a poignant moment of cultural innovation
and adaptation when his nineteenth-century hero pivots between worlds. Evoking a rainy day in the 1830s on the south-western coast of Western Australia, Scott introduces the novel’s central character, Bobby Wabalanginy, whose name combines a childish European nickname with his Aboriginal identity. Taking chalk and slate, the young man writes in his mother tongue, Noongar, using the technology of the English invaders, transforming sound to script.

Kaya
Writing such a word, Bobby Wabalanginy couldn’t help but smile. Nobody ever done write that before, he thought. Nobody ever writ [sic] hello or yes that way!

Roze a wail.
Bobby Wabalanginy wrote with damp chalk, brittle as weak bone. Bobby wrote on a thin piece of slate. Moving between languages Bobby wrote on stone.¹

The scene is a rich depiction that suggests we should not assume a smooth transfer of oral language to words in written form. In the transcription of Noongar and the translation into phonetic English of the image of a whale on the coastal horizon (roze a wail), an image that we come to understand later as central to his identity, to his ‘Dreaming’, Wabalanginy gains a new and distinct form of expression. This new technology of writing presents a way of documenting the powerful stories of the Dreaming, the religious principles and way of being that shape Aboriginal understanding of the ongoing relationship between the natural and supernatural world.² Writing gives the Dreaming stories independent life outside the ceremonial contexts where the stories are told, and away from the land that nurtures and is nurtured by them.

In Wabalanginy’s awareness of the difference between his whale Dreaming, «a story he carried deep inside himself, wrapped around the memory of a fiery pulsing whale heart»³ and story he can tell by «only writing», there is the more than a distinction between oral and written form. The form of the story itself is part of how Wabalanginy knows the story, and how he carries and apprehends its meaning and significance. In contrast to the story

¹ Scott 2010, 1.
² On Aboriginal ‘Dreaming’ see Pike 2010; Stanner 1989; Weir 2009, 63-65.
³ Scott 2010, 2.
learnt and held as oral language, an account in writing «wasn’t true, it was just an old story, and he couldn’t even remember the proper song.»4 Of this written form «he erased the marks with the heel of his hand»,5 but the oral account is different; it cannot disappear while Wabalanginy remains to tell it. As contemporary scholars working to conserve and reclaim Aboriginal language and story also tell us, the oral form of the story cannot be erased without «an inevitable loss of Indigenous identity […] [and] diminishment of all life, their [Aboriginal Australians] life included».6 The movement between forms of the narrative is as much (perhaps more) of a translation as the movement between languages.

This awareness that the form of the narrative is part of its meaning has been a significant thread in research using oral evidence in Australia, especially for Aboriginal Australians. Three areas of discussion have been especially vibrant in recent years: the impact of English as a language shaping the colonial reality, the significance of (and conservative resistance to) including oral evidence and Aboriginal memory alongside documentary sources for Australian history, and the reality that telling, recording and working with oral accounts is a deeply relational process that requires an existential commitment from all involved.

2. Language shaping the land. The experiences of the people in a place shape the language: thus the landscape of Australia is embedded in stories told in Noongar and some 600 other distinct Aboriginal dialects in ways that are quite different from English.7 This is clear at the relatively simply level of vocabulary and is becoming clearer as documentation of threatened languages gathers pace. For example, in Jirrbal, the language of Queensland’s north-eastern rainforest speakers claim their tribal totem using the verb wurrali-nyu meaning literally «become one with», making phrases such as «I am now a river penda tree, tall and strong», (Julujulu ngaja wurrali-nyu) or «I become as one with the crocodile» (Maybaja ngaja wrruali-nyu) routine in

4 Scott 2010, 3.
5 Scott 2010, 4.
6 Wier 2009, 138.
7 Evans 1998.
The complex kinship system was conveyed in specialized vocabulary marking age ranges, status, and potential as well as actual relationships, and required speakers of particular relationships to use distinct dialects in each other's hearing. The verb *nyalan* translates as «to tell someone what relationship another person is to them». Specific vocabulary multiplied according to local context and culture – so a related language Girramay has at least five words for «to eat» varying according to the food: *nanban* for eating fruit and vegetables, *burnyjan* for meat, *rubinyu* for fish, *bajan* meaning «to bite», and *majan* for the process of biting into the honeycomb, sucking out the honey and chewing on the honeycomb. An intimate understanding of the terrain required words such as *yilgan* «to almost get to a place» and distinct words that distinguished features such rivers or other waterways as dry or flooded, flowing, stocked with crayfish, and marked their comparative size. Speaking the local language made possible ways of seeing relationships among people and between people and the environment.

Throwing this interconnection into relief, Jay Arthur’s work on the language of settler Australia has made clear the separation between people and the Australian environment that English carried within it. Paying close attention to the English-language descriptions of Australia since colonization, Arthur’s work shows a «default country» assumed within English. The language that grew in the «small green land» of Britain cannot really name the «wide, brown land» of Australia without distorting it. The «double vision» of the settler Australians is especially evident in relation to the English word «river». Naming the Australian waterways as «river» brought echoes of England’s permanent, full-flowing water courses so that settlers noticed the absence of the European-style river, rather than the presence of Australian waterways that did not fit that norm. Among the telling examples Arthur draws from tourist literature and instructions to settlers and farmers, the implicitly

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8 Dixon 1987, 150.
9 Dixon 1987, 153.
10 Dixon 1987, 153.
11 Dixon 1987, 151.
12 Dixon 1987, 152.
13 See for example Blake 2011; Dixon, Blake 1979.
defective rivers of Australia are «lost», «degenerate into […] channels», «come to a dead end» rather than behave like the European model flowing strongly to the sea.\textsuperscript{15} The displacement that has been built into English-language narratives of Australia adds impetus to efforts to acknowledge the distinctive patterns of Australian English, Aboriginal English and, more importantly, to encourage the use of the Aboriginal languages that have survived colonization.\textsuperscript{16}

3. \textit{Oral tradition and Aboriginal memory in Australian history.} Oral tradition and Aboriginal memory does not yet have an undisputed place in the narrative of Australian history but awareness has been growing of the significance for a full and honest account. As early as 1939 the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner drew attention to the ‘solid indifference’ to the Aboriginal story in the national history since colonization in 1788.\textsuperscript{17} In 1968 Stanner broadcast a series of public lectures on Australian public radio which, together with landmark publication by historian Charles Rowley and the growing political involvement of Aboriginal activists, brought awareness among scholars and the community of the need to break the «great Australian silence».\textsuperscript{18} In the 1970s and 1980s documentary film-makers, oral historians and writers from within and beyond the Aboriginal community brought the voices of Aboriginal Australians to public attention. Their account of past and present experiences was all the more compelling because it was not simple a written record, but spoken and visual presentation of events such as the foundation of the Aboriginal tent embassy, and of memories of lived experience such as growing up under the Aboriginal Protection legislation.\textsuperscript{19} The distinctive impact of the oral narrative is highlighted in the argument for Aboriginal land rights. In 1981 the key claimant Eddie Mabo gave a public lecture that laid out the case in all its details, but the material only came to life for a wider audience

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Arthur 2003, 18.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} See McCoy 2012; Arthur 1996; Ramson 1997.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Stanner 1939 cited by Curthoys 2008, 238.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Stanner 1991; Rowley 1970; see Curthoys 2008, 241-47.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} The films \textit{Ningla a Na} (1972) by Alessandro Cavadini and Carolyn Strachan on the Tent Embassy, \textit{Lousy Little Sixpence} (1983) by Alec Morgan on the struggle for self-determination included important interview statements from Aboriginal people embassy.
\end{itemize}
when Trevor Graeme’s films *Land Bilong Islanders* (1989) and *Mabo: Life of an Island Man* (1997) told the human story of the political issue. As Aboriginal film-maker and historian Frances Peters-Little points out, including oral material broke open the written record:

These are stories that were missing from the history books in our schools, but when Indigenous people eventually told them they changed the way the world viewed Indigenous history. For many years, Indigenous voices had struggled against the silence about Aboriginal history; eventually, through film and oral history, they were finally able to make themselves heard.\(^{20}\)

The re-evaluation of the Australian settler history was debated hotly and became deeply politicised from the mid-1990s.\(^ {21}\) The weight of academic argument and well-respected practices of historical research is clearly with the Aboriginal voices, with the need to tell the human story drawing on all the available evidence, oral, visual and material, as well as text-based records; and also with the need to evaluate all of these sources not only oral evidence. But the media-battle for and against oral testimony has left a ‘yawning chasm between elite, scholarly discourse and mass perception of the past’.\(^ {22}\) Ironically, popular opinion has not been persuaded by the academics that the voices of the people matter. Ingrained assumptions that writing marks superior civilization still suggests oral accounts are less trustworthy than written ones.\(^ {23}\) Creative and artistic presentations of historical truth in film, painting, novels and autobiography have brought Aboriginal experience to a wider public, often eliciting a powerful emotional response. But this category of knowing does not necessarily galvanise action for change. For the personal stories to prompt the shifts in public policy that they imply, there needs to be a wider recognition that the genuine knowledge is founded on compassion and commitment, not in the service of polemic but towards the engagement that enables the deepest understanding.

4. *Relational histories: the work of listening.* The model of the committed researcher, rather than the detached forensic academic,

\(^{21}\) See Macintyre, Clark 2003; Manne 2003.
\(^{22}\) Evans 2010, 12.
\(^{23}\) Peters-Little 2010, 4.
has increasing currency. Aboriginal academics and others who work with Indigenous history in Australia are among the clearest commentators supporting ‘engaged, passionate history’. As Frances Peters-Little puts it, and as the work of Lorina Baker, Shino Konishi, Maria Nugent, Barbara Paulson, and Troy Pickwick among others shows, Aboriginal researchers do not have the luxury of detachment and find that non-Aboriginal scholars do their best work when they also are alive to Indigenous voices.

I believe that one’s responsibility as a historian is to seek knowledge of an indigenous viewpoint and lived experience, and to look for additional evidence that might support that view, or at least explain why it exists. Our aim should be not to undermine indigenous perspectives and squabble about whether Aborigines are ‘accurate’, but rather to understand their viewpoint with compassion, and at the very least, ‘include’ it, consider it. For me, the inclusion of Aboriginal voices as primary sources is an absolute must for understanding and practising Aboriginal history.24

To argue for engagement with the sources, and even identification with them, is not unusual now after Foucault and the linguistic turn. Given the heat generated by debates about objectivity on Aboriginal issues in Australia it is important to also remember that leading historians have supported ‘engagement’ as intellectual stance, even when it was far more counter-intuitive. Keith Hancock who published the first modern history of Australia in 1930, and whose international career included the British government’s commission to lead the team writing the official history of Britain’s war effort, advocated throughout a long and influential career for «attachment, justice, and span» as a three-fold rubric for good historical work. At the mid-point of his career, in a lecture on the British war histories in 1950, he observed, in language that reflected the male-dominance of the profession:

Many years ago, I argued in print that attachment, not detachment, is the historian’s first virtue. I meant by this he needs a warm sympathy as well as a cool head, and that, before delivering his Olympian Judgements he should make himself closely intimate with the people of his history and the things they were trying to do.25

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24 Ibidem.
25 Hancock 1951, 41.
Hancock did not mean considered approval at a remote desk, but all the complexity of relating to the people who made and were part of the sources. In relation to study he was doing of British economic history during the Second World War for example, he needed to meet people, to ask them questions.

I feel completely certain that historians enjoying free access to British official records of the recent past are likely to make their worst mistakes by missing chances to talk with the persons who made the documents. In my experience distance rather than intimacy is the chief cause of historical error.26

Hancock acknowledged that intimacy was dangerous, and needed to be balanced with the ‘justice’ (or careful historical technique and awareness of the nature of source material) and ‘span’ (or the capacity to make connections between apparently distinct bodies of evidence, to see links and draw conclusions). Nevertheless, he pushed against the social scientific barrier of objectivity, in favour of human complexity, and particular relationship.

What Hancock proposed as a method of coming to read written material, oral historians have brought to the heart of the analysis itself. Increasingly, important work acknowledges the ‘shared author/ity’ of narrators and researchers, and takes for granted that field workers ‘are not taking notes, but comparing them’ with their informants.27 As just one example, a cross-disciplinary project focused on memories of the Aboriginal mission at New Noricia in Western Australia is working collaboratively with the Aboriginal stakeholders and the Benedictine community founded by the first missionaries to explore the differences in the way stories are held and told.28 The personal stories of individuals concerned, both Aboriginal people and missionaries, are showing us how uncomfortable and challenging, how compelling and transformative, the transfer from experience to words can be. As we trace the movement of experience from the heart and into written words that form stories of the mission at New Norcia we are aware that for the people involved the telling of their stories is almost never a private matter, but an event that often influences (or should influence) a public policy agenda. When there is a shift

26 Ibidem.
28 Massam, Rolfe 2010; Massam, Rolfe 2011.
from private to public narrative, it is marked in our contemporary context by the move from oral to written form.

In a sense this is the movement made by Kim Scott’s fictive hero Wabalanginy, and it carries the same risks and possibilities. As our research team draws on methodologies of history, theology, and educational psychology we are discovering again that meaning and significance are shaped by the questions we ask and the context in which human experience is narrated and heard. The impact of telling a story is felt by those who speak, or write, and by those who hear and see or read; but the impact is distinctive and particular. We are hoping that working collaboratively with the communities of people who hold the memories, and not only across but ‘between’ the disciplines of history, psychology, and theology, we will move beyond accounts in which contradiction is simply layered in, as alternative readings of reality. We are not so naïve as to think we will find the ‘normative’ truth of the Aboriginal mission, but we do hope to raise awareness of the distinctive norms that govern the telling of stories and their interpretation, so that the movement of experience from the heart and into words becomes part of the narrative itself.

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